

Influencer marketing - native and narrative advertising

Daniela Aura BOGDAN

“Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați

daniela.bogdan@ugal.ro**Abstract**

This paper examines influencer marketing as a contemporary form of native and narrative advertising, arguing that its persuasive effectiveness relies on the interplay among storytelling, credibility, authenticity, and platform-specific communication strategies. The study aims to explore how influencer marketing operates at the intersection of advertising, digital communication, social influence and ethical responsibility, while highlighting the mechanisms that transform promotional messages into engaging personal narratives. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative research design that combines a review of the relevant literature with illustrative case-study analyses of Romanian and international influencer campaigns on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and AI-generated social media platforms. The analysis focuses on the distinction between influencers and traditional endorsers; the role of native advertising and storytelling; the importance of credibility and audience engagement; the influence of platform-specific communication practices; the emergence of AI-generated influencers; and the ethical challenges associated with advertising disclosure and transparency. The findings indicate that influencer marketing derives its persuasive effectiveness from the combined use of native advertising, storytelling, authenticity and audience engagement, while platform-specific communication strategies further shape consumers' perceptions of credibility and trust. The analysis also demonstrates that the emergence of AI-generated influencers introduces new challenges regarding authenticity, transparency and ethical communication. The paper concludes that the long-term success of influencer marketing depends on maintaining a balance between persuasive effectiveness and ethical responsibility, with transparency, credibility, and compatibility among influencers, brands, and audiences remaining essential to sustaining consumer trust.

Keywords: influencer marketing; native advertising; storytelling; authenticity; AI-generated influencers; digital advertising.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most influential and persuasive forms of digital advertising, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between brands, digital creators and consumers (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019). As audiences increasingly avoid traditional advertising through ad blockers, subscription-based platforms and selective media consumption, companies have shifted

their attention towards social media personalities capable of communicating with highly specific online communities in a more direct, personal and emotionally engaging manner (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Unlike conventional advertising, which often interrupts the consumer's media experience, influencer marketing is integrated into everyday digital practices such as scrolling, watching, commenting, sharing, liking and following. Promotional content no longer appears solely as an external commercial message but is frequently embedded within personal stories, recommendations, tutorials, reviews, lifestyle posts, live streams or short-form videos, making advertising less intrusive and more closely aligned with users' everyday online experiences (Evans et al., 2017).

Freberg et al. (2011) define social media influencers as independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through content distributed across digital platforms. More broadly, influencers may be understood as digital content creators who can shape opinions, attitudes, and purchasing decisions through credibility, expertise, and sustained interaction with their online communities (Abidin, 2016; Chirică, 2024). Their persuasive capacity depends not only on the size of their audience but also on the trust they establish, the authenticity they project and the degree of identification they generate among followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In this respect, influencers differ significantly from traditional celebrity endorsers. Whereas celebrity endorsement relies primarily on transferring fame and public recognition to a brand, influencer marketing derives its effectiveness from perceived relatability, niche expertise and continuous dialogue with audiences.

The rapid expansion of influencer marketing reflects broader transformations in digital media consumption and communication practices. Increasingly fragmented audiences no longer rely exclusively on institutional or corporate sources of information but frequently seek recommendations from individuals whose experiences, values and lifestyles appear familiar and trustworthy. As a result, commercial communication is increasingly mediated through interpersonal relationships rather than direct brand-to-consumer interaction. This process generates a form of mediated credibility in which products and services are introduced not by corporations alone but by trusted digital intermediaries whose recommendations appear spontaneous, authentic and experience-based.

This paper argues that influencer marketing should be understood simultaneously as a form of native advertising and narrative advertising. It operates as native advertising because promotional messages are adapted to the communicative conventions, visual aesthetics and interaction patterns of individual social media platforms, allowing them to blend naturally into users' online experiences (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016; Evans et al., 2017). At the same time, it functions as narrative advertising because products are introduced through stories of everyday life, personal transformation, routine, vulnerability or self-improvement rather than through direct promotional claims. Storytelling, therefore, becomes one of the principal mechanisms through which advertising acquires emotional resonance, memorability, and persuasive power (Fisher, 1984; Bruner, 1991).

The purpose of this study is to examine how influencer marketing functions as a persuasive communication strategy within contemporary digital culture. Specifically, the paper analyses the distinction between influencers and traditional endorsers; the role of native advertising and storytelling; the importance of credibility, authenticity, and audience engagement; the influence of platform-specific communication strategies; the emergence of AI-generated influencers; and the ethical challenges associated with advertising

disclosure and transparency. By combining theoretical perspectives with illustrative examples drawn from both Romanian and international digital marketing practices, the study seeks to provide an integrated understanding of the mechanisms through which influencer marketing creates persuasive relationships between brands and consumers.

The central argument advanced throughout this paper is that influencer marketing derives its effectiveness from its capacity to humanize advertising. Rather than presenting products through direct commercial persuasion, influencers embed promotional messages within narratives of everyday experience, emotional connection and perceived authenticity, encouraging audiences to interpret recommendations as trustworthy personal opinions rather than explicit advertising. However, the same mechanisms that strengthen persuasion may also blur the distinction between genuine communication and commercial promotion. Maintaining audience trust therefore requires more than effective marketing strategies; it depends on transparent disclosure, responsible communication and a high degree of compatibility between influencers, brands and the communities they address (Johnson et al., 2019; Boerman, 2020).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the research materials and methodology. The subsequent sections examine the principal mechanisms underlying influencer marketing, including native advertising, storytelling, credibility, audience engagement, platform-specific communication strategies, AI-generated influencers and the ethical implications of digital persuasion. The paper concludes by discussing the main findings, acknowledging the study's limitations and outlining directions for future research.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study adopts a qualitative research design that combines a literature review with illustrative case-study analysis to examine the mechanisms by which influencer marketing functions as a form of native and narrative advertising. Rather than measuring the quantitative effectiveness of influencer campaigns, the research seeks to explain the persuasive strategies that underlie this communication model and to explore the ethical issues posed by its growing presence in contemporary digital environments. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting communication practices, persuasive mechanisms and patterns of audience engagement rather than on statistical measurement (Krippendorff, 2018).

The theoretical framework integrates research from advertising, digital communication, persuasion theory, influencer marketing and storytelling. Particular attention is paid to Romanian contributions on social media influencers and advertising (Balaban, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2021; Chirică, 2024), complemented by international research on native advertising, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), digital credibility, platform-specific communication and consumer behaviour (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Evans et al., 2017; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). These perspectives provide the conceptual framework for examining how influencers establish credibility, cultivate authenticity and integrate commercial messages into everyday digital narratives.

The empirical corpus comprises a series of illustrative case studies drawn from both Romanian and international digital environments. Romanian examples include influencer campaigns published on Instagram, TikTok and Facebook, as well as recent public debates concerning advertising disclosure and regulatory interventions. International

examples include the virtual influencer Lil Miquela and several widely discussed influencer marketing campaigns illustrating the evolution of digital advertising. The selected cases were purposively chosen because they represent different communication formats, social media platforms, and promotional strategies, enabling a comparative discussion of the principal mechanisms underlying influencer marketing (Yin, 2018).

The analysis is guided by four research questions: **(RQ1)** How does influencer marketing differ from traditional celebrity endorsement? **(RQ2)** What role do native advertising and storytelling play in increasing the persuasive effectiveness of digital advertising? **(RQ3)** How do the communicative characteristics of different social media platforms influence marketing strategies? **(RQ4)** What ethical challenges emerge as commercial communication becomes increasingly integrated into apparently authentic digital interactions?

Datasets were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), focusing on recurring themes such as credibility, authenticity, emotional engagement, audience interaction, native advertising, transparency, advertising disclosure, and AI-generated influence. Rather than evaluating the commercial performance of individual campaigns, the analysis explores how these strategies contribute to the persuasive effectiveness of influencer marketing and reshape the relationships among brands, digital creators and online audiences. The findings are interpreted comparatively in order to identify common patterns and emerging trends across different platforms and forms of digital communication.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings are presented thematically to examine the principal mechanisms by which influencer marketing functions as a persuasive communication strategy in contemporary digital environments. Rather than evaluating individual campaigns in isolation, the discussion adopts an integrated perspective that combines theoretical concepts with illustrative examples from Romanian and international digital marketing practices. The analysis begins by defining influencer marketing and distinguishing it from traditional celebrity endorsement, then examines the complementary roles of native advertising and storytelling in shaping persuasive communication. It then explores the importance of credibility, authenticity, and audience engagement, analyses the influence of platform-specific communication strategies, discusses the emergence of AI-generated influencers, and concludes with the ethical challenges associated with transparency, advertising disclosure, and digital responsibility. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing as a dynamic communication ecosystem in which technological affordances, narrative practices and ethical considerations interact to influence consumer attitudes and behaviour.

3.1. Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most dynamic forms of contemporary digital advertising, reflecting broader transformations in media consumption, consumer behaviour and digital communication (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Unlike traditional advertising, which relies on direct promotional messages disseminated through mass media, influencer marketing integrates commercial communication into the everyday interactions between digital content creators and their

online communities. This shift has fundamentally redefined the relationship between brands and consumers, replacing one-way promotional communication with more interactive, personalised and experience-based forms of engagement.

Influencers may be defined as individuals capable of shaping the attitudes, opinions and purchasing decisions of online audiences through credibility, expertise and sustained interaction with their followers (Freberg et al., 2011; Chirică, 2024). Rather than functioning solely as content producers, they cultivate distinctive digital identities by maintaining an active online presence and engaging continuously with their communities. Their persuasive power derives not only from visibility or popularity but also from the perceived authenticity of their communication and the trust established with followers (Abidin, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Although the terms *influencer* and *endorser* are frequently used interchangeably, they represent two distinct communication models. Traditional endorsement relies primarily on celebrity status and the transfer of symbolic prestige from a well-known public figure to a commercial brand. In such campaigns, the advertising message is usually designed and controlled by the company, while the celebrity serves primarily as its public representative. Influencer marketing, by contrast, is grounded in niche expertise, perceived relatability and continuous interaction with audiences. Digital creators generally produce their own content, adapt promotional messages to their personal communication style and integrate brands into narratives that resemble ordinary aspects of everyday life rather than conventional advertising (Balaban, 2021; Freberg et al., 2011).

The growing importance of influencer marketing reflects profound changes in contemporary media consumption. Increasingly fragmented digital audiences frequently rely on influencers as trusted intermediaries who can filter the vast amount of information available online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Rather than consulting official corporate communications, many consumers prefer recommendations from individuals whose lifestyles, experiences, and values resemble their own. Consequently, trust has become one of the principal currencies of influencer marketing, enabling commercial messages to circulate within relationships that appear personal rather than institutional (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencers may also be classified according to the size of their online communities. Balaban (2021) distinguishes between nano-, micro-, macro- and mega-influencers, while recognising celebrities who have successfully extended their public visibility into digital platforms. Although larger audiences increase potential visibility, research suggests that engagement and perceived authenticity often decline as audience size grows (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Consequently, many companies are increasingly collaborating with micro- and nano-influencers, whose communities tend to be more cohesive and exhibit higher levels of interaction and trust.

Another defining principle of influencer marketing is audience overlaps, namely, the degree of compatibility between an influencer's followers and the promoted brand's target audience. Successful campaigns depend not simply on an influencer's popularity but on the alignment between followers' interests, values, and expectations and the characteristics of the advertised product or service. When this compatibility is achieved, credibility is transferred from the influencer to the brand, increasing message acceptance, purchase intention and long-term consumer trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencer marketing encompasses a wide variety of promotional formats, including tutorials, product reviews, unboxing videos, shopping hauls, lifestyle diaries, live

streams, giveaways and discount-code campaigns. These communication formats transform advertising into an interactive experience in which followers actively participate through comments, reactions, content sharing and direct interaction with creators. As a result, promotional messages become embedded within everyday digital communication rather than appearing as intrusive commercial interruptions (Balaban & Szambolics, 2021).

Ultimately, the effectiveness of influencer marketing lies in its capacity to humanise advertising. Commercial communication becomes embedded within personal narratives, everyday experiences and emotional interactions that encourage identification, trust and long-term engagement. However, the same characteristics that strengthen persuasive effectiveness also generate important challenges. Because a brand's reputation becomes closely associated with that of the influencer, companies may become vulnerable to reputational crises arising from controversial behaviour or inconsistent communication. Furthermore, the increasing integration of promotional content into ordinary social media interactions has blurred the distinction between authentic recommendations and paid advertising, raising significant questions regarding transparency, advertising disclosure and consumer protection (Evans et al., 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

3.2. Native Advertising and Storytelling as Persuasive Strategies

The transformation of digital advertising has fundamentally altered the ways in which promotional messages are created, distributed and perceived. Contemporary consumers are increasingly resistant to conventional forms of advertising, prompting brands to adopt communication strategies that prioritise authenticity, emotional engagement, and seamless integration into everyday online interactions. Among these strategies, native advertising and storytelling have emerged as two of the most influential mechanisms through which influencer marketing achieves its persuasive effectiveness (Evans et al., 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

Rather than functioning as independent communication techniques, native advertising and storytelling operate in a complementary manner. Native advertising provides the structural framework that enables commercial messages to blend naturally into the communicative conventions of social media platforms, while storytelling supplies the narrative structure through which products acquire emotional meaning and personal relevance (Fisher, 1984; Bruner, 1991). Together, these strategies transform advertising from a direct promotional intervention into a form of social communication embedded within users' everyday digital experiences.

Within influencer marketing, promotional messages are rarely presented through explicit commercial discourse. Instead, products become integrated into personal narratives, routines, experiences, and moments of vulnerability, encouraging audiences to perceive recommendations as authentic expressions of lived experience rather than conventional advertising. This shift significantly increases audience engagement while simultaneously raising important ethical questions concerning transparency, advertising disclosure and the recognition of persuasive intent.

The following sections examine these complementary mechanisms in greater detail. Section 3.2.1 discusses the principles of native advertising and its role in reducing advertising avoidance. Section 3.2.2 explores storytelling as the principal emotional strategy underlying influencer marketing, while Section 3.2.3 analyses a Romanian case study illustrating how narrative advertising operates in practice.

3.2.1. Native Advertising in the Age of Advertising Avoidance

The rapid expansion of digital media has profoundly transformed the relationship between consumers and advertising. While online platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for brands to reach global audiences, they have also enabled users to avoid unwanted promotional content. Banner blindness, advertising fatigue, ad-blocking software and the widespread tendency to skip or ignore online advertisements have considerably reduced the effectiveness of traditional digital advertising (Evans et al., 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Instead of attracting attention, conventional advertisements are frequently perceived as interruptions that disrupt online experience.

This shift in consumer behaviour has encouraged advertisers to adopt less intrusive forms of promotion that align more closely with the communicative logic of digital platforms. Native advertising has emerged as one of the most effective responses because it integrates branded content into the visual, linguistic and functional conventions of the medium in which it appears (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Unlike conventional advertising, native advertising resembles editorial or user-generated content, making promotional messages appear more relevant and less disruptive to users' browsing experience.

Within influencer marketing, native advertising reaches an even higher level of sophistication. Promotional content is incorporated into formats that audiences already expect to consume, including lifestyle posts, tutorials, travel diaries, beauty routines, product reviews, unboxing videos, live streams and *Get Ready with Me* content (Balaban, 2021; Chirică, 2024). Instead of encountering an isolated advertisement, followers experience an ongoing narrative in which the promoted product becomes a natural component of the influencer's everyday activities. Consequently, persuasion is embedded within apparently authentic social interaction rather than presented as an explicit commercial intervention.

The effectiveness of this strategy largely depends on the trust relationship established between influencers and their audiences. Through continuous interaction, digital creators cultivate familiarity, emotional proximity and credibility, encouraging followers to perceive recommendations as sincere personal advice rather than corporate promotion. As Johnson, Potocki and Veldhuis (2019) demonstrate, advertising presented in this format is generally evaluated more positively and generates higher levels of engagement because audiences process it as ordinary social media content rather than immediately recognising it as persuasive communication.

However, the same characteristics that enhance the effectiveness of native advertising also generate important ethical concerns. As sponsored content increasingly resembles authentic social media communication, consumers may find it difficult to distinguish between genuine recommendations and paid partnerships. According to Wojdyski and Evans (2016), this reduced recognition of persuasive intent represents one of the central challenges of contemporary digital advertising. Consequently, scholars, regulators and digital platforms increasingly emphasise the importance of transparent advertising disclosure through standardised labels such as *Paid Partnership*, *#ad* or *#sponsored*, enabling users to recognise the commercial nature of online content while preserving trust in both influencers and brands (Johnson et al., 2019).

The evolution of native advertising demonstrates that contemporary digital marketing is no longer centred exclusively on transmitting commercial information. Instead, it seeks to create communication environments in which promotional content becomes seamlessly integrated into users' everyday digital experiences. Within influencer

marketing, native advertising provides a structural framework through which branded messages circulate naturally across social media platforms, while storytelling—examined in the following section—supplies the emotional dimension that transforms advertising into meaningful, memorable and persuasive experiences.

3.2.2. Storytelling as an Emotional Advertising Strategy

While native advertising provides the structural framework through which promotional messages become integrated into digital environments, storytelling supplies the emotional dimension that gives those messages persuasive power. Contemporary marketing increasingly recognises that consumers rarely make purchasing decisions based solely on information or technical product characteristics. Instead, they are more likely to respond to narratives that generate emotional engagement, personal identification, and long-term memorability (Fisher, 1984; Bruner, 1991).

Storytelling may be understood as the strategic use of narrative to communicate ideas, values, and commercial messages through characters, conflicts, and resolutions rather than direct promotional claims. Within influencer marketing, this narrative approach transforms advertising from a transactional act into a relational experience. Rather than simply presenting a product, influencers construct stories around everyday situations, personal challenges, aspirations or moments of vulnerability in which the promoted product appears as a natural component of the narrative rather than its primary focus.

The persuasive effectiveness of storytelling derives from its capacity to generate emotional involvement. Fisher's (1984) Narrative Paradigm argues that individuals naturally interpret reality through stories rather than through purely logical arguments. Consequently, narratives are evaluated not only for factual accuracy but also for coherence and ability to resonate with personal experience. Similarly, Bruner (1991) maintains that storytelling represents one of the fundamental ways in which human beings construct meaning and interpret the world around them. Consumers therefore tend to respond more favourably to emotionally engaging narratives than to explicit persuasive discourse.

Within digital advertising, storytelling performs several complementary functions. It captures attention in an online environment characterised by information overload, humanises brands by associating products with authentic or apparently authentic experiences, and facilitates emotional identification between audiences and content creators. As Aaker (2010) argues, stories are considerably more memorable than isolated facts because they activate both cognitive and emotional processing, increasing the likelihood that consumers will remember not only the narrative itself but also the associated brand.

Influencer marketing makes extensive use of these narrative mechanisms. Instead of relying on conventional advertising formats, influencers frequently present products through morning routines, travel experiences, wellness journeys, beauty rituals, family life, professional achievements or personal setbacks. Such narratives encourage followers to interpret recommendations as genuine experiences rather than commercial promotions. Consequently, products become integrated into the influencer's lifestyle and personal identity, making promotional content appear spontaneous, credible and authentic.

Narrative communication also plays a central role in constructing authenticity, a defining characteristic of influencer culture. Followers generally expect influencers to reveal aspects of their personal lives, share both successes and failures, and communicate in an informal, conversational style. This continuous narration of everyday experiences

creates a sense of intimacy and accessibility that strengthens relationships between influencers and their audiences. As a result, commercial collaborations are more readily accepted when they align with the influencer's established identity, values, and communication style.

Nevertheless, the growing reliance on storytelling also complicates the distinction between authentic communication and commercial persuasion. Because promotional messages are embedded within emotionally engaging narratives, audiences may fail to recognise the persuasive intent underlying the content. This reinforces the importance of transparency and advertising disclosure discussed in the previous section. Storytelling therefore represents both one of the greatest strengths of influencer marketing and one of its principal ethical challenges.

The increasing importance of narrative communication demonstrates that successful digital advertising is no longer centred primarily on products but on experiences, emotions and identities. Within influencer marketing, stories function not merely as creative communication techniques but as persuasive frameworks through which commercial messages acquire credibility, emotional significance and long-term memorability.

The theoretical observations discussed above become particularly evident in concrete advertising campaigns. The following Romanian case study illustrates how native advertising and storytelling operate simultaneously to increase persuasive effectiveness while reducing audiences' perception of commercial intent.

3.2.3. A Romanian Case Study: SERAI and Narrative Advertising

The persuasive mechanisms discussed above may be illustrated through a Romanian example of narrative advertising published on Facebook. Instead of relying on conventional product-centred promotion, the SERAI Anti-Hair Loss Conditioner campaign demonstrates how storytelling can transform commercial communication into an emotionally engaging experience by integrating persuasive messages within a personal life narrative.

The advertisement opens not with the presentation of the product being promoted but with the story of Elena, a 39-year-old nurse from Ploiești who struggles with progressive hair loss. The account unfolds gradually, describing months of unsuccessful treatments, repeated medical consultations, emotional frustration and the psychological consequences associated with the condition. Throughout most of the text, the product itself remains absent. Instead, readers are invited to identify with the protagonist's vulnerability, uncertainty and persistent search for an effective solution.

Only after emotional engagement has been established does the commercial message emerge. The conditioner is introduced as a dermatologist's recommendation and presented as the successful resolution of Elena's problem. Structurally, the advertisement follows the classical narrative sequence identified in storytelling theory—exposition, conflict, rising tension and resolution (Bruner, 1991). Rather than interrupting the reading experience, the promotional message becomes the logical conclusion of the story itself.

From a marketing perspective, this example illustrates several defining characteristics of native advertising. First, the commercial element is deliberately postponed until readers have already invested attention and emotional involvement in the narrative. Second, the advertised product is introduced through lived experience rather than technical specifications or direct promotional claims. Finally, persuasion relies primarily

on empathy, identification, and emotional resonance rather than explicit commercial discourse. Consequently, audiences are encouraged to associate the brand with hope, personal transformation and regained self-confidence rather than with its functional characteristics alone.

The SERAI advertisement further demonstrates how storytelling reshapes the relationship between advertising and consumer attention. Instead of competing for visibility through slogans or overt promotional language, the text maintains readers' interest by stimulating curiosity about the protagonist's experience and its eventual outcome. In this way, persuasion operates indirectly through emotional engagement rather than through conventional advertising techniques. As discussed by Fisher (1984) and Bruner (1991), narratives encourage audiences to construct meaning through identification with characters and situations, making persuasive messages more memorable and emotionally compelling.

At the same time, the campaign highlights several important ethical concerns. Readers who become emotionally invested in Elena's story may not immediately recognise its commercial purpose. Because the narrative closely resembles a personal testimony or editorial article, persuasive intent remains partially concealed until the final stages of the text. This ambiguity exemplifies one of the principal dilemmas associated with native advertising. Although narrative communication increases audience engagement and message effectiveness, it may simultaneously reduce consumers' ability to recognise advertising, particularly when sponsorship disclosure is absent or insufficiently visible (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016; Johnson et al., 2019).

This case study demonstrates that storytelling has become considerably more than a creative communication technique. In contemporary digital marketing, narratives serve as persuasive architectures that transform products into meaningful experiences and commercial messages into seemingly authentic life stories. The effectiveness of such campaigns, therefore, depends not only on the quality of the narrative itself but also on maintaining an appropriate balance among emotional persuasion, authenticity, and ethical transparency. The SERAI example confirms that native advertising and storytelling operate most effectively when they create genuine emotional engagement while remaining consistent with the principles of responsible and transparent communication.

3.3. Credibility, Authenticity and Audience Engagement

The effectiveness of influencer marketing depends not only on visibility but also on digital creators' ability to establish credibility and cultivate authentic relationships with their online communities. Unlike traditional advertising, where persuasion is primarily associated with brand authority, influencer marketing transfers much of this persuasive power to the individual communicating the promotional message. Consequently, credibility has become one of the most valuable resources in contemporary digital communication, shaping audience attitudes, purchase intentions and long-term perceptions of brands (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Trust is constructed gradually through a combination of expertise, authenticity and sustained interaction with followers. Influencers generally specialise in niches—such as fashion, beauty, technology, travel or fitness—and build their reputation through the consistency, quality and perceived usefulness of the content they create. However, expertise alone is rarely sufficient. As Abidin (2016) argues, audiences also expect authenticity, understood as the perception that influencers communicate honestly, share

genuine experiences and recommend products that align with their personal values and lifestyles. This perceived authenticity encourages followers to interpret recommendations as sincere opinions rather than purely commercial endorsements, reinforcing both trust and persuasive effectiveness.

Continuous interaction further strengthens these relationships. Unlike celebrities participating in traditional endorsement campaigns, influencers communicate directly with their audience through comments, direct messages, live sessions, and interactive features such as polls, questions, and quizzes on social media platforms. These practices create a sense of accessibility and participation, allowing followers to feel involved in the influencer's everyday life. Such interactions contribute to the formation of online communities in which communication becomes reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Followers are no longer passive recipients of advertising but active participants who provide feedback, ask questions, share experiences and influence future content. This ongoing dialogue strengthens audience engagement while simultaneously increasing confidence in promotional recommendations.

Another important determinant of campaign effectiveness is the degree of compatibility between the influencer and the promoted brand. Successful collaborations depend on **audience overlaps** - that is, the correspondence between the demographic profile, interests and expectations of an influencer's followers and the target market of the advertised product (Balaban, 2021). Equally important is **value congruence**. Products that naturally complement an influencer's established identity are generally perceived as more authentic and persuasive than collaborations that appear motivated exclusively by financial considerations. When audiences perceive inconsistencies between an influencer's public image and the brand they promote, trust may decline rapidly, negatively affecting both the creator and the company.

The increasing professionalisation of influencer marketing has also highlighted the importance of audience quality. Not every online community represents genuine engagement. Some creators artificially inflate their popularity through purchased followers, automated accounts or engagement bots, practices that distort campaign metrics and reduce advertising effectiveness. As De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) demonstrate, audience size alone is an unreliable indicator of persuasive potential, making the quality and authenticity of engagement considerably more valuable criteria when selecting influencers for commercial collaborations. Consequently, brands and marketing agencies increasingly rely on specialised analytical tools to evaluate audience authenticity, interaction quality and demographic compatibility before initiating partnerships.

Another important advantage of influencer marketing is the ability to evaluate campaign performance using measurable digital metrics. Social media platforms provide advertisers with immediate access to metrics such as engagement rate, impressions, click-through rate (CTR), conversion rate, reach and audience growth. These indicators allow companies to assess not only the visibility of promotional campaigns but also their ability to generate engagement, stimulate consumer interest, and influence purchasing behaviour. Continuous access to performance data further enables brands to optimise ongoing campaigns and refine future communication strategies based on audience responses.

Ultimately, credibility, authenticity and audience engagement should be understood as interconnected dimensions rather than independent variables. Expertise generates authority, authenticity fosters trust, interaction strengthens community, and appropriate brand congruence reinforces persuasive effectiveness. Together, these

elements explain why influencer marketing has become one of the most successful communication strategies in the contemporary digital environment. More importantly, they demonstrate that persuasive influence depends less on the size of an audience than on the quality of the relationships established between influencers, brands and the communities they cultivate.

3.4. Platform-Specific Influencer Marketing Strategies

Social media platforms are more than technological channels for distributing promotional messages. Each platform possesses a distinctive communicative architecture, technical affordances, audience profile and interaction logic, all of which influence the strategies adopted by influencers and brands. Consequently, successful influencer marketing requires adapting promotional practices to the communicative conventions, aesthetics and expectations associated with each digital environment rather than replicating identical campaigns across multiple platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

The choice of platform shapes not only the format of promotional communication but also the relationships established between influencers and their communities. Long-form video environments encourage detailed explanations and educational content; visually oriented platforms privilege aesthetic presentation and lifestyle branding, while algorithm-driven short-video applications reward spontaneity, entertainment and viral dissemination. Understanding these differences is essential for explaining why identical campaigns may produce substantially different outcomes depending on the digital ecosystem in which they are delivered.

3.4.1. YouTube: Long-Form Content and Expertise

Among contemporary social media platforms, YouTube remains one of the most influential environments for digital marketing because it combines visual communication with long-form storytelling and educational content. Unlike platforms centred on short, rapidly consumed videos, YouTube enables creators to produce detailed product reviews, tutorials, demonstrations, interviews, and explanatory content that provide consumers with extensive information before making purchasing decisions.

One of YouTube's principal strengths lies in the credibility generated through depth of presentation. Viewers often invest several minutes—or even considerably longer—watching reviews, comparisons, or demonstrations, allowing influencers to share personal experiences, discuss advantages and disadvantages, answer frequently asked questions, and illustrate products in realistic everyday contexts. Such extended formats foster perceptions of expertise, authenticity and transparency, particularly when creators are recognised specialists in fields such as technology, beauty, fitness, education or finance (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The platform also promotes sustained interaction through comments, subscriptions, community posts and live broadcasts, enabling audiences to participate in ongoing discussions that extend beyond the original video. User comments often serve as an additional source of information, shaping perceptions of both the influencer and the advertised product. This collaborative exchange strengthens community engagement while simultaneously reinforcing the credibility of promotional messages.

Consequently, YouTube combines persuasive audiovisual communication with community validation, making it particularly effective for products and services that require detailed explanation, comparison or demonstration before consumers make purchasing decisions. Rather than relying on rapid emotional appeal alone, persuasion on YouTube is built through information, expertise and sustained audience engagement.

3.4.2. Instagram: Visual Identity and Lifestyle Branding

Instagram has established itself as one of the most influential platforms for influencer marketing because of its strong emphasis on visual communication, aesthetic coherence and lifestyle branding. Rather than providing extensive information, the platform encourages creators to construct carefully curated personal identities through photographs, short-form videos, Stories and Reels that seamlessly integrate products into visually appealing representations of everyday life. As a result, advertising becomes closely associated with aspiration, self-expression and personal identity rather than with direct product promotion.

Within this visual ecosystem, promotional content commonly takes the form of fashion inspiration, beauty routines, travel experiences, wellness practices and lifestyle recommendations. Products are rarely presented as isolated commercial objects; instead, they become integral elements of a desirable way of life that audiences are encouraged to identify with. Consequently, persuasive effectiveness depends not only on the perceived quality of the advertised product but also on the symbolic meanings attached to the influencer's carefully constructed public image (Abidin, 2016).

Instagram also facilitates a wide range of commercial collaborations, including sponsored posts, affiliate marketing, product reviews, account takeovers and brand-sponsored live sessions. Features such as Stories and Reels reinforce the impression of spontaneity and immediacy, while permanent posts contribute to the long-term construction of a coherent digital identity. Romanian influencers such as Sânziana Negru and Carmen Grebenișan illustrate how aesthetic consistency, cinematic visual storytelling and personal branding can be successfully integrated into commercial collaborations without disrupting the continuity of their online narratives.

Ultimately, Instagram demonstrates that persuasive communication increasingly depends on visual identity rather than on explicit promotional discourse. Brands become embedded within carefully curated lifestyles, allowing advertising to function as a natural extension of personal identity rather than as an external commercial intervention.

3.4.3. TikTok: Algorithmic Visibility and Viral Engagement

TikTok has rapidly become one of the most influential social media platforms, fundamentally reshaping influencer marketing through its algorithm-driven content distribution model. Unlike platforms where visibility depends primarily on the size of an established audience, TikTok's recommendation algorithm enables even relatively unknown creators to reach millions of users when their content generates high levels of engagement. Consequently, visibility is determined less by popularity alone than by audience interaction and algorithmic amplification.

This algorithmic logic has encouraged the production of short, dynamic, and highly entertaining videos that capture attention within the first few seconds. Trends, challenges, music, humour, creative editing and rapid visual transitions have become defining characteristics of TikTok communication, transforming entertainment into one of

the platform's principal persuasive mechanisms. Brands therefore compete not only for consumer attention but also for algorithmic visibility within an environment characterised by continuous content circulation.

Another distinctive feature of TikTok is the central role of electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Recommendations, product demonstrations, and user experiences spread rapidly through reposts, duets, stitches, and comment interactions, amplifying both positive and negative product evaluations. As a result, purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced not only by influencers themselves but also by the participatory behaviour of users who reinterpret, reproduce and redistribute promotional content. This collaborative circulation considerably extends the reach and persuasive potential of advertising messages.

Romanian creators such as Andreea BLD exemplify this communication strategy by incorporating fashion recommendations into everyday lifestyle videos instead of producing overtly commercial advertisements. Promotional content appears natural because products are integrated into everyday activities, reinforcing perceptions of authenticity while encouraging audience participation and interaction.

TikTok illustrates how contemporary digital persuasion is increasingly shaped by algorithmic visibility, participatory culture and user-generated interaction. In this environment, successful influencer marketing depends not only on creative content production but also on understanding the platform's recommendation system and the dynamics through which audiences collectively amplify promotional communication.

3.4.4. X (formerly Twitter): Opinion Leadership and Public Discourse

Compared with Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, X (formerly Twitter) occupies a more specialised position within the influencer marketing ecosystem. Rather than focusing on lifestyle branding or visual self-presentation, the platform is primarily associated with news dissemination, political communication, public debate and real-time information exchange. Consequently, its commercial potential is generally more limited in sectors such as fashion, beauty or lifestyle, while remaining highly relevant for campaigns centred on current affairs, technology, business, institutional communication and public policy.

Nevertheless, X continues to play an important role in communication strategies that depend on opinion leadership, professional expertise and immediate interaction with audiences. Influencers active on the platform are frequently journalists, entrepreneurs, politicians, academics or technology specialists whose authority derives primarily from knowledge, professional reputation and active participation in public debate rather than from visual identity or lifestyle representation. As a result, persuasive communication on X relies less on storytelling and aesthetic branding and more on credibility, immediacy and informed participation in ongoing public conversations.

The platform also enables rapid dissemination of information through reposts, hashtags and real-time discussions, making it particularly effective for public awareness campaigns, corporate communication and crisis management. In these contexts, influence is generated through expertise, timely intervention and sustained participation in public discourse rather than through emotional lifestyle narratives or highly curated visual content.

Platform Comparison

The comparison of these four platforms demonstrates that influencer marketing should not be regarded as a uniform communication strategy. Instead, promotional

practices are shaped by the technological affordances, communicative conventions and audience expectations associated with each digital environment (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Consequently, the effectiveness of influencer campaigns depends not only on selecting appropriate influencers but also on adapting communication strategies to each platform's distinctive characteristics.

YouTube privileges expertise, detailed explanation and educational content; Instagram emphasises visual identity, aesthetic coherence and lifestyle branding; TikTok rewards creativity, entertainment, algorithmic visibility and participatory engagement; while X remains primarily a platform for opinion leadership, professional expertise and public discourse. Each environment therefore encourages different forms of persuasive communication and requires distinct approaches to audience engagement.

Taken together, these observations demonstrate that platform architecture plays a decisive role in shaping contemporary influencer marketing. Successful campaigns are not simply transferred from one social media platform to another; they are carefully adapted to the interaction patterns, communicative conventions and expectations of each digital community. Understanding these platform-specific dynamics is therefore essential for explaining both the opportunities and the limitations of influencer marketing within today's rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

3.5. AI Influencers and the Future of Digital Persuasion

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has given rise to a new category of digital communicators: AI-generated or virtual influencers. Unlike human creators, these computer-generated personas are designed and managed by companies or creative agencies, yet they perform many of the same functions as their human counterparts. They publish content, interact with followers, endorse products, participate in advertising campaigns and collaborate with international brands while maintaining carefully constructed online identities. Their emergence represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary digital marketing because it challenges traditional assumptions regarding authenticity, credibility and the nature of persuasive communication.

Although entirely artificial, virtual influencers operate according to the same communication principles as human content creators. They cultivate recognisable personalities, maintain active social media profiles, respond to comments, participate in cultural events and share apparently personal experiences. As Marwick (2015) observes in her discussion of digital self-presentation, online influence increasingly depends on the strategic construction of identity rather than on physical presence alone. Consequently, these virtual personas are deliberately designed to reproduce the spontaneity, accessibility and emotional proximity commonly associated with successful influencer marketing. As Moustakas et al. (2020) further demonstrate, audiences frequently interact with AI-generated influencers in ways remarkably similar to their interactions with human creators, despite being fully aware that these identities are fictional.

One of the best-known examples is Lil Miquela, a CGI-generated influencer created in 2016 by the Los Angeles-based company Brud. Presented as a nineteen-year-old musician, fashion enthusiast and social activist, Lil Miquela rapidly became one of the world's most recognisable virtual influencers, collaborating with internationally renowned brands such as Prada, Calvin Klein, Dior, Chanel, Samsung and Pacsun. Beyond commercial partnerships, she has participated in awareness campaigns, fundraising

initiatives and public debates, illustrating the increasingly complex social and cultural roles assumed by AI-generated influencers within contemporary digital communication.

From a communication perspective, Lil Miquela demonstrates that successful influencer marketing depends less on the communicator's physical existence than on the coherence of the narrative surrounding them. Her creators have constructed a sophisticated digital persona through carefully orchestrated storytelling, fictional relationships, public controversies and sustained interaction with followers. Even episodes such as the staged hacking of her Instagram account were incorporated into this evolving narrative, reinforcing the illusion of authenticity while simultaneously generating media attention and audience engagement.

The growing popularity of virtual influencers illustrates what may be described as the *authenticity paradox* of digital communication. Traditionally, authenticity has been regarded as one of the principal conditions for establishing trust between influencers and their audiences. AI-generated personas challenge this assumption by demonstrating that users may willingly engage with entirely fictional identities, provided that these remain narratively coherent, emotionally engaging and aesthetically convincing. Authenticity therefore becomes less a matter of factual reality than of narrative consistency and perceived credibility (Sands et al., 2022).

From a marketing perspective, AI-generated influencers offer several strategic advantages. They are available continuously, their public image can be carefully controlled, they are immune to many of the reputational risks associated with human celebrities and they enable brands to develop highly consistent international campaigns. Unlike human influencers, virtual personas cannot unexpectedly become involved in scandals unrelated to the promoted brand, making them attractive long-term commercial partners. At the same time, however, these advantages generate important ethical and philosophical questions concerning transparency, accountability and the increasingly blurred distinction between human communication and algorithmically generated content.

The expansion of AI-generated influencers also reflects broader transformations associated with the digital economy and generative artificial intelligence. As these technologies become increasingly sophisticated, future advertising campaigns are likely to combine human creators, virtual influencers and fully AI-generated content within the same promotional ecosystem. Consumers will therefore require new forms of digital literacy capable of distinguishing between authentic lived experience, fictional narratives and algorithmically generated persuasion.

Ultimately, the emergence of AI-generated influencers should be understood not merely as a technological innovation but as evidence of a profound transformation in the nature of digital advertising. Contemporary influencer marketing is gradually evolving from the promotion of products through human experience toward the construction of persuasive digital identities whose effectiveness depends on narrative coherence, emotional engagement and audience participation rather than on physical existence alone. This evolution suggests that future research on influencer marketing must increasingly address the intersections between artificial intelligence, identity construction, consumer trust and ethical responsibility.

3.6. Ethical Challenges and the Future of Influencer Marketing

The rapid expansion of influencer marketing has created unprecedented opportunities for brands and digital creators, while simultaneously generating complex

ethical challenges related to transparency, authenticity and consumer protection. The same characteristics that make influencer marketing highly persuasive—its conversational tone, emotional storytelling and perceived authenticity—may also obscure the commercial nature of promotional messages. As a result, responsible communication has become a central concern in contemporary advertising research (Boerman, 2020; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

One of the most widely debated issues concerns advertising disclosure. Native advertising intentionally reduces the visual and linguistic distinctions between commercial and non-commercial content, enabling promotional messages to blend naturally into users' online experiences. Although this strategy increases audience engagement, it may also diminish consumers' ability to recognise persuasive intent. According to the *Persuasion Knowledge Model*, individuals evaluate advertising differently once they become aware that they are the targets of persuasive communication (Friestad & Wright, 1994). When sponsored content is clearly identified, audiences activate their persuasion knowledge and interpret promotional messages more critically. Conversely, when commercial intent remains concealed, recommendations are more likely to be perceived as genuine personal opinions, increasing persuasive effectiveness while simultaneously raising important ethical concerns.

For this reason, regulatory authorities and digital platforms increasingly require creators to disclose commercial collaborations through labels such as *Paid Partnership*, *#ad*, *#advertisement* and *#sponsored*. Such disclosures enable consumers to distinguish editorial or personal content from paid promotion while simultaneously protecting the long-term credibility of both influencers and brands. As Evans et al. (2017) and Johnson et al. (2019) demonstrate, transparent disclosure does not necessarily reduce advertising effectiveness. On the contrary, openness may strengthen consumer trust by signalling honesty, accountability and professional responsibility.

Another significant challenge concerns the preservation of authenticity. Throughout this study, authenticity has been identified as one of the principal foundations of influencer credibility. Nevertheless, increasing commercialisation may gradually erode this perception. Audiences often become sceptical when creators promote numerous unrelated products, frequently change brand partnerships or endorse goods that appear inconsistent with their previously expressed values and lifestyles. Excessive commercialisation may therefore weaken parasocial relationships, reduce consumer trust and ultimately diminish the persuasive effectiveness of influencer marketing.

The emergence of AI-generated influencers further complicates these debates. Unlike human creators, virtual personas do not possess genuine experiences, emotions or personal opinions, despite presenting themselves through highly convincing digital narratives. Their growing presence challenges traditional understandings of authenticity while raising new questions concerning accountability, transparency and consumer awareness. As artificial intelligence continues to reshape digital communication, future regulatory frameworks will likely need to address not only the disclosure of sponsored content but also the identification of AI-generated identities and synthetic media.

Ethical responsibility extends well beyond advertising disclosure. Influencers increasingly shape public attitudes towards beauty standards, mental health, environmental sustainability, political issues and consumer behaviour. Their recommendations may influence purchasing decisions, lifestyle choices and even public opinion. Consequently, digital creators occupy a position that combines commercial influence with considerable

social responsibility. Controversies involving creators who promote unrealistic body ideals, misinformation or socially irresponsible behaviour illustrate how reputational risks affect not only individual influencers but also the brands associated with them.

Ultimately, the future of influencer marketing will depend on maintaining an appropriate balance between commercial effectiveness and ethical responsibility. Consumers increasingly value transparency, consistency and authenticity, while legislators, regulatory authorities and digital platforms continue to develop mechanisms designed to protect online audiences. As influencer marketing evolves alongside artificial intelligence, synthetic media and increasingly sophisticated forms of native advertising, responsible communication will become not merely a legal requirement but a strategic competitive advantage. The long-term success of influencer marketing will therefore depend not only on technological innovation or persuasive creativity but also on preserving the trust that underpins every meaningful relationship between brands, creators and digital communities.

4. Conclusions

Over the past decade, influencer marketing has evolved from a niche promotional practice into one of the defining communication strategies of the contemporary digital economy. This transition from traditional advertising to creator-centred communication reflects broader transformations in media consumption, consumer behaviour, and the relationships between brands and audiences. Rather than relying on direct commercial persuasion, digital creators promote products through credibility, emotional engagement and storytelling, embedding promotional messages within narratives that resemble authentic everyday experiences. As a result, advertising has become increasingly integrated into ordinary digital interactions rather than remaining a separate commercial activity.

The present study has argued that influencer marketing should be understood simultaneously as a form of **native advertising** and **narrative advertising**. Native advertising enables commercial messages to blend naturally into the communicative conventions of social media platforms, while storytelling provides the emotional structure that encourages identification, trust and memorability. Together, these complementary mechanisms explain much of the persuasive effectiveness of influencer campaigns and distinguish them from more traditional forms of commercial communication.

The analysis further demonstrates that successful influencer campaigns depend on a complex interaction of factors extending well beyond audience size. Credibility, authenticity, expertise, sustained interaction with followers and compatibility between influencers and brands all contribute to persuasive effectiveness. Similarly, the communicative architecture of different social media platforms shapes promotional practices in distinct ways, requiring advertisers to adapt their strategies to platform-specific forms of interaction rather than applying identical communication models across multiple digital environments.

Particular attention has been devoted to the emergence of AI-generated influencers, a phenomenon that illustrates the continuing transformation of digital communication. Virtual influencers challenge conventional assumptions regarding authenticity by demonstrating that persuasive relationships may develop even between consumers and entirely fictional digital identities. This evolution suggests that future research on digital persuasion will increasingly need to address the intersections between artificial intelligence, identity construction, algorithmic communication and consumer trust.

The study has also highlighted the ethical challenges accompanying the rapid expansion of influencer marketing. Native advertising and storytelling derive much of their persuasive power from their ability to blur the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial communication. While these strategies increase emotional engagement, they may simultaneously reduce consumers' ability to recognise persuasive intent. Consequently, transparent advertising disclosure, responsible communication and ethical accountability emerge not merely as legal requirements but as essential conditions for maintaining public trust within digital advertising ecosystems.

One of the principal contributions of this paper lies in integrating concepts that are frequently examined separately within existing literature. Rather than approaching influencer marketing exclusively as a promotional technique, the study conceptualises it as a complex communication ecosystem in which storytelling, native advertising, authenticity, platform architecture, audience engagement and ethical responsibility function as interconnected dimensions. By combining theoretical perspectives with illustrative Romanian and international examples, the paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital influence is constructed, negotiated and sustained across contemporary social media environments.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The analysis relies primarily on qualitative interpretation and illustrative case studies rather than quantitative audience data, experimental research or interviews with influencers and marketing professionals. Consequently, the findings should be regarded as conceptual rather than statistically generalisable. Future research could extend the present discussion through comparative cross-cultural studies, longitudinal analyses of influencer–audience relationships, experimental investigations of consumer responses to sponsored content, or empirical research examining the reception of AI-generated influencers across different demographic groups.

As digital technologies continue to evolve, influencer marketing will inevitably undergo further transformation. Artificial intelligence, immersive media, synthetic content, and increasingly sophisticated recommendation algorithms are likely to reshape the relationships among brands, creators, and consumers. Within this rapidly changing environment, however, long-term success will depend not merely on technological innovation but on preserving the principles that have always underpinned persuasive communication: credibility, authenticity, transparency and meaningful human relationships. Ultimately, the future of influencer marketing will be determined not by how convincingly technology can imitate human influence, but by how responsibly that influence is created, communicated and sustained.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?" *Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity*. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342>
- Aaker, J. (2010). *Harnessing the power of stories*. Stanford Graduate School of Business.
- Balaban, D. C. (2021). *Publicitatea: De la planificarea strategică la implementarea media*. Polirom.
- Balaban, D. C., & Szabolics, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Social media influencerii și rolul lor publicitar*. Tritonic.
- Boerman, S. C. (2020). The effects of the standardized Instagram disclosure for micro- and meso-influencers. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 103, 199–207.

- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21.
- Campbell, C., & Marks, L. J. (2015). Good native advertising isn't a secret. *Business Horizons*, 58(6), 599–606.
- Chirică, M. (2024). *Celebritățile digitale și publicitatea: Utilizarea platformelor Instagram și TikTok dintr-o perspectivă comparativă*. Tritonic.
- Cialdini, R. B. (2024). *Psihologia persuasiunii: Totul despre influențare. Amplifică-ți puterea de convingere și învață să te aperi de manipulare* (3rd ed.). Business Tech International Press.
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828.
- Evans, N. J., Phua, J., Lim, J., & Jun, H. (2017). Disclosing Instagram influencer advertising: The effects of disclosure language on advertising recognition, attitudes, and behavioral intent. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 17(2), 138–149.
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51(1), 1–22.
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*, 37(1), 90–92.
- Friestad, M., & Wright, P. (1994). The persuasion knowledge model: How people cope with persuasion attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(1), 1–31.
- Johnson, B. K., Potocki, B., & Veldhuis, J. (2019). Is that my friend or an advert? The effectiveness of Instagram native advertisements posing as social posts. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 24(3), 108–125.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68.
- Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251.
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73.
- Marwick, A. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27(1), 137–160.
- Moustakas, E., Lamba, N., Mahmoud, D., & Ranganathan, C. (2020). Blurring lines between fiction and reality: Perspectives of experts on marketing effectiveness of virtual influencers. *International Journal of Information Management*, 54, Article 102103.
- Sands, S., Campbell, C., Plangger, K., Ferraro, C., & Tsao, H.-Y. (2022). Too real to be fake: The influence of virtual influencers on consumer responses. *Psychology & Marketing*, 39(8), 1524–1538.
- SERAI Nature. (n.d.). *SERAI Anti-Hair Loss Conditioner*. <https://serainature.ro/pages/anticadere-2>
- Sprout Social. (2025). *Virtual influencers: What brands need to know*. <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/virtual-influencers/>
- Wojdyski, B. W., & Evans, N. J. (2016). Going native: Effects of disclosure position and language on the recognition and evaluation of online native advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 45(2), 157–168.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.