

THE IMPACT OF INFLUENCERS AND INFLUENCER MARKETING ON THE FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION: PERCEPTIONS OF CROATIAN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The terms influencer and influencer marketing are relatively new. However, they have raised research issues and gained a lot of attention in various research areas, ranging from social psychology, information and communication technology to marketing. Nevertheless, the impact of influencers on the adoption of new products and services, brand awareness and brand recognition is undeniable. Despite the impressive growth and popularity of influencers and influencer marketing in general, there is a lack of academic and practitioner research on the impact influencers have on the formation of public opinion. This study attempts to provide better insight and understanding of this subject as well as to represent a stepping stone for future research in this area. The theoretical starting points of this paper accentuate the knowledge based on influencers and influencer marketing, the formation of public opinion and the role of media in the formation of public opinion. The main objective of this paper is to determine the impact of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion on everyday topics among a sample of 142 students from University North in Croatia from May to July 2022. The paper examines the differences in students' perception of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion with regard to gender, age, level of study and type of study. The obtained results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the surveyed students about the influence of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion according to the level and type of study and provide new insights for marketing and media practitioners.

Keywords: *influencer, influencer marketing, public opinion*

JEL classification: *M31*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has changed the world of computers and the way people communicate more than any innovation and technological achievement ever before in history. The telegraph, telephone, radio and computers in some way paved the way for the development of the Internet. Due to the many positive changes it brought shortly after its appearance, such as the fact that it enabled broadcasts all over the world and it serves it is an exceptional mechanism for the dissemination of information and interaction between individuals regardless of their geographical location, the Internet became very popular very quickly (Leiner *et al.*, 2009).

Since it has supplanted all other mass media, the Internet can be considered as the strongest and most important mass media in the world today. It is nowadays used through social media as a cultural venue and a main tool for marketing, spreading marketing and political messages, engaging the public and raising public awareness towards culture. Social media (otherwise known as social networking sites) became very popular in the past decade due to the “increasing proliferation and affordability of internet-enabled devices such as mobile devices and tablets” (Gandhi *et al.*, 2015).

There are many scholarly articles that tackle the issue of public opinions and the impact of influencers through the social media. For example, Moukarzel *et al.* (2021) tackled the issue of influencers’ impact on public opinion regarding the issue of breastfeeding, while Spálová *et al.* (2021) focused on the impact of influencers on public’s opinion on brands, finding significant distrust of politicians and political communication on brands, and a very significant impact of influencers on the public’s opinion. Moreover, Evans & Fill (2000) claim influencers to be „opinion formers and opinion leaders in the marketing communications process”. In their study, they focus on the UK motor market and explore the opinion formers and opinion leaders in the market, the utilization of press releases and events, the degree of objectivity of the messages and opinions conveyed through this influencing process as well as the measurement and evaluation methods regarding the effectiveness of PR activities. Social media is proven to be a very “powerful platform through which people’s attitudes and behaviours may be influenced both positively and negatively in relation to socio-political issues” (Haase & Worthington, 2023) and the consumption of influencers’ social media and content/opinion can provide “the same cultivation impact as consuming news on any offline platform, particularly during times of threat” (Omar & Casero-Ripollés, 2023).

The main objective of this paper is to present the concept of influencer marketing and to empirically assess the students' attitudes about influencers and influencer marketing on social media. Namely, the authors have surveyed a sample of 142 students from the University North in Croatia, in the period May – July 2022. This is one of the first empirical studies that assess the impact of influencers and influencer marketing in Croatia for that matter.

This paper is organized as follows: the second section provides a theoretical background and literature review on influencers and influencer marketing, the formation of public opinion and the role of media in the formation of public opinion. The third section presents the surveyed sample and used methodology. Empirical results from the study have been laid out in Section 4, together with a discussion of the results. The last, Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

2.1. Influencers and influencer marketing

Interestingly, there is still a lack of universal criteria of influence in the literature (Zhuang *et al.*, 2021). However, social influence refers to the “behavioural change of individuals affected by others in a network”, and represents “an intuitive and well-accepted phenomenon in social networks” (Gandhi *et al.*, 2015).

Influencer marketing is rapidly growing and its global market size “more than tripled between 2017 and 2020, from three billion to 9.7 billion U.S. dollars in the three years alone”. Influencers are operating virtually in very different industries, starting with the cosmetics, apparel and shoe industry, to the fitness and electronic gaming industries (Nafees *et al.*, 2021).

The basic definition of the concept of influencers and influencer marketing lies in the etymological analysis of the term itself, and this term could be referred to as opinion leader and brand ambassador (Spalova *et al.*, 2021).

The influencer profession is enlisted nowadays as a modern profession. An influencer is a person who has an impact on other people's opinions, attitudes and willingness to purchase a recommended product or a service. Moreover, an influencer is a person who "has the power to influence the purchase of others due to their knowledge, authority, position, relationship with their audience or some other characteristic" (Keček *et al.*, 2022). The role of social media influencers (otherwise known as SMI) is becoming more and more essential to the processes of branding, brand management and shaping of consumer brand attitudes (Nafees *et al.*, 2021).

In regard to their number of followers, influencers are divided into six types of influencers (Mesarić and Gregurec, 2021):

- 1) Social Butterflies
- 2) Reporters
- 3) Citizens
- 4) Brand Ambassadors
- 5) Authority
- 6) Activists

The social butterflies are present at many social events and know many important people. They are more popular than influential, and their influence is indirect. Reporters function like classic media. They share reliable information with friends and followers, and their posts are often shared and have a direct impact on other people. Citizens are influencers who are regular Internet users, but by commenting on social networks they leave reviews and have an influence on the increase or decrease of sales. Brand ambassadors are people who are respected in a certain area and want to monetize their knowledge and reputation through the transparent promotion of a service or product. If they are persuasive, the brand they are promoting will have more sales. Authoritative influencers are people who are an authority in a certain area, so a certain amount of people trust them. They influence the Internet, and mostly outside it. Influencer activists are the most influential, and the easiest to move other users to buy and participate in activities (Mesarić & Gregurec, 2021).

Through their relationship with their audience, influencers can shape behaviours and opinions, they are considered to be opinion leaders, and through communication through social networks, they can influence people who follow them so that they make a purchase decision (Szcurski, 2017). With their posts and content on social networks, influencers lead trends, promote ideas, promote products and services, and all this is very interesting to study since it is a new phenomenon. Moukarzel *et al.* (2021) explored the perspectives and impact influencers have on online breastfeeding communication strategies. They found that in such delicate and health-related subjects, the opinion and interpretation of the WHO code by influencers could reveal „deep ideological differences” and could possibly be dangerous to their followers. However, they found this to be a trigger for future constructive communication efforts with public health stakeholders.

2.2. Formation of public opinion

The term public opinion has been in use for many years. Moreover, it has been in constant use since the 18th century. Shepard (1909) discusses the concept of public opinion more than a hundred years ago. He distinguished public opinion from the opinion of an individual and stated that even those positions on which the majority of society members can agree cannot always be considered public opinion. Public opinion is an opinion on which members of the public agree, but not in such a way that this agreement came about by chance. Public opinion implies the accumulation of individual views on a topic (Tanta, 2007). It represents a dynamic process of expressing, adapting or harmonizing ideas on the way to the collective

determination of the course of action (Cutlip, 2005). Attitudes and values are crucial in the development of public opinion on a topic (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023).

A public opinion is a form of social consciousness that differs from individual and can have three meanings (Tomić, 2008):

- Public opinion as all publicly expressed opinions
- Public opinion as all opinions related to a subject of public interest
- Public opinion as a group of generally accepted opinions in the general public

The influence of public opinion can be seen on many issues such as politics, elections, culture, fashion, literature, art, consumption, marketing and public relations (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Public opinion can be formed on all issues on which a part of the public may agree or disagree. Public opinion can be researched and its research has a great role in democratic societies, but it requires a responsible approach. The results of public opinion polls influence political decision-making, and because they are politically sensitive and have a social responsibility, public opinion polls are conducted following very strict criteria (Lanza Posavec, 2015).

2.3. The role of media in the formation of public opinion

The media influence people's way of thinking, their emotions and actions. There are two types of media influence – overt media influence and gradual media influence. The obvious influence of the media is easily noticeable because it refers to easily visible things. The gradual influence of the media is not as easily observed as the overt influence and it takes place continuously from the moment someone receives the media message. (Potter, 2011).

The media have an influence on different parts of a person's life, which Potter (2011) defines as four forms of influence:

- 1) Influence of the media on cognition
- 2) Influence of the media on attitudes
- 3) Influence of the media on the emotional state
- 4) Influence of the media on behaviour.

Regardless of whether the influence of the media is easy to see or whether a person needs to be observed in order to see that influence, today it is increasingly clear that the media has an increasing influence on the entire population. There is a thesis that many people invest large amounts of money in the media, so the media begin to play a huge role in the formation of public opinion. Due to the influx of money, the media get the feeling that their power has begun to grow and they begin to use their power in an egoistic and aggressive way, and anyone who has money can control the media and through media control could influence public opinion (Pavelić, 2021). The development of new media has caused a form of crisis, resulting in an unorganized and chaotic space in which traditional journalism has been suppressed and journalists have become like soldiers fighting for profit. For the owners of media companies, the profit of the portal is more important than the credibility of the information placed in the public (Kovačić and Baran, 2018). Influencers are opinion leaders on social networks (Szczurski, 2017). If they are seen as such, it is clear that they influence shaping public opinion. One can look at the example of influencers who promote a healthy lifestyle and exercise and the number of their followers on social networks. Among these followers, influencers shape attitudes and values and, through this process, influence public opinion.

3. RESEARCH DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this research, the data were collected using an anonymous questionnaire. 142 undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students of the University North in Croatia participated in the survey in the time frame of May – July 2022. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents according to gender, age group, field of study and level of study.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to gender, age, field of study and level of study

		Number respondents	of Percentage
Gender	Male	49	35
	Female	93	65
Age groups	18-25	82	58
	26-55	60	42
Type of study	Social	92	65
	Technical	30	21
	Biomedicine and healthcare	20	14
Level of study	Undergraduate	75	53
	Graduate	32	23
	Postgraduate	35	24

(Source: Posavec (2022))

Female students predominated in the sample. The first age group, from 18 to 25 years old, surpassed the second age group, which consisted of 42% of respondents. Students in the social field of science responded the most to the survey, and students of biomedicine and healthcare the least. More than half of the respondents were undergraduate students.

Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used in the data analysis. Basic descriptive statistical indicators were calculated to describe the basic features of the research data. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to examine the distribution of the data obtained from the research. It was observed that it deviates statistically significantly from the normal distribution, so the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to test the statistically significant differences between the groups of respondents. Multiple comparison tests detected samples that were statistically significantly different. Differences confirmed at the level $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conducted survey sought to examine whether influencers and influencer marketing on social networks have an impact on the formation of public opinion on everyday topics, for example, the emergence of the COVID-19 virus or the war in Ukraine among students of the University North in Croatia. Respondents evaluated their attitudes on a five-point scale (starting with 1 – they are not influential at all to 5 – they are extremely influential).

Table 2. Respondents' views on the influence of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion by gender

Gender				Mann-Whitney test	
Male		Female		Z	p
Mean	Median	Mean	Median		
3,43	4	3,49	4	-0,187	0,849

(Source: Posavec (2022))

It is evident from Table 2 that slightly higher average value of the impact of influencers on the formation of public opinion on everyday topics was calculated for female students. The median value was the same for male and female respondents. According to the results of the Mann-Whitney test, no statistically significant difference was confirmed in the attitudes between male and female students about the influence of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion. Since these are respondents who share the common feature of belonging to the student population, this group of respondents equally, regardless of gender, perceives the influence of influencers on the formation of public opinion.

Table 3. Students' attitudes about influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion by age groups

Age groups				Mann-Whitney test	
18-25		26-55		Z	p
Mean	Median	Mean	Median		
3,43	4	3,53	4	-0,436	0,659

(Source: Posavec (2022))

A slightly higher average value of the analyzed variable was calculated for students of the second age group, while the median for both age groups is the same. According to the results of the Mann-Whitney test, there is no statistically significant difference in the attitudes

between students of the first and second age groups about the influence of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion. Both age groups of students are equally exposed to the activities of influencers, and as today the boundaries between different age groups are shifted and mixed, it is understandable that there is not even a statistically significant difference in the influence of influencers on the formation of public opinion, which would depend on the age of the respondents.

Table 4. Students' attitudes about influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion by the level of study

Level of study						Kruskal-Wallis test	
Undergraduate		Graduate		Postgraduate			
Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	H	p
3,21	3	3,66	4	3,86	4	7765	0,020

(Source: Posavec (2022))

The lowest average grades and median values were detected among undergraduate students. According to the results of the Kruskal-Wallis test, there is a statistically significant difference between the surveyed students in their views on influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion. The test for multiple comparisons determined that, regarding the influence of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion on everyday topics, undergraduate and postgraduate students differ statistically significantly.

Table 5. Students' attitudes about influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion by type of study

Type of Study						Kruskal-Wallis test	
Technical		Social		Biomedicine and healthcare			
Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	H	p
2,93	3	3,57	4	3,85	4,5	7159	0,028

(Source: Posavec (2022))

The highest average grades and median values were detected for students of biomedicine and healthcare. According to the results of the Kruskal-Wallis test, in the case of the influence of influencers on the formation of public opinion, there is at least one group of students that, considering the type of study, is statistically significantly different from the others. Regarding the impact of influencers on the formation of public opinion on everyday topics, statistically significant differences were confirmed between students of technical studies and biomedicine and healthcare.

5. CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to investigate and explore the opinions and views of students regarding the impact of influencers and influencer marketing on public opinion. A sample of 142 students from University North in Croatia during the period of May to July 2022 has been analyzed and surveyed with a structured questionnaire. The results reveal rather interesting insights. Namely, no statistically significant difference was confirmed in the attitudes between male and female students about the influence of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion. In addition, the age of the students does not affect the impact of influencers in the formation of public opinion. However, the impact of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion on everyday topics significantly differs among undergraduate and postgraduate students and among students of technical studies and biomedicine and healthcare.

The current study, however, has a few limitations which will be addressed in future work. Namely, the greatest limitation is the relatively small analyzed sample. For this reason, in future work, authors plan to incorporate a bigger sample and possibly even students from other universities in Croatia. Additionally, the research is limited to the impact of influencers and influencer marketing on the formation of public opinion regarding everyday topics and this could be extended to each area of interest, such as branding, brand management and even political elections.

From a practical perspective, the research results from this study could be used as a benchmark for launching new marketing strategies and enhancing the effectiveness and availability of existing marketing strategies. Moreover, the results revealed that influencers and influence marketing do have a big impact on the formation of public opinion among students, which could also be applied to steer public opinion in certain directions, and possibly even to support decisions and impact opinions during political election processes. This is a subject the authors plan to cover in future research.

This study sheds light on a relatively new research field, i.e. influencer marketing and the impact influencers hold on the formation of public opinion. This is a topic that is topical and needs to be addressed, and this paper could represent a stepping stone for future research in this area and an incentive for other scholars to look into this subject more closely.

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