Consumer perceptions of *influencers'* sway over product purchasing

Percepción de los consumidores respecto al peso que ejercen en ellos los influencers *para la compra de productos*

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This article considers consumer perceptions in order to analyze influencers in relation to product purchasing. To this end, a survey was conducted among a group of social media users between the ages of 16 and 34 years. Using principal component analysis, it was determined that the perceived dimensions of influencers coincide with those of traditional opinion leaders.

KEYWORDS: Influencer, social media, digital marketing, consume.

En este artículo se analiza a los influencers en la compra de productos considerando las percepciones de los consumidores. Para ello se recurre a una encuesta dirigida a usuarios de redes sociales con edades comprendidas entre los 16 y los 34 años. Mediante un análisis de componentes principales, se determina que las dimensiones percibidas en los influencers coinciden con las de un líder de opinión tradicional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Influencer, redes sociales, marketing digital, consumo.

Introduction

The use of social media has become widespread among the population. 66.8% of Spaniards between the ages of 16 and 74 used social media sites in 2016 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2017). Such sites have thus become not just a means of leisure and entertainment, but a reference source for topics of interest. Social media has also come to play a key role in companies, offering them a two-fold advantage. On one hand, it cuts the cost of disseminating information in comparison to traditional media, and on the other, it is more easily targeted at specific groups of consumers (Simeone & Russo, 2017).

In view of this, a successful communication strategy should take into account the fact that anyone with a presence on social media can exert a positive influence if they act as a brand ambassador. For example, Dulceida, a Spanish fashion blogger who had 2 million followers on the social networking site Instagram in 2017, could increase awareness of a textile brand simply by mentioning it. However, a negative influence can also be exerted by *influencers* who call for product boycotts or create controversy. For instance, Nestlé cut its ties to Spanish YouTuber JPelirrojo because he was too happy about the death of a bullfighter (Verne, 2016).

Consequently, it seems essential to gain a thorough understanding of the so-called influencers who are present on social media. The general objective of this article is thus to analyze social media influencers in relation to consumer purchasing behavior. Specifically, it aims to identify multiple dimensions in the perceived traits of digital influencers, to discover whether there are segments of consumers that value these traits differently and, finally, to determine how important influencers are as a source of advertising relative to the medium employed (traditional vs. social media).

Influencers: concept, traits and advertising use

According to the Real Academia Española (RAE, 2017), the concept of influence, as it relates to someone who wields it, denotes someone with power or authority whose intervention may result in an advantage,

favor or benefit. Keller, Fay and Berry (2007) describe influencers as people who consume a great deal of information and are much more likely than average to seek out information and to share ideas with and make recommendations to other people. For Zanette, Brito and Coutinho (2013), influencers are individuals whose opinions and behavior affect the decisions or choices of other people. With respect in particular to influencers who are present on social media, according to the online dictionary *Marketing Directo* (2017) these influencers are people who produce information on products, services or, thanks to the social media phenomenon, any current issue or topic. They often specialize in or discuss specific subjects or areas, and generally tend to interact and engage with other users, sharing their opinions, thoughts, ideas and reflections.

Fresno García, Daly and Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo (2016) define "influencer" as a new sort of independent social agent with the ability to influence the attitudes of audiences using online social media, in competition with and in parallel to professional media outlets. For Biran, Rosenthal, Andreas, McKeown and Ramboweiri (2012), an influencer in an online discussion is a person who actively participates in a disorganized group and resolves a discussion, a person who provides an answer to a posted question which is accepted after the discussion, or a person who brings knowledge to a discussion. A digital influencer could thus be defined as someone who, by means of social media posts, establishes a connection with their followers and conveys credibility with respect to a given topic.

To identify an effective digital influencer, consideration must be given not only to the number of their followers, but also to the influencer's quality. It is therefore of interest to determine the traits that a person should exhibit in order to be considered influential. According to Bakshy, Hofman, Mason and Watts (2011), influencers should have credibility, expertise, enthusiasm and connectivity. Armano (2011) points out that credibility is important and determines their ability to influence through activities and transparency that help build their reputation. Social media expertise is not gained in courses, but through participation and adding value to a social system (Armano, 2011). For instance, influencers may draw on their knowledge of certain subjects to

write articles and share their knowledge with their followers (Redacción Antevenio, 2016). Some individuals have profound expertise in a certain subject, have an extraordinary number of contacts in their social network, or are exceptionally persuasive (Gladwell, in Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot & Scott, 2007).

Trust is also linked to influence. If a person doesn't inspire enough trust, it is highly unlikely that they will become a digital influencer. There are many ways to inspire trust in the user. One of the best is, for example, for an influencer who is working with a brand or promoting a specific product to try it out and show it to users, sharing the experience with them (Redacción Antevenio, 2016). Communication skills are another essential trait in digital influencers. They must communicate very effectively with their followers. In fact, their ability to socialize and communicate causes the number of their followers to increase each day (Redacción Antevenio, 2016).

Given the array of traits that an influencer should possess, this paper hypothesizes that these traits can be grouped into dimensions based on their relationship to one another. Raghupathi and Fogel (2015), for example, found that when there was a perception that the person posting ads on Facebook did so with a lack of self-interest (i.e. out of benevolence) and was being honest and truthful (i.e. acting with integrity), purchases of the advertised product increased significantly.

Furthermore, various authors, such as Schwartz et al. (2013) and Zhang, Moe and Schweidel (2017), have highlighted that the same messages on social media can be perceived differently by people depending on their own personal characteristics (age, gender, etc.). However, the perceived traits of social media influencers have not been associated with the characteristics of the audience. It thus seems appropriate to segment the market of social media users taking into account not only the perceived traits of digital influencers but also the sociodemographic profile of readers on social media. Given the growth of the Internet, there are countless opportunities to influence purchasing decisions, and identifying the relevant segments is of key importance (Lyons & Henderson, 2005).

Given the range of traits described above, it seems clear that there are different types of influencers. Indeed, Villaveces (2017) distinguishes

between people who champion a company, ordinary individuals such as, for example, teenagers, brand ambassadors, professionals and famous people or celebrities. Bakshy et al. (2011) believe that ordinary people who communicate with their friends, for instance, may be considered influential, but so may journalists, semi-public figures, celebrities and civil servants. It's clear, however, that these different types of influencers have the ability to influence very different numbers of people.

Social media has become a key element of companies' strategies to promote their products. According to Gil-Or (2010), 88% of companies use social networks to supplement their marketing operations. Companies with large communication budgets use social media along combination with traditional communication channels. In contrast, companies with smaller communication budgets use social media as their primary marketing medium.

One of the features that make the Internet and social networking sites a key means of communication in any corporate strategy is that they enable direct and immediate contact between the company and consumers. They are thus an ideal forum for enabling advertising messages to be heard and for instilling trust in them (Gangadharbatla, 2008). In fact, according to IAB Spain (2017), 47% of users have a favorable perception of the presence of advertising on social media, rating it positively, and just 18% don't like it at all. The data reveal that social media has an influence on the purchasing process of 52% of the users surveyed. In summary, as Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009) point out, social networks are replacing traditional media (TV, radio, etc.), which are in decline among today's youth.

METHODS

The data in this paper was collected via a survey that was conducted on a population of male and female social media users aged 16 to 34 years in Valencia, Spain. This age range was chosen because it has the largest number of active social media users in Spain (INE, 2007). Individuals in this age bracket also make up a population group commonly referred to as "millennials".

The sample size was 205 respondents, resulting in a margin of error of ± 6.98% in the worst-case scenario with a confidence level of 95.5%.

Stratified sampling by age and district was used to select the sample. The geographic variable of district was used to control possible variation of parameters such as socio-economic status (higher- or lower-income neighborhoods). Surveys were conducted individually in June and July of 2017, with respondents selected using the random route method.

The survey included questions about the type of social media used. Information was also collected on how important various influencer traits were considered to be when purchasing products, and their influence on purchases of four different product categories (fashion, technology, leisure travel and alcoholic drinks). Both of these aspects were assessed using a five-point scale where 1=not important at all and 5=very important. The items used in the survey to evaluate influencers' traits were taken from Redacción Antevenio (2016) and Armano (2011). The survey also contained a question which suggested various alternatives for the purpose of assessing the influence of media and advertising sources on product purchases, and it ended with a question on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Principal component factor analysis was used to obtain the perceived dimensions of influencers. The ratings assigned to the various traits of social media influencers were used to segment the market using two-stage cluster analysis. Conjoint analysis was used to assess the importance of influencers as a source of advertising relative to the specific medium used. All prior analyses were performed using the software SPSS 16.0. Finally, with respect to the sample profile, 55.6% were female, the average age of the sample as a whole was 26.4 years, and 44.4% had university studies. Respondents cited WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, in that order, as the most frequently-used social media, while Twitter, Snapchat and Google+ were used less often.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dimensions of digital influencers
After performing various principal component analyses using different extraction methods and evaluating the alternatives based on their interpretability, a three-component solution with Varimax rotation was chosen. As shown in Table 1, the three components explained 66.5%

of the total variance, which is higher than the level of acceptability of 60% (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 2008). In addition, the internal consistency of the constructs was assessed with Cronbach's alpha, and all of them were above the suggested level of 0.7. Similarly, the feasibility of factor analysis was verified by the KMO value of 0.869, which indicated a strong correlation.

TABLE 1

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF THE TRAITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Variable	Factors		
	Apparent lack of self-interest	Empathy	Perceived expertise
Perceived as independent and autonomous	0.784		
Acts honestly and consistently	0.781		
Opinions can be trusted	0.765		
Expresses ideas well		0.820	
Is easy to relate to, friendly		0.761	
I like the content they post		0.628	
Answers questions and inquiries		0.478	
Conveys mastery and command of topics discussed			0.820
Seems to have a high level of knowledge			0.780
Enables you to stay current on new trends			0.686
% of variance explained	47.0	10.6	8.8
Cronbach's alpha	0.795	0.774	0.757

Source: created by the authors.

The first component, which explains almost half of the total variance (47%), was labeled "Apparent lack of self-interest" because it included various attributes of that nature, such as seeming to act independently and autonomously, seeming to act honestly and consistently and the ability to trust the influencer's opinions. This result seems to highlight

that, in contrast to the suspicion and mistrust aroused by messages sent by companies themselves, influencers may play a key role in attaining trust and perceived reliability in the marketplace. In view of this, to remain credible the influencer and the brand in question must share a connection; they need to share the same philosophy. For example, Andrea Compton, a YouTube content creator who had over half a million subscribers in 2017, has said that "in this world you have to be true to who you are. If somebody catches you in a lie, they won't forgive you and it'll sink you" (PRNoticias, 2017).

The second component explains almost 11% of the total variance and is called "Empathy" because it involves how the message recipient feels about the influencer, as evidenced by the variables: good expression of ideas, friendly and relatable, posts enjoyable content, answers any questions asked. The "Empathy" dimension would measure the quality of the interactions, and would thus be a valuable addition to a quantitative method of identifying influencers (Anger & Kittl, 2011). One example is Rubius, a YouTuber who typically plans his videos based on his followers' requests. Users value him because he shows them that he is concerned with and listens to them. Ultimately, this is one of the key traits that enable a person to become a true digital influencer (Redacción Antevenio, 2016).

Finally, the third component, which explains roughly 9% of the total variance, is labeled "Perceived expertise". It encompasses three variables that are considered to be traits of an expert on a given topic: they convey mastery and command of the topic being discussed, they seem to have a high level of knowledge and they stay on top of current trends. Digital influencers therefore tend to transmit information that they consider unique and reliable (Smith et al., 2007). Otherwise, a lack of credibility as an expert could lead to decline in their influence. In addition, an influencer's reputation as an expert is attested to not only by the number of their followers but also by the content that they post, which can be evaluated with voting systems such as "likes" on Facebook (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). In other words, their messages must be and seem to be credible, or they won't resonate with consumers.

The three dimensions perceived in digital influencers by the survey respondents in this study coincide with those that Kelman identified for opinion leaders in the 1950s and 1960s (Dubois & Rovira, 1998). In other words, empathy, expertise and a lack of self-interest are also the three traits that a digital influencer must possess. This empirical result confirms the findings of Lyons and Henderson (2005): "Online opinion leaders share many traits with their traditional marketplace counterparts" (p. 326). Influencers, then, will be opinion leaders if they are perceived to possess these three traits. Despite this, a YouTuber who has a large number of followers on social media, for example, but who is not able to sway the community's perceptions based on a lack of self-interest and on expertise, can only offer media reach, not influence in the way that opinion leaders do. Therefore, when choosing a person who can influence purchases of a company's products via social media, it must be borne in mind that not just anyone will do. Moreover, although there are differences between online and offline communication, there are also some aspects that aren't replaced by others, and continue to be valid as traits perceived in opinion leaders in both social and traditional media. Tsang and Zhou (2005), for instance, found that product information may be circulated by online influencers, but that contact with them in offline environments was also important.

Market segmentation based on influencer dimensions

Factor scores, which constitute composite measures of each factor calculated for each individual, were used to perform segmentation with two-stage cluster analysis. Four segments were obtained as a result (see Table 2). The first segment rated the three dimensions perceived in digital influencers positively, and represented one-fourth of all survey respondents. The other three segments rated only one component positively. The fourth segment, for example, which was also the largest, only thought it was important for the influencer to appear to be acting with a lack of self-interest.

When characterizing each segment, significant differences were found in relation to gender and age bracket, and for the influence of social media on the purchase of fashion and technology products

TABLE 2

MARKET SEGMENTATION USING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER DIMENSIONS

	Segment 1	Segment 2	Segment 3	Segment 4
	(n=53)	(n=58)	(n=32)	(n=62)
	(25.9%)	(28.3%)	(15.6%)	(30.2%)
Apparent lack of self-interest **	0.88	-0.20	-1.56	0.23
Empathy **	0.48	0.77	-0.01	-1.13
Perceived expertise **	0.59	-0.72	0.55	-0.11

**, *, significant differences at 1% and 5%, respectively.

Source: created by the authors.

(Table 3). However, there were no differences between the segments in relation to level of studies completed, employment status, type of social media used or the influence of social media on the purchase of leisure travel or alcoholic drinks.

The first segment, which rated all three dimensions of influencers positively, consists mainly of women (almost 75%) of an intermediate age, that is, between 24 and 31 years (54.7%), whose fashion purchases are strongly influenced by social media. This profile likely reflects the fact that the bulk of the most influential fashion blogs are written by women who are predominantly between the ages of 20 and 30 (Navarro & Garcillán, 2016; Sábada & San Miguel, 2014). It should be noted that this segment thinks social media influencers should have all three dimensions: lack of self-interest, empathy and expertise.

Griffith (2011) believes that online influence in the fashion world is rooted in a desire to see real women with real-world clothes who speak about themselves, their daily lives, the way they dress, etc. Similarly, Ramos-Serrano and Martínez-García (2016) point out that fashion influencers (with respect to bloggers) don't act in a professional capacity, but make their experience visible. The second segment, which only considers the trait of empathy to be important, is notably comprised of very young millennials. They likely want to be seen, known and respected by means of empathy, that is, a relationship based on in-depth

knowledge (Ordun, 2015). The third segment, which only values the perceived expertise of the digital influencer, consists preponderantly of men aged 32 or more, whose purchases of technology products are heavily influenced by social media. In other words, with respect to technology products in particular, members of this segment may turn to an influencer to ask advice or due to the perceived quality of the information that they provide. This finding might be explained by the fact that younger people are generally much more engaged with technology (Schrader & McCreery, 2008), which means that older men attach more value to influencers' expertise. However, the gender characterization of this segment is at odds with the findings of other studies. Colás, González and De-Pablos (2013) found that men use social media to meet emotional needs and to strengthen self-esteem. Even so, it is possible that the nature of the product in question, technology, could explain this apparent discrepancy. Finally, the fourth segment attaches importance to an apparent lack of self-interest in digital influencers, and shows

TABLE 3

CHARACTERIZATION OF MARKET SEGMENTS BASED ON
SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER DIMENSIONS

	Segment 1	Segment 2	Segment 3	Segment 4
Gender (%) **				
Male	26.4	53.4	59.4	43.5
Female	73.6	46.6	40.6	56.5
Age bracket (%) **				
Up to 23 years	28.3	46.5	25.0	33.9
24 to 31 years	54.7	34.5	31.3	32.2
32 years or older	17.0	19.0	43.7	33.9
Influence of social media on product purchasing (average, where 1=none and 5=a great deal):				
Fashion **	4.2	3.4	3.3	3.3
Technology *	3.6	3.5	4.0	3.3

**, *, significant differences at 1% and 5%, respectively.

Source: created by authors.

intermediate values for the variables considered. For example, ratings are fairly equally distributed among the different age brackets. However, this is an important segment for brands, as those that aim to be perceived as authentic will need to use influencers who are intrinsically motivated by the inherent value of the product in question (Holt, 2002). In other words, consumers in this segment should perceive that influencers' efforts are not motivated by commercial interests.

Importance of influencers: media and sources

Finally, the role of influencers as a source of communication was analyzed relative to the specific advertising medium employed, to determine their influence on product purchasing. To this end, conjoint analysis was used to evaluate the attributes of the source, i.e. the influencer and the advertising medium. With respect to the source of the advertising message, two different influencer levels were assessed: ordinary people (not famous) and celebrities (famous). The two profiles were compared and contrasted in terms of public visibility and cost. Moreover, Pate and Adams (2013) found that endorsements by friends and by celebrities were the most influential in terms of increasing product purchases among millennials. By way of example, Bakshy et al. (2011) argue that a celebrity who tries a product on television or in a magazine ad would presumably exert a different sort of influence than a trusted friend who endorses the same product in person.

It should be noted that the advertising medium employed also plays a role in the influence exerted over the consumer, which is why the second attribute studied is the type of communication channel employed. With respect to the advertising medium, two levels were used for this variable: television (TV), as the main advertising channel, and social media, given its growing importance. This attribute was chosen because the nature of communication on social media differs from that of conventional advertising (Castelló & Pino, 2015). These factors and levels were considered and it was decided that the full profile method would be used. This method enables respondents to rate all possible stimuli (in this case, there were four). Influence on product purchasing was evaluated using ratings on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 was the strongest level of influence. The effects of the various factors

analyzed were estimated using ordinary least squares regression. The results are given in Table 4. Before proceeding to discuss this analysis, it should be highlighted that the model can be considered to be a good fit, as the Pearson correlation coefficient was close to 1, indicating a good estimate.

The message source, i.e. the influencer, was found to be the most important attribute, with respondents giving notably higher utility or satisfaction ratings to influencers who were famous. One explanation for this may be, as Dotson and Hyatt (2005) point out, that using celebrities to endorse products makes them more socially conspicuous, which means that consuming the products helps millennials to make a statement about themselves. In contrast, the advertising medium used was less important (37.1%), with social media receiving a higher utility rating than TV. This finding is in line with that of Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009), as traditional media is becoming less effective as a means of influencing individuals' behavior in light of the proliferation of social media and the corresponding decline in readers of conventional media.

In summary, in view of the findings of this study, a famous person on social media would undoubtedly constitute the advertising mix with the greatest utility in terms of consumers' product purchases. Indeed, McCormick (2016) found that using celebrity endorsers triggered an intention to buy the product advertised in millennial consumers.

TABLE 4

RESULTS OF CONJOINT ANALYSIS OF THE FULL SAMPLE

Attribute/Level	Utility	Relative importance (%)
Message source (influencer)		61.3
Ordinary person	-0.936	
Famous person	0.936	
Medium		37.1
TV	-0.160	
Social media	0.160	
Constant	5.46	

Pearson's r = 0.998

Source: created by the authors.

Moreover, the author highlighted that social media platforms were changing the advertising landscape and shaping consumers' outlook on celebrities. These findings seem to indicate that celebrities play a key role in purchasing behavior, but other ordinary people such as, for example, the celebrity's followers or fans also seem to be important, as they can send these endorsements over their social networking sites.

Conclusions

This study, which aims to expand the research available in Spanish (the original language of publication) relating to social media sites and the use of such sites by companies, enables useful conclusions to be drawn which contribute to advancing the state of the available specialized literature. The three dimensions which encompass the traits of a digital influencer that were analyzed coincide with the dimensions of a traditional opinion leader. When choosing an influencer, these findings should therefore be taken into account, and it should not be assumed that having a large number of followers creates influence. Moreover, not all social media users rate influencers equally, which is why four segments with different profiles were identified. Each segment requires customized actions. Furthermore, social media-based advertising using influencers who are famous seems to be of greater utility in terms of swaying consumers' purchasing decisions.

The originality of this paper lies in the fact that, in contrast to most studies that aim to identify influencers, which use algorithms that analyze links such as the number of friends or posts (Eirinaki, Monga & Sundaram, 2012), this study conducts an analysis based on the opinions of social media users. Moreover, it is precisely the fact that this study's findings can be used to improve these algorithms which is one of its practical implications. Booth and Matic (2011) describe a set of variables for measuring social media influence which include, among others, the volume and level of media that cite the blogger in question. This indicator could reflect the "Perceived expertise" dimension. Similarly, the "Empathy" dimension could explain the inclusion of indicators relating to engagement, that is, influencers' interactions on social media. In view of this, an area for future development might be the creation or revision

of algorithms to identify influencers based on the three dimensions that have been identified herein.

Furthermore, the segmentation performed provides a deeper understanding of how consumers perceive social media influencers with regard to their various traits. In view of this, another of this study's practical implications is that it offers evidence that companies that plan to use influencers should consider their traits, the type of product in question and the profile of the potential consumers in order to achieve a strong impact on followers. Not all of the traits exhibited by influencers operate in the same way. In fact, as Zhang et al. (2017) point out, identifying key aspects is important in order to characterize the interests of the individuals involved and adjust advertising content by means of specific messages. For instance, for a fashion brand with a potential female market, the influencer should possess all three dimensions identified in this study in order to exert a notable influence. This could contribute to increasing sales and improving profitability by boosting the effectiveness of sales communications. The main takeaway is that an influencer isn't the right answer for all products.

Finally, the main limitation of this study is that it focuses on the millennial generation and on certain types of products. In the future, it would be desirable to contrast these findings with findings for earlier generations such as, for example, Baby Boomers, and for other products such as cultural goods (movies, music, books and video games) which have a strong presence on social media.

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