IMPACT OF INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS ON WORD-OF-MOUTH

Case: Ismael Harb Vera

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The objective of the thesis was to study Instagram users’ perception of Instagram influencers and to study an Instagram micro-influencer who has a real-life experience in influence marketing. The objective was formed based on the purpose of the thesis to create an overview of influence marketing on social media and to disclose a role of Instagram influencers as a part of online word-of-mouth mechanism.

The thesis project is narrowed down to Instagram influencers. Therefore, the Instagram platform was chosen as research social media channel due to its high importance among Instagram influencers and a significant number of users worldwide. The two types of Instagram profiles are described. The features of a personal profile are explained briefly. The features of a business profile are included with a detailed description. Moreover, the thesis disclosed such topics as authenticity and content creation as significant components of online word-of-mouth principle, and micro-influencers because of a researched Instagram influencer and effectiveness of this type of influencers on online influence marketing.

In order to achieve objectives of the thesis the qualitative research method in a format of a focused interview and the quantitative research method in a format of an online survey were applied for primary information and data collection on the twelfth week of the year 2019. The secondary research was conducted by using the latest published literature, articles and websites.

The theoretical background collected as a part of the secondary research creates a full overview of the research topic. The results of the research provide information about Instagram users’ perception of Instagram influencers and underline the most important aspects affecting online word-of-mouth on Instagram. Therefore, the results of the thesis research provide companies with information that can be utilized in order to include Instagram influencers in marketing planning, and influencers with information that can support the development of the relationships with their followers.

Key words: Instagram, influence marketing, influencer, Instagram influencer, social media.
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**SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

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<tr>
<td>AI</td>
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<td>WOM</td>
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1 INTRODUCTION

The power of social media is an unconditional fact. The fast growth of social media effect encourages companies to involve more components into their marketing plans. Social media influencers become active support and an integral part of marketing daily activities via an Instagram social media channel. (Buffer 2019.)

The objective of this thesis project is to disclose a generic principle of influence marketing through the Instagram social media platform and to prove that Instagram social media influencers have an impact on online word-of-mouth mechanism. The following targets also take place during the research: to prove that influencers can be used as a tool to increase customer engagement, and to study Instagram users' perception of Instagram influencers. The thesis is narrowed down to one particular Instagram influencer – Ismael Harb Vera.

The secondary research is based on the most recent, in a time frame of the past decade, literature, scientific and academic articles, and websites.

The theoretical framework is focused on social media and influence marketing, Instagram as a marketing communication tool, and influencers as a promotion and customer engagement plan. The limitation of both topics and influencers' representatives is applied due to the target to study a current marketing trend in an overall perspective and to illustrate it with a real-life example.

In order to achieve goals of the thesis both qualitative and quantitative research methods of collecting primary information and data are applied. The qualitative research method is represented as an online interview with a chosen social media influencer. This helps to understand the relationship between the chosen influencer and Instagram users, and to study a real-life experience of being an influencer. The quantitative research method is represented as a survey conducted among Instagram users. The survey supports in analyzing Instagram users perception and recognition of Instagram influencers.
2 ISMAEL HARB VERA

Ismael Harb Vera – @iharvera – is a Spanish visual content creator and a travel and lifestyle social media micro-influencer mainly active on the Instagram platform. Ismael has started his path of becoming an influencer during his seasonal job as a marketing representative of a local tourism company in Rovaniemi, Finland. As an influencer, Ismael is focused on showing his home country as well as other places he travels to from the local point of view. The digital content is represented in Instagram Stories, IGTV, Instagram Stories Highlights, and video and photo sharing. Also, Ismael follows a seasonal change of the colored scheme: winter posts are dominant with white tones, summer posts include a blue color, and spring and autumn content have a bright and colorful theme mixed with brown tones (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Screenshots of Ismael Harb Vera’s Instagram Profile (Instagram 2019)](image)

The current amount of followers on Instagram’s account is twenty-three thousand five hundred and thirty eight as of the thirteenth of March 2019. This
grants the influencer with the eighty six thousand thirty third place in a category of travel influence profiles on Instagram (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot from InfluencerDB (InfluencerDB 2019)

Ismael is an active user of Instagram and its functionalities. As a travel influencer, he adds a geotag to every post created. This is done due to the fact that he wants to share a visited place with his audience. In order to spread awareness of the content generated on Instagram he adds hashtags in a comment under a post, and tags other representatives of travel and lifestyle communities and companies on a picture or a video uploaded. The process of engaging with the followers is done via answering to the comments left under his content (Figure 3).
The influencer is an ambassador of the Away Company. It is a travel and lifestyle brand producing luggage and travel essentials (The Away Company 2019). Ismael spreads the awareness of their suitcases via tags on his posts and in Instagram Stories publications (Figure 4).

Since 2019 Ismael's Instagram profile has a verified authenticity confirmed by Fohr. The Fohr is a social media platform focused on creating a database of social media influencers to prove that influencers’ all followers and followers’ activity on profiles are real (Fohr 2019). It means that all engagement Ismael’s Instagram profile has with the followers is natural and actual (Figure 5).
Ismael Harb Vera was chosen as a representative of social media influencers for this thesis project due to fast and significant growth from a regular user of Instagram to a brand ambassador.
3 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

3.1 Social Media

Marketing communication mix – or promotion mix – is a combination of marketing components used to aim marketing communication plan to engage with customers. Advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct and digital marketing are marketing components. Each one of them plays an essential role in a communication mix. Social media is one of the tools used to apply the purpose of direct and digital marketing responsible for interaction with customers in order to build trustworthy and long-term oriented relationships through a variety of platforms. (Armstrong & Kotler 2017, 168-170, 235, 241.)

Social media covers many aspects and requirements of a brand-customer relationship. It is based on a bidirectional connection between companies and customers. One the one hand, it is called customer-generated media. Customers want to share their opinions and experiences within a brand, and they want to be heard. Social media is an opportunity for customers to interact with other customers. On the other hand, social media is a foundation for dialog creation. It enables companies to have a concrete focus on a target group in order to create digital content, able to satisfy customers’ expectations. The content has to be relevant, up-to-date and informative. The more a company researches and evaluates customers’ desires and feedbacks the more it is able to filter and improve the quality of the provided content. It is also an opportunity to activate a co-creation process. Hence, a model of interaction between customers and companies has reshaped. The customers are active participants of the process aimed at both satisfying their needs and meeting companies’ strategies such as an increase of brand awareness, a creation of valuable customer journey and strengthening the customers’ loyalty. (Mangold & Faulds 2009, 357-358; Briones, Kuch, Fisher & Jin 2011, 37-38; Boone & Kurtz 2007, 488; Zhang, Guo, Hu & Liu 2016, 229-230.)
According to Statista, the number of time people spend on social media on a daily basis has increased by fifty percent from 2012 to 2017 and is equivalent to two hours and fifteen minutes per day on average (Figure 6).

![Figure 6. Daily Time Spent on Social Networking by Internet Users Worldwide (Statista 2019a)](image)

For the same period of time, a number of social media users worldwide has increased from one point four billion to two point forty-six billion people and is equivalent to a growth of nearly seventy-six percent (Figure 7).
Figure 7. Number of Social Media Users Worldwide in Billions (Statista 2018b)

Time is a valuable resource. Social media is a fast way to reach a large amount of people and helps to spread awareness. Cost-effectiveness is a proportion of money and resources invested in a promotion campaign to the size of an audience a campaign can possibly attract. Therefore, social media is a tool which allows spending the least to receive the most. (Armstrong & Kotler 2017, 244-245.)

The twenty-first century is an era of globalization and digitalization. It can be concluded that social media is an effective digital marketing tool with the following characteristics: targeted and personal, interactive, and time- and cost-effective. It is the second only to such tools as content marketing, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, and big data. Social media facilitates establishing a transparent communication digital platform. (Statista 2018a.)

3.2 Social Media Channels

Social media channels are platforms created and used in terms of social media with a purpose to communicate, entertain and inform. These platforms are categorized into blogs, social networking sites, content communities, forums
and bulletin boards, and content aggregators. Every category is responsible for a certain type of digital entertainment. Firstly, blogs are online journals used to tell a story with additional functionalities such as storing audio, video and photo files. Secondly, social networks are applications aimed at providing a communication platform where people can exchange information. Thirdly, content communities represent themed sites oriented on a specific target group. Fourthly, forums and bulletin boards are similar to social networks. An exception is that forums and bulletin boards are platforms for exchanging information concerning a certain topic or theme. Lastly, content aggregators represent a customized type of applications. They are hybrids of the special needs of a user. (Constantinides 2014, 56; Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2008, 47-51.)

Social networking sites are the most common type of social media channels. They provide easy access for both customers and companies. Moreover, they are the main platforms for strengthening such a phenomenon as a word-of-mouth (WOM) influence. These social media channels emphasize the value of customers' interaction with each other as well as with brands. (Ho, Leong, Looi & Chuah 2018, 50; Constantinides 2014, 57; Simon & Tossan 2018, 175, 177.) For example, Facebook and Instagram are one of the representatives of social networking platforms. Facebook is a free channel used to communicate with people by sharing lifetime moments via personal account (Rouse 2014). Instagram is a free mobile application created for photo and video sharing within a community (Instagram 2019).
4 INSTAGRAM

4.1 About Instagram

Instagram is a free social networking service launched by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010. It is a communication platform, which facilitates users from expanding their network by expressing their opinions and views via the creation of various digital content. Instagram is also a marketing tool used to strengthen relationships with existing customers and to reach new ones among over a billion users. (Statista 2019b; Instagram 2019; Liu & Suh 2017, 13.)

The following functionalities of the platform represent content creation and sharing process on Instagram: photo and video publication, IGTV, Instagram Stories, Instagram Stories Highlights, and Live Video.

Photo and Video Publication
Photo and video sharing, also known as an Instagram post, create a feed for followers of an account.

Instagram Stories
Instagram Stories are used for creating a post available for twenty-four hours only. This functionality attracts millions of users on a daily basis (Ward 2017).

Instagram Stories Highlights
Instagram Stories Highlights let users save previously posted Instagram Stories separated to categories of users’ choices.

Live Video
Live Video translation is real-time content sharing.

IGTV
IGTV is the latest added functionality. The launch of it took place in 2018. IGTV is a tool to store vertical videos longer than one minute.
The following main functionalities of the platform represent communication process on Instagram: Instagram Questions and Instagram Survey, Instagram Direct, content evaluation, and comments.

**Instagram Questions and Instagram Survey**
Both Instagram Questions and Instagram Survey are part of Instagram Stories. Questions are used in order to interact with a profile’s followers and be able to provide information concerning a raised topic. The survey has a purpose to get closer to followers and to learn about their opinions about a raised topic.

**Instagram Direct**
Instagram Direct is a functionality launched in 2013. The idea behind it is to emphasize the communication process and to strengthen networking perspectives.

**Content Evaluation and Comments**
Content evaluation and comments are one of the most important components. The amount of likes and comments left under a post as well as the number of views is a measure of customer engagement rate.

Recognition and categorization of the content are facilitated with hashtags, geotags and captions. Hashtags are space-free words, which help to specify a post. Geotags provide information concerning a geographical location a post belongs to. Captions are an additional description where a user can disclose the purpose of a post and share his or her opinion. (Instagram 2019; Instagram Business 2019; Klosterman, Plumeyer, Böger & Decker 2018, 5.)

The focus of the thesis project is influencers on Instagram as a part of a social media marketing plan. Therefore, a detailed description of Instagram tools is limited to business profiles. Thus, the general functionalities of the application are explained briefly.
4.2 Instagram for Business

Instagram has a reputation of the most popular social media channel among social media influencers. On the one hand, it is a platform where users have freedom of action. People are able to focus on the content they want to see and want to create. The highest engagement rate among other social networking sites is a proving fact. (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez 2018, 2, 7; Warren 2018.) On the other hand, Instagram has a strategy to be a strong marketing tool as an advertising channel (Djafarova & Rushworth 2016, 1).

Instagram has two different types of user accounts available: personal and business. The personal account is a standard account available for every person who uses the application. The business profile is an advanced profile launched in 2016. Instagram has over twenty-five millions business profiles worldwide. They are created in order to track statistics of the profile and have an overview of followers’ activities on a profile to increase customer engagement. Therefore, brands, celebrities, and social media influencers mostly use business accounts. Instagram Insights, contact information, and promotions of posts are additional features of a business account compared to a personal account.

**Instagram Insights**

Instagram Insights is an analytical functionality with the same features individual for every business profile. The features are divided into three categories: activity, content, and audience. The activity feature evaluates a number of people reached, the way they found a content generated by a business account and actions taken while visiting a profile. The statistic overview is weekly and is separated by a day of the week. The content section reflects all posts generated during a week. It includes general publications on an account, Instagram Stories and promoted posts. The audience statistics provide information concerning the main locations, age range, gender, and the average of the most active times of a profile’s followers. The top locations can be viewed both by countries and cities. The age range can be viewed as general and as gender-related. The
activity timeframe can be viewed by both hours and days and supports in choosing the right time to post content on a profile.

Contact Information
Contact options are additional information provided on a profile to facilitate the networking process. A user is able to share a phone number, an email address, and an address.

Promotion
Promotion is a pay functionality of the platform allowing converting a created post into an advertisement. Every promoted post has two targets. The first target is to create a following-up link aimed at inviting people to take the desired action. A user can choose to send people to profile, profiles’ website, profile’s direct messages or shop front. It is a pay functionality of the platform. The second target is to increase awareness and reach new people. A user is able to choose a target audience for a sponsored post. It can be automatic or customized. An automatic option is focused on people similar to followers of a profile. The manual option is focused to reach people based on chosen location, interests, and age and gender. The promotion of the post can be available up to thirty days for a budget from one euro per day to one thousand euros per day (in Europe). The duration and investment amount affect distribution. The longer and the more expensive a promotion is the more people are reached. (Instagram 2019; Instagram Business 2019; Perez 2016; Leto 2018.)
5 SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE MARKETING

5.1 Influence Marketing and Word-of-Mouth in Social Media

Influence marketing is a strategy of focusing marketing activities on people, who have social importance, in order to affect customers’ opinions, experiences, and increase customer engagement rate. The aim is to build an emotional connection between brand representatives, also called brand ambassadors, and brand consumers. This connection is directly proportional to how well the company is able to understand its customers and how much the customers trust the company. (Brown & Fiorella 2013, 1-2.)

The principle of influence marketing lies in the inherent implementation of word-of-mouth phenomenon. In other words, it is an ability of the brand to provide the right influential ambassador, who is able to deliver a message to the customers and affect their perception of this message. (Brown & Fiorella 2013, 2, 58.) Word-of-mouth is the importance of the opinions of people who are familiar to a person. These people have the ability to inspire and change the perception of values. This way of influencing individuals is based on both direct and indirect contact between people. People create a feeling of close relationship with those to whom they are drawn. It contributes to spreading the effect of word-of-mouth and is a significant component in the development of transforming opinions, behavior, and values. In marketing, customers are able to listen to those who have social significance. (Thoumrungroje 2014, 8-9.)

There are four principles – also known as the Four A’s – of the word-of-mouth phenomenon, which are taken as a basis: audience, acceptance, amplification, and application (Figure 8).
Firstly, the audience is the target group any marketing strategy is focused around. The group definition and specifications depend on a campaign the company runs. Secondly, the acceptance is a measure of customers’ trust in a marketing strategy a company has. Thirdly, the application is considered as a capability to use social media channels. Information in terms of social media channels spreads fast and has a high influence effect on consumers. Therefore, both wrong and right decisions made by the companies will immediately have an outcome. Hence, it is important for companies to follow a strategy of understanding how to use social media tools in order to stay invisible behind the message they send to the customers. Lastly, the amplification stands for ensuring that the company is able to reach the audience. A high stream of data via different channels surrounds the customers. Thus, influence marketing has to be a strictly navigated and clear strategy for the company. (Brown & Fiorella 2013, 2, 58-63.) The Four A’s can be considered as an analytical tool of the influence marketing. The target of the tool is to study factors affecting a marketing campaign in order to meet expectations and desirable results in the end.
Online word-of-mouth, also called electronic word-of-mouth, is a digital version of traditional word-of-mouth. Social media is a distribution channel. It allows companies to access a large audience and to be able to activate influence marketing worldwide. This underlines the power of the traditional word-of-mouth. (Sedera, Lokuge, Atapattu & Gretzel 2017, 826-827.) Instagram is a strategically important platform for online word-of-mouth implementation. This social networking site allows users to belong to communities based on interests and content they want to see. The customers can easily find members of the same community they belong to in order to expand the networking. Community selection is based on similar interests, values, suppositions, and admirations. Moreover, the growth of Instagram users audience is significant. People have a big variety of profiles to follow. Therefore, Instagram is a database of potential brand ambassadors for companies. (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017, 1-3; Simon & Tossan 2018, 177.)

The trust is one of the key aspects leading the influence marketing. According to the Nielsen Company, eighty-three percent of customers rely on suggestions and recommendations received from people they know. This rate is the highest among other marketing distribution channels. (The Nielsen Company 2015, 3, 7.) Therefore, the popularity and effectiveness of both traditional and online word-of-mouth are explained by a high level of trust created via constant interaction between customers and people they follow or admire.

5.2 Customer Online Engagement

Social media is an online gate for building and developing the brand-customer relationship. These digital bonds are based on trust, loyalty, and understanding called customer engagement. In other words, customer online engagement is an emotional attachment of consumers to certain brands via social media channels. (Harrigan, Evers, Miles & Daly 2017, 388-389.) Moreover, it is one of the most important measures of a marketing strategy for a company. A rate of the customer online engagement is a figure whether or not the company understands and follows its consumers. The more the company focuses on increasing a level of commitment to listening to its customers and provides only
relevant and desired digital content for them, the more the customers are loyal. It means that people trust the information they receive, they get attached to the content generated for them and they are open to help the company to grow. (Zhang et al. 2016, 230.)

Online customer engagement is a significant measure of the brands’ online performance. Nowadays customers are active users of social media platforms. Hence, consumers expect brands to be agile, flexible, and respectful social media content generators. For example, the engagement level increases when companies provide an online tool for bidirectional communication with their customers. Formation of customer engagement is a long and challenging path. The trust and customers’ satisfaction stay at the forefront when considering a larger picture of the marketing strategy. They bring the value to both the company and the brand-customer relationship. (Mangold & Faulds 2009, 361; Briones et al. 2011, 38.)

5.3 Influencers

Social influence is the ability of individuals to reshape or change the mindset of others. The mechanism works due to such a concept as social significance. It means that a person has valuable experience, and his or her opinion or advice is considered important and trustworthy in society.

Influencers are considered as public personas, who create an authentic digital content able to endorse their followers. This endorsement is based on trustworthy relationships, and ability to affect the opinions of others. The message the company sends to its consumers can be either accepted or rejected. The rejection means a low level of trust or a wrong understanding of the message. The acceptance shows an opposite reaction of the customers. Therefore, the companies involve social media influencers in order to control the flow of information perception provided. The influencers are opinion leaders responsible for the process of a distribution of the company’s message to the customers. Therefore, the influencer has to be in line with the company’s strategy and understand the brand’s values in order to be able to carry the
process of the influence marketing. The process starts from receiving the message from the brand, creating a suitable digital content, delivering the message to the customers, and ends with ensuring that the message is perceived. It means that the company has to take into consideration such aspects as the influencer performance on a particular social media channel, cohesiveness between the influencer and the brand in a sense of authenticity, and a forecasted outcome of the collaboration. (Hennesy 2018, 18-19, 131-132; Brown & Fiorella 2013, 60; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017, 3.)

Firstly, social media performance stands for a number of followers the influencer has. Most importantly, the engagement rate on the influencer’s profile has to be significant. In this case, the customer engagement rate is measured as a proportion of users activity – likes, and comments – to a number of followers (Figure 9).

\[
\text{Engagement} = \frac{(\text{likes} + \text{comments})}{\text{followers}}
\]

Figure 9. Online Customer Engagement Formula (Canning 2018)

Secondly, cohesiveness stands for matching the digital content of the influencer and the values of the brand. The influencer has to find an approach to the brands’ customers. It means the opinion leader has to represent the community of the customers and be able to satisfy their expectations via an influence marketing campaign. Usually, the last ten posts on the influencer’s Instagram profile are taken as a sample. Rarely the sample is taken based on the past month activity. Lastly, the collaboration is an investment in a marketing strategy. Therefore, the company has to ensure that the influencer is able to meet the goals of the promotion in advance. (Freberg K., Graham, McGaughey & Freberg L. 2011, 90, 92; Phua, Lin & Lim 2018, 94-95.)

The success behind Instagram influence marketing lies in people’s desire to be active in the online world. For example, Instagram users like to share the
moments of their life by creating digital content. Moreover, Instagram, as a marketing communication tool, provides an opportunity to interact with people who share the interests, views, and opinions. Instagram triggers an emphasis on online word-of-mouth principle. (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017, 2.) The social media influencers are an effective tool of the influence marketing because of the connection created between the followers and the content creator. Instagram created a feeling for its users that they are close to people they follow. The customers consider the brand ambassadors as people they know and, therefore, they can trust. When there is a cohesive connection between the brand and the digital content created by the Instagram influencer the followers have a bigger faith in advertised products or services. (Simon & Tossan 2018, 178-179.)

Instafamous, Instagrammer, Instagram influencer, opinion leader, a public persona, and public figure are the words describing the social media influencers in terms of social media platforms. These people are famous among the community they represent or belong to. On Instagram, influencers increase their popularity via collaboration with companies, other influencers, and most importantly the content they create. (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017, 2; Liu & Suh 2017, 12-13.)

5.3.1 Content Creation and Authenticity

Digital content is an individual and unique vision created by social media influencers in order to express themselves and to deliver a message to the followers. The better the match between consumers’ expectations and the content the greater the value of the influencer. Thus, this means that the high-quality provision of online material on social networks allows not only to increase the level of trust in the opinion leader but also to contribute to the expansion of the audience. (Casaló et al. 2018, 2, 7.)

As a part of marketing, content creation has to include the promotion of a product or service. To support a high level of trust between the influencers and the followers the promotion should not be evident. It has to be authentic. The
authenticity is both uniqueness and transparency. The uniqueness is represented as a creative approach and a desire to build trustworthy relationships. The transparency stands for honesty. Therefore, the authenticity in terms of social media and Instagram particularly is when the influencer keeps being him- or herself regardless of being a part of a marketing plan. In terms of marketing, the authentic approach means a match between influencers’ self-expression and requirements to a promotion from a company. (Loewen 2018; Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard 2018, 1-4, 6-7.)

Instagram is a social media platform for online user-generated content. The popularity of Instagram as a marketing tool is in a higher engagement rate and a high level of users’ interest in content created by other users and influencers rather than companies. This happens due to the fact that people only follow people who they know or admire. Followers want to be alike with the influencers. This is a reason why authenticity is so important when social media influencers become a part of a marketing plan. (Osman 2018; Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard 2018, 1-4, 6-7.)

5.3.2 Micro-Influencers

The micro-influencers are this type of social media influencers who are considered the closest to a generic audience of the customers and have a high level of trust among them. They are known as the most effective and authentic representatives of influence marketing. Micro-influencers on Instagram are representatives of people who express their passion and share it with their followers on a daily basis. They are reachable and have a pronounced interest not only in the content they create but also in people who follow them. Also, micro-influencers can be considered as fans of products and services they mention in terms of their digital content. Hence, they are people who represent a customer target group and are able to help to navigate a marketing plan. (Brown & Fiorella 2013, 90; Kelly; Barker 2017.)

Micro-influencers benefit the marketing with the organic relationship with customers, significant engagement rates, and a benefiting outcome of
collaborations. They are people who have an average amount of followers on Instagram within other influencers in the community they create digital content for. There is no strict definition of a number of the followers the micro-influencer has to have to be considered as one. Nonetheless, commonly the micro-influencers have less than fifty thousand but more than ten thousand followers on their Instagram profiles. The lower amount of advertisement on the micro-influencers’ profiles leads to perceive the content as authentic and to emphasize online customer engagement. For example, the customer engagement rate among micro-influencers is in a range of eight percent, which is nearly four point seven times bigger than among influencers with an audience of over one million followers. Therefore, the followers consider a promotion as a true opinion or a piece of advice rather than a marketing campaign. (The Mediakix Team 2016; Wiley 2019.)

Collaboration between the brands and the micro-influencers is built on a desire to achieve an outcome of the sponsorship via online word-of-mouth promotion. Companies’ sponsorship can be considered differently. For example, the sponsorship can be a provision of free goods or services or an offer to become a brand ambassador. The outcome is considered as received digital content created by the influencer in terms of the promotion. For example, a company can ask to repost the content or to be tagged in a post. Hence, the collaboration requirements and conditions depend on the company and the influencer. (Farmiloe 2018; Wissman 2018.)

It can be concluded, that micro-influencers are the most effective and benefiting representatives of the social media influencers. They are driven by the creation of a qualitative digital content for their followers and value the customer engagement they are able to reach.
6 RESEARCH METHODS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDY

6.1 Research Methods

Research is a systematic process of gathering information in order to study and analyze new facts and gain knowledge concerning a chosen topic. A research project is implemented in order to create and provide an overview of a current situation with a goal to educate concerning the chosen topic and suggest possible improvements or developments. There are two different methods of research: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative research method is focused on providing data about the research topic in a numerical format, hence, to evaluate information collected. Therefore, the received results are statistically important. The qualitative research method is aimed at studying the characteristics and the influence of real-life experience taking people’s perceptions and reflections into consideration. Collected qualitative information is presented in a nominal format. (Collis & Hussey 2009, 3, 7, 63.)

The Internet is an opportunity to apply primary research online by using social media channels. The social media became an essential and part and parcel of everyday life in the twenty-first century. There are over two billion users of different social media channels worldwide (Statista 2018b). For the researcher, to apply the primary research online benefits with a low cost of the research implementation, less time needed for the organization, and access to a wide audience regardless of the distance. The researches focused on studying the population of the Internet, collecting primary data from both focus groups and personal interviews, and quantitative online surveys are common representatives of the research techniques applied on the Internet. (Proctor 2005, 16, 29; Bryman 2004, 470.)

In the scope of the thesis project, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were chosen. The qualitative research method was chosen to achieve such objectives as collecting data about the real-life experience of the studied Instagram influencer and to understand what the key elements in an influencer-followers relationship from his point of view are. Moreover, the qualitative
research method was chosen to support the data collected from the quantitative research. The quantitative method was applied in order to consider the research topic from the Instagram users’ point of view and to identify their perception of Instagram influencers. Both research methods were applied online via social media channels.

6.2 Quantitative Research Method and Implementation

The chosen quantitative research method was implemented via the survey technique. The survey is used to analyze information received from the sample. The population is a scope of people defined in terms of the research. (Collis & Hussey 2009, 62, 76-77.) Sampling is a process of considering only a part of a population for a planned research project but with a perspective to apply the research result to the whole population. The chosen sample has to represent features of the target population. (Proctor 2005, 105-106, 109.) In the case of this research project, the whole population is considered as all Instagram users who viewed the Instagram Stories on the researcher’s page. Therefore, the sample is represented in the face of Instagram users who saw the Instagram Stories on the researcher’s profile and answered the survey.

A questionnaire is a supporting tool of the survey aimed at structuring the questions planned to ask from the chosen sample. Every questionnaire has an introduction, which helps respondents – people who answer the questions of the survey – to understand what the research is about. (Proctor 2005, 190.) In terms of the research survey for this thesis project, the Instagram users were provided with a definition of Instagram influencers and the target of the research.

Questions are divided into two categories such as closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. Firstly, the closed questions have a format when all variations of possible answers are attached to the question. It means that the question can be either dichotomous or multiple-choice. The dichotomous type of question usually requires the respondent to answer yes or no. The multiple-choice type of question suggests the respondent selects from one to a few
answers. Secondly, the open-ended questions aimed at receiving information from the respondent in his or her own words. (Proctor 2005, 199-200.) The researcher was aimed to receive an overall picture of relationships between users and influencers, and users’ perception of the influencers. Therefore, the research survey created for Instagram users consisted of ten questions, which were closed, dichotomous, and multiple-choice questions (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of Questions in a Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of a question</th>
<th>Question number in the questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closed question</td>
<td>4, 5, 6, 9, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dichotomous question</td>
<td>1, 2, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-choice question</td>
<td>3, 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey used in terms of the thesis project was an online survey. It means that respondents were invited to visit the “Webropol” survey platform in order to complete the survey. The link to the survey was posted in a caption of the researcher’s profile on Instagram. Instagram was chosen as a supportive channel for the survey distribution because it is one of the main social networking sites with a highly important role in influence marketing. Moreover, this platform provides quick access to a big audience. The invitation to answer the questionnaire and thank you message were distributed via Instagram Stories on the researcher’s profile. This method of distribution was used because of the efficiency of Instagram Stories as an Instagram feature (Southern 2019). It helped to attract attention from the researcher’s users – the research sample – people, who are users of the Instagram platform (Figure 10).
Due to the fact that the research sample is a reflection of the whole target population, it has to be defined (Proctor 2005, 109). Therefore, questions about gender, age range, and familiarization with the term “influencers” are asked. This supports with understanding a variety of the researched sample. The rest of the questions were reflecting questions asked from Ismael Harb Vera during the interview. This approach supported the goal to collect opinions of both the influencer and the Instagram users about the same research topic. The chosen language of the survey was English because of the goal to receive as many answers back as possible. The questionnaire took place on the twelfth week 2019.

Figure 10. Screenshots of Invitation and Thank You Messages (Thesis Author 2019)
6.2.1 Quantitative Research Results

The link to the survey was available during twenty-four hours. During this time the number of researcher’s followers who saw the Instagram Story with the invitation message was equal to 297 people. Among this amount, 111 followers followed the link and answered the survey. The questions asked in the survey covered such topics of the secondary research as online word-of-mouth, content creation and authenticity, micro-influencers, and influencers in general.

The first question asked from the respondents was aimed to prove that the sample is familiar with the term “Instagram influencer”. The answers provided to the question were yes and no. The number of respondents, who confirmed that they have heard the term, is 109, which is 98 percent of all respondents. Only 2 percent of the respondents, which is two people from the sample, stated that they have never heard of Instagram influencers (Figure 11).

![Figure 11. Respondents’ Familiarization With the Term “Instagram Influencer”](image)

This question helped to frame the sample: the majority of respondents were familiar with the term. It was a general question asked to ensure that respondents understand what the research topic was about. Hence, this is a reason why the question belongs to a dichotomous type of question.

The second question asked from the respondents was focused on studying how many people from the sample follow any influencer. Among all respondents, 81 percent said that they follow an influencer when 19 percent said that they do not follow any influencer’s profile on Instagram (Figure 12).
The answers for the question were yes and no, hence, the question was a representative of the dichotomous type. This question helped to investigate the number of respondents, who are interested in Instagram influencers and follow them. The results show that the majority of the respondents follow influencers. This means that the majority of the respondents are a potential target to strengthen influence marketing via online word-of-mouth.

The third question asked from the respondents helped to understand the motivation of the sample to follow the profile of an influencer. The respondents had such options to answer as: 1) to increase communication network; 2) to learn about a new brand / product / service; 3) to enjoy content on a profile; 4) to get advice about brand / product / service; and 5) to get inspiration. The majority, 72 percent of respondents, said that they would follow an influencer to enjoy digital content an influencer creates. Also, 57 percent stated that for them inspiration is an important factor. Less people, 36 percent agreed that they would follow an influencer to get familiar with a new brand, product or service. Only 29 percent said that they would follow an influencer in order to get an advice about a new brand, product or service. The minority of respondents, 16 percent, said that they would like to increase communication network via influencer's profile (Figure 13).
The question was asked in a format of multiple-choice question. The goal was to understand what the most important reason for Instagram users from the sample to follow an influencer is. The options provided, were based on a definition of the Instagram influencer. The result of the question confirmed an important role of the digital content the influencer creates on the Instagram platform. It proves that the content has to have a clear message and a high quality to attract the respondents’ attention. Moreover, the question also confirmed that the respondents are interested in brand-, product- or service-related content provided by an influencer. Hence, they would follow an influencer to receive information or advice about brands, product, and services they already know about or are new to them.

The fourth question was asked in order to understand how the sample perceives recommendations from an influencer about a brand, product or service. The answers to the questions were the following: yes, no, and somewhat. The majority of respondents, 69 percent, stated that they somewhat rely on a recommendation they receive from an influencer. Moreover, 18 percent say they absolutely believe in a received recommendation. The minority of respondents, 13 percent, said they do not trust an influencer’s advice about a brand, product or service at all (Figure 14).
The asked question is a representative of a closed type of the question. The choice of this type was due to the focus on understanding how trustworthy influencers are in terms of marketing, hence, how cohesively online word-of-mouth is integrated into Instagram influencers’ environment. Due to the fact that there might be a double-standard way of treating a recommendation from an influencer because, for example, micro-influencers can get paid to promote a brand, product or service, the respondents were provided with three different options of an answer. This question showed that there is no ultimate belief to influencer’s recommendation about a promoted brand, product or service from the respondents. It means that mostly the sample trust the influencer’s opinion. Nonetheless, there still has to be a development towards a transparency and authenticity of a recommendation in order to increase level of respondents’ trust.

The fifth question was asked in order to investigate what the chosen sample trusts more – a promotion from a company or a promotion from an influencer. The majority of respondents, 65 percent, stated that they trust a promotion from an influencer more than a promotion from a company. The remaining 35 percent of the sample said they prefer a promotion from a company rather than a promotion from an influencer (Figure 15).
This was a closed question with only two answer options provided. The options of the answer were narrowed down to two in order to benchmark different types of advertisements on the Instagram platform. The goal was to investigate what kind of a marketing promotion the respondents prefer. The results illustrate that the respondents trust a promotion from an influencer almost twice as much than a promotion from a company. This proves an effectiveness of the online word-of-mouth as a principle of influence marketing on Instagram, and influencers as a tool used to active influence marketing.

The sixth question was asked in order to investigate whether the respondents notice advertisements in posts of people they follow on Instagram. The answers provided to the question were yes, no, and sometimes. More than a half of respondents, 58 percent, stated that advertisements of people they follow are noticeable. However, 33 percent said that they find promotions in posts only sometimes. The rest of 9 percent of respondents stated that they do not notice advertisements in posts of people they follow (Figure 16).
The question was asked in the closed question format in order to provide the respondents with all answers possible. The reason to ask this question was to understand how invisible marketing on Instagram is. The goal of correctly planned and implemented influence marketing via influencers is in providing as invisible promotion as possible. Therefore, the results of the question prove that some part of the marketing that goes through Instagram influencers is imperceptible, but the majority is still noticeable. It means that improvements of the process of delivering a message from a company to Instagram users via influencers have to be applied.

The seventh question asked the respondents to say if they have ever used a recommendation received from an Instagram influencer. The recommendation can be considered, for instance, as a place tagged in a post of an influencer or influencer’s advice about content creation. The majority of the respondents, 69 percent, confirmed that they followed a recommendation they received from an influencer on Instagram. The remaining 31 percent of respondents said that they have never used a recommendation from an influencer (Figure 17).
This dichotomous question supported with researching the effect of online word-of-mouth based on experience of the respondents. The results of provided answers prove that Instagram influencers have social importance among the chosen sample. Therefore, the researcher’s respondents listen to influencers and use recommendations they provide.

The eighth questions asked the respondents to mark all actions they took on an influencer’s Instagram profile. The answer options provided to the sample were following: 1) liked a post; 2) saved a post; 3) participated in a poll (Instagram Stories Survey); 4) checked tagged accounts; 5) sent a direct message; 6) commented under a post; 7) replied to Instagram Stories; 8) followed a link mentioned on a profile; 9) shared a profile with others; and 10) asked an open question on Instagram Stories. The majority of the respondents, 83 percent, said they liked a post of an influencer. The second most popular action taken on influencer’s profile was “checked tagged accounts” with 56 percent of respondents. The third most popular action was “followed a link mentioned on a profile” with 50 percent of respondents. The least popular answer options were “commented under a post” with 27 percent of respondents who chose this option, “sent a direct message” with 17 percent of
respondents, and “asked an open question on Instagram Stories” received 14 percent (Figure 18).

![Figure 18. Engagement Between Respondents and an Influencer N: 111](image)

This was a multiple-choice question, which means the respondents were able to choose as many answer options as possible. The answer options consisted of all engagement actions possible for every Instagram user on an influencer’s account. The results of provided answers showed that the majority of the respondents used content evaluation and comments, and recognition and categorization functionalities of the Instagram platform in order to interact with an influencer. The least popular functionalities were communication such as Instagram Questions and Instagram Direct. These results prove that the respondents prefer to enjoy the content of a profile and learn about new brands, products or services rather than to expand networking.

The ninth question was asked in order to define the age groups of the respondents. The majority of the respondents, 59 percent, which is equal to 66 people, belong to the age group of 18-24 years old. The age group of 25-34 years old was represented by 29 percent from the sample, which is 32 respondents. Less people, eight respondents were in the age range 35-44 and represented 7 percent. Only three people in the age group of 13-17, which is 3 percent, answered the survey. The minority represented age groups of 45-54.
and 65+, which is equal to 1 percent or one respondent for each of the groups. There were no representatives of the age group 55-64 (Figure 19).

![Figure 19. Age Groups of Respondents N: 111](image)

This was a closed question asked in order to frame the sample taken. The age groups were selected according to options provided by the Instagram platform. The results showed that the majority of the respondents belonged to the age group 18-24 year old users of Instagram.

The tenth question was asked with the purpose to support with defining the sample of the respondents. The majority of the respondents, 55 percent, represented females and the minority of the respondents, 45 percent, represented males (Figure 20).

![Figure 20. Gender Groups of Respondents N: 111](image)
The answer options for this closed question were selected according to Instagram’s options of the profile identification. The results received showed that relatively the same amount of both genders participated in the survey. The difference is nine people.

The questions about gender and age range were asked in the end of the survey. This approach helped to focus respondents on the content of the questionnaire in the beginning and collect general information about the respondents afterwards. The sample can be defined as active female users of the Instagram platform in the age category from eighteen to twenty-four years who are familiar with Instagram influencers.

6.3 Qualitative Research Method and Implementation

The qualitative research method is used to prove that all important aspects are considered. Moreover, the qualitative researched is also commonly applied in order to support the data collected in the quantitative research. (Collis & Hussey 2009, 63.) The target of the thesis project is to collect information to explain the way online word-of-mouth is implemented via influencers in terms of marketing. Therefore, the qualitative interview was chosen as a supporting technique in the study.

The interview is a process of collecting qualitative data based on experience and own perceptions of the researched person or a group of researched people. Hence, it is aimed at getting the insights of the research topic. (Rubin H. & Rubin I. 1995, 1-2, 6.) There are the following types of qualitative interviewing: semi-structured, unstructured, in-depth, focused, focus group, oral history, and life history. Firstly, the semi-structured interview is a set of variable questions with a generic overview of the research topic. Secondly, the unstructured interview is represented as an interview guide – a list of research subjects. Thirdly, the in-depth interviews are a combination of both semi-structured and unstructured interview approaches. Fourthly, the focused interviews are specified on questions around one research topic and ask the respondent to express his or her own opinion based on experience and perceptions he or she
gained. This type of interviewing technique conducts with one interviewee. Fifthly, the focus group and group interviews are variations of the focused interview, but the respondents are represented as a target research group, and, therefore, the chosen research topic can vary. Lastly, oral history interview and life history interview techniques are used in order to collect information about the past happenings and the consequences of them or to study a story of the respondents. (Bryman 2004, 113.) In order to meet the objective of the thesis research project, the focused interview was selected as a qualitative research technique. This type of interview supports the goal to collect information from a particular influencer. Hence, the researcher is able to receive the Instagram influencer’s perception of influence marketing in terms of Instagram social media platform and the role of the influencer in it. Moreover, the focused interview facilitates collecting practical observation concerning the customer engagement between the influencer and Instagram users aspect, and therefore, helps to study the insights of a motivation to be the Instagram influencer.

The questions used in the interview technique belong to a category of open questions. The open question asks the interviewee to express his or her thoughts, experience and perceptions within the research topic in a free format. Therefore, it means that the collected results will reflect to the study in the most qualitative way. (Collis & Hussey 2009, 200-201.) The target of the research was to collect a real-life experience and its perception from a particular influencer. Consequently, only open questions were used during the interview. The structure of the interview questions is based on the secondary data collected. Therefore, the interview sums up all aspects disclosed in the theoretical part. This helps to have a clear overview of each topic disclosed (Table 1).
Table 1. Categories of Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary research topic the question belongs to</th>
<th>Question number in the interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About Instagram</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram for Business</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence Marketing and Word-of-Mouth in Social Media</td>
<td>6, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Online Engagement</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencers</td>
<td>1, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Creation and Authenticity</td>
<td>4, 9, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-Influencers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview was conducted in English via FaceTime video call on the twelfth week of 2019. The respondent was Ismael Harb Vera. Ismael is a micro-influencer who creates digital content on the Instagram social media platform. The influencer’s Instagram profile has a verified authenticity since 2019 and attracts over twenty-three thousand followers. Ismael Harb Vera was chosen as an interviewee due to his vigorous activity as an Instagrammer and the rapid acquisition of the influencer status.

6.3.1 Qualitative Research Results

To start the interview, Ismael Harb Vera was asked to describe what it means to be an influencer from the Instagram influencer’s point of view. “For me, it is about creating content and being creative, but also doing what I love and what I like”, – said the influencer. The interviewee said, that despite the fact that he agrees that influencers are an implementation tool of influence marketing, for the influencer it has never been a goal to become one. For the influencer, the most important thing is the value of being able to entertain his followers on Instagram through the lens of digital content he creates about things he likes and enjoys. For example, on the influencer’s Instagram profile themes of architecture, nature, and visited places are dominant objects of the content. Ismael also creates Instagram content about brands, products, and services.
The acquisition of the influencer status came naturally. The respondent said that the more he posted on Instagram the more attracted attention from Instagram users who liked his publications. Therefore, the more high-quality publications he was providing the bigger the audience he was getting. This is the way the respondent prioritizes Instagram over the rest of social networking sites. In Ismael’s opinion, Instagram has a proved reputation of the best content sharing and distribution social media channel. The influencer also considers Instagram as the best and most suitable platform for social media influencers. Such a strong prioritization of the platform was explained in a sense that for the influencer Instagram is a source of unlimited inspiration together with an opportunity to share his experience with quite a big audience of social media users.

Among standard Instagram features available for every user of the platform, Ismael finds an unconditional benefit of the business profile in a possibility to have an informative overview of his followers. Therefore, the influencer underlined such Instagram functionality as Instagram Insights. As for the Instagrammer, the demographics, age range and gender of the followers play an important and relevant role for the interviewee. On the one hand, the statistics are often demonstrated to the companies the influencer collaborates with. This is a useful functionality, which facilitates the process of creating and implementing content only relevant for companies and followers. On the other hand, checking the statistics helps the influencer to understand what he should do better or what he does wrong. The interviewee also underlined such features as Instagram Stories and general photo and video sharing.

During the interview, Ismael emphasized that authenticity plays an important role not only for him but also for all Instagram influencers. The interviewee said that, in his opinion, the main proof that his account is authentic is his followers. The Instagram users who follow Ismael’s profile are real. It means that from ninety to ninety-five percent of all influencer’s followers are active users of the Instagram platform. The rest of the accounts are fake – empty accounts – or have a minimum activity within the social networking site. The company Fohr, which specializes in proving the authenticity of Instagram influencers, confirmed
this fact. The other part of the authenticity of the interviewee’s account is the content. The influencer does not post only advertisements and is not aimed at only satisfying his followers. Of course, the influencer admitted that he listens to Instagram users who follow him and tries to answer their expectations. Nevertheless, Ismael stays loyal to himself and posts only things that he likes and enjoys. In the interviewee’s opinion, to find a good balance between his creativity and interests, commercial posts and followers’ expectations is the key to keep a profile authentic.

Another question asked from the interviewee was focused on understanding how the influencer makes sure that his Instagram profile and content he creates matches with a collaboration offer he receives from a company. The respondent said that it is important to learn what the company or collaboration is about. Therefore, the influencer must be able to understand whether there will be a right meaning in a message he is going to send and cohesiveness between the content and company, product or service he is going to advertise. For example, if a collaboration offer is about diet cereals it will not make any sense for followers. Hence, the process of receiving, delivering and ensuring that Instagram users perceived the message will fail. “People are never going to interact with the post that does not make any sense in your gallery”, – stated the influencer. Ismael noticed that he also pays attention to the value of the collaboration. For instance, when an offer is about a product that he would purchase himself, he considers collaboration worthy. Another example is when an offered product or service fits his travel and lifestyle content of the Instagram profile.

It was important to disclose what kind of relationship the influencer has with his audience and the way he builds online customer engagement. The influencer agreed with the definition of online word-of-mouth and described his relationships with the followers as really close. The influencer believes that Instagram facilitates building bonds between influencers and their followers. The followers of Ismael’s profile often contact him in order to ask different questions about brands, products, and services mentioned in the influencer’s publications. For the influencer, to be honest with followers is a priority. For
example, if the Instagrammer is paid to promote a restaurant, he visits the place, creates a suitable post and publishes it. Nonetheless, if the follower asks about a promoted restaurant Ismael provides an honest answer taking ethical aspects into consideration. The fact that the interviewee is transparent with his audience and is motivated to communicate with people who ask his advice, recommendation or opinion strengthens his credibility as an influencer. People appreciate a bidirectional connection they have with the interviewee. Hence, the Instagram users trust the influencer and the content he creates on the platform: “They believe that you give them real you”.

In comparison to advice and recommendations asked, the number of feedbacks the influencer receives from the followers is smaller. Ismael explained it as followers’ higher interest in listening to the experience the influencer had with a company, product or service he mentioned in his content rather than sharing followers’ personal experience. In most of the cases, as a travel influencer, the interviewee is contacted in order to ask for a recommendation about a city or places to visit.

The influencer was asked about possible factors that can affect his profile and lead to a decrease of the followers. Ismael explained that the main and most common factor is a change of the content. When an influencer stops posting something that people follow him or her for, it might lead to a drop down. It means that when Instagram users choose to follow an influencer they find a match between the influencer’s profile and their expectations or interests. When followers receive content they are not used to then they might lose inspiration they found in influencer’s profile. The other reasons include an Instagram algorithm, followers who no longer find the profile entertaining, and simply a bad week. This is why, in the interviewee’s opinion, it is important to constantly refresh the content by implementing some innovations, enjoy the work of an influencer and not only listen to followers but also try to predict their impressions of the future publications.

At the end of the interview, Ismael was asked to express his thought about the future role of Instagram influencers. The respondent finds traditional marketing
– such as TV and newspaper advertisements – outdated and uninspiring. The interviewee stated that as long as an influencer enjoys what he or she does and creates, stays loyal to him- or herself and appreciates opportunities the social media provides, especially Instagram, the influencers will remain as a part of influence marketing and marketing in general. For the researched influencer, authenticity is the most important word in influence marketing because nowadays to be an influencer is a trend.

Ismael Harb Vera was asked eleven different questions in the same order as presented in the question guide (Appendix 1). The following interview questions covered all topics disclosed in the secondary research. This research technique helped to create an overview of the influencer’s overall opinion of his understanding of what it means to be a micro-influencer on the social media Instagram platform and his perception of the experience he gained. Also, the interview helped to prove that both customer engagement and authenticity of digital content are significant components of the impact of social media influencers on online word-of-mouth.

6.4 Summary of Results

6.4.1 Summary of Survey Results

In order to understand point of view of the researched population, the summary of the survey results is applied. During the survey, such topics as Instagram influences, customer engagement, online word-of-mouth mechanism, and content and authenticity were covered in a question format for the respondents under the study.

Based on results of the survey, the majority of the respondents was familiar with such tool of online word-of-mouth as Instagram influencers. It means that Instagram influencers are known among the researched sample. Moreover, the confirmation of this is that the largest part of respondents said that they follow an influencer on Instagram. Therefore, it was essential to understand what motivates the researched respondents to follow an Instagram influencer.
People, who answered the survey, prioritized entertaining content as the main motivation to follow an influencer. The second most common answer was inspiration. Consequently, it means that Instagram users, who represent the researched sample, are interested in following high quality inspiring content. Moreover, the digital content created by an influencer has to be in line with interests of people who follow an Instagram profile of an opinion leader. The users of the platform also search for information about new brands, products or services on profiles of Instagrammers due to the fact that people who answered the survey placed checking tagged accounts as the second most common activities they took on an influencer’s profile. Hence, such Instagram influencers who create commercial content are also interesting for Instagram users.

The online word-of-mouth topic was also disclosed in the questionnaire. The largest part of the sample agreed that they somewhat or completely trust recommendations about brands, products or services received from an influencer. Moreover, the majority of the researched users of the Instagram platform also stated that they followed a recommendation obtained from an Instagrammer, for example, visited a promoted place or used a brand, product or service mentioned in a commercial post. Furthermore, this reinforces that the researched sample trusts an opinion of a public persona. Additionally, the respondents selected a promotion from an influencer as trustworthy in comparison with a promotion from a company. This means that an opinion or advice received from an influencer is valued for the respondents. Accordingly, the online word-of-mouth has an influence on the researched sample. This proves that an Instagram influencer not only can be considered as a supportive element of the online word-of-mouth mechanism, but as a direct performer who leads the influence marketing in terms of social media and particularly the Instagram platform.

According to the results of the survey, the respondents of the survey used all Instagram customer engagement features in order to interact with an influencer. Nonetheless, the biggest engagement with an influencer’s profile happened via photo and video sharing. The first most common activity was a like left under a publication. This functionality falls under the most basic Instagram features and
is available for every user of the platform. The second and third most selected activities were a possibility to check tagged accounts on a post and follow a link mentioned on a profile. Therefore, it shows an interest of Instagram users in learning about new brands, products or services. On the one hand, this is an example that influencers are transparent with their followers. On the other hand, it also means that followers of an influencer are strongly involved in online word-of-mouth mechanism via the Instagram platform.

It can be concluded, that the survey conducted with researcher's Instagram followers proved that online word-of-mouth works. Nonetheless, due to the fact that the majority of the respondents said that they notice commercial posts on profiles of people they follow, improvements have to be applied. Because the more followers see promoted content the less trust they have on an influencer. The reason is that users of the platform have to have a feeling of creating connection with an influencer and believe that every post, expressed opinion, and given advice come from the public persona him- or herself instead of companies and brands he or she represents. This is the way the online word-of-mouth can remain as the mechanism used to activate influence marketing on social media. The researched sample's overall perception of the Instagram influencers can be described as effective collaboration between the users of the platform and public personas built on mutual interest in digital content generated by the influencers and trustworthy relationships. Moreover, the results of the research proved that Instagram is a powerful social media platform and that Instagram Stories attract a wide audience. The Instagram Stories published on the researcher's profile were available for twenty-four hours only, but helped to collect answers from one hundred and one respondents. Hence, Instagram Stories can be considered as a feature for fast distribution of information to a target group.

Certain limitations have to be considered in terms of implementation of the qualitative research method via online survey technique. The first limitation is access to the survey. The swipe-up link on Instagram Stories was not available for the researcher during the process of distributing the invitation to the sample. The swipe-up link can be used in case if there are over ten thousand followers
on Instagram profile (Loren 2017). It means that every respondent had to check the researcher’s profile in order to access the link to the survey. The second limitation is the chosen sample. In order to participate in the survey the respondent had to check Instagram Stories on the researcher’s Instagram profile. The third limitation is the time the survey was available. Due to the fact that Instagram Stories provide content during twenty-four hours only, the respondent had to answer the survey within twenty-four hours after the invitation was published. The fourth limitation is a chosen language. The respondent had to speak or be able to understand English language in order to answer the questions.

6.4.2 Summary of Interview Results

The summary of the interview results is applied in order to create an overview of the interviewee’s point of view concerning such topics as Instagram influencers, customer engagement, online word-of-mouth mechanism, and content and authenticity on Instagram, covered in an open question format under a study, and to support the data collected during the survey.

Based on the interview, content creation and authenticity play the key role in building relationships between Instagram influencers and users of the Instagram platform. The researched interviewee underlined that the digital content he creates as an influencer has a high quality, and is inspiring and enjoyable for him. The influencer also mentioned that he continued sharing his experience via Instagram because people liked and supported what he did. This links to the results received from the researched sample. Therefore, it is crucially important to stick to the principle of creating only this content that brings the pleasure for both an influencer and Instagram users.

The authenticity is an unconditional component of successful content creation on Instagram. The researched influencer especially focuses on achieving a significant level of trust and transparency on his Instagram profile. The interviewee is honest with his followers about commercial posts in his content, and recommendations, advice, and experiences he shares. Ismael also
confirmed that his followers often contact him in order to ask questions about places the influencer visited or companies, products and services mentioned on the Instagram profile. Furthermore, the Instagrammer admitted that he received feedback from Instagram users who followed his advice or recommendation. Consequently, it means that Instagram users are interested in sharing the experience with the influencer, whose advice or recommendation they took advantage of. According to answers received from the researched influencer, online word-of-mouth is fully integrated in building relationships between influencers and Instagram users. In these relationships the authenticity stays in the forefront.

Based on the answers received from the interviewee, customer engagement is a significant measure. It shows not only a motivation of an influencer to build a communication bridge with followers but also affects the authenticity. In terms of Instagram, the authenticity is considered as uniqueness and transparency of a digital content provided by an influencer, and is a proof that followers of a profile are real. It means, that users who access an influencer’s profile are interested in the content and are motivated to interact with a profile. The researched interviewee explained that for him it is important to entertain his followers and keep in touch with them. The communication between Ismael and his followers is created via photo and video sharing and Instagram Stories. Consequently, comments under a post, likes and replies to Instagram Stories are the main customer engagement features for the researched influencer.

It can be concluded, that the summary of the interview results proves that micro-influencers are an effective and powerful tool, which can be used in order to strengthen online word-of-mouth mechanism in building trustworthy relationships with Instagram users, who are current or potential customers of different brands, products, and services. Moreover, information received in the qualitative research supports data collected via the quantitative survey technique.

Certain limitations concerning focused interview as the chosen qualitative research technique have to be considered. The first limitation is the number of
interviewees. Different Instagram influencers create unalike content. The results received from the researched Instagrammer can be applied to travel and lifestyle influencers only. The second limitation is the number of followers on the influencer’s profile. Instagram content creators with smaller and bigger audiences may have a contrast approach to people who are interested in their profiles. It means that the received results may be applied to micro-influencers only. The third limitation is authenticity. The researched interviewee has a verified authenticity and, therefore, high level of customer engagement rate with followers, who are real and active users of Instagram. Hence, the results of the interview can be applied to only these influencers, who can prove their authenticity on the platform. The fourth limitation is Instagram as the choice of the researched social networking site. The focus of the thesis project was on Instagram influencers only. Nonetheless, other types of influencers may choose another social media channel for content creation. Therefore, the results of the qualitative research can be applied to Instagram influencers only.
7 CONCLUSION

Social media is an integral part of modern life. People became active users of various social media channels. The reason is the desire to share an opinion and experience with others. Nowadays, companies increasingly try not only to integrate their business into various social media networks, but also to keep abreast of emerging trends because they understand that it is the right way to build strong and trustworthy relationships with their customers and, accordingly, strengthen a status in the international market. Moreover, social media creates an environment for influence marketing. It allows to spread information fast and to access a wide audience in order to reshape people’s mindsets via online word-of-mouth principle.

Instagram has reached a colossal growth since its launch from 2010 to 2019. This social media networking platform is in constant development and creates a fruitful business environment. The Instagram influencers are one of the most significant proofs of this. Instagrammers are users of the Instagram platform who found inspiration for creating authentic and motivational content, and were able to acquire their significance among those people who admire them and, accordingly, listen to their opinion.

The objective of the thesis project was to prove that Instagram social media influencers have an impact on online word-of-mouth mechanism. In order to study this, two supportive sub-objectives were selected. The first sub-objective was to collect and analyze information about Instagram users’ perception of Instagram influencers. The second sub-objective was to prove that Instagram influencers could be used as a customer engagement tool because of their special relationships with users of the platform. The results of the research implemented and presented in the study can facilitate companies, which want to integrate Instagram influencers to their marketing planning.

The implementation of such qualitative research technique as a focused interview and such quantitative research technique as an online survey helped to meet both the main objective and sub-objectives. The interview was
conducted with an Instagram micro-influencer Ismael Harb Vera, who creates travel and lifestyle digital content on Instagram. The online survey was conducted among the researcher’s Instagram followers who received an invitation to answer the questionnaire via Instagram Stories on the researcher’s profile. English language was chosen as the research language of the survey in order to collect as many answers as possible.

The secondary research of the thesis project was focused on disclosing a generic principle of influence marketing on social media and on educating concerning Instagram influencers. Such topics as self-branding on social media, return on investment (ROI), and emotional marketing were not a part of the research. Accordingly, the researcher suggests going into these topics to create a complete overview of the impact the Instagram users have on marketing planning.

The primary research used to collect information and data for the thesis project helped to create an overall perception of Instagram users about Instagram influencer, and to collect information about a real-life experience of Instagram micro-influencer. Therefore, the researcher suggests expanding qualitative information collection. For example, the suggestion is to conduct an interview with more than one respondent, or to research influencers with a both smaller and bigger number of followers. The survey technique used in terms of quantitative data collection can be further developed and improved. For instance, the researcher suggests to create the survey focused on followers of a particular influencer, and conduct the survey on an influencer’s Instagram profile. This approach can benefit with studying relationship features between an Instagram influencer and his or her followers.

Instagram influencers who want to better understand what is important to focus on when building relationships with their followers can use the results presented in this thesis. Companies who consider involving Instagram influencers in their marketing planning can also use this research as a recommendation for effective influence marketing on social media.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Ismael Harb Vera Interview Question Guide

Appendix 2. Instagram Users Questionnaire
1. What does it mean to you to be an influencer?

2. Why do you choose Instagram?

3. What are the Instagram features you use the most?

4. What makes your account authentic?

5. How do you make sure that there is a match between your Instagram profile and a collaboration offer?

6. What kind of relationships do you have with your followers?

7. Do your followers contact you to ask questions about brands / products / services mentioned on your profile? If yes, what kind are they?

8. Do you get feedback from Instagram users on experiences you share? If yes, what kind are they?

9. When you have a decrease of followers on your profile how do you find out what you need to change? What are the most common reasons that this happens?

10. On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is «not important at all», 2 is «not important», 3 is «neutral», 4 is «important», and 5 is «very important») how does the opinion of your followers reflect on your content?

11. How do you see the role of Instagram influencers in marketing in the future?
1. Have you ever heard about Instagram influencers?
   • Yes
   • No

2. Do you follow any Instagram influencer?
   • Yes
   • No

3. Why would you follow an influencer on Instagram? (You can choose as many options as you like)
   • To get inspiration
   • To get an advice about brand / product / service
   • To learn about new brand / product / service
   • To increase communication network
   • To enjoy content on a profile

4. Do you trust an influencer's recommendation about brand / product / service?
   • Yes
   • No
   • Somewhat

5. What do you trust more?
   • A promotion from a company
   • A promotion from an influencer
6. Do you notice advertisements in posts of people you follow?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Sometimes

7. Have you ever followed a recommendation from an Instagram influencer? (Tried brand / product / service, visited a tagged place, used content creation advice and etc.)
   - Yes
   - No

8. What kind of action did you take on an influencer’s Instagram profile? (You can choose as many options as you like)
   - Liked a post
   - Commented under a post
   - Saved a post
   - Replied to Instagram Stories
   - Participated in a poll (Instagram Stories Survey)
   - Followed a link mentioned on a profile
   - Checked tagged accounts
   - Shared a profile with others
   - Sent a direct message
   - Asked an open question on Instagram Stories
9. What is your age?
   - 13-17
   - 18-24
   - 22-34
   - 35-44
   - 45-54
   - 55-64
   - 65+

10. What is your gender?
    - Female
    - Male