**Title: The role of influencer marketing during the lockdown: An analysis of Italian influencers**

**Abstract**

Nowadays, the way to convey a message has changed. Traditional media are not the most effective way of communication anymore because the audience cannot interact with screens. Communication today is more immediate, direct and authentic. Marketing influencers represent a personalized toolthat does not have a form. During the lockdown, the number of people who started following these influencers increased as well as the number of people who improved their opinion about them.

This article examines the role of influencers during the lockdown caused by COVID-SARS 19, since there is a lack of academic research on this topic.

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted based on the content analysis of 559 Instagram posts by Italian influencers - Chiara Ferragni, Benedetta Rossi and Clio make-up.

During the lockdown, the power and role of influencers could be understood as communication by means of the extraordinary content that has a social purpose rather than a commercial one.

The paperreaches very interesting results, it emphasizes the role of the influencer marketing during the lockdown and identifies three trends: social inclusion, emotional solidarity, responsible and ethical communication.

**Key Words**

Influencer marketing, COVID-SARS 19, Instagram influencers, social media, communication management, content analysis

**Introduction and Objectives**

It's October 19, 2020, a phone call that is definitely unexpected: the President of the Italian Council called Chiara Ferragni and Fedez. The President, Giuseppe Conte, asked the digital entrepreneur and rapper to help him convey a very important message. The Prime Minister asked the couple, who had been very active on social media, to help him convince Italians, especially young people, to wear masks during this difficult period of the COVID-SARS 19. During the lockdown, young people followed the influencers rather than TV programs and the news (Bloomberg,2020). This particular period has had a strong impact on everyone's life, increasing the need to communicate, share and establish authentic relationships through social networks. This trend has been confirmed by all the platforms that have recently evidenced an inevitable increase in the time users spend online and an unprecedented increase in the interactions on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube between influencers and followers. So far, social networks continue to have the highest historical usage in the world. Indeed, since the onset of the health emergency, the creation of bulletin boards has increased by 60 per cent compared to the same period last year, with 40 per cent more content saved on an annual basis (Ipsos, 2020). We know that the world has changed. Like other global events with a global impact, COVID-SARS 19could potentially change the way we see the world, the way we think, and the way we live our lives. Despite human tragedies - the loss of life, broken families, widespread fear, economic and social changes - the pandemic-driven lockdown created a cultural legacy that will live long in our memories and the memories of the future generations. The Osservatorio Influencer Marketing (OIM) unifies Ipsos and FLU, specializes in influencer marketing and it is a leading market research company and an Italian agency belonging to Uniting Group Holding. OIM conducted a qualitative and a quantitative survey in May 2020 in Italy. The former was carried out in an online community of 30 people while the latter was conducted through 500 online interviews with the followers of influencers and the users whose age varied between 18 and 55 .The results of the quantitative survey show that one in four users started to follow new influencers and almost 70% of respondents agreed with the opinions of influencers while 18% of respondents even improved their opinion about the influencers. In contrast to what happened before the emergency, during the lockdown 63% of the interviewed users stated that they used social media to keep up with current events (dataPp that before the pandemic was 28%); 52% used social media to keep in touch with their family and friends (common habit to only 39% of users before the pandemic) (Flu,2020). There were also the most established habits to look at trends and photos of the moment, follow pages and profiles of brands and products, share and comment on content posted by themselves or by others and use social media as if they were a search engine. In the wake of numerous difficulties due to COVID-SARS 19, influencer marketing has emerged as an efficient way for relevant, engaging content to achieve global reach. (Hongwei He, Lloyd Harris, 2020). This article examines the role of influencers marketing during the lockdown caused by COVID-SARS 19, due to the limited academic research on the newness of this topic, a qualitative methodological approach has been adopted based on content analysis of some influencer marketing related to the Italian scenario: Chiara Ferragni, Clio make-up and Benedetta Rossi.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Influencer marketing**

Influencers marketing are seen as unique people with a strong reputation in particular areas, who can generate useful content (Kim et al., 2017), followed by a significant number of online social network users (De Veirman et al., 2017). The reputation may be drawn from the expertise and consumer confidence of influencers in their field. Success and sway of influencers can be determined by their engagement, which defines the ability of consumers to respond to a post. One way of measuring the engagement is to compute a person in a post based on time spans such as monthly, daily or hourly periods and calculating the number of likes, comments, shares, retweets and favorites (Arora et al., 2019). They are the leaders of online opinion who succeed in building their unique public image (also called self-branding). They do this through fascinating narratives that attract followers to their social media accounts (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) for cultural / commercial purposes (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Influencers marketing are essential intermediaries for brands aimed at the new generation, which is notoriously hard to reach (Enke & Borchers, 2019). They share tastes and knowledge, including fashion, beauty, hobbies and everyday life, with other individuals, and provide product reviews. An influencer is someone who works on social media in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).Influencer marketing is a communication strategy that uses popular and influential users of social media (Gillin, 2009) and has become a new strategy increasingly adopted by companies (Lou et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). Influencers may post to any social media platform, although Instagram and Facebook are the most popular (National Advertisers Association, 2018). Enterprises pay influencers money or in goods, services, trips, experiences, etc. Influencer marketing is the most economically efficient and the most direct and organic tool when contacting potential customers as part of the innovative marketing strategies (Lou, et al., 2019). It could be defined as the use of influential opinion leaders (influencers), celebrities or non-celebrities, with many followers on social platforms, to foster positive attitudinal and behavioral responses in their followers (consumers) about the interests of the brand through the use of shared positions on such platforms, and to enable influencers and followers to participate in the co-creation of the brand. Influencer marketing aims to create favorable WOM (word of mouth) users to influence their various followers' actions (Petrescu et al., 2018). Influencers, apart from their digitally formatted messages, are considered as personal and credible sources to which the consumer can relate. (Boerman,2020; DeVeirman et al., 2017). Therefore, traditional advertising is being lost in the era of digitalization, sensory overload, social mistrust and individualization and then, marketing influencers are now powerful marketing means (Nirscl and Steinberg 2018). Finally, messages from influencers appear to originate from a "person like you or me" and not a probably distrustful company, which can be seen as a means of bringing consumers to buy their products (Jahnke, 2018).

**Influencer marketing and lockdown: an overview**

As countries around the world have been locked down, businesses have cut back on their operations and marketing spending has been extensively cut, some observers predict that the social media influencer industry would be all but 'killed off'. As economic prosperity, personal pleasure and public health shifted to focus and community involvement, COVID-SARS 19 seemed to have ended influencer marketing as we know it. However, as a world adapted to the life of a pandemic, numerous influencers who are driven by trade continue to thrive, suggesting that influencers are even more important as marketing opportunities for ideas and products because people are hungry for online content (Archer et al., 2020). Statistics suggest that during the period of lockdown social media use increased dramatically, with an overall survey of 30 markets showing a 61% increase in commitment over normal rates of use (Forbes, 2020). During the lockdown, young people followed influencers rather than TV programs. Whilst some influencers have struggled clearly to adapt to changing market conditions and to rapidly seize business opportunities (Bloomberg,2020), others have embraced the world crisis, exploiting public insecurity and disorientation in order to develop power and reach marketability and market share, mainly posting COVID-SARS 19 (Archer et al., 2020). The major research on influencer success has mainly concentrated on numerical requirements such as the number of participants, retweets or page rankings. The only criterion for remuneration may be the number of followers (Wiedmann et al., 2018). These requirements may intuitively appear excellent for predicting the success of an influencer camp, but they are not sufficient to show the content in the social network of influencers marketing and the reason for the success of the influencer marketing. This article examines the role of influencers during the lockdown caused by COVID-SARS 19, since there is a lack of academic research on this topic. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted based on the content analysis of 559 Instagram posts by Italian influencers - Chiara Ferragni, Benedetta Rossi and Clio make-up. Therefore, the research question is: What role did influencer marketing play during the lockdown?

**Methodology**

The aim of this study is to understand, referring to the Italian scenario, the role that influencer marketing played during the global pandemic (COVID-SARS 19) and whether its activities had different impacts on their role within the society, with reference to the Italian market. In order to answer the research question, three influencers of the Italian scenario were examined, each belonging to a specific category; Chiara Ferragni as lifestyle influencer, Benedetta Rossi as food influencer and Clio Zammatteo (Clio Make-up) as beauty influencer.

Chiara Ferragni has a total of 23,511,327 million followers divided as follows: 1,213,390 million followers on Facebook page, 152,000 subscribers on YouTube channel with over 1 million views for some videos published, 509,000 thousand followers on Twitter and 21,636,937 followers on Instagram.

Clio Make-up has a total of 7,106,833 million followers: 1,340,000 million subscribers to the YouTube channel with a record of 4 million views for some tutorials, 2,639,703 followers on Facebook page, 181,000 thousand followers on Twitter and 3,127,130 million followers on Instagram.

Benedetta Rossi has a total of 12,813,997 million followers: 2,330,000 million subscribers to the YouTube channel with a record of over 3 million views for some videos, 7,060,749 on Facebook page, 15,000 thousand followers on Twitter and 3,408,248 followers on Instagram.

The choice fell on these three characters because according to a study conducted by the Influencer Marketing Observatory (OIM) emerged that Chiara Ferragni, Benedetta Rossi and Clio Make-up were the most followed influencers during the lock-down due to the global pandemic.

In order to achieve the objective, a content analysis has been carried out through the posts published on the official Instagram pages.

The reference period within which the analysis was carried out, goes from March 9, 2020, the start-date of the lock-down in Italy, until May 18, 2020, the last day of lock-down.

For the purpose of the analysis, a qualitative study was conducted through NVivo, a qualitative research software used to classify, group and organize unstructured data, which helps to improve the rigor of data analysis and reduce errors in the dissemination of data in manual analysis (Crowley et al., 2002). More specifically, 332 posts by Chiara Ferragni, 176 Benedetta Rossi and 51 posts by Clio-Makeup were analyzed in the period of reference; the most repeated words were identified through words counting, obtained thanks to the use of "Word Frequency" by Nvivo. Word frequency is a code that assists researchers in their research projects. It provides a list of words, without making changes, in order to avoid bias. Finally, word frequency provides a sample word cloud chart or other type of graphics, that utilizes Stata’s own scatter graphs. The word cloud chart is simple, while the code that generates the chart, is more complex and it is provided to the user for possible modification, betterment and adaptation with respect to individual needs (Dicle et al., 2018).

**Findings**

The evolution of social networks has led to an exponential increase in the visibility of influencers, and their media power has increasingly emerged. In order to help and launch unity campaigns and contributions to defeat the COVID-SARS 19, but also to recount their own national lives, a more prominent position was used.

According to a very recent analysis published by Nielsen, it was found that during the lockdown people's confidence in influencers increased, mainly due to the role played during the pandemic, raising public awareness, entertaining and pampering their followers, thus relieving the stress due to the “stay at home”. In addition, they gave examples of creativity, proposing activities and solidarity, capturing the emotional part of the users, through storytelling about their lives. Influencers were among the first to adapt to this change.

The carried out analysis highlights very interesting results, summarized in the following table (TABLE 1):

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marketing Influencers | Word Frequency | Media Engagement Rate | Media Engagement rate in the analysed period | Follower increment/decrement |
| Chiara Ferragni | Son (67), Emergency/Quarantine/Hospital (24), Memories (23), funny video (22), sponsor (17), family (16), birthday (10), cook (8) | 2,16 | 3,86 | + 1.450.912 |
| Benedetta Rossi | Cake (20), Tart (10), Emergency (6), Easter (6), Gnocchi (5), Parmesan cheese (4), Pizza (4), Cookies (4), Doughnut (4) | 1,17 | 2,33 | + 634.879 |
| Clio Make-up | Clio Pop-up (18), Daughter’s birth (8), Homemade (7), Tutorial (4), (6), Focaccia (2), Sponsor (2), Cake (2) | 0,93 | 3,37 | + 142.167 |

559 posts have been analyzed, and from the results that emerged in the Table 1 it can be immediately noticed that the highlighted words refer to concepts related to the family, the emergency due to COVID-SARS 19, tutorials on how to cook, prepare homemade masks, or make funny videos. It is clear that the focus on the activities they normally perform has shifted, giving space to different ways of communication. It is noted that the word “sponsor” for example, very rarely emerges, in the case of Benedetta Rossi it is not repeated even once, while words like "Emergency", "Homemade", "Family/Son/Daughter", are repeated much more frequently for all three cases of analysis.

This is one of the most interesting aspects that emerged from the results.

Let's remember that being a marketing influencer is basically a job like others, what made the difference with them was also the companies, who understood the importance of continuing to talk to consumers but in a new and authentic way; clearly the role of influencers was decisive, who decided to stop their commercial communications turning towards: socially inclusive, responsible and ethical communication. It remains, in our opinion, a missed opportunity for companies that have decided not to change their communication or say anything about it.

From the overall analysis of the posts, different themes emerged: concepts related to the awareness of users towards the pandemic and through crowdfunding initiatives. This is particularly true in the case of Chiara Ferragni. Moreover, through the proposal of homemade activities or products, for example baking cakes or creating homemade face masks, the influencers have entered people’s daily life, sharing moods and helping them to make the hours fly. In fact, in addition to entertaining and producing creative content, their role has been informative and focused.

Another important element is the use of words such as “Emergency/Quarantine/Hospital, Homemade, Family”, which are expressions of collective feelings and social solidarity. It can define this concept such as emotional solidarity.It is considered “the degree of closeness between individuals, whereby a sentiment of ‘we together’ is championed over the notion of a ‘self-versus-other’ dichotomy” (Woosnam et al., 2009).

Other collected data, are represented by the level of engagement (which we remind you, it is the level of involvement related to a content through reactions or comments), which during the period analyzed has increased, this is certainly because people had more time available but also because the content was of interest; to confirm what said above, there is another significant data given by the exponential increase in the number of followers, + 1.450.912 for Chiara Ferragni, + 634.879 for Benedetta Rossi , + 142.167 for Clio Make-up.

It is clear that the role of influencer marketing, in this period of health emergency has evolved. The sphere of entertainment is undoubtedly the area of predominant interest for followers, but it has emerged a particularly interesting fact related to the ability of influencers to get in tune with their followers, so let's talk about the empathic aspect. From Table 1 in fact, it is possible to notice how the engagement has increased during the lockdown period, even if the contents in the posts were not sponsorship, but stories of life, memories and entertainment activities.

Wanting to observe the role of influencer marketing in an evolutionary perspective, we can say that, according to the results, the key word for success will be "Trust": content made with professionality, seriousness and authenticity.

**Discussion**

Influencers played a prominent role on the Internet during the lockdown in terms of data sharing, promotion of good practices and charity. The role of influencer marketing has undergone the evolution that has led to the production of quality content that can capture the users’ attention. But perhaps it is also true that, once again, it can be said that the social role of the influencer and their human aspect have been further emphasized in this situation. Influencers were able to provide information and advice on the behaviors to be held to address the current critical issues, which meant that followers were more interested in their online activities. The significance of the most followers obtained must be attributed, in some cases, to the capacity that some of them have had to develop beneficial initiatives. A powerful example of this was Chiara Ferragni and Fedez, who decided to collect the funds needed to create a temporary intensive care pavilion at the San Raffaele Hospital in Milan. Benedetta Rossi was the influencer who delighted and pampered her followers through the creation of recipes, offering support and company. Through daily shared tutorials, Clio make-up has entertained its followers. We can summarize these behaviors through the identification of 3 different concepts: no sponsor, emotional solidarity, socially inclusive, responsible and ethical communication. The analysis has verified how many have decided not to share or reduce the content to be sponsored during lockdown, at a time when disparities between people have increased, and many marketing influencers have had socially inclusive behaviours. This is a great example for the society.

**Limitations and further research**

The present work has limits that can be traced back to various aspects. First of all, the use of a single social platform, Instagram, does not allow a view of the activities of the total marketing influencer, but only related to the posts published on the platform under analysis. In the future research it can extend to other Social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, TikTok). Secondly, the analysis has been carried out paying attention only to the Italian scenario, in the future research it can extend with a cross-country analysis; at the end, the number of influencers, which we remind to be three, could be limited in order to generalize the results. In a future research it could also be analyzed the perception that followers have had of influencers during the lockdown.

**Managerial Implication**

The role of influencer marketing within the society can also have a more important impact on different issues compared to those usually treated. The activities performed during the lockdown, which differ from those that people practice daily, could also arouse interest from companies that do not necessarily operate in the influencer's sector. From the data, it has emerged that the role of influencers has also had great social impact, so many companies could choose to use influencer marketing even just to promote ethically correct and socially responsible behavior or even, to convey the interests of their target audience. The corporate communication, in fact, is moving towards a new trend, the humanization of the brand as an element to create a sustainable competitive advantage over time. Human branding creates connection with the brand and increases the level of trust, it is the element that supports the use of marketing influencers as ambassadors not only of a product or service but also of a mode of communication that aims to create long-term ties.

**Conclusion**

The current research wanted to analyze the role of influencer marketing, more specifically to highlight its role during the global pandemic due to COVID-SARS 19. During this period, influencers have managed to make people trust them thanks to the spontaneous role they played in raising public awareness; examples are: taking care of the entertainment and pampering their followers forced to stay at home, leveraging the adherence and knowledge of their audience through the interpretation of tastes, needs and requirements. They have had the ability to investigate the emotional component of the moment, giving rise to great examples of creativity, often adapting their style, their storytelling, showing creative skills and ability to interpret. All this happened very quickly and even before other communication operators. In short, influencers were among the first to adapt. They have literally entered the homes of Italians, generating a fiduciary dividend that they will be able to benefit in product communication when they are called upon to build brand stories or tell product experiences. Reassurance will then be among the first communication objectives.

Interesting aspects emerge from the work, which shows how influencer marketing has impacted people's lives, not by sponsoring products and services, but by promoting social responsibility, ethical and inclusive behavior.

**References**

Archer, C., Wolf, K., Nalloor, J., (2020), “Capitalising on chaos – exploring the impact and future of social media influencer engagement during the early stages of a global pandemic”, *Media International Australia.*

Arora, A., Bansal, S., Kandpal, C., Aswani, R., Dwivedi, Y., (2019), “Measuring social media influencer index- insights from facebook, twitter and instagram”, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 49, pp. 86-101.

Association of National Advertisers, (2018) “Survey report: How ANA members are using influencer marketing”.

Boerman, S.C., Willemsen, L.M., Van Der Aa, E.P., (2017), “This post is sponsored: effects of sponsorship disclosure on persuasion knowledge and electronic word of mouth in the context of facebook*”, Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 38, pp. 82-92.

Campbell, C., Grimm, PE., (2019), “The Challenges Native Advertising Poses: Exploring Potential Federal Trade Commission Responses and Identifying Research Needs”. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 38(1), pp.110-123.

Crowley, C., Harre, R. and Tagg, C. (2002), “Qualitative research and computing: methodological issues and practices in using QSR NVivo and NUD\* IST”, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 5(3), pp. 193-197.

De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., and Hudders, L., (2017), “Marketing through instagram influencers: the impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude”, *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 36 (5), pp. 798-828.

Dicle MF., Dicle B., (2018), Content Analysis: Frequency Distribution of Words. *The Stata Journal*; Vol.18(2), pp.379-386.

Elliott, H., (2020), “When the picture isn’t pretty: how influencers are adapting to lockdown social media stars face uncertain futures as multibillion-dollar revenue streams dry up”. *Bloomberg*, 2 April.

Enke, N., Borchers, N.S., (2019). “Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication”. *International Journal of Strategic Communication,* Vol.13(4), 261–277.

Gillin, P., (2009), “The New Influencers: A Marketer’s Guide to the New Social Media”, *Quill Driver Books*, Fresno, CA.

Grech, V., (2020). “Unknown unknowns – COVID-19 and potential global mortality”, *Early Human Development*, Vol. 144.

Holmes, R., (2020) “Is COVID-19 social media’s levelling up moment?” *Forbes*, 24 April.

Hongwei, H., Lloyd, H., (2020) “The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on corporate social responsibility and marketing philosophy”, *Journal of Business Research* Vol. 116, pp.176-182.

Jahnke, M., (2018), Influencer Marketing: Für Unternehmen Und Influencer: Strategien, Plattformen, Instrumente, Rechtlicher Rahmen. Mit Vielen Beispielen, *Springer Gabler*, Wiesbaden.

Khamis, S., Ang, L., Welling, R., (2016) . Self-branding, “micro-celebrity” and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Stud*. Vol. 8, pp.191–208.

Kim, S., Han, J., Yoo, S., Gerla, M., (2017), “How are social influencers connected in instagram?”, *International Conference on Social Informatics*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 257-264.

Lou, C., Yuan, S., (2019), “Influencer marketing: how message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media”, *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 19 (1), pp. 58-73.

Farmer, B., (2020), "Measure for measure: ‘like’ it or not, influencer marketing is changing", *Nielsen,* November 2020.

Nirschl, M., Steinberg, L., (2018), Einstieg in Das Influencer Marketing: Grundlagen, Strategien Und Erfolgsfaktoren, Essentials, *Springer*, Berlin.

Osservatorio Influencer Marketing - OIM, (2020) “Il ruolo dell’influencer ai tempi del Covid-19. La percezione dei consumatori”

Petrescu, M., O’Leary, K., Goldring, D., & Mrad, S. B. (2018). “Incentivized reviews: Promising the moon for a few stars”. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, vol. 41, pp. 288–295.

Mazzoleni, S., Turchetti, G., Ambrosino, N., (2020) “The COVID-19 outbreak: From “black swan” to global challenges and opportunities Pulmonology”, Vol. 26 (3), pp. 117-118.

Wiedmann, K.-P., von Mettenheim, W., (2020), "Attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise – social influencers’ winning formula?", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. ahead-of-print

Woosnam K.M., Norman W.C., Ying, T., (2009) “Exploring the theoretical framework of emotional solidarity between residents and tourists”. *Journal of Travel Research*, 48 (2), pp. 245-258.