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**Title**

**Brand Communication on Instagram during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perceptions of users and brands**

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**Abstract**

Social media, based on user-generated content, connectivity, and participation, have become a new environment for brands to capture attention and build lasting relationships with customers and fans. Participating in these platforms demanded a paradigmatic shift in branding and brand communication, who became more focused on listening to consumers and fans, interacting and collaborating with them, and nurturing mutually beneficial relationships. Digital influencers act as mediators between brands and their followers and play a pivotal role in Instagram marketing strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting confinement of the population and emergency status adopted in many countries, is having a profound impact on brands. Many of them, unable to produce and market their products or offering their services, are focusing on their communication, on remaining relevant or becoming more relevant for their fans and customers. Brand communication on Instagram has changed during this short period, and our exploratory study sets out to map the main changes and to understand how both brands, influencers and users perceive them. This article presents re-

sults from an online survey to a purposive sample of 160 Instagrammers, addressing their perceptions about the impact of these changes on their relationship with brands and influencers. We complement the perspective of users with interviews to 25 other relevant agents, namely Instagram influencers, marketing agencies and brands with relevant presence on Instagram.

## **Keywords**

Branding, Instagram, Brands, Communication, Instagram Marketing, COVID-19 pandemic

## **Introduction**

The emergence of social media represents a paradigmatic shift in brand communication. Due to the very own nature of social media, platforms that are built on the sharing of user-generated content, on the expansion of connectivity and networks, and on the empowerment of its users to communicate, create, share, like and dislike (Jenkins, 2006), brands abandoned their broadcasting communication model and adopted a conversational posture.

Brands tested and developed social media marketing strategies, soon acknowledging the importance of creating and sharing relevant and appealing content - content marketing, building interest communities around it - online brand communities and community management, and using virality to their advantage, maximizing the reach of their content and brand awareness (Kerpen, 2015; Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Empowered to share their opinions and experiences with brands, digital influencers emerged on social media, acting as opinion-leaders and becoming mediators between brands and users (Jenkins, 2006).

Instagram is a social media platform with an unique identity and aesthetic. Primarily thought of as a space for instantaneously sharing snapshots of moments, it completely changed the aesthetics of photography, being the now common selfies and flat-lay perspective two significant examples. Currently, several brands and influencers have built strong communities on Instagram, which are key for building brand awareness, loyalty and brand reputation (Carah & Shaul, 2015; Levin, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting confinement of the population and emergency status adopted in many countries, dramatically changed our way of living across the globe. Many brands, now unable to produce and market their products or offering their services, are focusing on their communication and on social responsibility (Socialbakers, 2020). With most of their customers and fans at home, social media such as Instagram are privileged platforms for keeping in touch, and the goals of brands vary from remaining relevant, to building awareness, to helping people stay positive and overcome difficulties and even to helping with concrete actions such as supporting health

professionals, raising funds and donations, or producing much needed items such as masks and sanitizer.

With our exploratory research, we intend to map the crisis responses and the new Instagram marketing strategies that are being adopted by brands, particularly in the Portuguese context. We also intend to understand how different stakeholders - such as users/fans, brands, marketing agencies and influencers - are perceiving these initiatives, discussing their positive and negative aspects.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***The importance of Instagram for brands***

Digital technologies have had a profound impact on several dimensions of our society. Consumption is one of them, and consumers who have grown up as digital media users have learned to use them as tools and resources for satisfying their needs. Some of the main changes in consumer behaviour are related to the perception of time and space - consumers are now used to shop in a global market and to get immediate satisfaction to their needs; and to their relationship with organizations and brands - empowered by social media to communicate with one-another, consumers trust other consumers more than they trust brands, and advertising in particular (Gunter, 2016; Zuboff, 2019).

These changes pose challenges to brands, but are also opportunities. Several brands have successfully transitioned to the digital environment and built strong brand communities on social media, where their fans have become brand ambassadors, spreading positive word-of-mouth online. Adopting a customer-centric perspective, social media are ideal platforms to build brand associations, particularly to lifestyles, to reference groups - influencers and celebrities, and to values (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017). Instagram, due to its visual nature and to the unique aesthetics that has emerged on this platform, is particularly relevant for brands related to fashion, design, travelling, food, among others (Levin, 2019).

Instagram has become important for brands because it is a very effective channel to reach its target audience, to build strong, lasting and meaningful relationships with fans, and to reach beyond its community, motivating recommendations and positive word-of-mouth (Carah & Shaul, 2015).

For users, fans and consumers, the presence of brands on social media, and particularly on Instagram, is also important, as it affords them aesthetic inspiration and also a sense of belonging to a community, and the opportunity to feel active and engaged (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017).

### ***Instagram marketing strategies***

Social media marketing is based on three pillars: content marketing, community management, and viral marketing (Tuten & Solomon, 2012). Due to their nature, set on con-

nectivity and user-generated content, social media are platforms where users gather and engage around interesting content. Thus, relevant and appealing content is essential to building and managing a growing and engaged community. However, it is not enough, as being part of a community is also participating, feeling important and valued, and identifying with the other community members. Community management is nurturing strong and emotional relationships between fans and brands, and between fans themselves, turning them into ambassadors. Sharing content about a brand feeds the expansion of a community and enhances brand awareness. Yet again, good and appealing content motivates sharing, and embedding “virality” elements on content brings social media marketing full circle, back to content marketing again.

Digital influencers are pivotal players in the social media landscape. They act as opinion-leaders for their followers, who often trust them more than they trust brands (McCorquodale, 2019). The relationship between digital influencers and their followers is based on intimacy, proximity, and identification. Followers are able to relate to influencers on a deep level, feeling that, at the same time, they are “just like them”, but also admiring them (Giles, 2018). Thus, influence marketing is also an important component of contemporary branding strategy (Levin, 2019).

Focusing particularly on Instagram, “Instabranding” follows specific guidelines (Ginsberg, 2015) for showcasing products and brands in an organic way. The visual nature of the content and its aesthetic quality is key for successfully communicating on this platform (Klassen, Borleis, Brennan, Reid, McCaffey & Lim, 2018). Also, users respond more to positive content, particularly with an inspiring tone, and to framing products and brands within a lifestyle and socialization context - promoting identification between users, influencers and brands (Ginsberg, 2015). There are several types of content that serve these purposes, apart from standard publications on social media. Social Network Advertising or Social Media Advertising is defined by D. G. Taylor et al. (2011) as general terms that encompass the various forms of advertising on social networks, which can be explicit (for example, banner ads and commercial videos) or implicit (for example, fan pages and comments related to the company). It is important to mention here the term Native Advertising which, according to Nieto (2018), is the publication of content promoted on a platform, respecting the format and style of the editorial content of that platform. Native ads are consistent with the page content, similar in design, and congruous across different platforms. In addition, the emergence and growing popularity of social networks such as Instagram amplified the effects of peer recommendations and facilitated the sharing of consumers’ opinions and experience (De Veirman et al., 2017).

These marketing strategies work because they promote synergic benefits for all the different players - brands, influencers, customers and fans. Brands are able to enhance their value and to build awareness, loyalty and reputation; being a digital influencer has become a new career; customers and fans have access to updates and exclusive deals

regarding their favourite brands, but they also connect to them on a deeper level, using them as a way of expressing their identity and values (Kornberger, 2010; Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

However, there is also a “dark side” to this deal, in which brands are more exposed to reputational crisis; influencers struggle to balance the promotion of brands with the authenticity that their followers demand and value; and members of these online brand communities face an “envy spiral”, in which they are constantly confronted with carefully curated content that presents a more appealing, exciting and stylish lifestyle than their own.

### ***Instagram marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic***

The contention measures adopted in many countries to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from social distancing, confinement and lockdown, radically changed our way of life. Most brands are confronted with difficulties to market and decrease in sales, a situation that forces them to rethink their strategy and reinvent themselves in order to remain relevant for their consumers, and, if possible, to contribute in the efforts for coping with the pandemic.

At home, most people have more time, and need, to consume digital content, and brands turned to social media as a way of remaining present and relevant in the new routine of their followers, possibly reaching new audiences, and also communicating their efforts to adapt. A study from Socialbakers (2020) reveals that brands are following these general strategies: a) communicating how they ensure the safety of their collaborators and customers; b) communicating tips, guidelines and tutorials adapted to “life at home” (e.g. beauty, health); c) communicating adaptations in their products; d) communicating how they contribute to their followers’ wellbeing by making available content that promotes health, that is supportive, that entertains, that is inspiring, that is hopeful; e) supporting health professionals and others who are in the “front line” of fighting the pandemic; and f) communicating solidarity actions directed at fighting the pandemic or supporting vulnerable groups. Followers responded more positively to brands that changed their production in order to create products useful during the crisis, such as masks and hand sanitizer. Also, users are spending more time on social media, but the Cost per Click decreased, revealing that they are engaging with organic content and not with advertising.

Influencers are also addressing the challenge of creating organic and authentic content that still showcases brands. They are also confined in their homes, and reveal more of their intimacy, revealing how brands are inserted in their own routines. They are also held accountable by their fans as role-models when it comes to staying at home and keeping themselves and others safe (Tsapovsky, 2020; Moore, 2020).

## **Methodology**

With regard to the methods used to collect data in this research, a questionnaire survey was conducted at first to capture primary data. The questionnaire survey was carried out through the Internet and aimed at "the knowledge of a population: their conditions and ways of life, their behaviors, their values, and their opinions." (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2013, p. 189). Later on, it was possible to test the different perspectives found in this first exploratory phase by confronting them with the literature review, and by complementing them with a second phase of data collection through interviews. The online questionnaire was created using an online tool, Google Forms. The survey had 25 closed questions and they were organized by themes, facilitating their reading and understanding. The themes were born from the theoretical review of the proposal.

In the second instance of our study, semi-structured interviews were conducted online. The interview allowed an exchange to be established during which the interlocutor expresses his/her perceptions of the moment of a global pandemic caused by COVID-19. As a complement to the primary data collected by the questionnaire survey, a semi-structured script was prepared for 25 specialists and professionals working in the field of Digital Advertising in the social media as well as in the areas of Communication and Digital Marketing in Portugal and in Brazil.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Below we present the results of the empirical investigation. We start with the results of the online survey and then address the answers presented by specialists and professionals working in Digital Advertising (Social Media) as well as in the Communication and Digital Marketing field.

The profile of the surveyed Instagrammers corresponds to a group between 19 and 65 years old, 88% of whom were female, 58% had a degree and the vast majority lives in the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, 43%. This population uses Instagram mainly to create/share or view publications (85%), create/share or view stories (84%), to follow news about subjects that interest them (72%). On the other hand, only 40% uses the platform to keep up with news and brand offers. Regarding the relationship with digital influencers, only 3% of respondents do not follow influencers. It is worth mentioning that the main reasons to follow a digital influencer are: specific content published (90%), lifestyle identification (71%). As for the type of content published by influencers, the most interesting are tips and suggestions for products/services (60%) and inspiring content (47%), tutorials (53%) and live sessions (49%). The least preferred are giveaways (23%). The vast majority of respondents (over 80%) say they are little or not satisfied when an influencer uses the profile to advertise a brand or product without identifying it, making it look like genuine content, or when they stop producing content with which

they identify themselves with, or create very staged content, use many filters or contradict their own philosophy of life to support brands. On the other hand, they show special satisfaction when the published contents seem to reflect life naturally and in a genuine way (58%), mentioning only brands that are in coherence with their values and always identifying when they advertise (65%). In fact, 60% of respondents say that they like influencers to publicize the products they are interested in, and 71% say they have already purchased products that they have known through a digital influencer.

As for the relationship of Instagram users with their favourite brands, 63% indicate that they follow those brands. And, in general, they recognize advantages in the relationship of brands with digital influencers, as long as it is a genuine partnership for both parties, even admitting that it is a good way to receive information about their products of interest without having to search for it. Regarding their use of Instagram during the time of quarantine and their relationship with influencers and brands, the respondents affirm that they value the brands who continued to support digital influencers, even if the content was more limited (92%). 76% admit that their preferred content at the time of confinement was “entertainment”, followed by “suggestions to adapt the lifestyle to the moment” (65%). This group of respondents reveals a constant presence of Instagram consumption, presenting an interdependence between entertainment content and information respecting the position of a digital influencer and the relationship with the brands.

The specialists and professionals working in Digital Advertising (Social Media) as well as in the areas of Communication and Digital Marketing field consider that the main advantages of Instagram as a strategic communication tool have to do with brand awareness and engagement that this platform makes possible, especially among the youngest. They point to Instagram as a low-cost advertising medium, capable of communicating in a segmented way and, at the same time, reaching several people quickly. In addition, they demonstrate the ease of measuring results. As for the tools that the platform provides, they report that, at this moment, the most persuasive are stories and lives, mainly for the strategic use of content in a storytelling format. The use of digital influencers is considered an effective strategy, above all, to reach a wider audience, but within a specific segment. They claim that it is a good way to generate credibility for the brand and, consequently, gain consumer confidence. They say, however, that it is essential that the influencer genuinely reflects the brand's values.

I.19 Credibility. It is crucial to choose a soul that defends exactly the same principles as the brand. Above all, it is necessary that all the surroundings are organic.

In this same sense, they refer to the authenticity, personality, capacity for engagement, and quality of the publications of the digital influencer as essential factors to consider in the choice process.

I.25: Above all, I try to find an influencer who immediately correlates with my brand. Then I think it is important to analyse the type of posts that the influencer shares. The number of followers is of course important, but not always, especially when we have influencers with many followers and very little engagement.

With regard to the possible changes in strategy for Instagram, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents say they continue to invest in collaboration with digital influencers, and some point out that they have even increased this collaboration as a strategy within the scope of Social Responsibility.

I.25 Yes! In this moment of crisis, it is very important for the influencer to raise awareness so they can help shaping their follower's minds in a very positive way.

They also explain that for brands it has become even more important to focus on online promotion, with Instagram being a privileged means of doing so. However, they claim that the tone of voice has to become more “humanized”, “social” and “informative”. And more sustained by brand than product values. Values such as hygiene, safety, and health are now at the top of strategic needs.

I.13 Everything started to be more digital, it is important to communicate safety and hygiene for all consumers.

This group of interviewees revealed a change in perspective about the creation of content for Instagram and relationship between social media and brands. They address the role of social responsibility communication and a more strategic approach to the new role that social media represents for brands.

## **Conclusion**

With the presence of social media, Instagram has become constant in the daily lives of young people. The brands, perceiving this tendency, increasingly seek to communicate through these networks, abandoning their asymmetric communication model, and have adopted a dialogue posture. Instagram is a social media platform with a unique identity and aesthetic. Primarily thought of as space to instantly share moments, it completely changed the aesthetics of photography. Currently, several brands and influencers have



created strong Instagram communities, which are essential for brand awareness, loyalty and reputation. COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting confinement of the population and the emergency status adopted in many countries have dramatically changed the way of living around the world. As noted in this investigation, brands, now unable to produce and market their products or offer their services, are focused on communicating with social responsibility and often using digital influencers. These influencers are facing the challenge of creating organic and authentic content that still displays brands, revealing the content of intimacy, as brands are inserted into their own routines. They are also held responsible by their fans as role models when it comes to staying at home and keeping themselves and others safe. Telling stories and brand values is key to create a connection with followers. This new model of storytelling is a proposal for dialogue that finds individualized communication with digital influencers and those with their audiences. Brands quickly realized that promotional messages are not the kind that consumers want to see and have taken a more subtle approach. This subtlety must be accurately treated in regard to the creation of content for the storyteller. Considering the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the content created by digital influencers must be very well prepared to exceed public expectations. While consumers prefer the less disruptive nature of native advertising and its benefits for sponsoring brands, native advertising tactics, including influence marketing, must be respected not to mistake paid content with genuine content and not paid content. We conclude that there must be a greater awareness of topics such as the need for clear information in times of pandemic and due justification of contents that constitute payment/remuneration for digital influencers.

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