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Articles

Célia BELIM*

Health Activism *Is the New Black*: The Communication by Non-Governmental Organizations about COVID-19

Abstract

This article focuses on understanding how non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in their role as health activists, have built their communication on COVID-19. A triple analysis is used, qualitative-thematic, rhetorical, and semiotic, applied to a *corpus* of advertisements (n=68). The findings show that, thematically, NGOs propose an agenda that includes prevention, awareness (e.g., COVID 19's impact, aid, violence, disinformation, (ir)responsibility), donation, and praise for altruism. Rhetorically, *ethos* is built through the emphasis on the credibility of NGOs, the elite figures and the authenticity and factualism of human faces. Capitalizing on the innate emotional nature of humans, *pathos* is entangled in a plurality of positive (e.g., love, pride, hope) and negative emotions (e.g., worry). A variety of *logos*-based rhetorical strategies are employed, particularly those grounded in evidence, such as the use of statistical data, factual references, and pedagogical descriptions intended to clarify and support the argument. Additionally, the text incorporates a range of persuasive and emotional tactics, including stylistic features, phatic elements (e.g., questions designed to initiate contact with the audience), motivational language, and associations with noble causes. Techniques such as personalization and humanization are used to foster authenticity and public identification, alongside the portrayal of victims to evoke empathy. Furthermore, the symbolic use of icons and plastic signifiers, including colour schemes, enhances the communicative and emotional appeal of the message. The article offers professional, social, and scientific contributions.

Keywords: non-governmental organizations (NGOs); health activism; COVID-19; health communication; strategic communication

1. Introduction

Communication is vital for the existence and functioning of organizations (Palamarchuk & Polishchuk, 2023). It facilitates cooperation, building relationships, adapting to global changes, allowing to solve problems that transcend national borders, such as COVID-19. As Meywe (2020) emphasizes, the crisis response depends on what the organization does and what the organization says, in other words, it depends on communication.

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In recent decades, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become one of the basic pillars of public wellbeing (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020), have had a major impact on global society (Lewis, 2005), have become actors capable of considerably affecting public opinion (Giorgi, 2019), and influencing the awareness about international social causes, including health causes, in a global society (Schwarz & Fritsch, 2014, p. 161). Since NGOs are not motivated by a desire for profit, they are seen by the public as being more trustworthy than other organizations (Hoepner et al., 2021). Additionally, NGOs are the most rapidly growing type of organization in the world (Fergusson, 2018) and this growth has coincided with a perceived increase in the influence NGOs can and do exert over governments (Giorgi, 2019).

NGOs tend to be studied in their role as activists, not in the strategic communication of activists (Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2017, p. 87; Schwarz & Fritsch, 2014, p. 161). For this literature review, a Boolean search was carried out in March 2024 on the EBSCOhost database, “the leading provider of research database” (<https://www.ebsco.com/>), using the following keywords: “health activism” AND “NGO or non-governmental organization” AND “strategic communication”. The search generated no useful results, which shows the pioneering nature of this thematic proposal.

This research gap is surprising, as the results of the study conducted by Schwarz and Fritsch (2014) reveal that international NGOs tend to value their communications function and should be considered strategically mature. The authors observe that 60% of the NGOs that participated in the survey are categorized in the cluster of “excellent international public relations” (Schwarz & Fritsch, 2014, p. 177). NGOs have traditionally relied on strategic communication as a cost-effective way to reach different audiences and achieve certain objectives. This serves as a fundamental tool for NGOs, enabling them to gain access to the media, shape public discourse, and influence public opinion, while also positioning them as key players in issue management (Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2017). Healthcare activism has a long and rich history of social change, spanning diverse themes, from mapping diseases with epidemic potential to sociopolitical issues such as organizing for women’s rights (Gade, 2023). The literature reveals that there is limited research regarding health activism and what constitutes health activism (Mundie & Donelle, 2022).

In the context of COVID-19, health communication has a pivotal prominence in health and wellbeing, including disease prevention, health promotion and quality of life (e.g., Scardigno et al., 2023). Given that communication and health campaigns are aimed at mass adherence to specific actions, especially during a health emergency, various tactics and communication channels are used to inform, educate, and warn. Therefore, persuasive messages must be disseminated competently (Scardigno et al., 2023). The types of cues and levels of message construction related to practiced communication – which may constitute good practices – are of significant interest for understanding and improving persuasive processes (e.g., Scardigno et al., 2023) linked to health communication in the times of a pandemic.

In theoretical terms, this article draws on health communication studies, rhetorical theory, message strategy theory, and semiotic studies. Combining strategical health communication, health activism, advertising campaigns creativity and the communication challenges of organizations during a global pandemic crisis, the aim of this article is to understand the strategic and activist communication of NGOs about COVID-19.

2. The contribution of communication for health activism and NGOs in a pandemic crisis

A pandemic can turn NGO communication into activism. The breadth of COVID-19 and its peculiar characteristics distinguished it from other crises. This led NGOs to work hard on several fronts to protect the most vulnerable people against the effects of the epidemic and to maintain the performance of their organizations (Vameghi et al., 2022). NGOs are mostly defined by their cooperative or humanitarian aims rather than commercial purposes, intending to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development (World Bank, 1995). These organizations can be characterized as a subdomain of the broader non-profit sector, engaging concretely in the international plan (e.g., Edwards & Hulme, 1996). From this perspective, NGOs are often idealized as organizations committed to “doing good” (Saharan et al., 2021, p. 1), not returning profits generated to their owners or directors, institutionally separate from government, and voluntary (Fergusson, 2018).

Although activism is on the rise at global level (Tench & Yeomans, 2009, p. 131), health activism is not particularly common in either popular or academic discourse (Zoller, 2005). The term *activism* or *health activism* often goes undefined in the literature (Zoller, 2005, p. 343), is not consistently defined or is used interchangeably with advocacy (Mundie & Donelee, 2022). As a form of health communication, health activism (Zoller, 2005, p. 342) involves a challenge to the existing order and the power relations that are seen as negatively influencing certain aspects of health or hindering health promotion. To this end, health activism can employ direct action, as well as the creation and dissemination of messages aimed at raising awareness, educating, and mobilizing the public (e.g., Dorfman et al., 2005; Laverack, 2013; Talhouk et al., 2018; Zoller, 2005; Zoller, 2017). The concept involves attempts to change the status quo, including targets such as social norms, embedded practices, policies or the dominance of certain social groups (Zoller, 2005, p. 344). Health activists can be classified in terms of the issue within the area of health they are concerned with (Zoller, 2005, p. 347). Considering the performance of NGOs in light of COVID-19, health activism can be classified as: (1) *illness and disability activism*, which focuses on bringing attention to particular diseases (in this case, COVID-19), developing research and treatment, and altering public perceptions and norms regarding illness and disability; or (2) *public health and disease prevention activism*, which concentrates on removing the causes of disease and barriers to good health (Zoller, 2005, p. 349).

In situations of epidemics and pandemics, health activism can play a vital role in mobilizing resources, promoting preventive measures, and defending more effective response strategies, so the messages to be disseminated must be aligned with the identity of the activist organization and must aim to fulfill or act in line with the objectives of the message among the audiences to be reached. This means that communication must be used strategically, that is, for concrete purposes. *Strategic communication*, “the current reason for being” (Horwath, 2005, p. 1), is defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission (Hallahan et al. 2005, pp. 3-4). Specifically, it is about informational, persuasive, discursive and relational communication when used in a context of the achievement of an organization’s mission (Hallahan et al. 2005, p. 17).

Communication processes regarding health activism can include interpretation of illness causation, choice and articulation of solutions, development of public appeals, implementa-

tion of methods and tactics, forms of organizing (Zoller, 2005, pp. 351-352). As types of response to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, international NGOs resorted to symbolic statements, sharing third party knowledge, material support, running educational and awareness raising projects, issuing guidelines and producing knowledge (Ulybina et al., 2023).

In a pandemic or health crisis the uncertainty, strong feelings of urgency (Musolino et al., 2020, pp. 17-24), the higher vulnerability of some people and communities (HEG Expert Group, 2011, p. 26), and an overload of health needs on human and material resources (Thompson et al., 2006) are difficulties. Additionally, there is increased tension between individual freedom and collective protection (HEG Expert Group, 2011, p. 26). In this scenario, activists rely on symbolic legitimation (e.g., Ulybina et al., 2023) and on persuasive appeals to connect with the public to change attitudes and encourage action (Zoller, 2005, p. 354). An organization can use the opportunity to make itself visible in the public discourse centered pandemic by resorting to symbolic legitimation (Ulybina et al., 2023), which is based on the importance of language and symbols so that individuals can create a meaningful world about something linked to health. Awareness raising, behavioral change, and health promotion campaigns rely on symbolic communication, as societies attribute meaning to language and symbols to reinforce the acceptance of certain practices.

Comparing the NGO advertisement in South Africa and China, Liu et al. (2017) observe that both tend to use an emotional approach and there is a pattern to NGO advertisements, engendering gloom and sadness (pp. 22, 24). The authors point out that there are other ways of appealing to the publics, such as bringing them optimistic scenes that can evoke them with love and hope. The public tends to be more receptive to positive promotional campaigns (Liu et al., 2017, p. 24).

Since “most people are emotional” (Papp-Váry, 2015, p. 22), it can be said that an emotional approach can trigger passion in the public, which will create a longstanding effect. The author suggests adopting the South African advertising strategy and the guidelines used, such as being straightforward and using visual effects (p. 22). Focusing on the emotional dimension of the message, Nabi (2014) refers to fear, guilt, and humor as the emotional appeals that have received the most attention (p. 115). In another logic, O’Keefe (2014) notes that decisions to adopt specific message strategies for use in persuasive health interventions should be evidence based, just as evidence-based medicine informs health screening and treatment decisions.

Persuasive messages frequently use a basic expectancy-value mechanism to influence beliefs regarding the subjective likelihood of various outcomes occurring. The operational formula for preventing risky behavior is susceptibility multiplied by severity, using a loss frame to motivate the public with a high likelihood of suffering painful effects (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 9). Atkin and Rice (2013) explain that incentive appeals often build on existing values of the target public, so the message tends to reinforce their predispositions (p. 9). Murray-Johnson and Witte (2003) clarify that campaign strategists attempt to make the messages salient to the public (p. 475). The authors refer to stimuli and call to action as message content variables. A call to action helps move someone from wanting to make a healthy change to actually making it happen (Belim, 2022, p. 15). Health message designers create the cognition leading to motivation by choosing those message features, such as vividness, repetition, and placement in the mass media, that communicate “this is important to your health” (Murray-Johnson & Witte, 2003, p. 475). Repetition can also heighten the motivation to attend to a message (p. 476). Motivational variables, such as fear, threats, perceived severity, perceived susceptibility are essential to how a message is processed and whether action is taken (p. 477).

Specifically on the prevention of the risk of cardiovascular disease, Bellicha and McGrath (1990) emphasize that a multiplicity of tactics has been developed and tested to encourage adequate action. Messages have stressed the benefits of adopting healthy habits, such as protecting loved ones, safeguarding one's health, and being around to enjoy the rewards of life. The reverse tactic has also been used. Focus group testing has indicated that the emphasis of negative effects in a message of mild fear is believable, motivational and attention-getting (Arkin, 1987). Sharf and Vanderford (2003) also argue that, when personal stories of suffering are constructed, the individual dealing with serious and/or chronic illness understands a situation that may at first seem to not have a discernible explanation (p. 29). Atkin and Rice (2013, p. 9) systematize the qualities or appeals that influential messages should possess, identifying five key elements: 1. credibility, conveyed through the trustworthiness and competence of the source and the use of convincing evidence; 2. engagement, achieved through the presentation of style and ideas in a stimulating and stylistically appealing manner; 3. personal relevance, ensured by selecting content and style that the audience perceives as applicable to their own situation and needs; 4. clarity, attained by presenting the content in a simple, explicit, and detailed manner, making it easily understandable to the audience; and 5. motivational appeal, referring to the rewards recipients may obtain by adhering to the recommended health behaviors. Also, persuasive appeals may take the form of awareness messages, pleas for social responsibility or appeals to fear, sympathy, morality, respect, or social justice (Zoller, 2005, p. 355), ad framing (positive or negative outcomes), statistical information, emotions (*pathos*), altruistic versus egoistic appeals, efficiency ratings, or inclusion of goal attainment information (Wymer & Gross, 2021).

Based on the notion of health activism as both direct action and creation and dissemination of messages aimed at raising awareness, educating, and mobilizing the public (e.g., Dorfman et al., 2005; Laverack, 2013; Talhouk et al., 2018; Zoller, 2005; Zoller, 2017), and on Hallahan et al. (2005)'s understanding of strategic communication as informational, persuasive, discursive and relational communication (p. 17), three research questions can be formulated based on the aims of strategic communication: informational, persuasive, and relational/symbolic discourse:

Q1. What thematic associations are established in NGOs advertisements related to COVID-19 between January 11 and April 15, 2020?

Q2. What is the persuasive impact of the advertising messages created by NGOs about COVID-19 between January 11 and April 15, 2020?

Q3. What is the symbolic potential of the advertising messages disseminated by NGOs about COVID-19 between January 11 and April 15, 2020?

3. Method

3.1. Aims

To explore the message in its entirety (substance-issues; form-rhetoric; symbolism-deeper meanings), and assess its potential, specific objectives in line with the research questions are formulated:

1) to understand the thematic associations established in NGOs advertisements with the issue of COVID-19 between January 11 and April 15, 2020;

2) to investigate the persuasive potential of the advertisement messages used by NGOs about COVID-19 between January 11 and April 15, 2020; and

3) to explore the symbolic potential of the advertisement messages disseminated by NGOs about COVID-19 between January 11 and April 15, 2020. Respectively, the thematic agenda and the persuasive and symbolic capacity were analyzed.

3.2. Corpus

The *corpus* was selected based on the following: abundance of data; variety of language; understanding of the target audience; reflection of culture and society's values; and ease of access and analysis. The *corpus*, comprising 68 NGO ads, was the result of a search using the words "coronavirus" and "COVID-19" on two websites, which aggregate content from: a) ads – *Ads of the World*, described as "the largest creative advertising base in the world" (adsoftheworldnyc, 2024), using the tag "public interest"; and b) campaigns – *Campaigns of the World*, referred to as "the number one news source for advertisers and creative professionals" (COTW, 2024), where no specific tag was applied. The word advertisement is used in the sense of non-profit advertising. The analysis period was three months, between January 11, 2020, the day on which the first death caused by COVID-19 occurred in China, and April 15, 2020, as it marked the peak or near-peak of the first wave of infections and deaths in many countries, including the United States and several European nations (Johns Hopkins University, 2020; WHO, 2020). It was a critical turning point when public health communication intensified, governmental restrictions were reinforced, and non-governmental organizations began increasing their outreach to address growing public concerns and social vulnerabilities (UNESCO, 2020; Kickbusch et al., 2020). The timeframe was selected due to the significant impact of the virus infiltrating most countries during March 2020, also known as the *first wave of the pandemic*.

Given that academics and practitioners use a wide range of terminology to designate non-state actors, such as "NGOs", "civil society organizations", "interest groups", "non-profit organizations" or "third sector organizations" (Schoenefeld, 2021), which are entities involved in social causes, committed to the common good and thus the public interest, to the *corpus* of this study includes entities classified by Ads of the Word with the category "public interest industry". In addition to this inclusion criterion, the focus on COVID-19 was considered. No promoter nationality or medium type filters were applied. This option allows to compose a transnational, multimedia and multi-thematic *corpus* related to COVID-19. All advertisements returned according to the search criteria within the analyzed time-period were included in the *corpus*, constituting a "complete enumeration".

3.3. Qualitative techniques

The method used is qualitative, including qualitative content analysis – QCA (to fulfil the first aim), rhetorical analysis (for the second aim) and semiotic analysis (for the third).

3.3.1. Qualitative content analysis

The QCA was employed to seek out the underlying issues in the materials being analyzed (Bryman, 2012, p. 557). To operate the technique, the procedures suggested by Altheide (2004) were adopted (Table 1).

Table 1. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) Procedures

Step	Procedure
1	Generate a research question (<i>What are the thematic associations made by NGOs with the issue of COVID-19?</i>)
2	Become familiar with the context within which the <i>corpus</i> was/is generated
3	Become familiar with a small number of materials (ads present on the websites referred to)
4	Generate some categories (e.g., issue) that guide the collection of data

Note. Adapted from *Qualitative Media Analysis* by D. L. Altheide, 2004, Sage Publications. © 2004 by SAGE.

3.3.2. Rhetorical analysis

Rhetorical analysis concentrates on how the message is analyzed as an artistically structured instrument for communication and persuasion instead of what the message enunciates, involving breaking the text down into parts. Through this procedure, we can understand how the different parts operate, providing insights to reconstruct the overall persuasive strategies used. In the analysis conducted, the three “proofs of persuasion” – *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* – enunciated by Aristotle (century IV BC/2005) are considered (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories for Rhetorical Analysis

<i>Ethos</i> : those that reside in the moral character of the issuer, leaving the impression that he/she is worthy of faith	<i>Pathos</i> : those derived from the emotion that the speech arouses in the public	<i>Logos</i> : those that focus on what the discourse demonstrates
• <i>Credibility</i>, by exposing the trustworthiness and competence of the source and convincing evidence (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 9) • The perceived credibility of the source (Berlo et al., 1969) • <i>Trust</i> based on two attributes: <i>competence</i> (keeping promises) and <i>ethical behavior</i> (adopting the right behavior and commitment to improving society) (Edelman, 2020) • <i>Authority</i> representing the sender's level of expertise (Shaffi & Rowley, 2017) • Use of <i>real faces</i> in the iconic plan – <i>authenticity</i> • <i>Elite figures</i>	• <i>Love and hope</i>: bringing optimistic scenes to the public (Liu et al., 2017) • <i>Susceptibility multiplied by severity</i> – loss frame (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 9). • <i>Stimuli and cues to action</i> (Murray-Johnson & Witte, 2003, p. 475) • <i>Motivational variables</i>: fear, threats, perceived severity, perceived susceptibility (Murray-Johnson & Witte, 2003, p. 477) • <i>Fear, guilt, and humor</i> (Nabi, 2014, p. 115) • <i>Negative messages</i> (e.g., Arkin, 1987; Monahan, 1995, p. 86) • <i>Positive messages</i> (Monahan, 1995, p. 86) • <i>Awareness messages, pleas for social responsibility or appeals to fear, sympathy, morality, respect or social justice</i> (Zoller, 2005, p. 355) • <i>Shock appeals</i> (Wymer & Gross, 2021) <i>Emergent categories from the corpus:</i> • Empathy • Feeling of power/empowerment, of control • Feelings of impotence and vulnerability • Impetus for reflection and introspection • Pity • Pride • Sense of responsibility • Sense of emergency • Strangeness	• <i>Worry</i> • <i>Evidence-based medicine</i> (O'Keefe, 2014) • <i>Data / evidence and examples</i> (Ting, 2018, p. 238) • <i>Repetition</i> (Murray-Johnson & Witte, 2003, p. 476) • <i>Humanization and personalization</i> (Shaffi & Vanderford, 2003) • <i>Stylistic devices</i> can make the sender's thoughts concrete (Corbett, 2004, p. 143) • <i>Victims' portrayal</i>: children and their expressions, victims' facial expressions and poverty porn (Wymer & Gross, 2021) • <i>Narratives or stories</i> (Bruner, 1990; Scardigno et al., 2023)

Note. Based on rhetorical theory and sources from Atkin and Rice (2013), Murray-Johnson and Witte (2003), and additional *corpus*-based categories.

3.3.3. *Semiotic analysis*

Semiotic analysis is based on the study of deeper meanings of messages and of the signifying process through signs. A sign is defined as anything that carries information that can be received in different ways by each recipient, depending on his/her cultural repertoire (Poulios & Senter, 2016). The analysis conducted focuses on the two dimensions of the message (the verbal, and the visual); and on icons, denotation, and connotation; and plastic signifiers (Joly, 2008). Denotation is what can be described as simply being “there” (Bate, 2020). Connotation is the immediate cultural meanings derived from the content analyzed (Bate, 2020). Icons are figurative, recognized by what they show, while plastic signifiers (e.g., color, composition, framing, lighting, plan, shape, texture) are not just the simple matter of the expression of iconic signs, they are integral because they fully signify (Joly, 2008).

The codebooks prepared for the three analyzes follow a deductive logic, taking advantage of insights from the literature, which is combined with an inductive logic to accommodate the specificities of the *corpus*. To define the category scheme, we adopted some methodological precautions, such as: mutually exclusive categories and clear instructions to categorize.

4. Findings

4.1. Thematic associations with the issue of COVID-19

4.1.1. *Prevention*

Some NGOs focus on the advice to stay home (e.g., Ad Council). In certain ads, various relationships are drawn, such as: a) in the Ad Council’s ads, a relationship is established between staying home and saving lives (Ad 1); b) in the ads from the World Health Organization (WHOa, b – Ads 4-11), spreading out, staying two meters away from everyone and staying home are presented as influential factors to save lives and “not to be part of these numbers”; c) in the Saatchi & Saatchi ad (Ads 12-14), staying at home and stopping the spread helps save medical staff from taking a hit and stop non-domestic violence perpetrated by wearing a mask during work hours; d) in the ads from the United Nations (UN), keeping the distance “stops chaos” and helps control COVID-19 (Ads 15-17); e) the World Human Fund appeals to people to stay home for “your loved ones” and not put the elderly at risk (Ads 18-19). The WHOc and the UN make an association between washing hands frequently and stopping the spread of the virus (Ad 20).

4.1.2. *Awareness*

Within awareness campaigns, several topics were covered.

COVID 19’s impact

One awareness raising initiative is the Trans Lifeline campaign, which addresses the crisis of isolation of trans and nonbinary individuals, with an impact on their mental health (Ads 21-25). The campaign, based on the postulation that no one should be isolated because of his/her identity, is a call to this social minority to share their stories of being seen and seeing others, using the #WeSeeUs hashtag.

Aid

Senim-Meirim encourages distancing from other humans but not from pets, highlighting the issue of adopting pets (Ads 26-28). Another campaign focused on awareness is the one by Hogar de Cristo which aims to deliver support to the economically disadvantaged, who do not have the option of staying home (Ads 29-34). The UN also has a campaign that addresses homelessness, encouraging greater public empathy and engagement, particularly during times of crisis (Ads 35-37). Within the scope of the awareness theme, there is a focus on the financial education of students. Given that students face personal financial stress, exacerbated by COVID-19, DoSomething.Org and HSBC encourage participation in the online *Would You Rather* questions to receive a personal finance guide and become part of the most financially literate generation (Ad 38).

Violence

APAV foregrounds the effects of isolation, the possible dark side of being isolated, stating that anyone in this condition can also be a victim (Ads 39-41). Among these effects, APAV refers to the increase in various risks, such as the risk of being a cybercrime victim, the risk of crimes like embezzlement and robbery at home and in places with less vigilance, and the risk of suffering physical, mental or sexual abuse. The Anais Association also warns of the consequences of social distancing in terms of domestic violence (Ads 42-44). Social distancing means both being protected from coronavirus and, negatively, more time in which the aggressor is at home with his/her victims, increasing the number of domestic violence cases. Another three ads from the Anais Association, with thematic consistency, appeal to the isolation of violence, by not allowing domestic violence to increase during social distancing and reporting any abuse to the emergency services (Ads 45-47). The Women's Aid Federation also addresses the issue of domestic violence, recalling that, for thousands of women and children right now, home is anything but safe (Ad 48).

Disinformation

The fact of fake news spreading faster than the virus is the issue of the ad from the Spread The Truth Project (Ad 49). This umbrella issue can include the UN campaign focused on the contagious nature of disinformation, recommending that "if it doesn't have a source, don't share it" (Ads 50-52).

(Ir)Responsibility

Picturing a dystopian context, the WHO prepared a campaign on dark tales that focus on people, stressing that there are millions who did not stay at home and caused the virus to spread (Ads 53-55). Another campaign conducted by the WHO puts the responsibility on each person, appealing to mask wearing and saying that "it's your turn" (Ad 56).

4.1.3. Donation

The Marie Curie ad emphasizes the imperative that not everything can be put on hold, appealing to donations (Ad 57). With the same aim, Freedom from Torture focuses on the difficulties or impossibility of living on £5 a day, which is the reality of asylum seekers who are struggling to get by during the crisis (Ad 58). The International Medical Corps launched a campaign appealing for donations as a way of thanking health professionals all around the world – the heroes who have marks on their faces, symbolizing their frontline efforts – for their sacrifice (Ads 59-63). Alima and World Vision address the problems of developing coun-

tries that need donations to solve or mitigate problems. Alima focuses on the needs of African health systems, particularly respiratory equipment, which is necessary to save lives (Ad 64). World Vision refers to those who will be unable to apply “the barrier gestures” because their water is “too contaminated, too scarce, or too far” (Ad 65-67).

4.1.4. *Praise for altruism*

In contrast, the UN constructed a positive film medium campaign, praising the altruism and the WE, explaining that the world is still a WE, no matter how far apart people are (Ad 68).

4.2. Persuasive potential of the NGO messages about COVID-19

4.2.1. *Ethos*

All entities/promoters, such as the WHO, the UN and the Ad Council, enjoy credibility and reliability. The 2020 Edelman confidence barometer highlights that, nowadays, people’s trust is based on two attributes: competence (keeping promises) and ethical behavior (adopting the right behavior and commitment to improving society). Among the results of the referred barometer, NGOs are the leaders in ethical behavior (Edelman, 2020).

The presence of “elite figures” can enhance the credibility of communication. In this sense, the presence of Marcus Scribner, the American actor, adds value to the campaign by Do-Something.Org, and the reference to the Queen of Malaysia and the Mayor of London favors the UN’s campaign.

The use of the faces of real medical staff in a 15-hour long fight with COVID-19 lends authenticity to the campaign by Saatchi & Saatchi. The same technique is used by the International Medical Corps. The images of real homeless people also contribute to the credibility of Hogar de Cristo’s message. In the UN’s ad, the same technique is used, referring to the number of years the homeless person portrayed has lived on the streets. In the Marie Curie video, the testimonial of Lynn, who has terminal cancer and does not know how many weeks she has left, also makes the campaign more authentic and credible.

4.2.2. *Pathos*

Various emotions and reactions can be stimulated by the NGOs campaigns under analysis. A sense of responsibility can be awakened by various ads, such as the ones that appeal to social distancing (Ads 1-3) and not spreading fake news and disinformation (Ads 49-52). A sense of emergency is also employed (“Marie Curie nurses are needed now more than ever” – Ad 57; “is needed to save lives” – Ad 64). Empathy and pity are emotions presented in some campaigns, such as the ones related to domestic violence, sick people (e.g., Lynn, who has terminal cancer and does not know how many weeks she has left), victims (“survivors of torture in the UK might not have a choice” – Ad 58, poor people in Chile – Ads 29-34) and things that cannot be put on hold (Ad 57).

Among positive emotions, love is a feeling that is intended to be transmitted to homeless people (Ads 35-37), the elderly (Ads 18-19), and pets (Ads 26-28). At the same time, humor (Ad 38) can encourage fun experiences. Pride is the prevalent emotion present in the UN’s video (Ad 68). Cues to action are dominant in the campaigns’ content (e.g., “Be the good news the world need”). Among negative emotions, there is worry (“the coronavirus has arrived in Africa”, “It could be 3 times more deadly here”, “cases are increasing”, “critical

need”, “we don’t have enough” – Ad 64; “we won’t stay home”, “we won’t keep 1 meter apart”, “we won’t wash our hands” – Ads 65- 67); fear due to danger (Ads 15-17). Strangeness (and even fear) can be awoken through Ads 53-55 due to the presence of classical heroines (Alice, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel) on a hospital bed. “Once upon a time”, a stock phrase to introduce fairy tales and folk tales, can have an unhappy ending if people do not stay at home, showing that even heroes can be infected.

The impetus for reflection and introspection is present in the ad by Freedom from Torture (“Could you live on £5 a day during a pandemic?” – Ad 58). The feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability are exploited by Alima (“the virus can attack everyone” – Ad 64). But, conversely, a feeling of power, of control, is also implied: “everyone can attack the virus” (Ad 64).

4.2.3. Logos

Evidence and factual or statistical data lend strength to the message, such as “there are millions of victims worldwide” (Ad 39); “72% of students”, “more money paying off credit cards... than books for school!” (Ad 38); “thousands of women and children” (Ad 48); “based on true stories” (Ads 29-34); “the coronavirus has arrived in Africa”, “It could be 3 times more deadly here”, “lack of critical equipment and of health workers” (Ad 64); “coronavirus puts our elderly at risk of becoming extinct” (Ads 18-19); the description of true stories, “150 Tunisians”, “donate their 400 wedding meals”, “the Mayor of London books 300 hotel rooms” (Ad 68); “since the age of 15 [11] [8]” (Ads 35-37); “844 million people” (Ads 65-67).

The antithesis is present in both instances, the iconic and the linguistic. The antithesis is linguistically present in Ad 57 (“theatre on hold, holidays on hold, weddings on hold, marathons on hold, festivals on hold, parties on hold, school trips on hold, sports on hold *vs.* not everything is on hold”), Ad 48 (“domestic abusers are no longer walking among us” *vs.* “they’re locked inside with their families”), Ad 64 (“the virus can attack everyone” *vs.* “everyone can attack the virus”), Ads 18-19 (“elderly” *vs.* “young lady”, “young man”) and Ads 65-67 (“we won’t stay home”/“we won’t keep one meter apart”/“we won’t wash our hands” *vs.* “barrier gestures”). In the iconic plan, the use of different colors: cyan symbolizes healthy people *vs.* red, which indicates infection with COVID-19 (Ad 44); in other instances, cyan represents relationships without domestic violence *vs.* red, the opposite (Ads 43-44) and the perpetrator (Ad 44); in other cases red represents the increased number of patients infected with COVID-19 and the higher number of domestic violence episodes *vs.* cyan, representing control of these problems. The repetition of words (“on hold” – Ad 57; “too” – Ads 65-67) and of icons (e.g., modelled on the morphology of the virus that looks a corona, a crown – Ads 45-47) is also in use.

Other stylistic resources used are analogy, comparison, or metaphor. The morphology of the virus is used, the club-shaped viral spike peplomers that resemble a crown surrounding the virus when observed under an electron microscope, in a visual metaphor: a) to configure various cases of domestic violence caused by social distancing and family lockdowns, as well as conjugal relations (Ads 45-47); b) to demonstrate the contagiousness of disinformation and the idea that, like viruses, information can be contagious (Ads 50-52).

Ads 50-52 also explore the similarity to a word cloud. In Ads 15-17, an analogy is constructed between two elements that can be dangerous or mortal if they come into contact and the social contact that can cause COVID-19 to spread exponentially. The configuration of a television game show, with a presenter and a contestant, is a double analogy: to the typical television shows of the genre (e.g., “Who wants to be a millionaire”) and the online “Would

You Rather” questions (Ad 38). Ad 20 verbally exhorts people to “use it” and the images used consist of bars of soap positioned to represent the appearance and shape of a brain. The implicit proposal is to use the brain, rationality, and then the soap to wash your hands and avoid the virus. Also, ad 59 uses the expression “war heroes”, comparing COVID-19 to a war, to a military conflict.

Humanization and personalization also prevail (e.g., Lynn, a terminal cancer patient and whose health condition cannot be put on hold – Ad 57; the faces of health professionals/medical staff – Ads 12-13; Marcus Scribner – Ad 38; Ads 21-25; “Yashilda, 36 years old, son, 6 years old, husband” – Ad 58; Ads 29-34, 59, 64, 18-19, 35-37, 65-67, Ad 68 through the description of personal stories, such as the Queen of Malaysia, the Mayor of London). Puns and dysphemism are used and, in a certain way, metaphors, in Ads 12-14, with the expression of “non-domestic violence”. It alludes to the effects of leaving home: “medical staff takes a hit.”

Some signifiers and plastic signifiers are used, with a phatic function, such as squeaky colors, yellow underlines, the use of the question mark (e.g., “How much are your face masks worth on the black market?” – Ad 49; “Could you live on £5 a day during a pandemic?”, “If you had a spare fiver, what would you do with it?” – Ad 58; “where do you think you’re going, young lady?” – Ad 18) and exclamation mark (“over my dead body will you go out, young man!” – Ad 19), the creation of fake news to attract attention and then showing the truth (the “fake” fake news).

4.3. Symbolic potential of the NGO messages about COVID-19

The WHO uses flags in its advertisements. The use of various flags (Ads 4-8), occupying most of the space of the ad symbolically shows that the virus does not have one nationality, but several, affecting different people. In another ad, certain parts of the flags have various sizes, diverging from the original version, illustrating different indicators: critical and active cases, total recovered, new deaths, total deaths, new cases, total cases (Ads 9-11).

Chromatically, the use of a white (Ads 42-44, 49) or black (Ads 57, 42-44, 48, 64, 68) background serves to emphasize and maintain attention on the linguistic message. The blueprint of a house is evocative of the domestic area (Ad 42), where the family members are confined. Each member of the family is symbolized by a cyan circle. When they start to come into conflict, the color changes and turns red. Red, in this context, signifies an alert and the danger of relationships where domestic violence is increasing. The red in Ad 43 represents infected people and the relationships where domestic violence predominates. The graph in Ad 44 indicates the progress of the number of cases of infected people, which can be significantly higher than the capacity of the healthcare system (this problem is shown in red). By implementing social distancing, the problem is mitigated (the graph turns blue and then cyan). Red is also used in the graph to illustrate the increasing number of cases of domestic violence, motivated by the family lockdowns imposed by social distancing.

Dark and dehumanized scenarios (devoid of people), with only urban *furniture* (buildings, alleys) (Ads 39-41), signify the opacity of not knowing what is happening behind closed doors. In this context, APAV asks people not to be silent and to report domestic violence. Exploring the same scenario (urban, empty, depopulated), Ad 48 symbolically associates images and sounds with the lockdown. This lockdown represents the absence of safety for women and children that “are locked inside” with their aggressors. In Ads 35-37, the darkness suggests the loneliness of homeless people.

The ads by the UN (Ads 15-17) express classic danger situations, using the proximity of elements: a balloon and a cactus, a foot and a piece of Lego, a hairdryer and a bath filled with water. While many global brands have recently changed their *logos* by separating logo elements to promote social distancing, Senim-Meirim has rearranged the *logos* of these brands, encouraging people to adopt pets from animal shelters, in other words, inciting to get closer to animals and not to people – “keep distance with humans, not pets” (Ads 26-28).

Among positive symbols, the shapes of a heart between the human and animal hands (Ad 28) and the appeal “give your heart” (Ads 35-37) symbolize the love that can be extended. The heart “signifies love as the center of illumination and happiness” (Cirlot, 2003). According to the Egyptian system of hieroglyphs, hands signify manifestation, action, donating and husbandry (Cirlot, 2013). Holding hands can symbolize friendship, closeness and complicity. In turn, the UN explores the positivity of the word “WE”, with its connotations of community and altruism (Ad 68).

The three-in-a-row game, or tic-tac-toe, is the main symbolic focus of Ad 56. The reference to the game represents the bifurcation of the choices: using a mask or being infected by the virus. The use of classical heroines (Alice, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel) on a hospital bed can suggest that even supernatural, idolized and supposedly untouchable characters can be infected (Ads 53-55). In Ads 59-63, the reference to heroes is also present, with the intention to thank the health professionals and to make donations. Every heroic feature finds its analogy among the virtues necessary “to vanquish chaos and overcome the temptations offered by the forces of darkness” (Cirlot, 2002, pp. 147-148).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Trying to fill the gap identified by Schwarz and Fritsch (2014, p. 161), we study the role of NGOs as strategic communication activists. For creating public awareness and emphasizing particular issues to penetrate public agendas, all organizations should have a thematic agenda. of the main issues promoted by NGOs, are prevention, to avoid infection by COVID-19; awareness, intending to alert about other associated problems, like the lockdown; donation, to help causes and NGOs; and praise for good causes and actions. These are aligned with the role of the NGOs that have become influential actors in raising awareness of international social causes, including health causes, in a global society (e.g., Schwarz & Fritsch, 2014, p. 161) and “have a unique opportunity to provide meaningful input in improving and saving lives” (Rimal & Lapinski, 2009, p. 247). The topic of donations is also not surprising given that donations play a crucial role in the survival and success of NGOs, as they are often the primary source of funding for these organizations (Paço et al., 2014).

ONGs, perceived as more trustworthy than other organizations (Hoepner et al., 2021), contribute to helping people stay informed and guided them towards making decisions to protect their health and the health of others. They also provide instructions that must be followed when the health risks are high and ambiguous (Reynolds, 2006, p. 5).

The ads analyzed accomplish the guidelines identified by Atkin and Rice (2013) and Papp-Váry (2015, p. 22): they are, generally, simple, straightforward, motivational, and display visual effects. Given the globalization of COVID-19, NGOs have focused on universally understandable guidance, eliminating eventual cultural barriers. The results reveal that rhetorical tactics are used. Such tactics include statistical and factual evidence (*logos*), irrefutable

and, convincing information, as O’Keefe (2014) stressed, and emotional stimulation (*pathos*), by exploiting the assumption that humans are emotional creatures. The practice of diverse tactics can serve as a guideline for message senders, encompassing: cues to action; phatic and appealing functions (use of a question in order to establish contact with the public); stylistic resources (poetic function); credibility-building tactics for communicators; motivational content; pedagogical descriptions; evocation of good causes; personalization and humanization; victims’ portrayal (Wymer & Gross, 2021) to evoke compassion; and the symbolic approach of icons and plastic signifiers, especially colors. For rhetorical purposes, the ads analyzed tend to adopt the health communication orientations mentioned by some authors (e.g., Meyer, 2020; Reynolds & Quinn, 2008, p. 13S; Walton & Daisuke, 2020), such as an open, transparent and empathetic style of communication, traces of credibility, empathy, caring, competence, expertise, honesty, dedication, and commitment.

Ads’ *ethos* is built through the credibility of NGOs and the elite figures. Since Hovland and Weiss (1951), several authors have noted the importance of the source’s credibility and authority. For example, Sbaffi and Rowley (2017) conclude that the most widely discussed positive aspects of the content featured in the literature is the authority of the author, representing the level of expertise of the writers, followed by the credibility or trustworthiness of the information. The source credibility theory explains how the perceived credibility of the source of information influences the communication’s persuasiveness (Berlo et al., 1969). Also, the reference to prominent figures explores the “personal influence”, that we have known since Plato, which is persuasive (Katz, 2006, p. xxiv). Additionally, research show that institutional trust (an evaluation of an entity as competent in accomplishing what it is expected to do) is related to positive emotions. For example, studying the role of emotional response during an H1N1 influenza pandemic on a college campus, Kim and Niederdeppe (2013) discovered that the more students felt positive emotions (including “interested, alert or curious”), the more they trusted the college health center. This finding reveals that positive emotion was a significant mediator between crisis responsibility and relational trust.

Ads’ *pathos* is entangled in a plurality of positive and negative emotions, with the literature not being consensual on which direction is most effective. This emotional plurality is based on assumption that an emotional approach can create a longstanding effect (Papp-Váry, 2015, p. 22) and that the arguments linked to *pathos* can provoke powerful social action (Green, 2004, p. 659).

Discussing the potential of directional value of messages (positive and negative), Monahan (1995) argues that positive messages, such as the ones that allude to love, pride, empathy, sympathy, foster good feelings and the use of less elaborate or more heuristic strategies do not activate feelings of self-protection, but rather engender feelings of ease or comfort (Monahan, 1995, p. 86). On the other hand, negative messages, such the ones that generate fear, or guilt, foster the use of more elaborate, detail-oriented and analytical processing strategies (p. 86) and result in more careful processing because negative affect informs the audience that the current situation is problematic (p. 86). Humor is used with caution in the analyzed ads, given that the health issue in focus (COVID-19) is serious and literature recommends moderation in dealing with serious health problems. Abo et al. (2017), for example, found that humorous portrayals of health conditions can reduce perceived seriousness and support for related health policies. Calls to action and motivational content are expressively present and can help transform intention into practice (e.g., Belim, 2022; Murray-Johnson & Witte, 2003). Among negative emotions, fear-appeal messages try to persuade recipients in-

to healthy behavior by outlining the negative consequences that may emerge if recommendations are not followed (Jansen, 2017).

In terms of *logos*, the use of repetition is beneficial in health contexts, considering the effects this tactic can generate. When stimuli are learned by repetition, they are better remembered and retained longer (e.g., Ebbinghaus, 1964; Zhan et al., 2018). The use of metaphors in health communication calls for a more mindful and competent use of figurative speech (Michl & Wohlmann, 2019, p. 1). Metaphors are powerful tools that enable alternative ways of thinking about complex issues in healthcare (p. 1) and they can also be used in productive ways, serving as a means of inquiry into the other and into the self (p. 8).

Evidence and factual and statistical data offer tangibility, clarity, authority, and reliability to the content communicated. Personalization and humanization show that stories are real and create greater identification between receiver and communicator (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). Stories are a way of making sense of an uncertain or chaotic set of circumstances (Bruner, 1990). Narration helps shape human experiences, connect them with others, foster communities, and shape personal identity (Fisher, 1987).

In a semiotic logic, symbolical signifiers and symbolic legitimation (Ulybina et al., 2023) can create a meaningful world about something linked to health and produce impact, allowing a message to be conveyed attractively and accessibly to the sender. As the decoding of symbols tends to be easy and universal (e.g., flags, circles, colors, real faces, classic danger situations, the heart shape, hands, heroines, the three-in-a-row game), they facilitate the process of understanding the message. This fulfils the precepts of health literacy, which requires the presence of the dimensions of access, understanding and use of the instructions received (Belim & Nunes, 2023). Using symbolism also helps readers visualize complex concepts and follow pivotal issues, adding emotional weight to the message and fostering an effective approach to sensitive issues.

The analysis of advertisements and informative-persuasive-symbolical actions shows that, in the pandemic context of COVID-19, NGOs –acting as health activists – sought to influence, raise awareness, and reinforce social norms and health-related practices. Their commitment aligned with their mission, or “reason for being” (Horwath, 2005, p. 1), centered on the principle of “doing good”. This commitment reflects the principle that “information and knowledge are power” and the strategic use of persuasive and symbolic resources to strengthen communication.

The presence of health activism, along with the sub-typologies identified by Zoller (2005, p. 349), is evident. This includes *illness and disability activism*, as ad campaigns focus on bringing attention to a particular disease (in this case, COVID-19), and influencing public perceptions and norms. Additionally, *public health and disease prevention activism* is reflected in efforts to eliminate the causes of disease and barriers to good health.

Linking the research results to the concept of health activism, NGOs employed a range of persuasive strategies rooted in *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* to convey their explanations of COVID-19 causation and prevention. Leveraging their established credibility and authority, NGOs, like the WHO and the UN, effectively used *ethos* to reinforce trustworthiness. These organizations relied on reputable figures, such as medical professionals and well-known public figures, to enhance the credibility of their messages. *Pathos* was another key tactic, with campaigns designed to evoke empathy, urgency, or fear. Ads emphasized the immediate threat of the virus to individuals’ loved ones, healthcare workers, and vulnerable populations, thereby promoting a sense of collective responsibility. Additionally, *logos* was employed by pre-

senting factual data and statistics about the virus's impact, including infection rates and health disparities, which underscored the severity of the pandemic. These combined strategies aimed to create an emotionally and logically compelling narrative that highlighted the importance of adherence to public health guidelines.

NGOs also promoted health solutions by creating messages that emphasized prevention and behavioral modification to curb COVID-19 transmission. Campaigns were developed to encourage adherence to preventive measures like social distancing, mask-wearing, and frequent handwashing. For example, the WHO and the UN launched ads emphasizing physical distancing as a critical factor in "saving lives" and preventing further infections. Messaging was further enhanced by symbolic representations, such as the use of national flags to show COVID-19's universal impact and visual metaphors illustrating the virus's spread. The focus on staying home, wearing masks, and practicing good hygiene was tied to specific outcomes, including the protection of healthcare systems and the preservation of lives. Additionally, certain campaigns addressed social determinants by encouraging donations to support those financially impacted by the pandemic, such as marginalized groups and healthcare workers. Through these varied approaches, NGOs highlighted actionable solutions and fostered a sense of communal duty.

The findings may suggest that NGOs can actively shape health policies by influencing public perceptions, behaviors and social norms. Through widespread and emotionally resonant campaigns, NGOs worked to promote specific health behaviors and support social policies aligned with pandemic management, such as supporting vulnerable populations and advocating for adherence to public health guidelines. By framing the pandemic as a collective responsibility and emphasizing ethical behavior, NGOs aimed to shift public attitudes toward solidarity and compliance. Additionally, the persistent use of evocative imagery, appeals to empathy, and association with credible figures contributed to a more profound cultural shift. These campaigns not only informed the public but also sought to build a foundation for policy measures that prioritize communal health and social support structures. Consequently, by fostering behavioral change at the individual and societal levels, NGOs play an instrumental role in guiding both immediate and long-term health policies during crises.

Future research can explore the relational perspective of strategic communication, including the receiver, and the influence of the Health Belief Model (HBM) variables on intention, including cues to action and perceived threats. This study, based on a transnational, multimedia and multi-thematic *corpus*, offers several contributions: a) professional and operational, by providing knowledge about the strategic communication and advertising message of NGOs as health activists in the context of a pandemic and about communication practices in this context that can serve as a reference in other health situations; b) social, by promoting transparency about health communication practices and thus the population's commitment to healthy practices; and c) scientific, by filling a research gap and contributing to the message strategy theory, for example.

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Appendix

Table. Corpus description

NGO	Country	Link	Ad number
Ad Council	USA	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/integrated/ad_council_stayhome_save_lives	Ad 1, Ad 2, Ad 3
WHOa	Canada	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/digital/world_health_organization_spread_out_save_lives	Ad 4, Ad 5, Ad 6, Ad 7, Ad 8
WHOb	Portugal	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/wunderman_thompson_world_health_organization_covid19_flags	Ad 9, Ad 10, Ad 11
Saatchi & Saatchi	Croatia	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/digital/saatchi_saatchi_stop_nondomestic_violence	Ad 12, Ad 13, Ad 14
United Nations	Peru	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/united_nations_keep_your_distance	Ad 15, Ad 16, Ad 17
World Human Fund	Russian Federation	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/creative_gang_dont_risk_their_lives	Ad 18, Ad 19
WHOc and United Nations	Armenia	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/integrated/world_health_organization_united_nations_talenthouse_use_it	Ad 20
Trans Lifeline	USA	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/digital/trans_lifeline_weseesus	Ad 21, Ad 22, Ad 23, Ad 24, Ad 25
Senim-Meirim	Kazakhstan	https://campaignsoftheworld.com/print/senim-meirim-adopt-pets/	Ad 26, Ad 27, Ad 28
Hogar de Cristo	Chile	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/hogar_de_cristo_based_on_true_stories?className=collection-lb&contentid=386144&inline=true#collection-lb-content	Ads 29-31, Ads 32-34
United Nations	Peru	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/united_nations_i_stay_home	Ad 35, Ad 36, Ad 37
DoSomething.OrgHSBC	USA	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/content/dosomethingorg_hsbc_would_you_rather_with_marcus_scribner	Ad 38 (film)
APAV	Portugal	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/apav_victims_of_isolation	Ad 39, Ad 40, Ad 41
Anais Association	Romania	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/content/anais_association_isolateviolence	Ad 42 (film), Ad 43 (film), Ad 44 (film)
Anais Association	Romania	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/anais_association_isolateviolence	Ad 45, Ad 46, Ad 47
Women's Aid Federation	UK	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/film/womens_aid_federation_the_lockdown?className=collection-lb&contentid=386196&inline=true#collection-lb-content	Ad 48 (film)
Spread the Truth Project	Germany	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/digital/spread_the_truth_project_fake_news_spread_the_truth	Ad 49 (film)
United Nations	Argentina	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/united_nations_disinformation_is_contagious?className=collection-lb&contentid=386175&inline=true#collection-lb-content	Ad 50, Ad 51, Ad 52
World Health Organization	Turkey	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/film/world_health_organization_covid19_tales?className=collection-lb&contentid=386211&inline=true#collection-lb-content	Ad 53 (film), Ad 54 (film), Ad 55 (film)
WHOd	India	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/outdoor/who_covid19	Ad 56
Marie Curie	UK	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/film/marie_curie_on_hold	Ad 57 (film)
Freedom from Torture	UK	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/film/freedom_from_torture_do_what_we_can_for_vulnerable_communities?className=collection-lb&contentid=386187&inline=true#collection-lb-content	Ad 58 (film)
International Medical Corps	UK	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/digital/international_medical_corps_covid19_war_marks	Ad 59, Ad 60, Ad 61, Ad 62, Ad 63
Alima	France	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/film/alima_oxygen_for_africa	Ad 64 (film)
World Vision	France	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/world_vision_we_wont_stay_home	Ad 65, Ad 66, Ad 67
United Nations	USA	https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/film/united_nations_we	Ad 68 (film)

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The Development and Validation of a Scale to Measure Interest in Self-Marketisation Online

Abstract

In today's digital era, a strong online presence is not just desirable, but often lucrative. Our study elaborates on the development and validation of the Interest in Self-Marketisation Online (ISMO) scale, designed to measure how individuals perceive their online persona as a valuable asset. Drawing upon existing literature, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and three quantitative surveys, we established the ISMO scale as a reliable and valid instrument. An adult Romanian quota sample (n= 822) was utilised for the confirmatory stage of the study. The reliability and validity of the scale were tested successfully on an adult USA quota sample (n= 280). Findings revealed ISMO to be significantly influenced by attributes like materialism, self-monitoring, sincerity, and entrepreneurship. Moreover, it emerged as a powerful predictor of Facebook dependency, the number of online social networks one engages with, and the time spent on these platforms. Our study breaks new ground in understanding online self-marketisation (SMO), a concept that embodies the intersections of identity, self-presentation, and commercialisation in the digital age. From a practical perspective, measuring individuals' interest in self-marketisation online offers valuable insights into future self-conceptualisation and personal branding strategies, reflecting our growing immersion in the digital world.

Keywords: online self-marketisation; personal image salience; self-monitoring; entrepreneurship; scale development and validation

1. Introduction

As the digital landscape evolves, it creates an intricate web of self-expression, interaction, and personal branding. In the tapestry of this digital sphere, a potent paradigm of personal representation manifests: the practice of self-marketisation online. In this new form of

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self-expression, individuals actively curate their digital personas for personal or financial gain, often projecting a marketable version of themselves to the virtual audience (Marwick, 2013; Tuominen et al., 2023). This presents a complex interplay of individual motivations, self-presentation strategies (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010), and the technological affordances of online platforms. In recent years, the practice of self-marketisation has become not just an option but a requirement for those seeking to enhance their personal branding and professional visibility for financial prospects online. The digital self-presentation process is now tangled with the economics of attention, where visibility frequently translates into concrete social and financial capital (Heitmayer, 2024).

Given the complexity of this digital self-curation process, there is a need for a dedicated scale that assesses individuals' engagement in self-marketisation online, capturing the individuals' focus on leveraging their online persona for material rewards and the significance placed on online appearance and audience perception. As no comprehensive scale currently exists to measure self-marketisation, we propose a tool that assesses the extent to which individuals actively engage in strategic self-presentation online with the goal of monetising their digital personas.

Existing scales do not fully capture the complexity of the online self-marketisation concept, as they primarily address adjacent aspects. The Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS, Snyder, 1974) measures individuals' response to social cues but neglects the unique aspects of online environments and sincerity. Similarly, the Material Values Scale (MVS, Richins, 2004) gauges materialistic motivations but does not address the complexity of online self-presentation.

Scales like the modified Self-Presentation Tactics Scale on Facebook (SPTS, Rosenberg, 2009), the Instagram Self-Presentation Tactics Scale (ISPT, adapted by Sarita & Suleeman, 2017 from the original scale developed by Lee et al., 1999), the Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS for adolescents, Fullwood et al., 2016; and POSSA for adults, Strimbu et al., 2021) concentrate on platform-specific behaviour, limiting their cross-platform applicability, and do not focus on self-marketisation behaviours. Other scales, such as the Self-Presentation Tactics in Social Media (SPTSM, Huang, 2014), are culturally specific and have been adapted for specific demographics, such as Chinese adolescents. The Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008) assesses authenticity in daily interactions, but does not fully consider digital-specific challenges. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI, Raskin & Terry, 1988), though predictive of online behaviours like selfie-posting (McCain et al., 2016), mainly focuses on a single personality trait, missing the wider scope of self-marketisation behaviours and attitudes.

Also, the Digital Self-Efficacy scale (Ulfert & Schmidt, 2022) considers an important aspect of online self-marketisation by measuring confidence in using social platforms for effective self-presentation. However, by focusing on the perceived digital competencies, it fails to address self-marketisation strategies which are encompassed in the ISMO scale. Complementing the landscape of scales measuring online self-presentation and marketisation, The Personal Brand Equity scale by Gorbatoev et al. (2020) quantifies the external value of personal brands, contrasting with the ISMO scale's focus on the strategies of online self-marketisation like self-monitoring and sincerity. Therefore, this study aims to explore the multi-dimensional aspects of online self-marketisation as existing scales do not fully capture this concept. We incorporate Belk's (2016) seminal study of the digital self and Goffman's (1959) enduring theory of everyday self-presentation. Research on social comparison on social networks (Ver-

duyn et al., 2020) and the balance between self-promotion and authenticity in social media (Dumas et al., 2020) further illuminate online self-marketisation's unique characteristics.

The Interest in Self-Marketisation Online (ISMO) scale, based on recent theories and studies, is a new instrument for understanding motivations behind monetizing online personas. It highlights the role of influencer marketing (Joshi et al., 2023) in motivating individuals to self-market for material gains (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The ISMO scale also sheds light on managing personal image salience in digital spaces, capturing nuances of online self-marketisation. In an era where influencers are valued for authenticity (Köles et al., 2024), the scale emphasizes the importance of developing a marketable online identity, akin to influencer success.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Conceptualizing Self-Marketisation:

The Online Self in a Materialistic and Entrepreneurial Society

Self-marketisation is the ongoing and intentional effort to shape, refine, and promote one's personal identity as something valuable in the marketplace. It is closely tied to personal branding, where people consciously curate their online and professional presence to stay competitive in an increasingly digital world. Rooted in today's fast-paced, gig-driven economy, this process pushes individuals to present themselves as brands, combining emotional engagement, visual storytelling, and platform-specific strategies to maintain visibility and appeal (Whitmer, 2019). Self-marketisation extends beyond verbal self-representation to include aesthetic labour, where individuals meticulously curate their appearance, lifestyle, and daily activities to align with market expectations and strategically design their visual and narrative identity (Gran, 2025). This process fits into the platform economy, where people are pushed to create eye-catching and carefully curated online personas to gain followers and pursue career opportunities (Alacovska et al., 2025).

Expanding on Giddens' (1991) idea of the reflexive self, self-marketisation is about constantly adapting and reshaping one's identity to keep up with shifting social and economic trends. It goes beyond making a good first impression as it represents a long-term effort to stand out while still appearing authentic. Digital platforms add to this pressure, acting as both a stage where people showcase themselves and a metric for their success, while algorithms reward engagement-driven content (Dumitriu & Ciobanu, 2015; Rogstad et al., 2024).

Self-marketisation can also be understood as a form of self-commodification, where individuals transform their identities into branded, consumable products to increase economic and social capital. One of the main tensions in self-marketisation is the paradox of authenticity, as people must appear both genuine and carefully tailored to meet audience expectations (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This transformation is particularly visible in digital environments, where authenticity itself becomes a curated performance designed to attract engagement, sponsorships, and monetisation opportunities (Marshall, 2021). In this sense, self-marketisation operates as a dual process: individuals seek validation while simultaneously optimizing their visibility for commercial purposes. This process leads to tensions between authenticity and performativity, as individuals must balance personal expression with strategic branding (Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2023). This dual pressure leads to hyper-managed self-

presentation, where even vulnerability and personal struggles become strategic elements of one's brand (Zhao et al., 2025).

Self-marketisation reflects the neoliberal push for self-entrepreneurship, treating personal identity like a business, where individuals must constantly invest in their skills, image, and brand to stay relevant and market themselves effectively (du Gay, 1996; Arruda & Dixon, 2010). These pressures blur the line between personal and professional life, demanding a carefully crafted online identity that job markets expect more and more of (Duffy & Kang, 2019; Whitmer, 2019). Digital platforms have made self-marketisation feel less like a choice and more like a necessity. On YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, success depends on visibility, engagement, and staying in tune with ever-changing algorithms (Raun, 2018). Therefore, people navigate a constant balancing act, striving to appear both authentic and aspirational while carefully curating a digital persona that feels genuine yet strategically crafted (Raun, 2018; Whitmer, 2019). This shift makes self-commodification a professional necessity, requiring individuals to manage their online presence and leverage their networks (Dean, 2023).

Whether through content monetisation, sponsorships, or self-employment, self-marketisation serves as a mechanism for transforming personal identity into a form of financial capital (Chin & Chee, 2024), thus closely tied to entrepreneurial intent, as individuals leverage their online presence to develop economic opportunities. Self-marketisation is a form of entrepreneurial labour, where people constantly refine their self-presentation to attract audiences, clients, or employers (Jonsson, 2023). In today's social media-driven economy, visibility and engagement are essential for individuals to leverage their social capital for economic gain. Yan (2021) introduces the concept of self as enterprise, explaining how market-driven economies push individuals to self-manage and optimise their labour value according to economic principles. Also, entrepreneurial intent is deeply tied to opportunity recognition, where individuals identify and use resources to create economic and social value (Chell, 2007). Self-marketisation requires an entrepreneurial mindset, helping individuals stay visible, stand out among competitors, and ensure long-term career sustainability, reinforcing its role as a form of entrepreneurial ambition (Khamis et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2023). The rise of digital platforms has transformed self-branding into an entrepreneurial strategy, requiring individuals to cultivate a hybrid identity that balances self-expression with market-driven tactics to maintain relevance and monetize their presence (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Barros et al., 2025). Moreover, research shows that individuals with a strong entrepreneurial identity actively shape their personal brand as a competitive advantage in careers and business (Liñán et al., 2018). This highlights self-marketisation as more than just a digital presence and more about building a lasting entrepreneurial mindset (Zhang et al., 2024).

The digital era has transformed the 'online self' into a central identity aspect, blending digital expressions with physical existence (Cover, 2016; Marwick, 2013). This integration affects self-perception, making the online and offline selves increasingly indistinguishable and equally important in identity formation (Garbășevschi, 2021; Haimson & Hoffmann, 2021). A core dimension of self-marketisation is impression management, which draws from Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model. Individuals actively control and direct their self-presentation to influence how they are perceived by others. In digital spaces, this involves curating content, managing engagement, and crafting authenticity. Self-marketisation, in this sense, is both a performance and a regulatory process where individuals must balance idealized self-images with social expectations (Shulman, 2022). Furthermore, societal norms and materialistic values, alongside a growing entrepreneurial spirit, shape the management of the online self.

Materialism's influence on both real and virtual self-presentation highlights the intertwined nature of societal values and digital identity (Christopher & Schlenker, 2004; Frunzaru & Garbașevschi, 2016; Dittmar, 2021). The self-presentation in the online realm is also strongly influenced by the growing enterprise culture in society (Salamon, 2020). Here, individuals view themselves as entrepreneurs of their lives, pursuing the generation and extraction of value (Mardon et al., 2023). This entrepreneurial spirit has found its way into digital self-expression and self-marketing, leading to what could be termed the 'commodification of the self' (Illouz, 2021).

Materialism and entrepreneurship underpin motivations for online self-marketisation. Materialism, defined as attributing personal happiness, success, and social status to material goods (Belk, 1985; Richins, 1987), expands to online platforms as individuals seek material gains through virtual personas (Dittmar, 2021). On the other hand, entrepreneurship, denoting innovation, risk-taking, and proactivity (Rauch & Frese, 2007), in self-marketisation online signifies strategic personal branding for value creation in digital spaces (Shepherd, 2015). It expands to individuals marketing their skills and attributes on social media, exhibiting entrepreneurial behaviour (Agyapong et al., 2021). Materialism and entrepreneurship thus form the crux of online self-marketisation.

In a context where online platforms that reward self-promotion and self-branding are proliferating, individuals begin to approach their online self as a valuable commodity to be strategically curated, managed, and traded (Duffy, 2017; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Chandra et al., 2022). Consequently, the online self evolves to reflect a market-oriented society, shaped by material and entrepreneurial values. The way materialism, entrepreneurship, and online self-presentation come together to shape self-marketisation is complex and worth deeper exploration.

The increasing use of social networks has significantly shaped online behaviour, including self-marketisation, as users adapt their self-presentation strategies to fit evolving social media landscapes (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). One key factor influencing self-marketisation is social visibility, where high friend counts on social media act as popularity metrics, enhancing influence and reach, and ultimately reinforcing personal branding efforts (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Regular posting and interaction help people build a sense of community and stay visible online. This active engagement shapes how they present themselves, boosting their influence and perceived value in both social and professional settings (Verduyn et al., 2020).

The increasing use of and dependency on social media play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial intent, as these platforms encourage self-optimization, visibility, and audience engagement (Chin & Chee, 2024). By continuously interacting with algorithm-driven environments, individuals develop an entrepreneurial mindset, experimenting with branding techniques, audience analytics, and content monetisation strategies to sustain their digital presence and maximize opportunities (Pérez-Fernández et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the ever-changing digital landscape makes it challenging to understand how users rely on social media. Facebook, often studied due to its early dominance, broad user base, and wide reach, remains a key focus in research (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Kemp, 2023). While Instagram emphasizes visual aesthetics and personal branding (Liu & Suh, 2017), and TikTok focuses on creative self-expression and short entertainment (Eryc, 2022), the user behaviours and dependencies on these platforms are often more fragmented and less universally applicable than those on Facebook. Unlike general use, dependency reflects a stronger reliance on Facebook for self-presentation, and career growth (Michikyan et al., 2014). Research shows that validation-seeking behaviours drive users to continuously promote themselves to gain recognition and maintain their online

presence (Moninka & Eminiari, 2020). This reinforces self-marketisation, where individuals curate their content strategically to stay visible, strengthen their personal brand, and stand out in competitive digital spaces (Loh & Walsh, 2021). Additionally, Facebook's algorithms fuel dependency by driving prolonged engagement, making it a key space for entrepreneurial self-promotion and potential monetization (Duffy & Pooley, 2017; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). Exploring the relationship between social media reliance, especially on Facebook, and online self-marketisation facilitates a thorough examination of this modern digital trend and its effects. Self-marketisation is a key strategy for recognition and material opportunities in a digitalised world. It captures how materialism and entrepreneurship drive individuals to curate, optimise, and monetise their digital identity in an evolving platform economy, with Facebook dependency and use reinforcing these behaviours.

2.2. Navigating Online Identity: Self-Monitoring and Sincerity

As self-marketisation becomes increasingly embedded in digital id and non-verbal affective display, identity construction, self-monitoring emerges as a core mechanism for navigating this landscape. Originally described by Snyder (1974, p. 526), self-monitoring represents the self-control of "self-presentation, expressive behaviour, and non-verbal affective display". Individuals with high self-monitoring tendencies are highly aware of how they are perceived online, carefully selecting content that aligns with audience expectations, while reinforcing their entrepreneurial identity (Elias & Gill, 2017). Social media platforms push users to maintain a consistent and engaging personal brand, shaping their self-presentation to meet market demands (Whitmer, 2019). Personal branding is often described as a "self-focused and highly individualistic strategy for self-marketing" (Arruda & Dixon, 2010, p. 10). A key challenge in personal branding as self-marketisation is balancing control, authenticity, and consistency (Trang et al., 2023). Freelancers should continuously refine their online presence, demonstrating a blend of personal branding and professional positioning, with commercial appeal to secure work (Blyth et al., 2024).

In the digital world, the way people share personal information and manage interactions shapes how they balance their offline and online identities (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Hall et al., 2013; Skoric et al., 2016). Self-monitoring and sincerity play a significant role in this process, as social media blurs the line between authentic self-expression and societal expectations, rendering online authenticity more complex (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The capacity to curate online personas challenges the distinction between authenticity and online constructs (Cover, 2016), with studies indicating that online identities are more about strategic narratives than genuine self-expression (Kreling et al., 2022). However, an influencer's sincerity, built on genuine self-disclosure, deepens connections with followers, making them more likely to trust and act on recommendations. Gran (2025) highlights that online self-presentation operates as a form of performance, where individuals selectively disclose personal information to shape their public image. This balance between authenticity and strategic self-presentation reinforces their influence, showing that sincerity is not just about being real but also an important aspect of effective digital endorsements, blending relatability with commercial intent (Koay et al., 2023).

Effectively navigating self-marketisation and digital identity for monetisation purposes means finding the balance between strategic self-presentation and authenticity, visibility, and credibility so as to build trust and engagement and remain relevant for market expectations.

Likewise, self-monitoring is part of the process of adapting one's online persona, refining the image, and managing audience perceptions for personal or professional goals.

2.3. Measuring Self-Marketisation: Introducing the ISMO Scale

Given the prevalence of online interaction, understanding and measuring self-marketisation are essential. Influencers use social media to build a personal brand that aligns with audience expectations. Through strategic self-marketisation, they shape consumer behaviour and engagement while balancing authenticity and digital self-presentation (Lim et al., 2022). Existing scales like the Material Values Scale (MVS, Richins, 2004) and the Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS, Snyder, 1974) provide insights into psychological facets of self-marketisation, but focus on individual traits, missing specific behaviours and attitudes in the online self-marketisation process.

Self-marketisation, a strategic online self-presentation approach, corresponds with growing expectations of personal branding and digital impression management. Its desirability, often linked to career progression, social capital, and acceptance (Labrecque et al., 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011), remains unexplored in the literature, especially concerning motivations, behaviours, and outcomes.

The Interest in Self-Marketisation Online (ISMO) scale that we propose examines how actively individuals shape their online presence, capturing both their motivation to use their digital identity for financial or material benefits (materialistic drive) and their efforts to cultivate a curated and influential online image (personal image salience). The ISMO scale provides a comprehensive measure of online self-marketisation, capturing key elements such as self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974), sincerity (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), and an entrepreneurial self-presentation approach (Chen, 2013). It embraces the balance between strategic self-presentation and perceived authenticity, while accounting for materialistic (Richins, 2004) and entrepreneurial influences (Nicolaou & Shane, 2009).

Each of these dimensions reflects a different aspect of how individuals construct their online presence for self-marketisation. Materialism, in this context, influences online behaviour by driving individuals to create digital personas that signal material fulfilment and display their possessions as an equivalent for social worth (Islam et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2023). Social media provides a proper environment for materialistic values to flourish, as individuals are often exposed to possession-oriented content and imitate the lifestyles of influencers (Yang et al., 2024). Self-monitoring represents the ability to control one's self-presentation and maintain a consistent image across digital platforms (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2009; Garbaşevski, 2021), while sincerity examines the tension between authenticity and the deliberate curation of online identities, acknowledging the edited self that often emerges in digital contexts (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Entrepreneurial intent reflects the tendency to view the self as a project to optimize, the self becoming a flexible resource expected to acquire new skills and develop a brand to generate economic value (du Gay, 1996; Mallios et al., 2023). By integrating these aspects, the scale captures the complex motivations and strategies that define self-marketisation online.

The study also included Facebook dependency to assess how individuals engage with social media in the context of self-marketisation; the number of online social networks used and the time spent on social media. Facebook dependency, rather than mere Facebook use, was included in the model to better capture the psychological and behavioural engagement individu-

als have with the platform in the context of self-marketisation. While Facebook use measures frequency and access, dependency reflects a deeper reliance on the platform for social validation, identity construction, and strategic self-presentation, all of which are central to self-marketisation (Miranda et al., 2023; Qiu, 2024). Additionally, regarding the choice of social network, Facebook remains the dominant social media platform in Romania, with 12.3 million users at the end of 2024, representing 64.9% of the population, an increase of 1.2 million from the previous year (Statista, 2025), making it a key space for self-marketisation behaviours.

The ISMO scale, encompassing various dimensions, sheds light on the complex nature of online self-marketisation and its impact on digital identity. It provides a foundation for further studies into its psychological implications, well-being effects, and strategies for effective online persona management.

3. Development of the ISMO Scale

The development of the ISMO scale had six stages, following a process recommended by Kyriazos and Stalikas (2018), MacKenzie et al. (2011), and Morgado et al. (2017). In the first stage, items were generated following an analysis of existing literature together with qualitative data obtained from a series of semi-structured interviews on online identity construction and performance. The second stage aimed to evaluate face validity, which was verified in a focus group of academics and communication professionals. In the third stage, the items were purified through an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). In the fourth stage, the two-factor scale was confirmed through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The fifth stage targeted concurrent and predictive validity. In the last stage, the reliability and the validity of the English version of the ISMO scale were tested on a USA sample.

3.1. Stage 1. Item Generation

Insights from existing literature were used to generate a first pool of items. These emerging items were expanded and refined with the insights obtained from a series of 20 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with an average length of 60 minutes that were conducted over a two-month period. Sampling was guided by the objective of obtaining qualitative data from a diverse age group of young adults (21 to 35 years of age) coming from diverse socio-professional backgrounds. The Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied in order to isolate and define the main themes emerging from the data that were further used to guide the formulation of the final 21 items.

3.2. Stage 2: Face Validity Evaluation

To assess this initial pool of items, we conducted a focus group with 10 participants, 5 university faculty members and 5 communication professionals. They were asked to evaluate each item in terms of relevance and clarity and also provided broader insights to improve the face validity of the scale (the degree to which it appears effective in terms of its stated aim). This process led to a further reformulation and refinement of the items, which resulted in a pool of 17 items that were further tested empirically. Some items were dropped because they were

unclear or had meanings similar to other items (e.g., “The more popular you become online, the greater your chances of financial fulfillment are”).

3.3. Stage 3: Item Purification and Refinement

To refine the initial pool of items, the scale was administered to a convenience sample of 312 undergraduate and graduate students in communication. The majority of respondents were female (83%), aged 18 to 53 years (average=23.7, SD=6.3). Responses were distributed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree). All items displayed a normal distribution: skewness and kurtosis were less than 1, except for one item that had a kurtosis of -1.2.

Using principal component analysis and Direct Oblimin for EFA, we aligned with expectations of correlated factors in social science (Costello & Osborne, 2005). We followed robust criteria including a KMO > 0.5, Bartlett's Test p-value < .05, eigenvalue > 1, total variance explained > 50%, factor-loading > 0.50, cross-loading < 0.40, commonality > 0.40, and at least three items per factor. EFA resulted in two factors: “materialistic drive” (8 items) and “personal image salience” (6 items), forming the reliable ISMO scale (Cronbach's Alpha 0.87-0.92), with no collinearity issue (Pearson correlations between factors 0.55, max between items 0.63) (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis (n = 312)

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Eigenvalue	% of Variance
I1. A well-managed online image can lead to a better salary in the future.	.787		6.697	47.84
I2. The more popular you become online, the greater your chances of financial fulfillment are.	.787			
I3. I wish my online activity brought me material benefits.	.784			
I4. I would like to know how to better promote myself online.	.775			
I5. A good online image can bring you material benefits.	.715			
I6. I would like to be an influencer.	.703			
I7. It's important to promote yourself online.	.588			
I8. I work on my online image also for the potential material benefits it could bring me.	.547			
I9. I post online only things that put me in a good light.		.818	1.495	10.68
I10. I'm careful with the impression I make on online social networks.		.794		
I11. It's very important to me that, online, others perceive me the way I want them to.		.788		
I12. I want to build myself a certain image through everything I post online.		.723		
I13. I usually use online social networks to build myself a good image.		.676		
I14. I like to be appreciated and admired for what I post online.		.598		

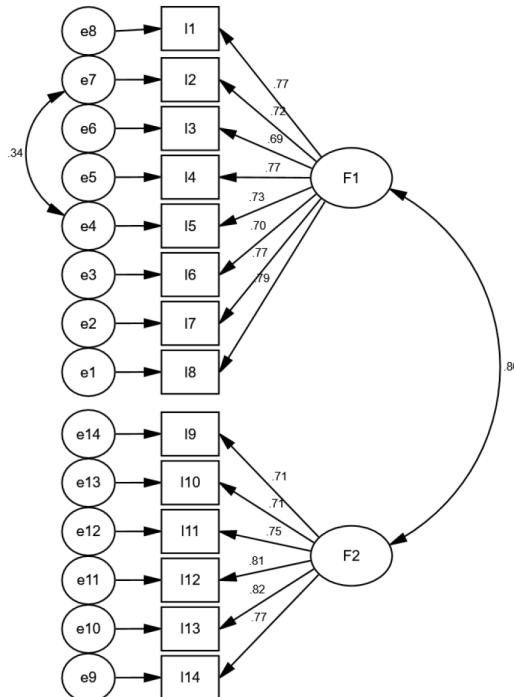
Note. α for ISMO: 0.92; α for Factor 1: 0.89; α for Factor 2: 0.87. AVE for ISMO scale: 0.53; AVE for Factor 1: 0.51; AVE for Factor 2: 0.54. CR for ISMO: 0.94; CR for Factor 1: 0.89; CR for Factor 2: 0.86. KMO:0.922. p-value of the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity < .001.

3.4. Stage 4. ISMO Scale Validation

To validate the ISMO scale, a questionnaire was administered to adult Romanians over 18 years of age ($n=822$) through a (paid) online survey platform owned by a multinational research company. The final quota sample was comprised of an almost equal number of male and female respondents and had a balanced distribution across age groups (see Annex 1). The majority (61.3%) of participants are college educated, with only 5.2% lacking high school completion. The ISMO scale items were randomly displayed. The CFA confirmed the scale structure identified in the EFA (Appendix B). In both analyses, the top two items for each subscale are the same, with one notable decrease in the loading of “I would like to be an influencer” from 0.703 in the EFA to 0.517 in the CFA. This may be due to the EFA sample consisting of communication students, who likely better understand influencer roles. Nevertheless, all ISMO scale items load onto the same subscales and meet standard cutoff points.

The structural equation modelling (SEM) results show a strong scale fit with EFA findings (Figure 1). Goodness-of-fit indices as per Hu and Bentler (1999) and Byrne (2010) confirm this: χ^2 (DF = 76) = 391.87, $p = 0.00$, GFI = 0.931, AGFI = 0.905, TLI = 0.946, CFI = 0.955, and RMSEA = 0.071 (CI = 0.064, 0.078). A notable modification index (M.I. = 77) between two items: “The more popular you become online, the greater your chances of financial fulfillment are” and “A good online image can bring you material benefits”, doesn’t support item overlap due to a Pearson correlation of 0.52. After including this covariation, goodness-of-fit indices slightly increase: χ^2 (DF = 75) = 368.66, $p = 0.00$, GFI = 0.948, AGFI = 0.927, TLI = 0.959, CFI = 0.967, RMSEA = 0.062 (CI = 0.055, 0.069). All standardized regression weights are over 0.69 with a factor correlation of 0.86, indicating a fitting model (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Second-order Two-factor Structure of the ISMO Scale (Sample 2, $n = 822$)



3.5. Stage 5. Criterion Validity

To test that the ISMO scale actually measures interest in self-marketisation online, criteria deemed “pertinent or applicable to the matter at hand” (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2009, p. 197) were also introduced. For this purpose, we employed the following additional scales: sincerity (Ashton & Lee, 2009), self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974), materialism (Richins, 1987), Facebook dependency (Ross et al., 2009), and intentions towards entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2012). We used the short versions of the sincerity and self-monitoring scales available from the IPIP repository (<https://ipip.ori.org/>). All scales displayed a five-point Likert-type structure with response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate lower sincerity but higher self-monitoring, materialism, Facebook dependency, and entrepreneurial tendencies. An index was created based on the number of online social networks (OSNs) and participants’ time spent on them. Scales for sincerity, self-monitoring, materialism, and entrepreneurship were used due to their presumed SMO ties. Measures of online social interaction, like Facebook dependency, OSN count, and online time, demonstrated online engagement. Facebook dependency was specifically included due to its prevalence in Romania, where the study occurred.

All correlations between the ISMO scale and the considered variables are significant (Table 2). Individuals with a higher interest in SMO monitor their self-presentation more closely, are less sincere, more materialistic, more interested in becoming entrepreneurs and more addicted to Facebook. Moreover, they have more accounts on OSNs and spent more time on these platforms. We used SEM with ISMO as a dependent variable for sincerity, self-monitoring, materialism, and entrepreneurship, and an independent variable for Facebook dependency. Even though all regression weights are significant ($CR > 3$), the goodness of fit indices’ values are poor (χ^2 (DF = 803) = 3402.70, $p = 0.00$, GFI = 0.836, AGFI = 0.816, TLI = 0.862, CFI = 0.871, RMSEA = 0.063 (CI = 0.061, 0.065)). MIs suggest a correlation between sincerity and self-monitoring (MI=401, Par Change=.50) and between materialism and entrepreneurship (MI=132, Par Change=.25). In the re-estimated model, sincerity does not have a significant impact on ISMO and was removed based on this information. The new model (Appendix C) displays acceptable goodness of fit values (Hu & Bentler, 1999) (χ^2 (DF = 573) = 1610.12, $p = 0.00$, GFI = 0.900, AGFI = 0.883, TLI = 0.923, CFI = 0.935, RMSEA = 0.47 (CI = 0.044, 0.050)). These overall results point to the reliability and validity of the instrument.

Table 2. Descriptives and Correlations Between ISMO and Chosen Criteria in the Romanian Sample (n=822)

	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. ISMO	3.17	0.98	0.94	-									
2. ISMO_Materialistic drive	3.15	1.05	0.89	.956**	-								
3. ISMO_Personal image salience	3.20	1.03	0.89	.917**	.759**	-							
4. Self-monitoring	2.49	0.69	0.76	.399**	.372**	.378**	-						
5. Sincerity	1.76	0.84	0.86	.412**	.394**	.378**	.536**	-					
6. Materialism	3.09	0.76	0.73	.449**	.445**	.390**	.286**	.332**	-				
7. Entrepreneurship	3.53	0.94	0.81	.330**	.363**	.239**	.239**	.96**	.358**	-			
8. Facebook dependency	2.92	1.05	0.89	.470**	.387**	.516**	.284**	.229**	.292**	.152**	-		
9. Number of OSN accounts	2.17	1.51	-	.342**	.347**	.287**	.175**	.218**	.203**	.200**	.213**	-	
10. Time spent on OSNs	-	-	-	.254**	.238**	.239**	.164**	.110**	.140**	.089*	.307**	.337**	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Note. All correlations are Pearson, except those referring to *time spent on OSNs* which are Spearman. Time spent on OSNs was measured on an ordinal scale, where: 1: Less than 1 hour, 2: Between 1 and 2 hours, 3: Between 3 and 4 hours, 4: Between 5 and 6 hours, 5: More than 6 hours.

3.6. Stage 6. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of ISMO English Version

To test the reliability and the validity of the English version, the scale was administrated to an USA quota sample (n=280) thorough a (paid) online survey platform. The items of the scales were displayed in a random order. The sample has similar number of respondents in what concern gender and age categories (Appendix D). The majority of the respondents (81.4%) are white and the most of them (41.8%) completed higher education.

The findings show that the English version of the ISMO is both reliable and valid (Table 3). The Crombach alpha of the ISMO is 0.95 and all the correlations between this scale and self-monitoring, materialism and entrepreneurship are moderate and significant. CFA show that the English version of the ISMO has two factors. Nevertheless, the loadings of the scale in the USA survey are different than in the Romanian sample. In the study on the USA sample, 12 items loaded on one factor and only two items loaded on the second factor: “I post online only things that put me in a good light” and “I’m careful with the impression I make on online social networks”. The second factor refer at actions that people can take online to make a good impression. A possible explanation for the discrepancy of the factors between the Romanian sample and the USA sample is the cultural differences (Chen et al., 1995). Even if the configural invariance is “the least stringent” (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016), or “the weakest form” (Finch, 2014) of invariance, the configural non-invariance is a limit of our scale.

Table 3. Descriptives and Pearson Correlations Between ISMO and Criteria in the USA Sample (n=280)

	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. ISMO	3.01	1.09	0.95	-					
2. ISMO1	2.96	1.15	0.95	.994**	-				
3. ISMO2	3.34	1.11	0.64	.715**	.632**	-			
4. Self_monitoring	2.52	0.91	0.85	.589**	.600**	.330**	-		
5. Materialism	3.12	0.82	0.72	.572**	.201**	.201**	.383**	-	
6. Entrepreneurship	3.33	0.99	0.74	.443**	.218**	.218**	.332**	.362**	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to develop and validate a scale to measure Interest in Self-Marketisation Online (ISMO). The scale was found to be reliable and valid, as evidenced by questionnaire-based research conducted on Romanian and U.S. samples. During ISMO scale validation, we defined two core dimensions: “materialistic drive”, depicting individuals’ focus on their online persona for potential material rewards, and “personal image salience”, showing concern for online appearance. The process established links between ISMO and related constructs, confirming it is influenced by materialism, self-monitoring, sincerity, and entrepreneurship, and affects Facebook dependency, number of online social networks used, and time spent on these platforms. The results help pinpoint conditions triggering online self-marketisation and highlight how societal commodification and digitisation impact self-construction.

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the validity of the ISMO scale, confirming its associations with several key psychological constructs and behavioural patterns. Specifically, the ISMO scale was found to be positively correlated with self-monitoring, a concept originally developed by Snyder (1974), which reflects an individual’s ability to regulate and adjust their expressive behaviours, emotions, and self-presentation in different social contexts. This relationship suggests that individuals with a higher tendency for self-marketisation online are also more adept at adjusting their public image in response to social expectations, emphasising their ability to strategically manage their online persona.

Conversely, the ISMO scale demonstrated a negative correlation with sincerity (Ashton & Lee, 2009). This result aligns with previous research indicating that individuals who engage in frequent self-marketisation may be more likely to adopt strategic or calculated behaviours rather than prioritising authenticity and unfiltered self-expression. Given that sincerity reflects a person’s tendency to be genuine, honest, and uncalculated in social interactions, this negative correlation suggests that individuals who invest significant effort in managing their online identity may be less inclined to adhere to purely authentic self-presentation strategies.

Furthermore, the ISMO scale exhibited a positive correlation with materialism, as measured by Richins (1987, 2004). Materialism reflects an individual’s tendency to place impor-

tance on possessions as a source of happiness, success, and self-identity. This finding supports the notion that individuals who actively engage in online self-marketisation may also be more likely to equate self-worth and social standing with material possessions, reinforcing the broader cultural association between consumerism and digital self-presentation.

Additionally, the ISMO scale was positively correlated with interest in entrepreneurship, Facebook dependency, the number of online social network (OSN) accounts, and time spent on OSNs, consistent with the findings of Frunzaru and Bo?an (2015) and Frunzaru and Garbașevschi (2016). This suggests that individuals who exhibit a strong inclination toward self-marketisation online are also more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities, possibly leveraging their online presence for professional or business opportunities. The positive correlation with Facebook dependency further highlights the potential addictive nature of online self-presentation behaviours, as individuals who invest in self-marketisation may become increasingly reliant on social media platforms for validation and recognition. Similarly, the correlation with the number of OSN accounts and time spent on these platforms suggests broader and more frequent engagement with digital networks is characteristic of individuals who prioritize online self-promotion.

The distinct value of our research lies not only in the novelty of the ISMO scale but also in the theoretical advancements it introduces. While previous studies have provided instruments to measure related concepts such as identity consistency (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2017), identity fusion (Jiménez et al., 2016), and online identity management (Frunzaru & Garbașevschi, 2016), none directly address the specific phenomenon of Self-Marketisation Online (SMO).

This study underlines the rising importance of self-marketisation in today's society, asserting that SMO as a preferred method of self-construction and performance.. It aligns with studies pointing to self-marketisation as a key modern-day phenomenon, boosted by social media and rampant commodification (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Tuominen et al., 2023). Focusing on the interest in SMO, an under-researched aspect, we provide a unique viewpoint. We propose interest as a vital precursor to actual self-marketisation, deserving more in-depth scrutiny. Therefore, the ISMO scale is the pioneer instrument assessing SMO's appeal. Our study has limitations, including the language and geographical territory, which may introduce idiosyncrasies. The scale yields different subscale structures in the USA and Romania, suggesting cultural impact on responses and limiting replicability. Since the survey in stage 3 is based on a convenience sample, and the surveys in stages 4 and 6 are based on quota samples, a non-probabilistic sampling approach limits the generalizability of the findings. Despite limitations, this study offers valuable theoretical and practical contributions. The rigorously and reliably developed ISMO scale can be used for future exploration of online self-marketisation's causes, links, and effects at both individual and societal levels. Future studies could investigate ISMO's cultural variations and associations with psychological constructs and behaviours. Additionally, exploring objective behavioural measures alongside self-reported data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of self-marketisation and its implications.

Finally, by highlighting the intricacies of SMO, this study opens new avenues for understanding the evolving dynamics of online identity construction, self-presentation, and self-perception in the digital age. It is hoped that the ISMO scale will serve as a foundation for further theoretical and empirical inquiries into this increasingly salient aspect of digital life.

5. Conclusion

The inextricable entwinement of the self with the digital context marks a transformative shift in how selfhood is understood and enacted. Online social networks have not only democratised the practices of self-marketisation but also normalised a transactional approach to the construction of self-identity. The increasing prevalence of Self-Marketisation Online (SMO) signals its growing importance and highlights the urgency for its thorough theoretical exploration.

As we improve instruments to investigate self-marketisation, our comprehension of its personal and societal implications expands. The ISMO scale introduced here provides a vital instrument for studying self-marketisation in digital modernity. Assessing individuals' interest in SMO provides foresight into future self-construction practices. A deeper understanding of SMO allows better prediction of its effects, supporting both individual digital navigation and policy development aimed at societal well-being. The ISMO scale establishes a base for future investigations into significant facets of our digital existence. Improving our comprehension of online identity dynamics, self-presentation, and self-perception sets the stage for additional theoretical and empirical studies into SMO, its precursors, associations, and effects on individuals and society. Future research should explore how the ISMO scale applies across different cultures, as self-marketisation may vary based on social norms and platform preferences. Testing it on probabilistic samples would also improve its generalizability. Additionally, as digital trends evolve, the scale could be adapted to capture new self-marketisation behaviours, including emerging behaviours shaped by AI-generated content and evolving social media trends.

In conclusion, the increasingly popular phenomenon of SMO, amplified by the omnipresence of online social networks, has profound implications for how we construct, present, and perceive our identities. Through the lens of the ISMO scale, we gain a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics, contributing to the broader discourse on selfhood in the digital age.

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Appendix A

Background Variables in Survey Stage 4 (n = 822)

	n	%
Gender		
Female	417	50.7
Male	405	49.3
Age		
18-24	84	10.2
25-29	80	9.7
30-34	79	9.6
35-39	81	9.9
40-44	79	9.6
45-49	81	9.9
50-54	85	10.3
55-59	82	10.0
60-64	85	10.3
65 years or above	86	10.5
Level of education		
Secondary school (8 grades)	11	1.3
Vocational school	32	3.9
High school (12 grades)	197	24.0
Undergraduate	78	9.5
Bachelor	327	39.8
Master's	161	19.6
PhD	16	1.9

Appendix B

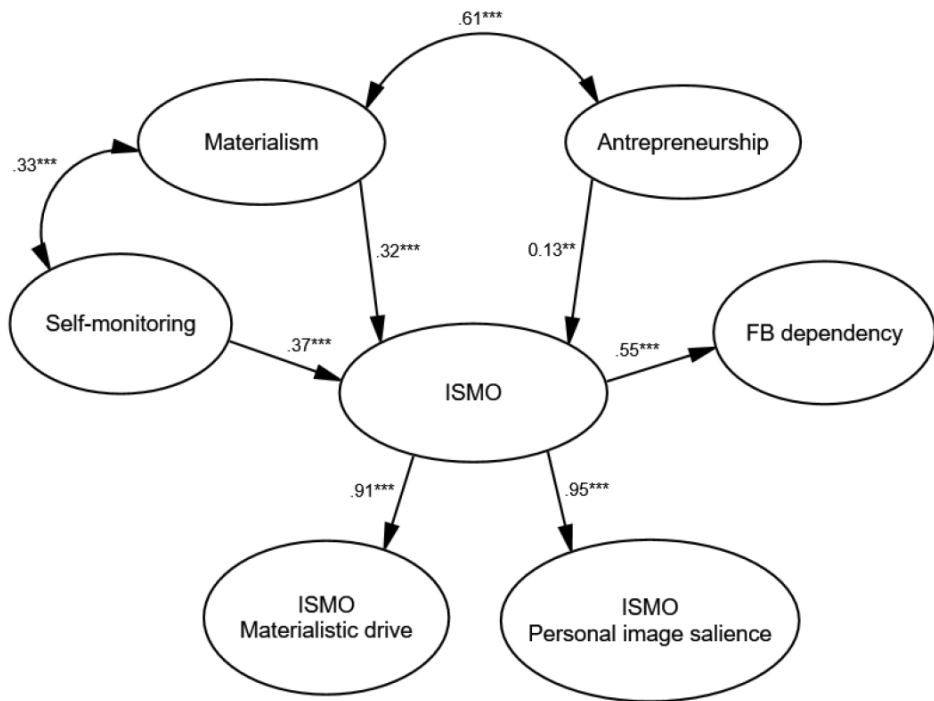
Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (n = 822) – Romanian version of the scale

	Component			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Eigenvalue	% of Variance
I1. A well-managed online image can lead to a better salary in the future.	0.890		7,81	55.78%
I2. The more popular you become online, the greater your chances of financial fulfillment are.	0.885			
I5. A good online image can bring you material benefits.	0.837			
I3. I wish my online activity brought me material benefits.	0.762			
I7. It's important to promote yourself online.	0.638			
I4. I would like to know how to better promote myself online.	0.583			
I8. I work on my online image also for the potential material benefits it could bring me.	0.556			
I6. I would like to be an influencer.	0.517			
I9. I post online only things that put me in a good light.		0.875	1,15	8.22%
I10. I'm careful with the impression I make on online social networks.		0.813		
I14. I like to be appreciated and admired for what I post online.		0.783		
I11. It's very important to me that, online, others perceive me the way I want them to.		0.744		
I12. I want to build myself a certain image through everything I post online.		0.736		
I13. I usually use online social networks to build myself a good image.		0.616		

Note. α for ISMO: 0.94; α for Factor 1: 0.89; α for Factor 2: 0.89. AVE for ISMO scale: 0.55; AVE for Factor 1: 0.52; AVE for Factor 2: 0.58. CR for ISMO: 0.94; CR for Factor 1: 0.89; CR for Factor 2: 0.87. KMO:0.959. p-value of the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity < .001.

Appendix C

Results of SEM with ISMO as a Dependent and Independent Variable (N=822)



** . Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
 *** . Significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Appendix D

Background Variables in Survey Stage 6 (n = 280)

	n	%
Gender		
Female	139	49.6
Male	138	49.3
Other	3	1.1
Age		
18-29	56	20
30-39	56	20
40-49	56	20
50-59	56	20
60 years or above	56	20
Level of education		
Elementary school	5	1.8
Some high school	61	21.8
Completed high school	117	41.8
Trade or vocational school	16	15.7
Post-secondary certificate or diploma	6	2.1
Bachelor's degree	38	13.6
Master's degree	27	9.6
Professional or doctorate	6	2.1
Other	4	1.4
Race		
White	228	81.4
Black or African American	28	10
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	1.1
Asian	6	2.1
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	4	1.4
Some other race	11	3.9

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Between Autonomy and Control: Influencer-Marketers Relations and Campaign Development

Abstract

Social media influencers have complex advertising functions as content creators and managers of their social media channels. The present research investigates the interaction processes between marketers and social media influencers during the advertising campaign's development within the principal-agent theory's theoretical framework. This study contributes to the research on managing strategic influencer communication by extending existing knowledge with insights from influencers' perspectives. Our method consisted of in-depth interviews with seventeen social media influencers from a European country, which were thematically analyzed. Respondents evaluated marketers' simple, bureaucratic, and conservative control through long-term relationships with brands and influencers' perspectives of the relevance of influencer-brand fit. Results unveiled influencers' efforts to maintain creative autonomy, foster positive audience reception, and align with the brand's overarching advertising objectives.

Keywords: principal-agent theory; qualitative research; social media influencers; strategic communication

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing witnessed a surge in popularity, particularly among young demographics who prefer authentic content (Lee et al., 2022). The past decade has not only transformed the modes of communication employed by media channels but has also redefined the nature and modalities of viewer interaction with the content they consume (Ye et al., 2021). Social media influencers are enabled by platforms to create and share content and engage with their followers, providing avenues for creative individuals or those with a voice to establish themselves and cultivate audiences (Holiday et al., 2023). Influencers embedded in

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several advertising functions, such as brand endorsers and social media managers, make them complex actors in the advertising landscape (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), while creativity has always been a crucial element in the development of an influencer (Brooks et al., 2021). Furthermore, social media influencers aim to enlarge their community of followers and monetize their celebrity status (Campbell & Grimm, 2019).

Borchers (2023) argues that influencer marketing campaigns differ from traditional advertising in the level of control marketers have over campaign development and outcomes. Marketers follow the so-called *letting go* paradigm at a declarative level by giving influencers creative freedom (Hoos, 2019). However, previous literature (Wellman et al., 2020) highlighted some limitations to this approach, particularly regarding the control that brands maintain over influencers. This creates tension between marketers, who aim to retain control over campaign development and implementation, and influencers, who seek to preserve their creative freedom in content creation and posting (McMullan et al., 2022). While previous research has largely focused on the marketers' perspective, there is a limited understanding of influencers' viewpoints on their professional relationships (Borchers, 2023).

This study contributes to the research on managing strategic influencer communication (e.g., Childers et al., 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021; McMullan et al., 2022) by extending existing knowledge with insights from influencers' perspectives. It specifically examines the interaction processes between marketers and social media influencers within the theoretical framework of agency theory (Bergen et al., 1992). The study aims to explore influencers' viewpoints on balancing creative autonomy with the need to effectively communicate the brand message as marketers require. Thus, this research seeks to advance the literature on developing influencer advertising campaigns by investigating the relationships among different advertising actors.

2. Theoretical Framework

A clear understanding of the objectives and underlying rationales of all actors involved is essential for analyzing the collaborative dynamics between influencers and marketers. Organizing influencer communication requires balancing formal contractual agreements with more flexible arrangements. In practice, literature often distinguishes between *influencer marketing* and *influencer relations* as two distinct approaches that require careful consideration in collaborations between marketers and influencers (Borchers & Enke, 2021). While *influencer marketing* focuses on short-term, campaign-based partnerships aimed at achieving immediate, measurable outcomes through isolated collaborations, *influencer relations* emphasize building long-term, ongoing relationships that foster trust, authenticity, and sustained engagement (Young, 2016). Both approaches are essential and must be managed thoughtfully to ensure successful and balanced influencer-marketer collaborations.

2.1. The Agency Theory

In influencer marketing campaigns, influencers are expected to perform activities on behalf of marketers or brands. The agency theory effectively explains this relationship (Bergen et al., 1992), where influencers act as agents serving the interests of their clients—namely, marketers and brands—while still considering their own interests. The theory encompasses

key elements such as performance monitoring and evaluation, incentive structures, contractual agreements, agency selection, and governance of agents.

The principal-agent framework (Rees, 1985a; 1985b) further illustrates how influencers, acting on behalf of marketers, can create information asymmetries in their relationship. To address the risks posed by these asymmetries, marketers often seek strategies to exert control over influencers (Borchers, 2023). While delegating decision-making authority to the agent can increase efficiency for the principal, it also introduces risks due to the principal's incomplete knowledge of the agent's behavior, which the agent might leverage for personal gain.

An agency relationship arises whenever one party (the principal) relies on another party (the agent) to perform actions on their behalf. This framework applies to employment relationships, where the hiring firm or a manager acting on behalf of the owners is the principal, and the employee is the agent (Bergen et al., 1992). Similarly, in the case of hiring an influencer, the same norm holds true, with the marketer or brand serving as the principal and the influencer as the agent acting in the brand's interest to achieve desired outcomes.

A similar problematic is explored by Stoldt et al. (2019), who introduce the concept of structured flexibility to describe how intermediaries facilitate relationships between brands and influencers. While their study focuses on the travel and tourism industry, their findings align with the principal-agent perspective, illustrating how formalized yet adaptable agreements help balance brand control with influencer autonomy. Their work highlights ongoing tensions in influencer labor and governance, which are also relevant to the present study.

Building on this, Shen et al. (2024) examine the role of contractual structures in influencer marketing, further demonstrating how contract design impacts influencer behavior. Their study finds that participation-based contracts are more effective for high-quality products, while sales-based contracts work better for low-quality ones. However, for moderately rated products, neither contract yields optimal outcomes, highlighting inefficiencies in influencer marketing. These findings reinforce the principal-agent perspective, emphasizing the role of incentive structures in mitigating agency problems and aligning influencer actions with brand objectives.

Extending these discussions into the political domain, Borchers (2025) explores how political communicators perceive collaborations with influencers. While influencers are seen as valuable for informing, interacting with, and mobilizing voters, challenges arise in adapting influencer marketing strategies to political campaigns, particularly regarding message complexity and expectations that influencers should work for free. These insights further illustrate the broader implications of influencer governance and contract negotiations, demonstrating that influencer marketing extends beyond commercial contexts into political communication, where similar tensions between structure, autonomy, and agency emerge.

2.2. Marketers

The agency problem arises from several challenges that stem from imbalances in information between the principal and the agent, which can manifest throughout different stages of their relationship—during the selection process, after signing the contract, and throughout the collaboration (Bernhold & Wiesweg, 2022). Initially, before any contract is signed, the principal often has limited knowledge about the agent's true capabilities, intentions, or overall suitability for the task. The principal might choose an agent who is not the best fit for the role and who may not deliver optimal results. In the first stage of the collaboration, selecting

the right influencers is crucial. Studies based on interviews with industry professionals identify a wide range of selection criteria, including the fit between influencers and brands or marketed products, influencers' popularity, self-branding, reliability, audience composition, content tonality, and pricing for paid collaborations (Childers et al., 2019). Carefully selecting influencers based on these criteria can enhance the effectiveness of influencer campaigns (Lim et al., 2017).

Once the contract is signed and the working relationship begins, new challenges emerge. The principal may struggle to effectively observe or monitor the agent's efforts and behavior. This inability opens the door for opportunistic behavior, where the agent may act in their own self-interest rather than in the best interest of the principal. There is limited information available about the specifics of the cooperation process between marketers and influencers (Borchers & Enke, 2021). According to Childers et al. (2019), legal departments of advertising agencies typically manage disclosure issues with influencers. However, a key challenge reported by marketers is the difficulty in measuring the outcomes of influencer collaborations (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). While some studies suggest that metrics such as impressions, reach, and engagement in the form of comments, likes, and shares are crucial for evaluating influencer performance (Childers et al., 2019), other important key performance indicators include brand awareness, sales, and traffic (Borchers & Enke, 2021). To better align evaluation methods, it is crucial to consider which steps influencers themselves deem most relevant.

Furthermore, over the course of the relationship, the agent's true motivations and priorities may only become apparent after a significant period has passed. Initially, the principal may believe that the agent is aligned with their goals, but as the relationship progresses, the agent's actions might reveal conflicting interests. In such cases, the principal may find it difficult, if not impossible, to influence or change the agent's behavior, especially when there is a high degree of dependency. This is particularly problematic when the principal relies heavily on the agent's specific skills, expertise, or access to resources, which limits the principal's ability to exert control (Picot et al., 1999).

These dynamics create a complex set of risks in principal-agent relationships, where information asymmetries and power imbalances can lead to undesired outcomes. To address these risks, marketers often feel the need to implement various forms of control to align the agent's behavior with their goals. Examining how influencers perceive these controls offers valuable insights into this relationship.

2.3. Strategies for Control in Marketer Practices

Research generally indicates that communication managers should avoid controlling influencers' behavior, as attempts to impose control may undermine the authenticity of influencers and, in turn, reduce the effectiveness of the campaign (e.g., Childers et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2022; McMullan et al., 2022). However, Borchers (2023) contests this perspective by presenting various control mechanisms that communication managers have developed to regulate influencer behavior despite the prevailing paradigm advocating for reduced control. These techniques can be classified into three major categories: simple, bureaucratic, and coercive control. Simple control encompasses predetermined scripts that outline expected influencer behavior, the management of interaction, particularly in the comment section, and the use of approval processes. Technical control is applied through mechanisms such as nudg-

ing, where influencers are invited to participate in events and can choose from a preselected range of products to endorse. Bureaucratic control pertains to formal agreements, such as contracts and briefings. Lastly, concertive control includes feedback, the cultivation of long-term relationships, influencer selection, and ongoing performance evaluation.

McMullan et al. (2022) identified three pivotal considerations that marketers must effectively balance and manage within their relationships with influencers: control, timeframe, and value tension. Control tension pertains to the level of influence wielded by brand managers. It underscores the significance of entrusting influencers to create authentic content that resonates with their audience on the chosen platform. Effective influencer marketing results are often achieved when brands demonstrate trust in influencers' expertise, allowing them creative freedom (Haenlein et al., 2020; McMullan et al., 2022). Marketers should recognize that influencer marketing differs from traditional advertising. Unlike ads, where marketers dictate design and placement, influencer partnerships leverage the influencer's authority and creativity, leading to more authentic social media engagement (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Haenlein et al., 2020). Firms should embrace the creativity and engagement of influencers rather than controlling every aspect of the content they produce (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014; Lin et al., 2018).

Timeframe tension highlights the importance of fostering long-term relationships between brands and influencers, emphasizing mutual respect and investment in long-term performance metrics (McMullan et al., 2022). Influencer marketing involves a personal element that differs from traditional business-to-business transactions, such as ad purchases. It requires engagement with individuals who have significant social media followings (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Companies should approach influencers similarly to other key stakeholders, engaging meaningfully and valuing their input (McMullan et al., 2022).

Finally, value tension underlines the critical factors in selecting influencers to promote a brand, emphasizing the importance of alignment between the influencer's social media persona and the brand's products and services. This consideration goes beyond mere follower count, highlighting the need for a genuine fit between the influencer and the brand's objectives and audiences (McMullan et al., 2022). It is also crucial to understand the underlying motivations of each social media influencer, as not all are willing to create content solely in exchange for payment (Pang et al., 2016).

2.4. Social Media Influencers as Strategic Communicators

Social media influencers can be viewed as actors who have built extensive and meaningful connections with organizational stakeholders. Through their content creation, distribution, interaction, and personal presence on social media, they wield significant influence over these stakeholders, making them valuable intermediaries in brand communication strategies (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Influencers have emerged as significant stakeholders in strategic communication. Depending on the specific objectives, influencers can fulfill various roles for organizations, and their range of services in strategic communication often appear broader compared to those offered by traditional service providers (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

In the dynamic landscape of influencer marketing, influencers function as agents who bridge the gap between marketers or brands and consumers. Just as customers rely on suppliers to provide accurate product information and deliver the desired benefits (Bergen et al., 1992), consumers depend on influencers to offer trustworthy insights about products and serv-

ices. This relationship highlights that agency issues, such as trust and information asymmetry, extend beyond traditional business relationships and are also relevant in influencer-brand interactions. Campbell and Farrell (2020) identify five categories of social media influencers, which are not solely determined by follower count but also by factors such as authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital. These categories include nano-influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers), micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers), macro-influencers (100,000–1 million followers), mega-influencers (more than 1 million followers), and celebrity influencers, gained fame through channels outside of social media.

Regardless of their audience sizes, influencers can determine followers to adopt specific behaviors toward brands. Creativity is at the center of influencers' activity beyond advertising. Marketers and brands can benefit from influencer creativity (Leung et al., 2022). Influencers need to enjoy creative freedom and not have their finished deliverables fully controlled by the brand. Imagine the creative brief of the campaigns requires too many details from the influencer, such as location or wardrobe information, requesting the influencer to film with a particular camera, but they use specific tools – e.g., a slight change in the tone of voice – to ensure that the content fits the brand persona. In that case, the influencer will lose their autonomy, so the influencer's public will perceive the content as inauthentic (McMullan et al., 2022). However, making the influencer brief less detailed is one of the hardest things for many brands because they do not want the influencers to shift the focus from their product or service to something else or to communicate incomplete campaign information (Borchers, 2023). This lack of control over the influencer content diminishes the brand's power. This leaves the influencer responsible to determine the success of the campaign, keeping their content more personal while endorsing the brand in an authentic way and not creating an advertisement of the brand with their face on it.

Audience perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness are central to shaping their behaviors in influencer marketing (Breves et al., 2019). When an influencer is perceived as credible, audiences are more likely to form favorable attitudes toward the influencer (Liljander et al., 2015), their sponsored content (Lou & Yuan, 2018), and the brands they promote (Munnukka et al., 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019). This enhances engagement with content and boosts purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020). Therefore, audience trust in the influencer is a key driver of the success of influencer marketing strategies, highlighting the essential role of credibility in fostering positive audience behaviors (Eisend & Tarahi, 2016). Research (Childers et al., 2019) shows that marketers also acknowledge the value of influencers who adopt a unique approach, as this helps them establish trust and credibility with both their current and potential audiences.

The perceived authenticity of influencers and brands significantly impacts the audience's further perceptions and behaviors. When influencers are seen as genuine, they develop stronger connections with their audiences, which in turn enhances audience attitudes toward the promoted brand and increases their likelihood of making a purchase (Ki et al., 2020). Authenticity has become a key factor in evaluating influencers and brands, and shape trust and loyalty (Moulard et al., 2021). Consumers, drawn to authenticity in their daily lives, are more likely to engage with influencers they perceive as genuine, fostering brand loyalty and purchase intention (Leigh et al., 2006; Tran & Strutton, 2014). Marketers understand that influencers who authentically demonstrate real-life usage of products or services enhance the credibility of the brand's message (Childers et al., 2019).

In instances where the influencer lacks authenticity, and the brand's influence appears to overshadow the creator's autonomy, the overall impact may not be favorable (Audrezet et al., 2020). This case is possible when the brand exerts greater control over the content. Hence, we asked the following research question:

RQ. How do social media influencers perceive their dynamic with marketers in balancing creative freedom and responding to marketers' control strategies?

3. Methodology

Given that our study aims to explore the dynamics of the relationship between social media influencers and brands, we applied in-depth interviews with $N=17$ social media influencers from (COUNTRY ANNONYMISED FOR REVIEW). In-depth interviews serve as a valuable methodological approach for eliciting individual perspectives. This qualitative method effectively prompts individuals to articulate personal feelings, opinions, and experiences, thereby facilitating an in-depth exploration of their subjective viewpoints (Tuchman, 2002). Moreover, similar methodological approaches were used to research social media influencers (e.g., Borchers, 2003; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou, 2022; Lou et al., 2023).

We developed an interview guide using a deductive approach. Following a step-by-step process, we formulated the interview questions for the main part of the interviews based on the concepts embedded in the research question. Initially, we reached out to more than 30 social media influencers with different communities of followers, according to Campbell and Farrell's (2020) classification. Theoretical saturation was reached. Seventeen influencers responded to our request, and we interviewed them. All influencers we addressed (aged 27 to 39) are active on Instagram, and some of them concurrently engaged on more than one platform, including YouTube, TikTok, or personal blogs. We interviewed twelve female and three male influencers. Most participants within our sample were not affiliated with an influencer marketing agency. However, each has amassed collaborative experience with various brands executing diverse social media campaigns. The interviews with influencers lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. We transcribed and analyzed the interviews using thematic analysis (Creswell, 2009). We followed a deductive approach based on the codes driven by the theoretical framework. Table 1 shows the structure of our sample.

Table 1. The structure of the sample

ID	Field	Influencer Type	Experience with Influencer Marketing (Years)	Age (Years)	Gender
ID_1	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	4 years	32	F
ID_2	Family	micro-influencer	4 years	32	F
ID_3	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	7 years	28	F
ID_4	Health	micro-influencer	12 years	33	F
ID_5	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	14 years	39	F
ID_6	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	2 years	34	F
ID_7	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	5 years	27	F
ID_8	Beauty and lifestyle	micro-influencer	4 years	22	F
ID_9	Lifestyle	micro-influencer	3 years	22	F
ID_10	Food	macro influencer	4 years	22	F
ID_11	Beauty	micro-influencer	4 years	24	F
ID_12	Books	micro-influencer	3 years	26	F
ID_13	Photography	micro-influencer	4 years	28	M
ID_14	Fitness	macro influencer	4 years	30	M
ID_15	Beauty	micro-influencer	4 years	32	F
ID_16	Beauty	Macro-influencer	10 years	33	F
ID_17	Lifestyle	Micro-influencer	8 years	30	F

First, we formulated interview questions grounded in principal-agent theory and control theory to explore influencers' perspectives on control strategies (McMullan et al., 2022; Boerchers, 2023). Using a structured interview approach, we deductively examined types of control described in control theory: simple, bureaucratic, and concertive. Our thematic analysis addressed approval processes as a form of simple control, formal contractual agreements as bureaucratic control, and long-term relationships between influencers and marketers as concertive control, weaving these topics into a cohesive exploration of control strategies. We also investigated influencer-audience relationships through the lens of principal-agent theory, emphasizing their importance in influencer marketing. While engagement metrics are typically shared with brands, we aimed to uncover the less visible, qualitative dimensions of these relationships that often remain inaccessible to marketers.

After a training session with coauthors, one author conducted all interviews online, adhering to a structured interview guide and asking follow-up questions when necessary. Interviews were conducted in the native language of the authors and respondents, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the trained author. The same author performed line-by-line coding of transcripts, attributing responses to themes drawn from principal-agent and control theories. Finally, the coder and principal researchers collaboratively reviewed the coded attributions, resolved inconsistencies, and reached a consensus on how the identified themes align with theoretical frameworks to address the research question.

4. Findings

4.1. The Framework of the Collaboration with Influencers

The collaborations between influencers and brands are characterized by significant variability in fee negotiation, deliverables, and overall campaign structure. While some influencers actively negotiate fees and propose deliverables, others leave these aspects to the brand's discretion. The details of each collaboration vary considerably, reflecting diverse strategies and preferences. These nuanced differences contribute to the dynamic nature of influencer-brand collaborations in digital marketing. However, fees remain a sensitive aspect of the marketer-influencer relationship that is not transparent to the public. Regarding fees, one of the influencers pointed out:

When a brand contacts me for a paid collaboration, I usually ask them what their budget would be for my deliverables. I like to do this so that I avoid proposing a fee that can be smaller than brand's budget. (ID_4).

When influencers work with marketing agencies, the agency's role in facilitating and negotiating is highlighted. However, many of our respondents work directly with marketers and brands rather than with influencer agencies. Most influencer campaigns adopt a structured approach, with brands providing influencers detailed briefs outlining essential brand information, product details, tone of voice, and specific campaign requirements. However, the level of detail in these briefs varies significantly between brands and campaigns, reflecting the dynamic nature of influencer collaborations. On this note, one of the respondents argued:

I have received many types of briefs during my collaborations with brands. Some of them were large documents with multiple details, others were a short paragraph in the email. I like to work with a brief that is somewhere in between. (ID_6).

4.2. Simple Control

During our discussions, we explored how brands balance providing influencers with creative freedom while maintaining control through campaign briefs. When asked about the extent of creative freedom afforded by brands, most influencers acknowledged experiencing a degree of autonomy. Scholars framed the approval process of influencer-brand collaboration as a simple control strategy (Borchers, 2023). The control process results in control tensions. Respondents highlighted a range of approaches brands take to accommodate influencers' creative expression. Influencers choose whether to work with a brand or not in the process of developing the campaign. Some refuse to participate in campaigns because they do not feel they can collaborate transparently. In influencer campaigns, it is common for brands to request to preview content before it is published. This allows brands to suggest modifications if needed. While some contracts explicitly address this practice, not all do. In our interviews, influencers shared their perspectives on brands' requests to preview content and the feasibility of adjusting as requested. While some respondents mentioned feeling restricted if asked to make some adjustments to the content, other respondents argued that the level of freedom varies depending on the brand and campaign dynamics:

Responses to the query demonstrate a range of influencers' perspectives regarding sharing content with brands before posting. Most influencers are open to this practice, as one of the respondents stressed:

I think it is fair play to show the content to brands prior to posting; it is a matter of fairness and transparency for the three parties involved: the brand – the influencer – the consumer (ID_1).

However, there are notable nuances in their viewpoints. Some influencers are willing to modify content upon brand request but emphasize the importance of limiting such alterations. The influencers believe that required modifications must be reasonable and within common sense and should not conflict with an authentic presentation of themselves and the brands. However, there are cases when influencers also ask the brand for approval when it is not requested to make sure that their content aligns with the brand's perspective before posting it.

Contractual terms also play a significant role, with some influencers willing to share content for approval if explicitly stated in the agreement. Additionally, influencers may discourage content pre-approval in situations where time constraints are tight or when engaged in barter agreements involving inexpensive products. According to previous literature (Borchers, 2023), formal contracts are part of bureaucratic control, and therefore, we addressed this topic in the following subsection.

4.3. Bureaucratic Control

Influencers expressed a wide range of opinions when discussing the ideal level of detail of formal agreements, including campaign briefs aiming to balance brand expectations with creative freedom. They believed briefs should provide conceptual ideas rather than strict guidelines to allow for artistic expression. This freedom of expression varies for many reasons, depending on each influencer. They consider it crucial to receive briefs that include product specifications. However, the creative direction should not be restrictive.

Influencers share different perspectives, stressing the industry's ongoing debate about the optimal balance between detailed guidance and creative freedom in influencer briefs and reflecting the diverse needs of influencers and brands in campaign collaborations. While some respondents favor detailed briefs, others preferred less detailed ones to maintain creative autonomy, expressing concerns that too much detail could stifle creativity. On this note, one of the respondents stressed:

I appreciate brands that give directions but also admit a certain freedom of expression so that the content can still be true to me. (ID_16).

Contracts are relevant for influencers to secure their payment. However, some respondents complained that brands do not always respect contracts, as many had unpleasant experiences. Some of these experiences are being paid late.

4.4. Concertive Control

In the case of long-term collaborations, a form of concertive control (Borchers, 2023), influencers value the mutual understanding built with brands. This often leads to arrangements where a predetermined set of deliverables allows for content promotion flexibility without needing pre-approval. On this note, one of the influencers highlighted the relevance of creating mutual understanding. Long-term relationships often result in reducing simple control strategies such as the approval process and are preferred by most influencers we interviewed as one of the respondents highlighted:

I appreciate brands that want a long-term collaboration from the start because to succeed, you need two to three collaborations at a minimum (ID_17).

For influencers, the decision to collaborate long-term is not transparent. Thus, some influencers we interviewed checked whether the brand wanted to continue the collaborations after delivering the results, while others refused to continue the collaboration if the communication had been broken during the other parts of the campaign. Influencers are sensitive to brand appreciation, as a respondent argued:

I appreciate it when a brand takes me seriously and trusts what I do (ID_17).

4.5. Influencers' Relationship with Brands

Influencers consider various factors when assessing and appreciating brand collaborations, including budget, transparency, communication, creative freedom, and a brand's willingness for long-term partnerships. Some emphasize the importance of developing a "business friendship," highlighting the interpersonal dynamics and clear communication as crucial for a successful collaboration. Many consider long-term brand collaborations more effective for their endorsement to have tangible results and reach the brand's marketing objectives for the campaign. Influencers highlight the importance of brands taking them seriously, being professional, giving briefs, and appreciating them.

4.6. Influencer-Brand Fit and Value Tension

Product quality is a key consideration for influencers, with many stressing its impact on their perception of a brand. Transparency about products and services is also valued, with an expectation for marketing strategies to be sensible, creative, and ethical, avoiding deceptive or aggressive tactics. Influencers often research a brand's reputation and test products before committing to a campaign. They prioritize aligning with the brand's values but also consider how the products fit into their lifestyle, emphasizing the importance of seamless integration and personal preference. One of the prospects stated that she becomes more invested in collaborations not because of the brand or product itself, but because of how she relates them to her personal life. This diligence underscores their commitment to authenticity, ensuring a genuine alignment between their brand and endorsed products. The potential value tension is highlighted by one of our respondents as follows:

If I don't know the product, I need to test it first for a couple of weeks. I cannot promote something that I have never used. However, it happened in the past to accept some collaborations right away, as they were products that I was already using and trusting (ID_16).

4.7. The Relationship with the Community of Followers

The influencers we interviewed primarily find intrinsic satisfaction in sharing information from their expertise with their followers. They emphasize the reciprocal engagement with followers as a motivating factor, with gratification coming from followers adopting their recommendations. Some liken the social media community to a "small village" and describe the nature of their relationship with the audiences as follows:

The idea of community does not refer to financial compensation. I am truly happy when I help people with my recommendations (ID_3).

This makes the influencers share content with a purpose centered on inspiring others. Further, giveaways and reduction codes are valuable for the relationship with followers. They often aim to engage their audience by curating attractive photos or videos and giving valuable insights across various domains of expertise and interest.

Another significant motivation for influencers is a genuine passion for content creation, expressed through sharing lifestyle aspects or enjoying the creative process itself, as one of the respondents highlighted:

My followers trust me a lot, so I rarely find a collaboration that I feel perfectly comfortable with. “I cannot promote everything because my followers are educated, and they do not buy everything (ID_5).

Additionally, some influencers are driven by business goals. They use content creation to expand existing enterprises and attract offline clients via social media. Most of them integrate their brand advertisements with their usual content, strengthening their personal brand for potential monetization in the future, trying to be as natural as possible.

5. Discussion

Our examination of influencer-brand collaborations has unveiled a nuanced and multifaceted landscape shaped by several factors. In line with previous research (McMullan et al., 2022; Borchers, 2023), influencers emphasize creative freedom, brand alignment, and the balance between autonomy and brand control. While they cherish the opportunity for creative expression, they also recognize the importance of aligning with brand objectives and expectations. This acknowledgment reflects a sophisticated understanding among influencers of the need to strike a balance between maintaining their unique voice and effectively conveying the brand’s message. Moreover, our findings unveiled that influencers are not inherently opposed to the control strategies applied by marketers. On the contrary, they even find benefits in bureaucratic control (Borchers, 2023) through contracts and agreements with marketers and brands.

Influencers are intermediaries that deliver brand messages to their audiences. As previous literature pointed out (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), influencers’ relationships with their audiences are crucial to them. Therefore, while developing relationships with brands, they also consider the quality of their relationship with their audiences. The influencers we interviewed value reciprocal engagement with their followers, finding intrinsic satisfaction in sharing expertise and inspiring their followers. Their commitment to authenticity drives them to maintain genuine connections with their audience, emphasizing that long-term relationships with brands are key to maintaining credibility. The participants in our study consistently stressed that transparency and ethical alignment with brands were essential to their collaborations. They also underscored the importance of creative freedom, which allows them to deliver authentic and resonant content to their audience. This aligns with Borchers and Enke (2021), who identified authenticity as central to strategic influencer communication, as well as McMullan et al. (2022), who found that the best results are achieved when brands trust influencers to create content that resonates with their followers.

Moreover, our findings indicate that while influencers appreciate brand clarity in campaign briefs as forms of simple and bureaucratic control strategies (Borche, 2023), they re-

sist overly prescriptive instructions, which can undermine their ability to maintain authenticity. This need for balance between brand control and influencer creativity reflects the notion of “letting go” in strategic influencer collaborations (Borchers & Enke, 2021), where influencers expect a higher degree of autonomy. Similarly, Childers et al. (2018) noted that although agencies maintain some creative control over influencer content, content creators are expected to stay on message while still showcasing actual, authentic use of products. Our findings expand on this by highlighting that influencers view their creative freedom as critical to their role, particularly in long-term partnerships. Hence, like previous research (McMullan et al., 2022), we found evidence that fostering authentic communication while campaigning for brands represents a potential tension for the influencer-marketing relationship. An additional potential tension represents a poor fit with the brand that the influencers must avoid, according to their perspective.

The balance between creative freedom and brand control is crucial to influencer collaborations. While most participants report experiencing a degree of autonomy in their content creation, the extent of this freedom often varies by brand and campaign dynamics. Influencers typically prefer transparent collaborations and may decline participation in campaigns where they feel restricted.

When it comes to value alignment, participants in our study placed significant importance on ethical standards and the brand’s values before committing to partnerships. This is in line with McMullan et al. (2022), who found that value alignment plays a pivotal role in influencer-brand relationships. Our results expand this understanding by revealing that influencers are not only concerned with the brand’s external image but also with how the brand’s practices align with their personal ethics, further cementing authenticity as a cornerstone of successful collaborations.

Our findings show that influencers value a mix of monetary and non-monetary rewards, with access to exclusive experiences or events serving as a meaningful form of compensation that resonates with their personal and professional goals. This reflects Borchers’ findings that influencer compensation often goes beyond monetary payments and is adapted to the structural realities of influencer work. Childers et al. (2018), while noting the high costs of influencer collaborations, also emphasized the complexity of contracts, a point echoed by our respondents, who stressed the importance of clear and fair agreements.

Lastly, participants in our study advocated for long-term partnerships as a way to foster more substantial, more trusting relationships with brands and prefer marketers’ conservative control (Borchers, 2023) strategies. Consistent with previous literature advocating for brand managers to cultivate long-term relationships with influencers (McMullan et al., 2022), our findings suggest that long-term collaborations often cultivate mutual understanding and flexibility between influencers and brands, facilitating smoother collaboration. The influencers we interviewed believed this approach improved their content’s quality and allowed for a more natural integration of brand messaging. McMullan et al. (2022) also stressed the importance of building long-term relationships to manage timeframe tension and overall performance, aligning closely with our findings.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The main contribution of our paper lies in its exploration of influencers’ perspectives on their ideal and desired relationships with marketers, filling a significant gap in the existing literature. By examining the nuanced dynamics between influencers and brands, the study

provides valuable insights into the factors that influence collaboration success, including creative freedom, transparency, and mutual respect. Additionally, it highlights the importance of contractual agreements and the impact of communication on the longevity of partnerships. This research enhances understanding of influencer marketing practices and offers practical implications for marketers aiming to foster more effective and authentic collaborations with content creators. Ultimately, the findings contribute to the broader discourse on digital marketing by emphasizing the need for a more relational approach that prioritizes the influencer's voice and agency in the collaborative process.

Our study has theoretical implications for the agency theory (Bergen et al., 1992) in the context of influencer marketing as it reaffirms previous findings (Haenlein et al., 2020; McMullan et al., 2022) on the pivotal role of transparency and authenticity within influencer marketing, which comes across when brands trust influencers and give them freedom to create content that resonates with their audience on the chosen platform. Influencers and brands recognize the critical role of genuine, transparent partnerships in establishing trust and credibility with their audience. Moreover, we delved into the nuances of crafting influencer briefs, revealing the delicate balancing act required to preserve influencers' creative autonomy while effectively communicating brand messaging. We found that detailed brand information in such briefs is indispensable, providing influencers with the necessary context to align their content with brand objectives. At the same time, our research emphasized the importance of allowing influencers the freedom to incorporate personal content details, ensuring that their unique voice remains intact.

Our study also highlights the role of social media influencers as intermediaries in content distribution. They do more than promote brands; they act as a bridge between companies and audiences, shaping marketing messages authentically and engagingly. This requires them to balance brand expectations with the needs of their followers, influencing how consumers perceive and interact with brands. Our findings show that the level of creative freedom influencers receive affects their ability to serve as effective intermediaries. When given more autonomy, they create genuine content and build trust with their audience, while too much brand control can reduce authenticity. This perspective adds to agency theory by showing that influencers must meet brands' and followers' demands, making them key players in today's digital marketing landscape.

5.2. Practical Implications

Our research has practical implications for marketers and brands. It highlights the diverse strategies employed by influencers, marketers, and brands in navigating collaborations. By acknowledging and addressing these intricacies, marketers, and influencers can cultivate more fruitful partnerships in the dynamic landscape of digital marketing. Based on our findings, we recommend that marketers develop long-term partnerships with influencers and apply simple and bureaucratic control strategies such as approvals, detailed briefs, and agreements while considering influencers' perspectives of authentic communication.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined how influencers navigate the balance between creative freedom and marketer control strategies in their collaborations. Our findings reveal that while influencers highly value autonomy in content creation, they also recognize the necessity of align-

ing with brand objectives to maintain successful partnerships. This balance is shaped by long-term collaborations, transparency, and ethical alignment, which contribute to mutual trust and flexibility between influencers and brands. Ultimately, influencer-brand relationships are defined by a continuous negotiation between creative independence and strategic brand messaging, highlighting the complexities of these collaborations.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research Perspectives

We are aware of the limitations of our study, which was conducted on a small sample, mainly including micro-influencers. Therefore, future research should continue to explore the relationship between influencers, marketers, and brands by using a larger and more diverse sample and applying a mixed-methodological approach.

The interview grid did not address the outcomes of an influencer campaign, which limits the ability to assess the effectiveness of campaign control, key performance indicators, and the influencers' contributions. Future research on the collaboration between influencers and marketers should also examine the marketers' perspectives to highlight common and divergent approaches toward influencer marketing. Comparative studies encompassing different countries are needed to reflect on cultural specificities in the marketer-influencer relationship.

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Book review

Florența TOADER*

Book review *Ne-pacea informațională. Cine pierde și cine câștigă în era hiperconectivității?* [Informational unrest. Who loses and who gains in the era of hyperconnectivity], by Alina Bârgăoanu, Editura Tritonic, 2024, 352 pages

The book *Ne-pacea informațională. Cine pierde și cine câștigă în era hiperconectivității?*, written by Alina Bârgăoanu, provides a critical reflection on the forces that shape today's digital landscape, and their influence over political stability, public health, or political and geopolitical relations. Alina Bârgăoanu is an expert in media studies and digital disinformation, who serves as Dean of the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations at The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, and is a member of the advisory board of the European Digital Media Observatory.

Through 70 editorials published in the Romanian quality newspaper, *Gândul*, between 2019 and 2023, Bârgăoanu explores interconnected themes like the lessons of the pandemic, the "war of interpretation", and "Pax Technica". Based on the main arguments raised by the author, the central thesis is that „information peace” is not merely described by the absence of war but is created by a truth-oriented information environment. Thus, this is a book that not only pledges for media and digital literacy, but also provides keys to understanding current events and how they unfold in today's media landscape. The author does so in an accessible language, though not straining away from academic rigor and nuancing, that can be accessible both to a specialized public, and a non-academic one.

The book addresses several recent history contexts and events such as the Covid-19 Pandemic (as underlined by chapters like: "The Coronavirus Infodemic", "How the World Will Change After the Coronavirus Pandemic", or "Disinformation Severely Damages Health"), the 2020 U.S. presidential election (in chapters like: "The 2020 Presidential Elections: This Time Is Different?", "The Real Winners of the 2020 Elections"), France's institutional measures on disinformation (in chapters like: "France Takes Institutional Measures to Combat Disinformation"), or former U.S. president, Donald Trump's, social media conflicts ("Trump vs Twitter?"). Such an approach suggests that the book is not just one that tackles misinformation, the power of social media platforms, or regulatory responses to the raise of Big Tech, but anchors such discussions in current events and provides ways of understanding them.

There are several themes that emerge reading through the chapters of the book: digital information warfare, as the book discusses "viral wars", "propaganda 2.0" and the role algo-

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rhythms play in spreading misinformation; how misinformation erodes public trust and creates division in society; the role Big Tech companies play in spreading misinformation and enabling manipulation; the impact of the digital information landscape on political power and the democratic process; the role of digital platforms in creating and amplifying echo-chambers; the raise of artificial intelligence, ethical implications, and the need for regulation of such technologies; the impact of the digital environment over cultural, social, and political identities; or the impact of the digital landscape on democracy and national security.

The book is written in a playful tone full of political, philosophical, historical, and cultural references. Chapters such as “Huawei – A Kind of Nord Stream 2 for 5G Technology”, draw a parallel between the global technological infrastructure and the energy pipelines, thus suggesting how technology plays a central role in today’s world, impacting geopolitical relations. Chapters like “The Seasons of Our Discontent” or “Revolt Against Reason” make literary and philosophical references, describing the way today’s digital information infrastructure rewrite the way individuals, media, and political actors interact. The chapter “Sleep peacefully, the algorithm rages for you!” references a popular Romanian slogan from the 90’s, “Sleep tight, FNI watches over you!”, related to a local investing fund that went bankrupt unexpectedly, leaving many Romanians who invested their money to lose all their savings. It is also an allusion to how today’s digital media landscape is governed by algorithms that work behind the scenes to shape perceptions, influence choices, and amplify conflicts. The same theory is discussed as well by Poerksen (2022), who acknowledged that the way information circulates in the digital realm leads to a permanent state of excitement and conflict.

Bârgăoanu’s book offers a multidisciplinary examination of current world events by making use of popular and widely discussed theories in the academic literature such as fake news, echo-chambers, media literacy, misinformation, or tech regulation. The book contributes to the wider debate in the academic literature on topics such as: media studies theories (see Fuchs, 2014; Couldry & Hepp, 2016), geopolitics and global communications (Farell & Newman, 2019), echo-chambers (Pariser, 2011), the characteristics of the digital media infrastructure (Poerksen, 2022). The fact that it is written in Romanian and that the author balances real-world case studies, academic concepts, and an accessible language make the book valuable for communication and media students and scholars, political actors and regulators, political advisers, and the general public as well. The analytical and nuanced tone of voice of the book, the strong editorial voice of the author, the engaging and conversational language, the critical and thought-provoking approach, and the playful reference packed titles of the chapters make this book intellectually engaging and relevant to today’s world events.

While the language the book is written in, makes it inaccessible to a wider audience, the Romanian public needs such editorial titles that provide a roadmap to understanding local and international events and the role played by the digital media and the algorithms in guiding their perceptions and actions. Given the approach, with standalone pieces, the book might not have the continuity of a traditional monograph. However, each piece brings a mixture of critical analysis, external references, and academic concepts, that provide useful analysis schemata for current world events. Lastly, the contribution in this book offers a good starting point for long term reflections and implications as it takes inventory and analyzes recent events and the hidden forces that govern them.

Overall, the book’s message and main concept – the idea of informational peace – is a relevant and timely one, that surpasses episodic events and ties the pieces together into a reflection over the need for tech regulation, information accuracy and an ethical approach to the

spread of information on digital platforms. This approach subscribes to a larger ongoing debate in the specialized literature. As such, this book is likely to benefit readers interested in understanding the intricate impact of digital media on society, politics and interpersonal relations, the concept of media literacy, the idea of information integrity, and the ethical governance of technology.

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