

# **Brand Communication and Digital Influencers: Fad or Bab!**

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*Today the media share the power to define agenda-setting with other spreaders and mediators of information that is available to “public audiences”. Among these new mediators, the so-called digital influencers (DI) have achieved great popularity. In the last decade, this popularity, in the context of social networks, has made them relevant and an attractive option for brands’ communication. As a result, identifying and selecting these DI – which, is assumed, to have a strong impact on their followers - constitutes one of the main challenges for companies and, above all, for communication managers. In this paper, we seek to understand the importance of DI for the brand, to describe the nature of the partnership and to know how the relationship between communication managers and DI unravels.*

*According to the results achieved in this exploratory survey, based in a mainly qualitative methodology, digital gatekeepers seem to be changing the work of those in charge of communication and branding, placing them as an important touch point for brand messages, alongside other traditional mediators.*

*Keywords: gatekeepers, digital influencers (DI), brand communication*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, Gatekeeping Theory (GT) argues that the media exerts real control over what information reaches society and how social reality is perceived by the public. If GT initially served to frame the role of mass media in the public space, it is now used to explain the action of new, often unidentified, communicative “elites” who have not necessarily come to guarantee more egalitarian information flows (Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2017; Amaral et al., 2016). However, GT does not seem to be the most adequate to explain the selection and circulation of information in the digital sphere, where anyone can create and publish content (Wallace, 2017).

The proliferation of social media, blogs, non-journalistic information platforms, virtual communities, prosumers, citizen journalism, collaborative journalism, and algorithms have dictated changes in the process of information dissemination by traditional media. Any one of these “individuals” has the power

not only to disseminate information, but to shape, interpret and reinterpret content and redistribute it across multiple platforms (Olsen & Sandholmen, 2019; Wallace, 2017). This new dynamic of content circulation, in the digital context, has not taken long to be recognized as enhancing the communicative action of organizations and their brands. The expressions “influence marketing”, “influencer marketing”, “digital influencers” highlight that these new communicative profiles are important within marketing and communication strategies.

In this sense, this paper proposes to gauge the importance of DIs to brands, characterize the type of partnerships agreed upon, and explore the nature of the relationship between DIs and brands. The methodology used seeks to bring in the voices of those who have the responsibility of deciding who the relevant IDs are for their organizations. Through structured interviews with brand communication managers, communication agencies and companies, we seek to understand the real positioning of these new opinion leaders within the communication strategies of organizations and communication agencies.

## **THE NEW DIGITAL GATEKEEPERS**

The concept of “influencer” originated in the context of unidirectional mass communication many decades ago, however, this does not take away its importance, on the contrary, it remains relevant in the context of dialogic communication models that social networks theoretically enhance. Among these, DIs, as gatekeepers, take a prominent position to disseminate content circulating on the web, acting both as co-authors and as message intermediaries (Navarro et al., 2020). A DI is described as a person who builds and maintains relationships with multiple followers on digital platforms and who has the ability to inform, entertain, and potentially influence the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers (Navarro et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). They are opinion leaders who, through visual exposure and narration of their lifestyle, experiences, and trivia - also using technologies, such as video, blogs, websites, and social media - engage with their followers, both virtually and face-to-face, through publications and participation in events, in order to persuade their followers (Olsen & Sandholmen, 2019; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Abidin, 2016). In this way, they serve the organizational goals of enhancing relationships with key stakeholders, improving business reputation, especially online (Vodák et al., 2019), but also promoting customer awareness of their digital activities and soliciting customer comments and feedback (Gillin, 2008).

These influencers can be artists, fashion experts, fitness instructors, famous people, friends of famous people, and even students (Lima, 2018; Abidin, 2016). According to Campbell and Farrell (2020) and Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019), they are people, or groups of “celebrities”, who have a large reach for disseminating information, either by the number of followers or by the actual influence on those who “consume” their content. These online opinion leaders expend “aspirational efforts” (Duffy, 2017) on behalf of brands. They do so in exchange for a certain commitment, namely remuneration or in-kind compensation such as free products, services, travel or experiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Crain, 2018; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Braga et al. (2017) describe them as “opinion-leading celebrities” and Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) as “bloggers” who have the ability to positively, or negatively, persuade the image of different potentially powerful brands (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Carvalho, 2018).

This diversity has stimulated the emergence of DI typologies taking into account, for example, the number of followers and the origin of their notoriety. Thus, we may be facing “celebrities” (famous on and off social networks); “macro-influencers” (famous on social networks, but not always off them); “influencers” (individuals with an important community on social networks) and “micro-influencers” (individuals who have some popularity on social networks and maintain a close relationship with their followers and is also an expert or has credibility on a certain subject), (Lima, 2018; Abidin, 2014; Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

According to Nahon & Hemsley (2013) cited in Navarro et al. (2020), the power of these gatekeepers lies in their ability to unite networks and power the amplification of information far and fast, engaging people for the ideas they promote. For communication and marketing professionals, the great challenge is to collaborate with these gatekeepers who can share, forward, extract, copy, or comment on content, but can also make explicit recommendations about organizations, brands, products, services, and ideas,

(Navarro et al., 2020), being aligned with the voice, identity, and culture of the organizations (Navarro et al., 2020; Gringarten, 2020; Jacobson, 2020).

The hyperconnectivity and comprehensiveness provided by the Internet have become great allies of brand communication. These characteristics enhance reach, the monitoring of that reach, social interaction, but also the ability to feed spontaneity, diversity, solidarity, and discussion among users united by ties of affinity, preferences, ideas, values, and suggestions for offers (Castells, 2017a; Kotler et al., 2011; Berger, 2016).

Influencer marketing is thus a kind of virtual word-of-mouth (Woods, 2016), in which consumers are more likely to react to informative and entertaining messages, transmitted by a social media influencer, than to a publication coming from the brand (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In view of this order of ideas, it is elementary to take into account the authenticity of the DI's personal brand, its image and reputation (Vodák et al., 2019; Gringarten, 2020; Jacobson, 2020).

## **THE “CO” PARADIGM: CO-CREATION, COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION**

With these new mediators, both organizations and communication targets take advantage of the creation of long-term relationships, goal achievement (van Ruler, 2018; Key & Czaplewski, 2017; Plowman & Wilson, 2018; Duralia, 2018), positioning reinforcement and identity consistency (Nguyen, 2019), translating into more value (Rèklaitis & Pilelienè, 2019). There is often a reversal of the value creation process, and even a shift in the power relationship, due to the ability people now have to influence each other (Castells, 2017b), transforming the B2B (Business to Business) and B2C (Business to Consumer) paradigm into C2C (Consumer to Consumer), as described by Peltier et al. (2020). It is a new power dynamic that, apparently, has given autonomy to the communicating subjects, to the extent that “users have become both senders and receivers of messages” (Castells, 2017 b, p. 22).

According to Costa-Sánchez & Túñez-Lopez (2018), these new dynamics have brought new times, new actors, new needs, and new terminologies, stimulating and extending connections between audiences, communities and brands. In this more interconnected world, the activation and differentiation of brands claim for attention (Sobreira & Arriscado, 2018, Arriscado & Sobreira, 2015). The importance of humanization and authenticity in this activation is increasingly emphasized and it is suggested, for example, the creation of personas as a form of personification of brand values (Kotler et al., 2011, 2017) and the affirmation of a management and leadership by values (Barrett, 2011), guided by social responsibility and sustainability. In this way, the desire to achieve the “friend status” is fulfilled, to be present in the lives of consumers and to “embody” the brands with more human attributes (Kotler et al., 2017; Aaker, J., 1997; Sung et al., 2015)

These new “social actors” have been called adprosumers by Costa-Sánchez & Túñez-Lopez (2018) - Ad(advertisement); Pro(producer) and Sumer(consumer) - in that they are simultaneously buyers, consumers and advertisers, making (passive) consumers a user generated content and an active participant in the definition and development of products and services, cooperating and collaborating at any stage of business development (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Grizane & Jurgelane, 2017).

In the traditional value creation process, companies and consumers play differentiated roles, while in the new “co” paradigm (co-creation, cooperation, collaboration and communication), consumers have the ability to choose according to their own visions of what they consider of value, stimulating quality, creativity and innovation in companies (Chen et al., 2018; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Stoldt et al., 2019; Sheehan & Morrison, 2009),

We are facing the reinvention of the communicative process through the engagement of people (Jiménez-Zarco et al, 2017; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014), bringing functional, emotional and symbolic benefits (Aaker, 2002) for all involved, due to a greater connectivity provided by the digital economy (Kotler et al, 2017). And as Kotler & Sarkar (2018) refocus the discussion, we are now within a new marketing mix paradigm that relies on the 4C's (co-creation, currency, communal activation, and conversation) and responds to co-creation and communal activation and conversation about brands.

It should be noted that this “emotional connection” is especially valued by the Y and millennial generations that are more interested and committed to this process of value creation, management by values and brand activism (Barrett, 2011; Kotler et al., 2011; Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Knight, 2010; Romani et al., 2015; Sivitanides & Shah; 2011; White, 2018; Martínez-Sala et al., 2018), finding in social networks a means to contribute to this co-creation process. All this in the expectation of being entertained, establishing friendships, spending time in conversations, exchanging images and nurturing bonds of belonging. It's these virtual community dynamics that brand managers seek to explore and enhance, because the time when consumers accepted - peacefully and serenely - what brands said and offered is long gone.

## **DIGITAL INFLUENCERS: BETWEEN ATTRACTION OR DISTRUST**

The literature highlights the institutionalization of this type of influence and its protagonists, as well as the focus on cooperation, collaboration and co-creation of content, in the context of branding (Kotler & Sakar, 2018; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Grizane & Jurgelane, 2017; Olsen & Sandholmen, 2019). However, according to Gillin (2008), the position of communication and marketing professionals facing this new world and these new players oscillates between enthusiasm, distrust and fascination. On the one hand, they fear losing control over their messages, on the other, they are excited by the prospect of using them to speak directly to their consumers, without the involvement of traditional media.

Research in this area demonstrates the effort of brands to identify indicators that help determine the importance of DIs. In this sense, Gillin (2008) proposes three main criteria for selection: (a) quality of content on the platforms, (b) relevance of content to the company or brand, and (c) search engine rankings. The author also adds that the main criteria for evaluating influence are the level of participation, the frequency of activity, and the prominence in the influencer's market or community. Also, Navarro et al. (2020) identified as main criteria for identification: the relevance of the topics/issues covered, the qualitative scope of content shared and forwarded by others, as well as the personal reputation of the DI.

Studies also confirm the idea that communication professionals have shifted their focus from quantitative criteria, such as community size, to more qualitative aspects, such as compatibility with brand values, creativity in posts, and engagement rate (Gringarten, 2020; Jacobson; 2020 Navarro et al., 2020; Gillin, 2008). Campbell & Farrell (2020) warn that DI campaigns involve multiple people in content creation and an excessive focus on metrics, which - citing Daniels (2018) - has led to DIs paying follower bots or *engagement* bots to inflate their success metrics.

In this dilemma, between fascination and distrust, communication and marketing managers must be clear in their strategies and make the brand's identity matrix thrive so as not to run the risk of diluting its meaning, damaging its reputation or even diverging from organizational goals, if they foster close and negative associations with individuals prone to personal indiscretions or scandals.

## **THE RESEARCH: PURPOSE, CONTEXT, METHODOLOGICAL OPTIONS AND PROCEDURES**

After the literature review, it is recalled that the purpose of this exploratory research is to contribute to a greater knowledge of the relationship between brands and the new gatekeepers, seeking to understand the role of DIs in communication strategies and the processes of identification and selection of them by communication professionals. To answer the problem discussed and meet the objectives previously defined, we chose a methodological approach of qualitative nature, collecting information through structured interviews, whose script development was based on bibliography in the field of social media and GT, including that associated with traditional media, but also in the concerns of researchers who work academically and professionally in these areas.

According to Resende (2016), the starting point of any qualitative research is the formulation of the problem or research question and, consequently, the way to answer this problem that we call objectives, previously identified. Following this, four questions guided this exploratory work: (1) What is the importance for the organization/brand of the relationship with the DIs? (2) What is the nature of the

partnership (paid or unpaid) between the brands and the DIs? (3) How do the DIs behave/act towards the information from the organizations/brands; (4) What indicators are used in their identification and selection?

The implementation of this research took into account the constraints caused by COVID-19, the potential of new communication platforms and the teachings of the Lean and Agile methodologies (Busche, 2014; Ries, 2012), so we focused on maximizing participants in the best possible time, responding to their expectations and in a flexible manner. In parallel, and because we assumed the exploratory nature of this work, we based the investigative process on the MVP – “Minimum Viable Product” logic, according to which we sought to reach the data with the shortest development time (Ries, 2011, p.58).

The interviews were conducted using Qualtrics, a research and feedback tool that allows for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data through which interesting, diverse and pragmatic views and practices were gathered, so the intensity of responses was preferred to quantification or statistical analysis (Demo, 2001).

The fieldwork took place between February 1 and 22, 2021, having requested, via email and after personalized telephone contact, the participation of communication and marketing professionals who, among their functions, worked with DIs.

For greater richness and versatility in the testimonies and, consequently, in the results, the questions began with a quantitative approach based on a 6-point Likert scale, which allowed a better distinction between the negative/unfavorable quadrant (between 1 and 3) and the positive/favorable quadrant (between 4 and 6). From here on, and always with the main objective of problematizing and understanding the phenomenon, open questions were formulated to obtain qualitative answers, on which the substance of this work was based.

The results of the interviews were systematized in tables, with predominance for content analysis, consisting of categories, context units and registration units (Bardin, 2011; Demo, 2001), and with the objective of codifying, that is, highlighting and categorizing the information arising from the direct speech of the interviewees.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS**

After the theoretical basis and after the presentation of the methodology, it is time to present and discuss the results achieved in this exploratory phase of a study that aims to problematize the relationship between organizations and the new gatekeepers, from the perspective of communication, marketing, and brand managers.

As for the characterization of the sample, by convenience, it should be noted that of the 16 participants, 12 belong to companies and 4 to agencies. In terms of training, 75% of the sample has qualifications in the area of communication and digital marketing and 93.75% revealed having experience as a digital influencer.

Throughout this analysis, the respondents' opinion is explored in four categories - (1) importance of DIs for organizations; (2) indicators of identification of influencers; (3) characterization of the type of partnership; and (4) DI attitude towards brand information - and the data obtained is contrasted with the theory, for an interconnected discussion of the literature review and the results achieved.

### **Importance of Digital Influencers for Organizations**

In the first table of discourse analysis, we explore the relevance of these new gatekeepers for organizations and brands, separating the answers between companies and communication agencies, since there is a differentiation that deserved to be highlighted due to the analysis of the direct discourse and consequently the isolation of the registration units.

**TABLE 1**  
**IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCERS FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

Organization Type	Context Units		Registration Units
	Companies	“(...) allows us to reach a certain audience very effectively and at a relatively low cost.”	
“Alternative and innovative way to get information to the target audience.”		Innovation in communication	
“It is fundamental, but it must be done with account, weight and measure ”.		Requires strategy	
“(...) reach a certain public and in this way advertise our products and services in a closer/more humanized/creative way.”		Proximity, humanization, and creativity	
“(...) they do an excellent job with results for the Brand, but this concept has become a little banalized.”		Results for the brand, but also trivialization	
“(...) parallel to conventional ways of impacting micro audiences”.		Alternative, micro-audiences	
“(...) an excellent option for the promotion of products and/or services due to its wide network and ability to influence the opinion of those who follow it.”		Scope, ability to influence	
“(...) a new vehicle of communication for the brand abroad that allows us to reach a larger target, which many times we could not reach through the media or our channels (...).”		New Expanded Audience Amplified brand voice	
“(they have) an important role in how a certain audience views an Organization or Brand (...) they have the ability to influence the decision making and the way their followers perceive a certain Brand, Product, Service, Organization, etc., for better or worse. (...)in principle, you are giving an honest opinion about what you are talking about, although in some cases we know that (...) you are paid to say something previously agreed upon. (...) Extreme importance (...) because the digital channels used today allow you to impact a large number of people and tend to be free of charge (...).The use of influencers is trivialized. I believe in a robust strategy of micro-influencers (...).”		Ability to influence the decision and positive or negative perception towards the brand. They represent a mix between sincerity and commercial agreement, but with great reach. Banalization requires strategy by micro-influencers	
“Brand content shared more organically and close to different target audiences.”		Organic reach Proximity	
Agencies	“the use of these ambassadors has been exaggerated”		Hyperbolization
	“greater engagement”		Engagement
	“ (...) they have a communication directed to a very specific target. (...) It is a communication tool in addition to advertising and media relations.”		Specific targets
	“It depends on whether they are B2B or B2C brands... For B2B, only if it is the technological area will there be much influence (...). For B2C (...) they are important for brand visibility.”		Advantage in B2C Visibility

From the testimonials collected and selected in the previous table, the importance of DIs is unanimous, both for communication agency professionals and for companies. The reasons given are diverse and range from the reach of the messages to the type of relationship projected with the public. And, although there

are interviewees who referred to the “trivialization” and hyperbolization in their use, most participants sustain the important role of these actors in the “visibility” given to brands/products and the expansion of their message, which is in line with the literature that explores their role both as co-authors and intermediaries of messages (Wallace, 2017; Navarro et al., 2020).

Other respondents also emphasized, on the positive side, the capacity of “engagement”, the “proximity” and “humanization” of the relationship with the targets, whether with a “micro-audience” or to increase the amplitude and impact.

“Influencing decision making and the way your followers perceive a certain brand” was the opinion of one of the interviewees, corroborated by others, but which is also advocated by several authors (Navarro et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Lima, 2018).

From a quantitative point of view, and on a Likert scale of 1 to 6, where 1 is “not at all important” and 6 “very important”, 88% placed the role of DIs in the positive quadrant (4: 6%; 5: 56%; 6: 26%) and only 13% of respondents rated them as “(3) somewhat important”.

Thus, research question (1) about the *importance to the organization/brand of the relationship with DIs* is considered answered, since both interviewees and the literature recognize their ability to build and maintain relationships, influence followers’ thoughts, attitudes and behaviors.

Also in this dimension and based on the proposals of several authors (Gringarten, 2020; Jacobson; 2020; Navarro et al., 2020; Gillin, 2008; Campbell & Farrell, 2020), we sought to identify - quantitatively - the selection criteria for the DIs (Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**INFLUENCERS IDENTIFICATION INDICATORS**

<b>Influencers Identification Indicators</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Relevance of the topics/problems addressed	5,56	0,70
Network ranking	5,38	0,78
Productivity	4,44	0,93
Quantitative reach	5,19	0,95
Qualitative reach	5,31	0,85
Personal reputation	5,63	0,70
Reputation of the affiliate organization	5,06	1,14

As shown in Table 2, in the DI selection process, professionals refer, although with a slight predominance, that the “Personal reputation” of the DI and “Relevance of the topics covered” on their digital platforms are the determining criteria to identify these public space mediators. From this we see that the indicators of personal nature and content overlap with those of quantitative nature, such as “number of followers” and “quantity of publications”. The “Productivity” of the DIs was the least scored indicator, followed by the “Reputation of the affiliated organization”, while the “Qualitative reach” intermediated the table.

Given the proximity of values, we wanted to ascertain through the IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, v. 25 (IBM Corp., Armonk, N. Y., USA) software whether the above averages differ significantly from each other regarding the importance given to the different indicators of ID selection. In this regard, the parametric ANOVA mixed repeated measures test was performed and found to have significantly different evaluations [ $F(6,90) = 3.591; p = 0.003; \eta^2 = 0.193$ ] between Productivity ( $M = 4.44; SD = 0.241$ ) and Relevance of topics covered ( $M = 5.56; SD = 0.182; p = 0.029$ ), as well as Network Ranking ( $M = 5.38; SD = 0.202; p = 0.040$ ), Quantitative Reach ( $M = 5.19; SD = 0.245; p = 0.011$ ) and Qualitative Reach ( $M = 5.31; SD = 0.218; p = 0.049$ ), but also regarding Personal Reputation ( $M = 5.63; SD = 0.295; p = 0.005$ ).

Supporting the importance of the “relevance of topics covered” criterion is Campbell & Farrell's (2020) statement that consumers prefer less intrusive online content and respond more favorably to the stylish, more subtle, less promotional content they typically find in brand advertisements.

In planning this work, there was indeed the desire to understand *what indicators are used in the identification and selection of the DIs*, so we considered that the quantitative data explored above shed some light on the fourth research question, helping to understand how these gatekeepers are chosen by the brands.

### Nature of the Partnership Between the Brand and the DI

Based on Campbell & Farrell (2020), who say that there are companies that compensate influencers with money or through in-kind compensation, such as products, services, free trips or experiences, we sought to know the respondents' opinion on this matter, supported by both quantitative and qualitative data.

**TABLE 3  
COMPENSATION TYPE**

<b>Compensation Type</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Paid	6 (37%)
Unpaid	3 (19%)
Both	7 (44%)

As for the type of partnership between brands and DI, table 3 shows that 37% of respondents categorically state that there is a monetary compensation, against 19% who say there is no type of remuneration. However, it is also noteworthy the fact that 44% of the sample points to a mixed practice, which contributes to increase the weight of remuneration in this partnership.

The quantitative data in this dimension aroused curiosity for the qualitative answers, in the assumption that they would help understand the type of relationship existing and what is supporting the said financially driven compensations. In this case, the information was arranged in table (4) according to the nature of the partnership between the brand and the DI, and since there are no notable differences of opinion between professionals from companies and agencies, we chose not to make this distinction.

To complement the quantitative analysis, Table 4 shows that financial compensation dominates the partnerships and that this depends on the importance or type of DI, the specificity of the action and the guarantee of publication. On the other hand, there are also several cases in which the partnership is based on compensation in kind, through the transfer or exchange of products, namely in the automotive sector, as well as in charm operations. There are also situations where the relationship is dependent on sharing content or participation in events.

Also noteworthy is the fact that one of the respondents differentiates between “ambassadors” and “influencers”, the former being mainly public figures from the artistic world, while the latter were born and raised on social networks.



**TABLE 4**  
**NATURE OF THE PARTNERSHIP (PAID OR UNPAID) BETWEEN THE BRAND AND THE DI**

Compensation Type	Units of context		Units of registration
	Financial	<p>“Depends on the importance of the influencer”</p> <p>“Can be remunerated and action-specific.”</p> <p>“Immediate financial compensation in the case of influencers (who were born in the digital world and have no other relevant profession, namely artist).”</p> <p>“Can be remunerated and action-specific.”</p> <p>“(…)when we want to guarantee publication, we develop a strategy of influencers with financial compensations.”</p> <p>“Depending on what we want, (…)if you want a certain influencer to share certain content on one of their social networks, a video for example, maybe we can make a paid partnership with them.”</p> <p>“The commercial side of digital influencers is very strong unlike journalists who advocate and seek their content.”</p>	<p>Dependent on the importance or typology of the ID and the specificity of the action and as a way to ensure publication</p>
	In kind	<p>“Loaning of vehicles.”</p> <p>“product cession”</p> <p>“One-time use of cars”</p> <p>“Partnerships based exclusively on the exchange/temporary loan of vehicles.”</p> <p>“Product exchange, product or service loan”</p> <p>“Product cession (car) in the case of ambassadors”</p> <p>“when we want to develop a charm action, where we just want to send the product to the influencer, there is no financial counterpart.”</p> <p>“May be unpaid and assigned only one vehicle and/or event experience.”</p>	<p>Transfer or exchange of products, vehicles, as well as charm operations</p>
	Other type	<p>“Creation of a strategic communication plan suitable to the digital influencer according to the interest and target audience of the institution, through a partnership that includes sharing information and content about the institution”.</p> <p>“On the other hand, we can organize an event to communicate a certain thing, where we invite influencers and in these cases, some of them end up sharing content on their social networks organically.”</p> <p>“(…) depending on the projects we have and whenever it makes sense.”</p> <p>“…since the forms of collaboration can be very varied, the various partnership alternatives are discussed with the influencer to choose the most suitable one(s) (…)” (agency-related approach).”</p>	<p>Content sharing</p> <p>Participation in events or the brands’ projects</p>

According to Navarro et al. (2020), in this new digital reality, the biggest challenge for brands is precisely to identify the IDs that are aligned with the voice, identity and culture of the organizations they

represent. Indeed, these opinion leaders, in exchange for a certain value or commitment to brands, have the power to convince different consumers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Crain, 2018; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), so they argue (especially the most successful IDs) that they create value for brands (Stoldt et al., 2019), in a kind of reinvention of advertising techniques (Sheehan & Morrison, 2009), but also of public relations and corporate communication, bringing together characteristics of all of them. In this movement of the “contribution economy” (Proulx, 2014) or “confluence culture” (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), it is thus up to brand managers to study, design and ponder their strategies.

Abidin (2014), in an analysis of different blogger statuses versus “price of privacy” and commercial gains, adds that DIs document their experiences “in exchange for compensation”, which depends on the status of the “celebrity”. Thus, those at the top of their career have a higher volume of traffic and have already developed an “alter ego” along with the real identity, so they have greater bargaining power, and in these cases, privacy even has “intrinsic value,” and the retention of private information is potentially synonymous with credibility.

When question (2) was asked at the beginning of this study about *the type of partnership (paid or unpaid) that exists between brands and DIs*, we did not expect such enlightening testimonies about the transactional and commercial nature of this relationship. In fact, the field results show that there are many DIs who, for their “aspirational effort” on behalf of the brands, have the opportunity to be better rewarded by them (Duffy, 2017).

### **Influencers’ Attitudes Towards Brand Information**

Also in this case, the information was structured by categories, this time based on the attitude of the DI - proactive, passive, and reactive (adapted from Schmitz, 2011) - to the messages provided by the brands, both in quantitative and qualitative data (Tables 5 and 6).

**TABLE 5  
ATTITUDE TYPES OF DIs TOWARDS BRAND INFORMATION**

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Proactive	3,81	0,95
Passive	3,63	1,41
Reactive	4,25	1,30

The quantitative information (Table 5) tells us that “reactivity” represents the most usual attitude of the DIs towards brand information, with an average rating of 4.25 (on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 represents the “least usual” and 6 the “most usual”), as opposed to proactivity (M = 3.81) and passivity (M = 3.63). The qualitative analysis (Table 6) allows us to “scrutinize” this dimension.

The results show that there is a dependence of the brands’ communications, initiative and guidelines on the profile and expectations of the DI, revealing greater proactivity when they are “smaller” in reach or if they are in the “conquest phase” of the brand. As Campbell and Farrell (2020) state, “nano influencers” tend to be more proactive in seeking out potential partnerships.

Given that the partnerships are mostly remunerated, one would expect greater proactivity. The perspective that DIs are mainly “transmitters” of content provided by the organization seems to overlap with the logic of co-creators, according to which the various stakeholders are involved in the process of creating value for brands (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Grizane & Jurgelane, 2017).

**TABLE 6**  
**INFLUENCERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS BRAND INFORMATION**

Attitude Type	Context Units		Registration Units
	Proactive	“As a general rule, (...) they tend to always exceed the briefing in order to achieve a better performance in their results and thus create a long-term relationship”. “Those with less reach are more proactive”. “In general, they try to learn more in order to fit the (brand) content elegantly into their (own) content.”	They exceed the briefing or bring elegance to the brands’ contents
	Passive	“(...) they transmit information according to the contents provided by the institution.” “Most of the time it has to be the company that gives the guidelines and proposals for action.” “We have to determine conditions of the partnership and often be the driving force.” “(...) I have some difficulty in evaluating, but I think it is mostly a passive attitude.”	Dependent on brand communications, initiative and guidelines
	Reactive or mixed attitudes	“Different profiles present different behaviors”. “Depends on the influencer.” “I think they (...) seek a balance in the way they comment (...) Some give their honest opinion (with nothing in return), others wait for a partnership to do so.” “It depends a lot on the information - more or less polemic.” “Most influencers with reach have a reactive or passive stance. They are not proactive.” “Usually (...) they have a more reactive type of interaction with us, although they are often proactive as well, especially in a first contact with the brand.”	Dependent on the profile type of the DI and their expectations, but also on the content of the information.

On the other hand, when they are dependent on the brands’ communications, initiative, and guidelines, they show a more passive behavior, allowing communication managers to use “a variety of techniques that aim to control, pre-structure and monitor what people (DIs) do with brands, so that these practices add value” (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 82 cited in Stoldt et al., 2019). These results seem to contradict the work of Stoldt et al. (2019) who cites the testimony of several DIs stating that they exceeded the number of publications contractually agreed upon with their respective brands.

Answering another question (3) of this research - *How do the DIs behave/act towards the information from organizations/brands?* - it can be stated that these DIs are still far from the characteristic behavior of traditional gatekeepers, known for their autonomy from brands, as well as from Duffy's (2017) statement that cultivating, satisfying, and engaging the public requires productivity and availability of the DI.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The initial purpose of this work was to know, clarify and assess the role and importance of the DIs within the brands’ communication strategies; to understand the identification and selection criteria of these influencers, the types of partnership, as well as to characterize their attitude and behavior towards the brands’ contents.

This exploratory research reveals that for the participants in the study, the DIs are important, that they are chosen for the quality of the content produced and for their reputation, but also that most partnerships are based on remuneration and that the DIs are not very proactive.

Although dissenting voices persist, referring to “exaggeration” and “trivialization”, the results help to answer the objectives of this work, insofar as they show the effective importance attributed by communication professionals to DIs. It seems clear that these new actors are established as gatekeepers of the “digital public space”.

In the choice of digital partners, the responses of these professionals are in line with published studies, since criteria of a qualitative nature are more important than those of a quantitative nature.

The nature of the partnerships between brands and DIs is also evident, which is defined by financial compensations or cession of products. Although this data is justified by the need to ensure the “transmission” of the “negotiated” contents, it raises relevant questions from the point of view of the conceptualization derived from the construct “influence marketing” and the ceding of control over the messages by the brands.

It will now be important to dig deeper into this research in order to understand whether we are talking about “professional influencers” or “influential consumers” who are *engaged*. This introduces new questions about the effective autonomy of paid or unpaid “consumer influencers”.

From a conceptual point of view, the theme of digital influence and digital gatekeepers is very assertive about the power that these interlocutors have over brands' communication contents, mirrored in the idea of “co-creation”, “co-authorship”, “co-production” and even the inversion of power, in the perspective that as gatekeepers they have an important role in the selection of information. In this case, the attitude of the DIs towards the brands' contents was described as being mostly passive, which contradicts the perspective of most authors. That is, brands seem to be “in charge”. This result deserves further study in order to understand “who submits to whom”, opening new paths for future research arising from this exploratory work.

The integration of these new actors in the brands' communication strategies seems evident. However, they seem to be perceived as more a “vehicle” for the transmission of messages defined by the brands than as real partners, with autonomy and power of decision about the content to disclose, create and share. They can work as gatekeepers insofar as they are important players in the communication process, but the doubt remains about their autonomy in the selection and filtering of contents they send to their followers, compared to traditional gatekeepers, such as journalists.

Despite the potential contribution that this analysis can give to a better understanding of how communication professionals relate to DIs, the analysis of the results should be cautious because it is an exploratory study. Among its limitations, the reduced number of participants stands out, as well as the online data collection. This fact does not allow a generalized reading of the possible attitudes and perceptions of brand professionals about DIs. But above all, this work allows us to get clues about the aspects that should be deepened in future research, with semi-structured interviews, more interactive and in-depth.

In conclusion, it can be said that, with digitalization, we are facing “a wonderful new world”, full of spell, but also suspicion, therefore, with much to explore and refine, both in terms of the proliferation of new gatekeepers and new tools at the service of organizations, but also the affirmation of authenticity, values and brand truth. In this new context, all players - traditional or modern mediators, as well as communication, marketing and brand managers - may have to rethink the relationships of interdependence, the quality of their work, the substance of their messages and the essence of their value propositions.

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