

The impact of influencers on the companies reputation in developing countries: Case of Morocco

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of social networks and their adoption by a large number of users, the importance of influencers continues to grow and companies are in a frantic race to recruit those most likely to promote their reputation and brand image. However, in the existing literature, there is little work that conducts quantitative studies on this subject in developing countries. For this reason, we conducted a study that attempts to understand the importance of influencers in reshaping public opinion of a company or brand. We chose as a subject of study a large Moroccan company operating in the telecommunications sector that hired a popular influencer among young Moroccans. We then adopted an approach based on scraping and analyzing the occurrences of the influencer's posts on Instagram and the content of the company's website and then publishing a questionnaire to 180 respondents in the age range of most of the followers of the influencer in question. The results suggest that a positive relationship exists between the influencer and brand reputation, meaning that if the person is following the influencer who has published content on the brand, that person is expected to be systematically aware of the brand, and vice versa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Personal Influence" is one of the most influential and frequently cited American research works on mass communication in the post-war period. It follows a study conducted by Lazarsfeld in 1944 on the media coverage influence on the presidential elections of 1940 [1]. While the concept of "influencer" originated in mass communication more than seven decades ago [2], influence marketing is a more recent concept. The latter is a new strategy increasingly adopted by companies [3], [4]. It could be defined as the use of influential opinion leaders (influencers), celebrities or not, with numerous followers on social platforms, to foster positive and behavioral responses among their subscribers (consumers) regarding the brand's interests by using shared publications on such platforms, and which also allows influencers and followers to participate in the co-creation of the brand's image on social networks [5], [6].

In their study that focuses on identifying the importance of social media influencers (SMIs) for communication professionals between Europe and Latin America [7], the authors suggest that there are important differences in the opinions expressed by communication professionals in Latin America and

Europe regarding the importance of SMIs for their organizations. 77.2% of public relations professionals in Latin America consider SMI important for their public relations activities, while in European countries only 58.4% of practitioners agree.

This notable difference prompted us to dig deeper to better understand the role of influencers in corporate branding in developing countries, especially since there are few quantitative studies on this topic in the existing literature. In addition, relatively little is known about the content and engagement strategy of influencers and its relationship to the engagement behavior of followers [8]. Therefore, we conducted a study where we tried to understand the importance of influencers in Morocco in shaping corporate awareness and brand image, and how these are perceived by social network users. We chose as a subject of study, a large company operating in the telecommunications sector in Morocco that has recruited a popular influencer among young users. We tried to answer the big question "What is the nature of the relationship between the influencer and brand awareness?. To achieve this, we first tried to answer the following 4 questions: Do the brand and the influencer share the same values?. What is the most appropriate social network for this collaboration? What are the reasons why clients follow the influencer?. Are influencers perceived as credible and trustworthy?.

Our approach is based first and foremost on the scrapping and analysis of the posts of the influencer in question and the content of the recruiting company's website, using techniques derived from natural language processing (NLP) field, in order to determine the values shared between the two. Then, we proceeded to publish a questionnaire among university students in the city of Agadir, which is home to numerous of followers of the latter, in order to collect as much information as possible that can help us in our study. We also set up an interview with the influencer to better understand the aspects of the collaboration with the recruiting company.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The massive adoption of social networks by users (especially professionals) is due to their ability to improve the efficiency of information sharing through collaborative filtering mechanisms for viral marketing recommendations and information dissemination techniques. Indeed, this information is disseminated from one node to another in a self-replicating manner, by sharing it with friends on the social network [9]-[12]. Friendly relationships between social users can result in significant variation in social networks, as users are influenced by their friends in decision-making [13]. Many research has focused on the interests of identifying who is influential in social networks [14], [15]. This often involves recruiting micro-influencers, users who have accumulated thousands or even millions of followers (i.e., other users who have subscribed to view that individual's publications). Given the abundance of micro-influencers to choose from, clues that help distinguish more or less effective social media influencers are of growing interest to marketers [16].

Choosing an appropriate influencer is a crucial challenge. Indeed, in [4], [17], the authors suggest that Instagram influencers with a high number of followers are considered more likeable, in part because they are considered more popular. However, if the influencer follows very few accounts themselves, this may have a negative impact on the likability of popular influencers. In addition, cooperating with influencers with a high number of followers may not be the best marketing choice to promote divergent products, as it decreases the perceived uniqueness of the brand and, therefore, attitudes towards this one.

Furthermore, in [18] and following the observation of the comparative effect of celebrities versus expert influencers on consumers' online purchase intentions for consumer electronics products, the authors suggest that there is a definite advantage in choosing an expert influencer over an attractive celebrity influencer while planning marketing communications. Unlike celebrities, influencers cultivate a sense of intimacy among their followers by sharing authentic and lived experiences in the areas in which they claim expertise [19]. The growth of mobile applications for image sharing, such as Instagram, has fuelled the rise of influencers [20]. These influencers have surpassed celebrities as social media favorites among millennials, the largest buying age group in the U.S. since 2019 [21]. Marketers are using social media influencers to build an interactive relationship with Gen Y consumers as this cohort continues to lose interest in traditional advertising. The informational value of influencer-generated content, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and subscriber similarity positively affect trust in influencers' brand publications, which in turn influences brand awareness and purchase intentions. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed in [3].

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Background to the study

To promote its E.L. event which is the first professional league of e-sport in Morocco and which has been gathering for 4 years the best national gamers, the company I has chosen the influential A.E.O. to serve

as ambassador on its own behalf. On March 5, 2020, the collaboration between the company and the influencer took the form of a humorous video, shared in the influencer's Instagram account, the video promoting the E.L. event. A.E.O is a very active content creator on both social networks, Instagram and YouTube, its goal is to create new creative ideas and share them with everyone. He has 151K subscribers on Instagram and 242K subscribers on YouTube (as of March 2020). We opted for an experimental field in order to understand the problem already mentioned concerning the impact of influencers on the notoriety of a company.

Our methodology aims to identify the following 5 points:

- Identify the value of the brand and the value of the influencer.
- Determine the most appropriate network that will bring the company to devote all its efforts to it.
- Determine why the client is following the influencer.
- Verify that influencers are perceived as credible and trustworthy.
- Verify the nature of the relationship between the influencer and brand awareness, i.e. we will check if the relationship is positive, i.e. if the person knows and follows the influencer who has published content on the brand, that person is expected to know the brand systematically, and vice versa.

3.2. Data collection

We prepared a questionnaire consisting of 12 questions. This is a method suitable for collecting primary data in quantitative studies in order to establish statistical relationships or quantitative comparisons. Thus, this method was chosen because it offers the possibility of collecting a large amount of information for a relatively large population. Moreover, this choice will facilitate the statistical processing of the data as well as their analysis.

In order to determine the value of the company I. on the one hand, and that of the influencer A.E.O. as well as his motivation on the other hand, we scrapped the posts published by the latter on Instagram. We also scraped the data from the company's site. These data are analyzed using techniques derived from natural language processing such as the analysis of similarities (ANOSIM). We also conducted an interview with the influencer to better understand the aspects of his collaboration with the recruiting company.

3.3. Sampling

This step is essential because it influences the next phases. For reliable results, the population must be accurately defined. Our sample is composed of men and women who are students between the ages of 18 and 28 years old and residents of Agadir. The participation in the questionnaire was voluntary. To check the responses validity, our description of the sample was based on the statistics of the Instagram account of the A.E.O. influencer, which we note that the majority of its audience is between 18 and 24 years old, 19% of its subscribers reside in Casablanca, and 8% in Agadir, representing the second city in terms of the number of followers as shown in Figure 1. Following the launch of the survey on social networks (Facebook and Instagram), we collected a total of 192 responses. Of these responses, we eliminated those representing missing or incomplete fields. In the end, we retained 180 valid responses.

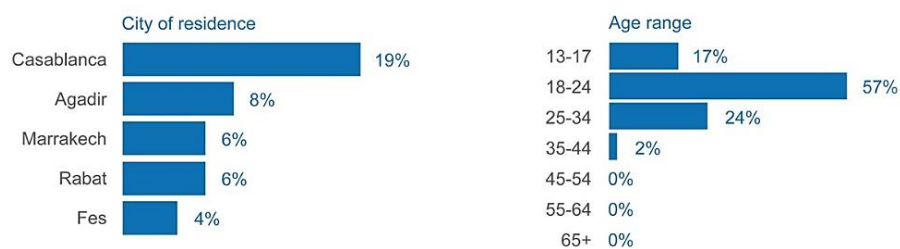


Figure 1. Distribution of OEA influencer followers by age and city of residence

4. RESULTS

4.1. Value of the company I

The values of a company have become a strategic axis subject of several studies and scientific research. Companies are aware of the importance of defining and developing a sociostructure of relationships and values more or less shared by their employees, in order to maintain the identity of the company and its coherence [22]. Reputation is an indicator of the esteem accorded to the company by its various audiences. It is formed in the minds of the stakeholders, hence its importance for the evolution and continuation of the

company. It corresponds to the values attributed to the company when defining its image (honesty, responsibility and integrity) [23].

Our work focused on the role that the company's value system plays in its attractiveness and brand image. The influencer we interviewed was interested in the company he collaborated with because, according to him, first of all he adheres to its value system, and appreciates its encouragement of new generations, creativity and innovation. We recall that the first objective is to identify the value of the brand and that of the influencer, we consider that when the influencer shares the same value as the brand, it strengthens his chances of successful collaboration. To verify this objective, we present the results of the content analysis, the interview guide and the questionnaire.

To identify the value of the company I, we researched its official website where we found that it has three values: proximity, simplicity and boldness. After having identified the values of the company I., we identified those of the influencer A.E.O. based on the interview guide, and we will check if the value that the company I wants to transmit is adequate with the one perceived by the Internet users and the influencer himself, then we will compare it with the value of the latter. We have performed a textual data analysis for the interview guide in order to represent the responses in a graphical form, which consists of a word cloud and a similarity analysis [24].

Figure 2 shows a word cloud based on the frequency of their occurrence. The word cloud is a visual representation of keywords in which words are printed in different sizes and weights to assess their importance. It is usually the first step in analyzing large corpora of texts to get an idea of the topic or theme [25]. In other words, only the most frequent words are represented, but their place on the graph does not reflect any relationship between them. In order to introduce the relationships between co-occurrences we need to move on to the analysis of similarities (ANOSIM).

ANOSIM approaches textual corpora in a different way. This method of analysis is part of an approach that stems from graph theory and is based on the search for similarities or dissimilarities. The analysis of similarities is based on the corpus's properties of connectedness. It gives rise to a tree-like graphical representation (maximum valued and related), where the nodes are the shapes, and where it is possible to make lexical communities appear. This algorithm aims at reinforcing the neighborhood relations between forms [26]. Thus, the objective of this analysis is to study the proximity and relationships between the elements of a set, in the form of maximum trees.



Figure 2. Cloud of words representing the value that the A.E.O. influencer wants to transmit

Figure 3 is a graphical representation of the word similarity analysis of the interview guide, which retains the idea of size proportional to frequency, while introducing the co-occurrence relationships between words. The position of the words in relation to each other is therefore essential, as are the relationships illustrated. We notice that the entreprise I (fuzzy) is associated with 7 words which are: time, work, come, first, domain, and with a powerful link with the two words: creativity and encourage. So, we can say that these are the same links of value that the company I tries to communicate: audacity, which means thinking and acting in a different way and giving great importance to imagination and creativity.

According to the interview guide, the Influencer also states that even before working with Company I, he held it in high esteem, because it values imagination in all areas and encourages creativity. It is one of the first firms that values influence and understands its power, and also supports the creativity of people who are just starting their careers. The company develops more human relations and encourages young people to devote their time to social tasks. We found that the value of the influencer is in line with the value of the company, and that the value of the company perceived by the influencer is the same as that communicated, so we need the last value, which is the value of the company I perceived by the respondents.

To this end, we present in Table 1 the results of question 2 of the questionnaire (“What do you think is the value of this brand?”). 44.44% of the respondents chose the valorization of imagination and the encouragement of creativity as a value of the telephone operator I. This means that the value perceived by the respondents is the same as that of the influencer.

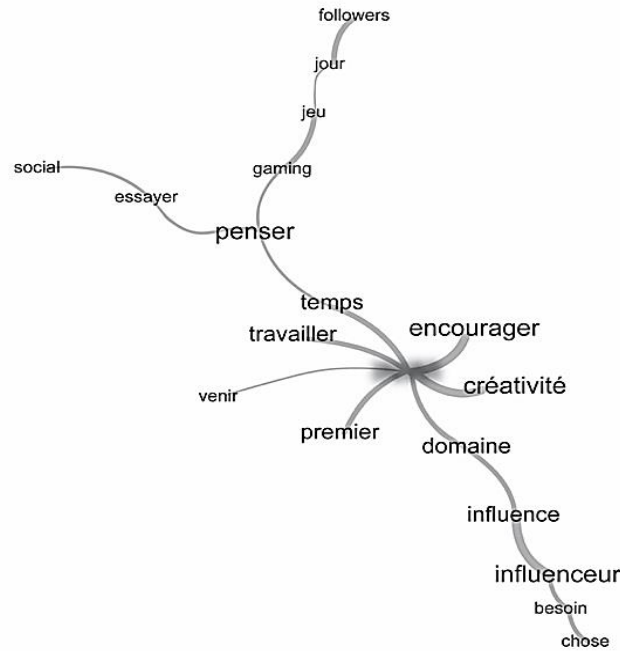


Figure 3. Similarity analysis of the words representing the values of the A.E.O. influencer

Table 1. Perceived value of the business I as perceived by questionnaire respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Quality of service	33	18.3
Valuing imagination and encouraging creativity	80	44.4
Proximity (is to ensure a more human relationship)	13	7.2
Corporate Social Responsibility	16	8.9
Customer Satisfaction	38	21.1
Total	180	100

4.2. Social networks

The second objective of this work is to determine which network the company should favor in terms of its communication, and also to determine the frequency of use of social networks, because we believe that the higher the frequency, the more likely the brand is to achieve its objectives. To verify this objective, we will present the results of question 5 and question 6 (respectively “Which social network do you use the most?” and “How often do you use social networks?”) in Table 2. The Analysis of the most frequently used social network reveals that 53.3% of respondents use Instagram.

Table 2. Most used social networks

	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	42	23.3
Instagram	96	53.3
Whatsapp	16	8.9
Snapchat	6	3.3
Twitter	18	10.0
Linkdin	2	1.1
Total	180	100.0

The analysis of the frequency of use of social networks shows that 84.4% of respondents use social networks frequently (several times a day), as shown in Table 3. According to Instagram Business, more than 80% of Internet users subscribe to a company, which allows companies to thrive through relationships with influencers (collaborations) by exploiting the interests and passions of Internet users [27]. It is worth noting that Instagram is the second largest online social network with 700 million active accounts and 32% of internet users worldwide [28].

Table 3. Frequency of use of social networks

	Frequency	Percentage
From time to time (once or twice a week)	3	1.7
Often (3 to 4 times a week)	25	13.9
Almost every time (every day)	152	84.4
Total	180	100.0

4.3. Motivation of the follow

The third objective of this study is to know the motivation why the customer follows the A.E.O. influencer, as we believe that knowing the reason will make it easier for the I. Company to target and have a better chance of success in communication as shown in Table 4. In its 2019 report, Rakuten found that live gift unwrapping and entertainment provided by influencers has a significant place among followers. In fact, 49% followers like to follow the adventures of influencers or watch them playing video games. 46% of people follow them because of their recommendations and wait for an influencer's opinion before buying a product. In France, for example, this figure drops to 40%. However, the analysis of the results of our study shows that 57.2% of respondents follow influencers for advice and ideas, which means that subscribers consider that following influencers is a good way to get information. But for this to happen, the follower should feel a sense of credibility and trust towards the influencer.

Table 4. Reasons for influencer follow-up

	Frequency	Percentage
Follow their daily life	28	15.6
Get advice and ideas	103	57.2
Simple curiosity	40	22.2
Not specified	9	5.0
Total	180	100.0

4.4. Credibility of the influencer

As a reminder, we previously mentioned that the more the influencer is considered credible, the more the brand gains the trust of its followers, since the latter trust the influencer's opinion and advice. To verify this, we will present the results of question 9 and question 10 (respectively “Have you established a relationship of trust with certain influencers?” and “Do influencers have strong credibility?”).

Although the conventional wisdom is that many people do not trust influencers, especially if they are promoting a product or service, because they are paid by companies to convey a good image of the brand [3], from the analysis of the relationship of trust with the influencers, we found that 68.33% of the respondents establish relationships of trust with the influencers as shown in Table 5. This means that followers are predisposed to take into consideration the advice and recommendations of the influencer they follow. Indeed, Table 6 shows that 67.2% of respondents find the influencer credible.

Table 5. Confidence relationship with influencers

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	123	68.3
No	57	31.7
Total	180	100.0

Table 6. Credibility of influencers

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	121	67.2
No	59	32.8
Total	180	100.0

4.5. Measuring the effectiveness of collaboration

The last objective is to verify the nature of the relationship between the influencer and the company's notoriety I, in other words, we want to see if the influencer has been able to increase notoriety (positive relationship). To verify this assumption, we will present the results of the content analysis and the

questionnaire. We want to find out whether the number of followers of company I as a result of the collaboration has increased. To do this, we used the statistics from the Instagram account of the A.E.O. influencer.

We recall that the collaboration started on March 05, 2020 in the form of a shared humor video in the account of the AEO Influencer, the latter has 151K followers, we followed the statistics of the AEO account, and also the statistics of the followers of the Instagram account of the company I from March 01, 2020 until March 14, 2020. Indicators show that 24,625 people liked the publication and 331 commented on it. We also found that it was shared 2,641 times and registered on 1,608 unique accounts.

The statistics we found on the accounts of the influencer's followers we interviewed regarding their interaction with the publication regarding the event show that these followers were responsive in terms of the number of shares and likes. This affirms the importance of targeting an influencer who shares the same interests as his community, and whom his audience trusts. This relationship of trust is built over time and developed through the effort and honesty of the content that the influencer broadcasts on social networks. We crossed the question "Do you know the E.L. event" with the question "Are you a follower of the A.E.O. influencer?" to see if a large proportion of respondents who are aware of the event are followers of the influencer as shown in Table 7.

Following the analysis of the results, we note that, among the respondents who follow the A.E.O. influencer on Instagram, 97.2% are aware of the E.L. event, while among the respondents who do not follow the influencer, 81.9% are not aware of the event. This means that the majority of followers of the influencer know about the event. It therefore seems clear that there is a positive relationship between the knowledge (and follow) of the influencer and the knowledge of the event federated by the recruiting company as shown in Figure 4. We can even express our surprise at the huge difference in the numbers, especially since the company in question is one of the largest firms in Morocco, and their online and offline communication channels are very broad, yet this was not enough to reach the majority of young people likely to be interested in the event. On the other hand, it is as a result of its collaboration with the influential A.E.O that the event's notoriety is growing.

Table 7. Crossover between knowledge of the E.L. event and knowledge of the influencer A.E.O

			Knowledge of the E.L. event		Total
			Yes	No	
Follower of the influencer	Yes	Participants	105	3	108
		% in Follow of the Influencer	97.2%	2.8%	100.0%
	No	Participants	13	59	72
		% in Follow of the Influencer	18.1%	81.9%	100.0%
Total		Number of people	118	62	180
		% in Follow of the Influencer	65.6%	34.4%	100.0%

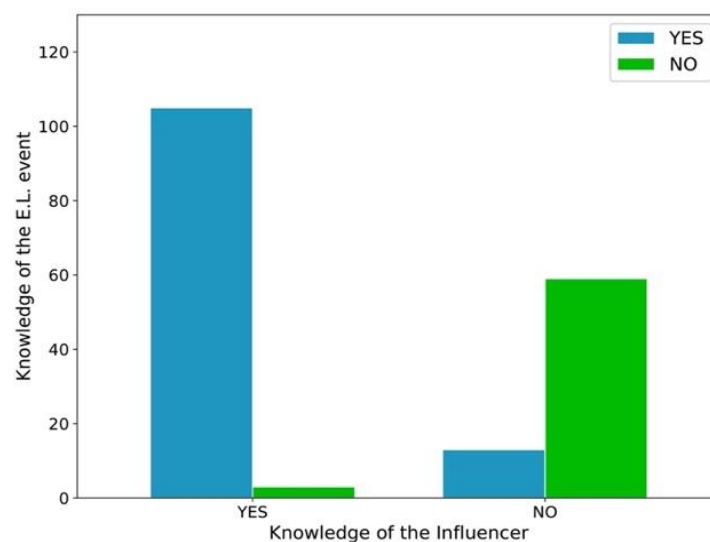


Figure 4. Crossover between knowledge of the E.L. event and knowledge of the influencer A.E.O.R

The effectiveness of influencers to increase brand engagement among crowds has been proven in numerous studies including [26], which describes how influencers use visual congruence as a representation of shared interests in a specific domain to create strong links with followers, or [30] which states that social media influencers (SMIs) are highly watched micro celebrities on social media platforms that engage consumers and have the potential to promote customer-brand relationships in different product categories.

However, the traditional questionnaire and interview method implies a scarcity of empirical data, forcing researchers to focus on a handful of relevant information [31]. Consequently, the results obtained would be even more precise and relevant if our study focused on a very large volume of data (big data) to which machine learning and data mining algorithms will be applied to extract richer and more specific information [32]-[36]. We also plan to use sentiment analysis techniques to better gauge the public's attitude towards the credibility of influencers and how much they are willing to trust them [37].

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The recruitment of influential opinion leaders (or influencers), whether famous or professional, has become a common practice in most large companies. These companies promote their brand image through the influencers they recruit, taking advantage of the popularity of internet users to follow them via social networks, whether to be aware of the details of their private life (in the case of celebrities), or to obtain advice or criticism on particular subjects (such as products or services). Marketers are recruiting social media influencers to build an interactive relationship with consumers, as many consumers (especially young people) continue to lose interest in traditional advertising. The content generated by influencers has a positive effect on subscribers' trust in a brand, which in turn influences brand awareness and purchase intentions. In our study, we sought to understand the extent to which influencers can have a direct impact on brand awareness in developing countries. We therefore focused our study on a large telecommunications company in Morocco that recruited a famous influencer among young people to promote its flagship event for gamers.

Our study tries to answer 5 key questions: identify if the brand and the influencer share the same values, identify the most appropriate social networks for the company, know the reasons that lead Internet users to follow the influencer, identify if Internet users find the influencer credible and understand to what extent the influencer can affect the notoriety of the event among social network users. To address the first point, we adopted an approach based on scraping data from the company's website and the influencer's posts on Instagram to which we applied NLP treatments, including similarity analysis. We also established an interview guide with the influencer, in order to better understand the context of the collaboration with the recruiting company. For the rest of the points, we published a questionnaire containing 12 questions for young users whose age range matched that of the followers of the influencer.

The results suggest that the value of the influencer is in line with the value of the company, and that the value of the company as perceived by the influencer is the same as that communicated. On the other hand, the value perceived by the respondents is the same as that of the influencer. Regarding the social network most used among young users, we found that Instagram is at the head of the list. Moreover, it is the network on which the influencer is the most active. The questionnaire also revealed that followers mainly follow the influencer in order to obtain advice and ideas and that they establish trusting relationships with influencers whom they consider credible. The last point, which is the key point of our study, reveals that there is a positive relationship between knowledge of the influencer and knowledge of the event federated by the recruiting company. In other words, for the vast majority of cases, if the respondent knows the follower, then he systematically knows the event organized by the company and which constitutes the point of collaboration between the company and the follower, and vice versa.

Given these results, we believe that influencers play a key role in communicating the company's image and reputation to users of social networks in developing countries, especially if they share the same values. At first glance, these results may seem obvious, but if we take into account the celebrity of the company, which is one of the largest firms in Morocco, and the fact that young users who are directly concerned by the event and who are not followers of the influencers are also unaware of the event, then we can better perceive the importance of these results.

Indeed, the influencer can be considered as an opinion leader on social networks, when his actions are studied and measured, he is able to intentionally influence buying behaviors notably thanks to professional marketing techniques via the different digital channels available today. The influencer has the power to stimulate new trends which motivates companies to engage him in their digital communication strategies. This was, according to our study, the case of the company we studied.

In addition, we believe it is important to specify that the posts that appear first on the user's news feed are posted according to three factors: the volume of user interaction, the type of content posted (like and comment) and the novelty of the post source. In the end, we believe that the results of this study provide

additional answers to the existing literature on the importance of influencers, especially in developing countries. On the other hand, it is clear that companies of these countries should move more and more towards opening up on social networks by recruiting reputable influencers who would be able to act as brand ambassadors to their followers.

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