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Trust Issues: When Influencer Marketing and PR Ethics Collide

Vincent Potage

^{1,2,3} Wyatt-Potage Consulting Royal Park, Balaclava, Mauritius

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*Corresponding author: Vincent Potage

Wyatt-Potage Consulting Royal Park, Balaclava, Mauritius

Abstract

This article examines the ethical landscape of public relations (PR) within the rapidly growing field of influencer marketing. It aims to dissect and understand the unique ethical considerations and challenges of this modern context. The discussion explores how the influencer phenomenon has transformed traditional PR practices, raising new ethical questions. Through analysis of real-world scenarios where the lines between authentic engagement and sponsored content blur, the need for clear ethical guidelines becomes evident. The responsibilities of PR professionals in navigating these grey areas, ensuring transparency, and maintaining public trust are unpacked. In a digital era where influencers wield significant power over public opinion, the critical need for upholding stringent ethical standards in PR practices is emphasized. The article concludes with forward-looking perspectives on reinforcing ethical practices in the evolving landscape of influencer PR.

Key Words: Influencer Marketing, Ethical Considerations, Public Relations, Transparency Standards, Authenticity in Communication

Introduction

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed the field of public relations (PR), introducing a new paradigm characterized by the emergence of influencers as pivotal opinion leaders (Yogesh, et al., 2021). These individuals, often ordinary users who have amassed significant followings on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter, have leveraged their online presence to shape and sway public opinion (Ahmad et al., 2020). This phenomenon has created unprecedented opportunities for brands and PR professionals to engage with audiences in more

personal and impactful ways (Ahmad et al., 2020). Influencers possess the unique ability to connect with their followers on a level that traditional media channels often cannot achieve (White, 2022). Their content, which ranges from lifestyle and fashion to technology and wellness, resonates deeply with their audience, fostering a sense of trust and relatability (White, 2022). Consequently, brands have increasingly turned to influencers to promote their products and services, recognizing the substantial influence these individuals wield (Yogesh, et al., 2021). This shift

towards influencer marketing represents a significant departure from traditional PR strategies that relied heavily on press releases, media coverage, and celebrity endorsements (Ahmad et al., 2020).

However, the rise of influencer marketing has not been without its challenges, particularly in the realm of ethics (Kim & Kim, 2022). The symbiotic relationship between influencers and brands has given rise to numerous ethical considerations that PR practitioners must navigate (Chen, et al., 2020). Central to these considerations is the issue of authenticity (Chen, et al., 2020). When influencers engage in sponsored content, there is a risk that this trust can be eroded if the sponsorship is not transparently disclosed (Hund, 2024). This blurring of lines between genuine endorsements and paid promotions can lead to accusations of deceit and manipulation, undermining the credibility of both the influencer and the brand (Hund, 2024). Transparency, therefore, emerges as a critical ethical concern in influencer marketing. PR professionals must ensure that influencers adhere to disclosure guidelines, clearly indicating when content is sponsored (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023). Moreover, the power dynamics in influencer marketing introduce another layer of ethical complexity (Kim & Kim, 2022). PR practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that the content they facilitate through influencers is accurate, ethical, and in the public's best interest (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023).

While influencer marketing offers significant advantages in reaching and engaging target audiences, it also presents unique ethical challenges. This article aims to explore these challenges and navigate the ethical landscape of influencer marketing. By prioritizing transparency, authenticity, and ethical responsibility, PR professionals can effectively harness the power of influencers while maintaining public trust and upholding the integrity of their practice.

The Evolution of PR in the Age of Influencers

The landscape of public relations has undergone a dramatic evolution with the rise of social media influencers (Quesenberry, 2020). Traditionally, PR strategies centered around media relations, press releases, and managing relationships with journalists and traditional media outlets (Kaul, et al. 2015). These conventional methods focused on controlling the narrative through established channels, often involving lengthy processes and significant barriers to immediate public engagement (Kaul, 2015). However, the advent of social media platforms has disrupted these traditional approaches, creating new pathways for direct and real-time communication between brands and their audiences (Richter & Ye, 2024). Influencers have emerged as central figures in this transformed landscape, serving as intermediaries who bridge the gap between brands and consumers (Richter & Ye, 2024). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are often seen as more relatable and accessible, which enhances their ability to engage with audiences on a personal level (Audrezet, et al., 2020). This shift has prompted PR professionals to adopt more dynamic and flexible strategies that leverage the unique strengths of influencers.

One of the key aspects of this evolution is the speed and immediacy of influencer-driven content. Social media platforms allow influencers to share their opinions and endorsements instantly, reaching vast audiences within seconds (Audrezet, et al., 2020). This immediacy contrasts sharply with the slower pace of traditional PR campaigns, which often require meticulous planning and coordination (De Veirman et al., 2017). The rapid dissemination of content through influencers enables brands to

respond quickly to market trends and public sentiment, providing a significant competitive advantage (Freberg et al., 2011). Moreover, the interactive nature of social media allows for a two-way communication flow that is not typically possible with traditional media (Shawky, et al., 2019). Influencers engage with their followers through comments, likes, shares, and direct messages, fostering a sense of community and dialogue (Shawky, et al., 2019). This engagement creates opportunities for brands to receive immediate feedback and insights from consumers, which can inform and refine PR strategies in real-time (De Veirman et al., 2017).

However, this evolution also brings new challenges and ethical considerations. The personal brand of the influencer becomes intertwined with the brand they endorse, making authenticity crucial (Hund, 2024). Audiences are quick to detect insincerity, and any perceived lack of authenticity can damage both the influencer's reputation and the brand's credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020). This necessitates a careful balance in influencer partnerships, ensuring that endorsements align with the influencer's personal values and audience expectations (Audrezet et al., 2020).

In addition, the sheer volume of content produced by influencers can create information overload, making it challenging for PR professionals to ensure their messages stand out (Swaminathan, et al., 2020). The crowded digital landscape requires innovative approaches to capture audience attention and differentiate brand messages effectively (Swaminathan, et al., 2020). Furthermore, the metrics for measuring the success of influencer-driven PR campaigns have also evolved (Childers, et al., 2019). Traditional metrics such as media impressions and advertising value equivalents (AVEs) are being supplemented with engagement metrics, including likes, shares, comments, and overall engagement rates (Childers, et al., 2019). These metrics provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact and effectiveness of PR efforts in the social media age (Childers, et al., 2019). Understanding these changes and adapting strategies accordingly is essential for leveraging the power of influencers effectively while maintaining ethical standards and public trust (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023).

Ethical Challenges in Influencer Marketing

As influencer marketing continues to grow, so too do the ethical challenges accompanying it (Bishop, 2021). These challenges are multifaceted, involving issues of transparency, authenticity, disclosure, and the potential for misinformation (Bishop, 2021). Addressing these ethical concerns is paramount for PR professionals seeking to maintain public trust and uphold the integrity of their campaigns. Transparency is a cornerstone of ethical influencer marketing. It requires that influencers clearly disclose their relationships with brands, especially when content is sponsored (Helme, 2023). This disclosure is not merely a legal obligation but also an ethical one, ensuring that audiences are aware of the commercial context behind the content they consume (FTC, 2019). The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States, along with other regulatory bodies worldwide, mandates that influencers must clearly and conspicuously disclose any material connections to brands (FTC, 2019). Despite these regulations, compliance remains inconsistent, with some influencers failing to adequately disclose sponsorships or partnerships, leading to potential deceit and erosion of trust (Evans, et al., 2017).

PR professionals play a crucial role in ensuring that influencers adhere to these guidelines. They must educate influencers about disclosure requirements and monitor their compliance (Gass, & Seiter, 2022). Tools and platforms that facilitate automatic disclosure tags can also help maintain transparency (Gass, & Seiter, 2022). Furthermore, PR practitioners should advocate for best practices in disclosure, such as using clear and unambiguous language (e.g., #ad, #sponsored) and placing disclosure statements at the beginning of posts where they are easily visible (Rubin, 2022). However, when influencers use language that promotes products or services that are misaligned with their personal brand or values, it can lead to accusations of inauthenticity (Vredenburg, et al., 2020). Influencers, intentionally or unintentionally, can spread misinformation, especially when promoting products related to health, wellness, or financial services (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The dissemination of false or misleading information can have serious consequences for public health and safety (Jin, et al., 2019). In addition to a perceived lack of authenticity, that can damage the influencer's credibility and, by extension, the credibility of the brand they are promoting (Audrezet, et al., 2020).

Maintaining credibility and authenticity involves carefully selecting influencers whose personal values and audience align with the brand's image and values (Gass, & Seiter, 2022). PR professionals should conduct thorough vetting processes to ensure alignment and encourage influencers to provide honest reviews and opinions about the products they promote (Rubin, 2022). Encouraging influencers to share personal stories or experiences related to the product can also enhance authenticity and build stronger connections with the audience (Hughes, 2019). PR professionals must ensure that the information shared by influencers is accurate, evidence-based, and not misleading (Aïmeur, et al., 2023). This involves providing influencers with clear, factual information about the products and services they promote and correcting any misinformation that may arise (Hughes, 2019). Collaborating with influencers who have expertise or credibility in relevant fields can also help mitigate the risk of spreading misinformation (Aïmeur, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the relationship between influencers and brands is often characterized by power imbalances, particularly when dealing with micro-influencers or those new to the industry (Aïmeur, et al., 2023). These influencers might feel pressured to accept terms that are not in their best interest, including inadequate compensation or overly restrictive contracts (Aïmeur, et al., 2023). Ethical influencer marketing requires that PR professionals treat influencers fairly and transparently, ensuring equitable compensation and respect for their creative autonomy (Boerman, et al, 2017). By addressing these ethical concerns proactively, PR practitioners can foster trust, build credible relationships, and create effective influencer marketing campaigns that respect both influencers and their audiences (Yuan & Lou, 2020). How social media influencers foster relationships with followers.

Impact of Disclosure and Transparency in Influencer Marketing

Disclosure and transparency are paramount in maintaining ethical standards within influencer marketing. The effectiveness of these practices directly impacts consumer trust, the credibility of both influencers and brands, and overall market integrity (Vredenburg, et al., 2020). In recent years, regulatory bodies such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States have emphasized

the importance of clear and conspicuous disclosure of material connections between influencers and brands (FTC, 2019). Despite these regulations, there are varying degrees of compliance, resulting in ethical gray areas that PR professionals must navigate (Neil, 2021). For example, when influencers fail to disclose their relationships with brands, they risk misleading their audience, which can erode trust and lead to public backlash (Neil, 2021). Research indicates that audiences appreciate transparency and are more likely to trust influencers who are open about their sponsored content (Evans, et al., 2017). This trust is critical because it underpins the influencer's ability to effectively promote products and services (Evans, et al., 2017).

PR professionals play a crucial role in ensuring that disclosure practices are upheld. This involves educating influencers about the importance of transparency and monitoring their compliance with disclosure guidelines (Neil, 2021). It is not enough to simply include a hashtag like #ad or #sponsored; the placement and clarity of these disclosures are equally important (Ducato, 2020). Disclosures should be prominent and easily understood by the audience to prevent any confusion about the nature of the content (Ducato, 2020). Moreover, transparent practices can enhance the perceived authenticity of influencer endorsements. Authenticity is a valuable attribute in influencer marketing, as it differentiates genuine recommendations from mere advertisements (Poyry, et al., 2021). When influencers are transparent about their partnerships, they can maintain their personal credibility while promoting brands, creating a win-win situation for both parties (Poyry, et al., 2021). This authenticity fosters deeper connections with audiences, who are more likely to engage with and act upon genuine endorsements (Audrezet et al., 2020).

However, one significant challenge with enforcing disclosure is the global nature of social media. Influencers often operate across multiple jurisdictions, each with its own set of regulations and guidelines (Goanta & Ranchordas, 2020). PR professionals must navigate this complex regulatory landscape to ensure compliance (Neil, 2021). Furthermore, the dynamic and fast-paced nature of social media means that disclosure guidelines must continuously evolve to address new forms of content and marketing strategies (Goanta & Ranchordas, 2020). Another challenge is the potential for influencers to resist disclosure due to fear of diminishing their perceived authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Some influencers believe that admitting to sponsorship may negatively impact their relationship with followers (Vredenburg, et al., 2020). PR professionals must work to dispel this misconception by highlighting the benefits of transparency and providing guidance on how to integrate disclosures seamlessly into content (Neil, 2021).

In addition to regulatory and perceptual challenges, there are technical hurdles to consider. Automated disclosure tools and platforms can help maintain consistency and compliance, but they require proper implementation and oversight (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023). PR professionals should leverage these tools while ensuring that disclosures remain genuine and contextually appropriate (Neil, 2021). Ultimately, the impact of disclosure and transparency in influencer marketing extends beyond legal compliance (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023). It shapes the ethical landscape of the industry, influencing consumer perceptions and fostering a culture of honesty and integrity (Neil, 2021). By prioritizing clear and honest communication, PR professionals can build trust, enhance the effectiveness of influencer campaigns, and

contribute to a more ethical and sustainable marketing ecosystem (Neil, 2021).

Real-World Examples of Ethical Challenges in Influencer Marketing: The French Experience

The rapid evolution of influencer marketing has brought with it several ethical challenges, significantly impacting both brands and influencers. France, in particular, has been proactive in addressing these complexities through legislative measures aimed at ensuring transparency and consumer protection in the digital space (Karsenty, 2023). The roots of France's influencer marketing regulations can be traced back to a growing concern about transparency and consumer protection (Karsenty, 2023). As influencer marketing became more prevalent, issues regarding the lack of clarity around sponsored content and potential misleading practices surfaced. Several factors contributed to the development of the French influencer marketing law, Act No. 2023-451, which was passed by the French parliament and came into effect in June 2023 (Direction générale de la Concurrence, de la Consommation et de la Répression des fraudes {DGCCRF}, 2023).

One major driver behind this legislation was the protection of consumers (DGCCRF, 2023). Regulators and consumer advocacy groups were particularly concerned about the impact of undisclosed sponsored content on consumer decision-making (Karsenty, 2023). Ensuring that consumers could differentiate between genuine opinions and paid promotions was deemed essential (DGCCRF, 2023). Misleading practices among influencers, such as promoting products they had not used or exaggerating their benefits, led to a significant loss of consumer trust and highlighted the need for greater transparency in the digital marketing space (Inside Tech Law, 2023). Additionally, there was considerable concern about the impact of influencer marketing on vulnerable audiences, especially minors (Joss, 2023). Regulators were motivated to ensure that children were not exposed to inappropriate content or pressured into purchasing products they did not need (Karsenty, 2023).

The French influencer marketing law, also known as the "Influencers Act," includes key provisions aimed at addressing these issues (Kolsquare, 2023). Influencers are now required to clearly and prominently label sponsored content as "advertising" or "commercial collaboration" to avoid engaging in misleading commercial practices (Kolsquare, 2023). This labeling must be easily noticeable and identifiable to the audience (Kolsquare, 2023). Furthermore, the law restricts influencers from promoting certain products or services, such as gambling, alcohol, or prescription drugs, to vulnerable audiences like minors (Karsenty, 2023). The law also mandates transparency in relationships, requiring influencers to disclose any financial or material benefits received in exchange for promoting a product or service (Inside Tech Law, 2023). Additionally, the legislation prohibits content that undermines human dignity, such as offensive or discriminatory remarks, and requires influencers to avoid making false or misleading claims about competing brands or products (Inside Tech Law, 2023).

While there was no single high-profile incident that directly triggered the creation of the French influencer marketing law, several instances of harmful or misleading practices contributed to the legislative response (Kolsquare, 2023). For example, in 2018, reality TV star and influencer Nabilla Benattia faced criticism for promoting a questionable financial product on Snapchat without

disclosing its risks (Kolsquare, 2023; Karsenty, 2023). This incident highlighted the need for stricter regulations around promoting financial products through influencer marketing (Kolsquare, 2023; Karsenty, 2023). Similarly, influencers faced backlash for promoting detox teas with unsubstantiated claims of weight loss and health benefits, which raised concerns about consumer safety (Inside Tech Law, 2023). Another significant issue was the widespread failure of influencers to properly disclose sponsored content on platforms like Instagram, leading to an investigation by the French consumer protection agency, the Direction générale de la Concurrence, de la Consommation et de la Répression des fraudes (DGCCRF), in 2021. This investigation underscored the widespread issue of non-compliance with existing advertising regulations and the need for more stringent rules (Upfluence, 2023).

The French influencer marketing law represents a significant step towards greater transparency and accountability in influencer marketing (Karsenty, 2023). Its implementation, however, has faced some criticism, particularly regarding unclear guidelines for certain aspects, such as thresholds for gifting disclosures and regulating French influencers operating outside of France (Fashion Law Watch, 2023). Efforts are ongoing to address these concerns and clarify the law. A dedicated industry trade body, the Union des Métiers d'Influence et des Créateurs (UMICC), has been established to represent all stakeholders, including influencers, brands, and tech players (Fashion Law Watch, 2023). The UMICC is actively participating in discussions about potential modifications to the law that could be implemented in 2024 (Fashion Law Watch, 2023).

By adopting stringent regulations, France aims to create a safer and more transparent environment for both consumers and influencers, setting a precedent that could influence global standards in influencer marketing (Karsenty, 2023). The ongoing efforts to refine and adapt the law underscore the dynamic nature of the influencer marketing landscape and the continuous need for regulatory vigilance to protect consumer interests and maintain industry integrity.

Conclusion

The ethical landscape of influencer marketing requires a commitment to transparency, authenticity, and ethical standards from both brands and influencers. This article explored how PR professionals can prioritize these principles and effectively harness the power of influencers while maintaining public trust and upholding the integrity of their practice. The future of influencer marketing lies in the ability to navigate these ethical challenges thoughtfully, ensuring that the relationships built between brands, influencers, and audiences are both genuine and sustainable.

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