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## *Influencer Marketing vs Employee-Generated Content: Effects on Brand Perception*

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**Introduction**

In recent decades, marketing has undergone a radical transformation, brought about by the development of digital technologies and the evolution of the Web. In the past, communication followed one-way patterns, with consumers in a predominantly passive position. Today, however, businesses operate in a hyper-connected context in which users do not just receive messages but also take on the role of content producers, capable of interacting in real time with brands and influencing their reputation. The growing use of social media necessitated a rethinking of traditional strategies and introduced new tools and approaches. Among these, two phenomena are particularly significant. The first is Influencer Marketing (IM), which leverages the visibility and credibility of digital creators. Initially considered very effective, today its impact is partially called into question by the decrease in trust, the saturation of sponsored content, and the reputational risks linked to the behavior of testimonials. The second is Employee Generated Content (EGC), which is content created by a company's employees, often perceived as more authentic, spontaneous, and reliable than official communications or external sponsorships.

Although IM has been widely the subject of academic analysis, EGC represents a recent and still little-investigated phenomenon, especially in the Italian context. In addition, there is a lack of comparative studies that can directly assess the effectiveness of these two modes of communication.

The present thesis fits into this framework, which aims to analyze to what extent the presence of different figures, influencers, or employees within brand communication influences consumer perception. The research is based on the following Research Question: "To what extent does the presence of different figures in brand communication, influencers or employees, affect consumer brand perception?" The hypotheses that guided the empirical investigation are derived from this question. First, it is hypothesized that EGC, compared to IM, may produce more positive effects in terms of attitude toward the brand (ATB), purchase intention (PI), content engagement (CE), and Word-of-Mouth Intention (WOM-I). Secondly, we intend to verify whether these effects are influenced by two specific

psychological factors: the greater perceived reliability (trustworthiness) and the favorability attributed to employees compared to influencers.

To answer these questions, the thesis is divided into three chapters. The first reconstructs the evolution of marketing, from the traditional model to digital logics, with special attention to the different phases of the Web, the birth of digital marketing, and the strategic role of social media. The second delves into the new forms of digital communication, first analyzing Influencer Marketing, with its evolution, the main theoretical models, critical issues and some case studies, and subsequently the Employee Generated Content, of which definition, benefits, limitations and business applications are presented. The third chapter is devoted to the empirical part: the research model, the methodology adopted, statistical analyses and hypothesis testing, followed by a discussion of the results and theoretical and managerial contributions.

Finally, the conclusions synthesize the main findings, emphasize their relevance for both academic literature and managerial practice, and suggest possible directions for future developments.

# Chapter 1

**The evolution of marketing: the reference context and new digital tools**

## 1.1 Introductory considerations

Businesses operate in an environment of profound and rapid change, characterized in large part by the inevitable advance of digitization. This first chapter aims to analyze in depth the theoretical framework underlying the profound transformation of marketing and its tools.

The current environment is marked by significant transformations propelled by technological innovation, which has created fresh and unique opportunities for people and companies (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Technological advances and the internet are now essential tools for expanding a business, making it possible to be very productive and effective.

Constant connectivity has multiplied interactions with potential customers, making digital marketing indispensable as a response to profound changes in the technological landscape and consumer behavior. However, this is not simply "marketing applied to digital" but a fundamental reconsideration of strategies, tools, and metrics (Kannan & Li, 2017).

Despite initial resistance, more and more companies have recognized and are recognizing the strategic value of these tools and are integrating digital logics to optimize results and thus thrive in an increasingly interconnected future (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

## 1.2 From traditional marketing to digital marketing

For decades, marketing followed well-defined patterns based on unidirectional logic and conventional media such as print, television, and billboards. The company would talk, and the consumer would listen. The relationship was vertical and often distant, and the measurement of effectiveness was approximate. However, the advent of the Internet has deeply revolutionized this scenario: from a passive audience there has been a shift to an active, connected, informed consumer who is

able to dialogue with brands in real time. The logics of interaction, personalization, and sharing have taken the place of mere exposure.

In simple terms, it can be said that traditional marketing was based on a model characterized by three main phases: stimulation through communication, purchase, and finally use/experience of the product or service. This approach was often monological, with the company talking to the consumer without an opportunity for immediate feedback.

From here, how did digital marketing come about?

Philip Kotler, a leading figure in the field, revolutionized this approach back in the 1980s, shifting the focus from product to customer and laying the foundation for modern marketing, culminating in Marketing 4.0. Kotler pointed out how, while not disappearing altogether, mass marketing has been overtaken by a new marketing that focuses on detailed, almost individual, segmentation. This means that companies no longer seek to reach "everyone" with the same message but rather to identify and target specific customer segments with personalized communications based on their interests, needs, and behaviors. Consider, for example, a sportswear company that, instead of running a generic TV ad, focuses on ads targeted at those who search online for "marathon running shoes" or those who follow social pages dedicated to fitness.

The last part makes it clear that organizations must now actively participate in digital communication. If they refrain, they risk losing relevance and visibility and being cut out of current market dynamics (Schulze Horn, 2015).

But let's start from the beginning: since the early '90s, the marketing world has undergone a radical transformation. As mentioned before, companies were basing their activities on unidirectional communication, without any direct and immediate interchange with the end consumer using traditional channels. reaching a very wide audience, but in a generalized way and with little possibility of measuring the effectiveness and personalization of the message against high investments.

Instead, today companies have the opportunity to leverage a wide range of digital strategies, such as social media marketing (ex. organic use of social, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok campaigns for engagement and direct sales), search engine optimization (SEO and SEM, to appear among the top Google results when a user

searches for a specific product or service), online advertising (e.g., Google Ads for display ads, Facebook Ads for campaigns targeting specific audience segments) email marketing (To cultivate customer relationships and promote personalized offers), interactive websites (providing users with engaging experiences and e-commerce features), and content marketing (creating blogs, videos, infographics to attract and inform potential customers) just to name a few. All these strategies have the first immediate effect of accelerating the transition from a prospect customer to lead generation.

Table 1 below summarizes the main strategies and tools used in digital marketing, depending on the business objectives set.

Tab n.1: *Digital marketing strategies and tools*

| GOALS | STRATEGIES | TOOLS |
|---|---|---|
| **Brand Awareness** | 1. Content Marketing<br>2. Social Media Marketing<br>3. Display Advertising | 1. Blog, video, infographic, podcast<br>2. Social Media Platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)<br>3. Banner ads on websites |
| **Lead Generation** | 1. SEO (Search Engine Optimization)<br>2. SEM (Search Engine Marketing)<br>3. E-mail Marketing<br>4. Landing Page Optimization | 1. Site optimization for search engines, attracting interested organic traffic.<br>2. Paid ads (Google Ads) to rank high in search results.<br>3. Newsletters and autoresponders to nurture leads with relevant content.<br>4. Dedicated web pages with forms to capture visitor information. |
| **Convert leads or visitors into paying customers** | 1. E-commerce Marketing<br><br>2. Retargeting/Remarketing<br><br>3. Affiliate Marketing<br><br>4. Marketing Automation | 1. Optimized product sheets, promotions, and sales funnel to purchase.<br>2. Personalized ads are shown to people who have already visited the website.<br>3. Partnerships with sites that promote products on a commission basis.<br>4. Personalized email sequences and chatbots to guide to final purchase. |
| **Customer Retention & Loyalty** | 1. Community Management | 1. Social groups and forums to create a sense of belonging and support. |

Source: *ns. elaboration from Wild Ali & Ortega-Gutierrez, 2025*

It is no longer just one broad channel; it is a huge ecosystem with many parts that work together. Companies can reach clients through a lot of different devices and platforms, like smartphones, tablets, laptops, dedicated apps, websites, social media, and e-commerce. This allows them to interact with consumers at different times and contexts of their digital day, optimizing marketing efforts with continuous company-consumer interaction through seamless navigation. Consider a user who sees an ad on Instagram, clicks on a product, adds it to the shopping cart on the e-commerce site, then receives an email reminder, and finally completes the purchase from the tablet: each touchpoint is part of a single integrated experience. The shift from traditional to digital marketing has been a revolution driven by the advent of the Internet and the rampant online presence of consumers. The global-scale adoption of the Internet, which has made an infinite amount of information and services accessible at marginal cost, and the subsequent introduction of increasingly sophisticated Web access technologies and devices such as multifunctional smartphones since 2007, of which the iPhone was the forerunner, have brought about a disruption in consumers' habits and the way they interact with businesses, opening the door to the large-scale diffusion of digital marketing. With these devices, the "always-on" connection has become a reality, and so users have continuous access, even in a free moment, to their devices and thus to information and potentially an ad (Bernritter et al. 2022), thus transforming themselves into a connected consumer. Consider that in 2025 (updated at the beginning of February), there are 5.65 billion people (unique users) worldwide who have access to the Internet, either via smartphones or PCs, and who spend an average of 6 hours and 38 minutes surfing the Web on a daily basis. This impressive statistic underscores the vastness of the potential audience and the significant time people spend online interacting with digital marketing campaigns in a more or less conscious way.

This section will illustrate how in just a few decades the entire marketing world has changed, leading to large sums of capital being invested in digital marketing. Spending on digital advertising continues to grow year after year, reaching $790 BILLION in 2024, a testament to its effectiveness and more measurable return on investment (ROI) potential.

There will be a focus not only on the historical trajectory of this momentous change but also on the forces that have driven these changes. In particular, the advantages that digital marketing offers in spite of traditional methodologies will be summarily described.

To fully understand how digital marketing was born, the next passage will briefly recall the history of the Web and how it has introduced new opportunities and challenges for marketers, making adaptability an essential quality for companies.

### 1.2.1 The Evolution of the Web from 1.0 to 4.0

In 1989 at CERN, Britain's Tim Berners Lee developed the first prototype of the World Wide Web. A software program capable of giving users access to information using hypertext and hypermedia links, created in response to the emergence of scientists to more effectively share the documents, data, and results of their research.

The first version of the Web, made public on August 6, 1991, is often referred to as Web 1.0, or "Static Web." It was a network of "read-only" content, where users, however, could not interact, taking a passive role. Although the emergence of the first websites stimulated changes in the way advertising was done, introducing the first banner ads (such as AT&T's famous banner in 1994) and e-mail marketing, the spirit of marketing remained essentially unchanged: interactions between companies and users were limited to one-way communication through company websites and online advertising.

Figure n.1: *The first ad banner on wired.com in 1994*



Source: *The Guardian, 2013*

Only in the 2000s did a real revolution begin.

Web 2.0, a term later coined by Dale Dougherty and Craig Cline in 2004, marked the advent of the first interactions between users and the digital world. Unlike its first version, Web 2.0 was profoundly interactive: it is the "read-write web." Its fundamental pillars were participation, sharing, and interaction. This flexibility allowed the eventual birth of the first successful socials (e.g., MySpace or Facebook), blogs, tagging systems (e.g., Flickr or Delicious), discussion forums, and wikis (e.g., Wikipedia). For the first time, users could connect with each other, share, and interact in true digital social networks, creating online communities based on common interests and personal relationships.

With Web 2.0, and also thanks to early social media, the phenomenon of User Generated Content (UGC) emerged, a fundamental concept for changing the direction of marketing strategies. UGC is essentially any form of content spontaneously created by users and posted on a site, social media, or other channels. Examples are reviews on Booking or Airbnb, video reviews on platforms with multimedia content such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, or comments under a post.

This evolution has profoundly transformed the role of users, who have transformed from mere passive consumers of information into active and influential creators, capable of shaping and directing public perceptions.

UGC is a form of Word of Mouth (WOM) that could be leveraged by companies for multiple purposes: obtaining valuable feedback (e.g., analyzing comments on a product to improve its features), creating active brand-related communities (such as Facebook fan groups or subreddits dedicated to a specific brand), and even involving consumers in the development of future strategies (through surveys, contests, or co-creation platforms, where customers' ideas become part of the innovation process).

In 2006, John Markoff of the New York Times introduced the concept of Web 3.0, or Semantic Web, although its existence actually dates back to 2010. The third generation of the World Wide Web proposes to reorganize the way content is searched and viewed by users with the goal of personalizing and optimizing online search based on users' history, interests, and desires. This has been made possible by training machines to understand and categorize data like humans, with the aim

of improving online searches, personalizing the user experience, and enhancing business intelligence. This need arose from the enormous amount of information on the web, which required tools capable of collecting and structuring it to support the evolution towards Web 3.0. The latter relies on technology like metadata (data that describes other data, such as the date and time of a photo) and artificial intelligence (AI) (algorithms for customized content, chatbots, and more) and intelligent software agents that analyze user behavior to suggest relevant content or products.

Today we are witnessing the initial phase of Web 4.0, a concept that is still being defined but whose potential is already evident. Although it is not yet possible to provide a single description, it is clear that this new era of the web will be based on the integration of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced environmental AI, the Internet of Things (IoT), blockchains, virtual worlds, and XR (Extended Reality) technologies, which include virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR). Thanks to these innovations, objects and environments, both digital and real, will be fully integrated and interconnected, combining the physical and digital worlds and opening up scenarios that until now were only imaginable in science fiction.

### 1.2.2 La nascita del digital marketing e i suoi strumenti

Digital Marketing is defined as "the process of innovatively and distinctively promoting and advertising a range of goods and services using a number of distribution channels that serve as a conduit between advertisers and customers." (Madushan, 2024)

Born some 30 years ago, it has rapidly evolved to become crucial to global corporate communications. Among its most well-known manifestations are User Generated Content (UGC), targeted ads, Influencer Marketing and the new Employer Generated Content (ECG).

Until the late 1980s, traditional marketing relied on one-way mass channels such as TV and radio, making it difficult to estimate the effectiveness of campaigns and tailor messages. The consumers passively received information, but interaction and the ability to give immediate feedback were limited. Companies were taking a

"push" approach, pushing products to an undifferentiated audience, with difficulties in measuring ROI and optimizing strategies in real time.

Digital marketing emerged with the Web in the early 1990s. Initially, with Web 1.0, it was uncommon. Early companies mainly exploited e-mail marketing and static websites with informational functions.

The debut of Archie, the first rudimentary search engine, in September 1990 marked the beginning of the online search era, and the foundation for the concept of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) was set. Although the term "SEO" was not coined until 1995, after the release of Yahoo (1994), it finally exploded with Google in 1998.

In 1994, AT&T implemented its first digital marketing strategy with an ad banner on hotwired.com, which recorded an astonishing 44% click-through rate (CTR).

The rise of Amazon and eBay between 1994 and 1995 marked the beginning of e-commerce, democratizing access to products and opening up new global markets with reduced costs.

At the same time, new technologies emerged to track consumers' digital activity, paving the way for the use of big data. In 1994, for example, the first online cookies were born, enabling companies to create detailed consumer profiles to target relevant and personalized advertisements directly to final users.

A few years later, in 1999, tools such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) were automated with the emergence of Salesforce and SaaS technology. In 1998, Google debuted its search engine that withstood the DotCom bubble, a financial scandal that wiped out many of the companies that offered only digital services. In the early 2000s, Google innovated with Google AdSense and Google Analytics, marking the end of the first phase of digital marketing.

With the introduction of Web 2.0, digital marketing accelerated. The years 2000-2010 were marked by the explosion of social networks (Facebook, YouTube) and the transition to mobile. These platforms let brands and people communicate to one other, which evolved to User Generated Content (UGC), a model that puts the customer first and supports businesses with honest and true advertising.

Between 2005 and 2010, internet penetration reached 50 percent, also fueled by the invention of the iPhone in 2007 and followed by that of other smartphones that facilitated mobile browsing. This technology allowed "mobile" marketing to

become pervasive and reach consumers with contextualized and personalized messages in real time.

After 2010, social media such as Instagram and TikTok debuted, where users with original content became influencers. These figures, able to speak to a wide audience and build trust with their followers, represented (and represent) a unique opportunity for companies. Thus, was born the tool of Influencer Marketing, which proliferated during the COVID pandemic in 2020 and continues to generate billion-dollar investments (Statista predicts $32.55 billion in 2025), representing a new channel for companies to reach specific, engaged audience segments, one that leverages the authenticity of influencers and overcomes skepticism toward traditional advertising.

In recent years, to personalize the consumer experience, companies have needed to access and analyze large amounts of data. Big Data techniques, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Customer Data Platforms (CDPs), and other sophisticated statistical tools have become crucial and have enabled unprecedented campaign optimization, maximizing ROI.

### 1.2.3 Strategic implications of digital marketing

After discussing the different steps in the shift from traditional to digital marketing and the benefits and new opportunities it has created, we should now briefly talk about the significant issues that this change has caused, which are new strategic challenges for businesses.

The table below summarizes the main areas affected by the transition from traditional to digital marketing in terms of advantages and disadvantages.

Tab n.2: *Digital Marketing's Opportunities and Challenges*

| Opportunities | Critical Issues/Challenges |
|---|---|
| **Increased measurability and ROI**<br>Digital marketing enables precise tracking of every action (clicks, views, conversions), allowing companies to measure the return on investment (ROI) of campaigns and optimize strategies in real time. | **Information overload and "noise"**<br>The large amount of online content can make it difficult for companies to stand out and capture consumers' attention. |
| **Precise targeting**<br>It is possible to reach extremely specific audience segments based on demographics, interests, and online behaviors, reducing waste and increasing message effectiveness. | **High competition**<br>The accessibility of digital has increased competition, making it more difficult to stand out. |
| **Lower costs**<br>Digital campaigns often have lower costs than traditional campaigns (e.g., print, TV), making marketing affordable even for small and medium-sized businesses. | **Privacy and data security**<br>The collection and use of consumer data raise constant concern about the proper use of such data in compliance with stringent regulations on the subject (e.g., GDPR). |
| **Interaction and personalization**<br>Digital marketing fosters two-way communication, enabling companies to interact directly with customers and offer personalized experiences, improving brand loyalty. | **Rapidly evolving technologies**<br>Continuous updating of skills and strategies is required for the company to remain competitive. |
| **Global reach and 24/7 accessibility**<br>Digital campaigns can reach a worldwide audience without geographical or time limits, greatly expanding market potential (always on). | **Lack of physical contact**<br>The absence of physical interaction can be a limitation in selling some products/services. |

Source: *ns. elaboration from Rosario et al. (2022)*

The first challenge a brand faces in finding its proper positioning in the digital market is the enormous amount of information available online, which consumers risk getting lost in. The chance to stand out and capture the attention of the public, therefore, for a brand, regardless of its sector, is made hard both by the excessive amount of digital content present for a given product but also by the high level of competition present on digital channels, where ease of access has exponentially increased the number of competitors.

Therefore, to address the digital market, which is so different from the traditional one, companies must adopt specific positioning policies and communication methods, investing in high-quality content marketing strategies and advanced search engine optimization (SEO) to improve visibility and relevance.

Another critical concern relates to data privacy and security. The collection and analysis of consumer data, despite being a crucial element of digital marketing, raises important ethical and legal issues. Regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) impose strict standards and carry stiff penalties for violations. In addition, digital marketing is exposed to the risk of cyber-attacks and theft of personal data. To deal with such issues, it's essential to use solid and transparent data management systems that can make sure companies can follow the rules and build trust with customers.

Also, the fast-changing nature of the digital world means that businesses need to keep their skills up to date and be able to change their plans quickly to stay relevant. In this regard, it is important to invest in ongoing staff training and the use of advanced analytical tools.

Finally, for some industries, the lack of physical contact can be a limitation, especially for products that require direct sensory experience. One possible solution could be to integrate digital marketing with omnichannel experiences, combining the best of the online and offline worlds, such as through virtual showrooms or hybrid events that allow customers to interact with the product in different ways.

## 1.3 The role of social platforms in marketing

With the rise of digital marketing, social platforms have transformed from simple personal communication tools to true strategic channels for businesses. Their ability to connect brands and consumers in a direct, dynamic, and interactive way has revolutionized the logic of traditional marketing. In this context, understanding the evolution of social media and the different types of social networks is essential to grasp their potential and develop effective communication strategies.

This segment will give a historical overview of the evolution of social media starting from the 1990s and will show not only the key steps in the evolution of these platforms but also the ways in which, in 20 years, they have globally revolutionized the social habits of the people who use them.

The social media phenomenon has not only influenced the way those who use it socialize, purchase, inform, and entertain themselves but also the way companies view their products or services and communicate with customers by shifting from transactional marketing to relationship marketing.

The phenomenon is recent but continues to evolve from year to year and shows no signs of slowing down and will surely continue with its trends to change the world of the future.

## 1.3.1 The history of social media

As Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) state, social media are a group of Internet-based applications that are based on the ideological and technological principles of Web 2.0 and enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

But how did the first social media come about, and how have they developed since then?

The first "social" activity can be traced back to 1971, when Ray Tomlinson sent the first e-mail within ARPANET, the project carried out by a division of the U.S. Department of Defense that laid the foundation for the Internet.

Then, on February 16, 1978, the first Bulletin Board System (BBS) went online, a system that allowed users to exchange both messages and files and access databases by connecting their computers to the telephone network via a modem.

In 1988 Jarno Oikarinen developed Internet Relay Chat (IRC), the first real-time chat system on the Internet. Based on a server-client system, IRC allowed two or more users to connect on one of its server channels, where they could write or read messages regarding a specific topic. IRC gave significant proof of the power of the Internet in creating international social networks, where news and interactions could break through the barriers of the pre-digital world. Famously, it played a key role in certain historical moments, from spreading the news of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to coordinating communications between survivors and rescue workers in the 9/11 attack.

With the advent of the World Wide Web and Web 1.0 in the 1990s, the first platforms attributable to social media in today's version were born. The most prominent is SixDegrees (1997), commonly recognized as the first social media platform ever created. The functionality of this platform was basic, being limited to creating a profile, creating a network of "friends," and sending simple messages.

It will take until the early 2000s, and then the advent of Web 2.0, for the first modern social media to be born, platforms designed to have the concept of UGC at their core. Therefore, in their architecture, they sought to emphasize user-created content and interaction between people. These years saw the birth of LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006), now X. These socials would become the drivers of change in the dissemination of information.

Many companies will land on major social media, thus starting a new branch of digital marketing, social media marketing. On platforms such as YouTube and Facebook (and then also Instagram and TikTok), the figures of content creators will also emerge, i.e., users who produce original content, usually with a specific topic, and who earn money based on the views of their videos.

From 2010 onward, some of the most widely used platforms still used today and recognized worldwide take hold. Instagram (2010) was born as a mobile-first platform, abandoning the centrality of the desktop version and promoting the use of the site at all convenient times. The social was focused on instant photo sharing to be customized with "filters," a unique feature that quickly made it world-famous. The increasingly creative nature of its content, the ability to make viral posts, and the high levels of engagement are just some of the elements that over the years have

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made Instagram the platform of choice for businesses as the channel of choice for corporate communications and digital marketing. According to a Statista report (2024), more than 70 percent of brands globally use Instagram for their marketing strategies. In addition, content on Instagram has an average engagement rate of 1.22 percent, higher than Facebook (0.07 percent) and X/Twitter (0.05 percent), making it particularly effective for B2C campaigns.

Following the acquisition by Meta, the new name of the holding company that to date owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, in 2012, new features, inspired by other social media, such as stories and reels (which will be explored in more detail a little later), live and integrated shops, were integrated, giving influencers very useful tools to get more and more in touch with their followers. As a result, they have opened the possibility for businesses to leverage the influencers themselves to reach as many users as possible, thus giving birth to the very important tool of influencer marketing.

Reinforcing the concept of visual storytelling, also in 2010, comes a new social media of a totally different character: Pinterest. Although less oriented toward direct social interaction, Pinterest, due to its systems of thematic boards and Pins. Pins are bookmarks that people use to save their favorite content, creating catalogs of ideas. On Pinterest you can create image and video Pins, as well as other types of Pins, such as Detailed Pins and Product Pins. In 2015, the shoppable pin (Shop the Look) was introduced, a tool that facilitates direct purchase from pins by providing business opportunities for brands. This strategy yielded remarkable immediate results: those who in fact implemented the "Shop the Look" strategy saw a significant increase in sales.

In 2011 Snapchat created a new feature that would soon be implemented in all other social stories. This social is based on temporary content that vanishes in 24 hours, stories, and chats with ephemeral messages. Snapchat quickly became a global phenomenon, managing to compete against the biggest socials of the day. However, once its main content was implemented by Meta on Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, along with many controversial stories, users quickly lost interest in the platform.

Instead, 2016 is the turn of the fastest platform to reach one billion registered users in history: TikTok. The Chinese platform owned by ByteDance again revolutionizes the method of user engagement, focusing on content of up to one minute (although as of today the maximum length of videos that can be uploaded to the platform has been extended to 10 min). TikTok is the latest company to redefine the logic of entertainment and content enjoyment, accelerating the spread of the format of short videos, songs, and viral challenges, all features later taken up by Instagram with Reels and YouTube with Shorts. Unlike Snapchat, however, TikTok endures, thanks in part to its engagement-based algorithm that allows even users with few or zero followers to reach millions of views with a single video. TikTok, along with Instagram, is one of the biggest opportunities for brands that nonetheless have to try to connect with increasingly wary young people who increasingly value creative, spontaneous, and original content over the usual marketing strategies.

As of February 2025, the number of unique users registered on social media is 5.24 billion people (about 64 percent of the world's population), and in We Are Social's World Digital World in 2025 report, it was noted that the sixth and seventh reasons for which social media are used are "finding products to purchase" and "finding inspirations for things to do or buy." Social media in modern society is one of the most effective marketing tools.

For them to be exploited to the fullest in marketing strategies, companies need to keep four issues in mind: the type of social networks, the demographics of the users who populate them, the primary functionality that these media offer companies, and social commerce. Let us now go into detail about these four points and how they can define successful marketing strategies. Now let's go into detail about the typology of social media that exists.

## 1.3.2 The types of social networks

Not all social media work the same way. In fact, there are different types of social media, and each of them has different characteristics for both the users and the companies that use them.

It is possible to distinguish social networks into:

- Collaborative projects, collective collaboration platforms.
- Blogs and microblogs, publishing text content and short updates.
- Content communities sharing media content such as videos, images, and documents.
- Social networking sites with the creation and management of personal profiles and social relationships.
- Virtual game worlds, interactive environments for multiplayer games.
- Virtual social worlds, simulations of social environments in 3D.

The category to which older social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and X belong is that of social networks. The purpose of these socials was that real social networks would come into being that are cultivated daily by users. Companies often and frequently conduct branding and customer service activities here.

Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, on the other hand, fall into the category of media-sharing networks. The primary activity on these platforms is to post content such as photos and videos in different formats. In these media, companies take advantage of influencers, who are ideal for promoting products and services to specific audiences.

Instead, places where users share advice or ask questions, such as Reddit, are known as discussion forums. Companies tend to use these socials for market research, customer service, and to gather ideas.

Finally, there are platforms that some users rely on to make decisions; these are sites for consumer reviews. Sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor aim to disseminate consumers' thoughts about a company or product, making it critical for companies to understand consumers' experience with their brand.

Each social is used by different audience groups. Facebook, for example, has a larger user base than the other socials, with balanced age groups of users. Facebook is predominantly used by people between the ages of 18 and 44, with greater representation among 25–34-year-olds (31.4%). X also has a very similar pool, with 58% of users being under 35 years old. While Instagram and TikTok are populated more by Millennials, and especially for TikTok, by Gen Z.

The next section will discuss one of the aforementioned digital marketing strategies in more detail: social media marketing (SMM). SMM, in fact, is home to two phenomena central to this experimental thesis: Influencer Marketing and Employee Generated Content.

## 1.4 Social Media Marketing, a strategic lever of digital

Businesses today need social media marketing (SMM) as a key strategic tool. It lets them not only promote their products and services but also talk directly to the public. According to academic literature, SMM is based on the use of social platforms to reach current and potential users, encouraging content sharing and continuous interaction (Dwivedi et. alt, 2021).

As Sabri et al. (2021) also point out, social networks, which began as personal communication tools, have evolved into true marketing channels, capable of influencing brand positioning and purchasing decisions.

The next paragraphs discuss the most significant elements of SMM, focusing on EGC and how it affects brands.

### 1.4.1 Main features of the SMM

In recent years, Social Media Marketing (SMM) has emerged as one of the most dynamic and central tools in companies' communication and promotional strategies. Its strength lies in its ability to connect brands and users in real time within participatory digital ecosystems, in which communication is increasingly interactive. In this new scenario, companies no longer limit themselves to broadcasting advertising messages but co-construct value and meaning with their audiences through a plurality of tools and formats.

The main features of SMM are articulated in several complementary dimensions.

First, the variety of platforms allows brands to simultaneously preside over different digital spaces, each with specific logics of use and targets (Instagram for visual aesthetics, TikTok for viral content, LinkedIn for B2B, etc.). Associated with this plurality is the diversity of content, ranging from short videos and stories to podcasts, live broadcasts, and textual posts.

Another aspect that makes SMM different is how intense the interactions are. In fact, companies now talk directly to customers through comments, private messages, and participatory campaigns, this is a big change from the one-way model of traditional marketing. This interactive approach is closely related to connectivity, which is the ability to create cross-media connections between users, brands, and communities, helping spread electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM).

Another significant component of the picture is how new technologies like AI and social listening tools can be used to analyze large amounts of data to tailor messages and predict how people will act in the future (Bashar et al., 2024).

However, it is possible to say that among the most significant declinations of SMM, two elements of all have taken a central role in building brand perception: Influencer Marketing and User Generated Content, or UGC, and Employee Generated Content, or EGC.

It is from this assumption that this thesis work is developed, with the intention of investigating how Social Media Marketing, through tools such as Influencer Marketing and user-generated content (UGC and especially EGC), influences brand perception, trust building, and engagement in the context of contemporary digital marketing.

**1.4.2 SMM and the influence on Employee Generated Content: first hints**

With the emergence of SMM as a strategic lever in the digital landscape, a new form of content has emerged that is taking center stage in business communication today: Employee Generated Content (EGC). This type of content, produced spontaneously or strategically by company employees, stands out for its authenticity and ability to generate trust, being particularly effective in a socially oriented context.

SMM has changed the way businesses talk to customers and provided employees new ways to promote the brand.

Social media allow employees to share their experiences, professional successes, and company initiative, this makes the content seem real and unmediated, which helps the company's reputation (Sabri et al., 2021). This process has been facilitated

by the growing importance of employee advocacy, integrated into digital marketing strategies.

According to a study conducted by Del Bosco et al. (2023), based on a sample of 224 Italian employees, explicit company encouragement and the adoption of clear social guidelines significantly promote the production of positive content by workers. In particular, the research found that specific training and a corporate culture open to digital dialogue are crucial in activating this type of participation, especially among those who are not digital natives or not very inclined to use social media. It is, therefore, a strategic lever for improving corporate visibility and strengthening employer branding.

As will be seen in subsequent chapters, integrating EGC into social media marketing campaigns produces significant benefits in terms of engagement and brand trust. Recent studies have shown that content shared by employees receives interaction rates up to eight times higher than content posted by official company pages.

Furthermore, when employees are engaged, communication inside and outside the company is more consistent, which makes the brand seem more human and trustworthy to the public.

In the context of the transition towards Web Marketing 4.0, EGC becomes a strategic asset for businesses focused on transparency and customer relations.

Social media marketing acts as a catalyst for these dynamics, offering tools and spaces to enhance the internal voice of the organization, in this way, the synergy between SMM and EGC is one of the most exciting things to happen in the future of business communication.

User Generated Content (UGC), and especially Employee Generated Content (EGC), is another very natural and persuasive way to communicate. People think this content is honest and trustworthy, which helps to strengthen the idea that the brand is open and honest (Shetty et al., 2024). Recent research has shown that user-generated content (UGC) helps build trust in a company, encourages customers to interact with it, and makes it more likely that people will recommend it through e-WOM (Usman & Wijaya, 2025).

It is from these initial hints that all the focal considerations of this paper arise, all the fertile ground for investigating the themes of the next chapter. It will describe how the union of Influencer Marketing and UGC gives rise to a hybrid communication ecosystem in which sponsored content, spontaneous reviews, personal storytelling, and active consumer participation feed off each other. When integrated consistently, these elements generate a "social proof" effect that reinforces peer influence dynamics and increases trust toward the brand.

The effectiveness of authentic influencers and genuine testimonials (including photos, reviews, and user videos) in humanizing the brand, increasing perceived closeness and consistency, and boosting favorability, engagement, and loyalty metrics has been also analyzed (Samanta, 2025).

# Chapter 2

**The new frontiers of marketing: from Influencer Marketing to Employee Generated Content (EGC)**

**2.1 Influencer Marketing**

### 2.1.1 Influencers' Evolution

Influencers are social media users with a large following that generates content online that can influence their followers' opinions and behavior. If at the beginning those people were just normal people that gained moderate visibility through the quality of their content, through the years they became real online celebrities. Each influencer has a specific area of interest and specialization; for example, there are influencers that mainly talk about make-up, fashion, travel, video games, music, etc. Being an influencer today, therefore, means representing a real professional figure, with involvement in structured advertising campaigns as well. According to Abidin (2016), this evolution from amateur users to professional micro-celebrities reflects the changing digital economy, where perceived authenticity and continuous interaction play a key role. It is within this frame of reference that Influencer Marketing fits.

Influencer Marketing is a marketing strategy that belongs to the Digital Marketing area, that implies a collaboration between popular social media users and brands to promote brands' products or services and facilitate consumer purchase decision-making.

Influencer marketing is now considered one of the most effective tools in the digital landscape. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) show that the combination of high visibility and subject specialization increases the perceived credibility of the influencer and improves the effectiveness of communication compared to traditional testimonials.

What made the adoption of this technique and these new figures interesting compared to more traditional testimonials (famous people such as actors, singers, or athletes who appear in advertisements or on billboards) is the possibility they have to interact with their followers, establish a dialogue, and create a greater sense of authenticity for the sponsorship. They have only been able to do this thanks to

the channel in which they operate. In advertising, the testimonial delivers a message in a one-way manner, whereas if an influencer posts a story or photo promoting a particular product, this can generate real-time interactions in which both the brand and the influencer can respond and create engagement or a stronger community.

Two-way dialogue is a key element in influencer strategy. According to Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard (2020), perceived authenticity comes precisely from the possibility for the user to interact with the influencer, to ask questions, or to witness "real-life" moments, which distinguishes influencers from traditional advertising testimonials.

In addition, the Two-Step flow theory (Katz, 1957) has brought up the concept of opinion leadership, which applies perfectly to the definition of influencer. In fact, the theory suggests that when an opinion leader, someone who has a better knowledge and familiarity with media and enjoys credibility and trust from the opinion followers (the masses), processes a message and sends it to the public, they're more likely to influence public opinion and behavior than traditional mass media. This theory is the basis for the success of this phenomenon.

The above-mentioned Two-Step Flow model is still one of the most cited theoretical foundations in the study of influencer marketing. Influencers represent exactly that figure of a mediator between the media and the public, capable of reworking and disseminating content in a personalized manner, contributing to the formation of collective opinion.

Figure n.2: *Influencer post in collaboration with a make-up brand*



Source: *Giovanna Goglino IG profile*

The birth of influencers coincides with the birth of social media, but before them there were various figures who participated in the construction of this figure. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, blogs were born, where regular people could post content of interest to them and thus create a community with their followers. Many of these blogs became so popular that they were able to place advertising banners that were displayed to anyone who visited the page to read a new article. One of the first examples of a blogger who managed to earn a steady income from her articles was Heather Armstrong, who, thanks to her blog for mothers, Dooce, reached 8.5 million visitors per month in 2009, earning up to $40,000 per month.

Heather Armstrong was a symbol of the transition from amateur to semi-professional communication: her case shows how trust built within a niche can generate consistent economic results.

However, the evolution of influencers has deeper roots than just the birth of Instagram or TikTok. After the launch of YouTube in early 2000, some of those bloggers changed their communication from blog articles to video blogs (vlogs), documenting their personal experiences, opinions, stories, or daily activities, filmed in a "diary" style.

Examples of vloggers in Italy are HumanSafari (Travel), Jakidale (Tech & Product Review), Michele Molteni (Tech & Do It Yourself), and Emma Mezzadri (Day In The Life, Personal Growth). In addition to vlogs, YouTube features a wide variety of other content, such as gameplay videos (MikeShowSha or FaviJ), educational videos (GeoPop), niche videos (e.g., SlimDogs with content about cinema and movie productions), challenges (Mr. Beast), or sketches (Le Coliche, I Barbari). With YouTube, the vloggers were born, and the content creation became a worldwide phenomenon with users uploading videos on a wide range of topics. During this period the users started to enjoy and get used to video content and visual storytelling.

As highlighted by Burgess and Green (2018), YouTube has not only enabled the dissemination of authentic content but has also democratized the production of video content, setting the stage for the rise of the creator economy. With the advent of modern social media, Instagram, and TikTok, the figure of the influencer was

born. This category includes anyone with a large following who has the ability to influence their followers. So, unlike vloggers, bloggers, or YouTubers, where it was difficult to find people who already enjoyed celebrity status thanks to their achievements in sports, film, or television, well-known figures began to appear among influencers.

Modern social media has broken down the barriers of access to digital celebrities. According to Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017), the modern influencer is a self-promoting micro-celebrity (as already, in part, anticipated), creating a personal brand through posted content and relying on visibility, accessibility, and relationality.

This is also due to the structure of social networks. YouTube and blog articles, for example, were based on the creation of written or audiovisual content that was complex to write or film and edit, which sometimes took a lot of time. Furthermore, the income they could gain from these media would not have been comparable to what they were already earning. With Instagram and TikTok, however, content has become much faster to shoot and post, sometimes without even needing to edit the videos, and the average length of content is between 30 seconds and a minute. The brevity and immediacy of this content, typical of TikTok and Instagram, have indeed changed communication codes: rapid fruition has become the norm, and the viral potential has made these spaces ideal for companies that want to reach large and segmented audiences in a short time (Freberg et al., 2011).

Given the viral potential of this content, companies are willing to pay much more for sponsorship.

The celebrities that operate on social media as influencers are called "celebrity influencers" and usually have more than a million followers.

Influencers can be divided into five categories based on the number of followers they have:

- Mega Influencers (> 1M followers)
- Macro Influencers (500k - 1M followers)
- Mid-Tier Influencers (50k - 500k followers)
- Micro Influencers (10k - 50k followers)
- Nano Influencers (1k - 10k followers)

This classification is useful for companies that want to identify the right profile based on the target audience and available budget. Recent studies indicate that micro and nano influencers often generate higher engagement and a greater perception of authenticity, despite having less visibility. Specifically, micro-influencers, despite having fewer followers, are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy: their relationship with the public is often more direct and personal, which fosters higher levels of engagement than mega-influencers, who are often seen as more aloof or motivated by financial interests.

Over time, the phenomenon of influences has grown so much that these figures can often be found in contexts that, in the early days of the web and social media, few would have thought they would reach. In fact, in recent years it has not been difficult to see Web Stars first and influencers now creating brands (e.g., Huda Kattan with "Huda Beauty" in the beauty world or Chiara Ferragni with "Chiara Ferragni Collection" in the fashion world), participating in films either in major roles or as extras (e.g., Addison Rae in "He's All That" or Frank Matano in "Ma Che Bella Sorpresa"), or writing books (e.g., Carlotta Perego or Alessia Lanza).

The contemporary influencer is now, therefore, a cross-media figure: entrepreneur, testimonial, author, and actor. This shows how the influencer is no longer just a "medium" but a true "personal brand," capable of capitalizing on its social and cultural capital (Marwick, 2013).

### 2.1.2 Relevant theoretical framework

In the last paragraph it was shown how the influencers were born. and their evolution from bloggers to web stars with YouTube and then influencers with the new media. In this section will be shown the underlying theoretical models governing the mechanisms that lead Influencer Marketing to be a successful tool. Using these models, it has been possible to explain how influencers affect consumer perceptions, message credibility, and purchase behavior, and to highlight different aspects of the relationship between brand and audience.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing can only be fully understood if we refer to the theoretical models that explain its psychological and communicative

functioning. Such models help to interpret how users process influencers' messages and on what cognitive basis the trust in them is based on (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). One of the models underlying the analysis of influencer marketing effectiveness is the Source Credibility Model. Developed by Hovland and Weiss (1951) and then adapted to online communication by Ohanian in 1990, this model today posits as the underlying element of the influencer-user relationship the user's perceived credibility toward the source of the message (influencer). In order to measure the credibility of the content creator and thus the results on consumer behavior (e.g., Purchase Intention) or Brand Equity dimensions (e.g., Brand Awareness, Brand Loyalty, Brand Image), four basic dimensions should be kept in mind (Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova, 2022):

- Expertise: The degree of knowledge of the topic or subject matter covered by the creator;
- Trustworthiness: The perceived sincerity, honesty and integrity of the source;
- Attractiveness: Perceived social or aesthetic appeal of influencers;
- Similarity: Perceived degree of similarity between the endorser and the customer.

The source credibility model is one of the most applied in the study of influencer marketing. The three basic factors given above determine the effectiveness of the message.

For a promotional message to be successful and the persuasion attempt to succeed, the source must be perceived as competent, honest, socially attractive, and perceived with a high degree of similarity with the consumer. It was also noted the importance and fragility of the message and influencer's credibility. To support this, in the studies of Belanche et al. (2021), it is shown that when users perceive that a sponsored product doesn't fit with the influencer and that the collaboration is based solely on money, the dimension that is most negatively affected is exactly the credibility.

A second theoretical model that is important for understanding how this phenomenon works is the Persuasion Knowledge Model.

The PKM, developed by [Friestad and Wright (1994)](#), is a theoretical model that shows consumers' reactions to attempts at persuasion in marketing. With the studies made on the functioning of the model, it has been noted that a higher level of awareness of the persuasive nature of a message can change the way people respond to it and its source. Over time, people develop knowledge about persuasion techniques, which, combined with knowledge about a specific topic and knowledge about an influencer or brand, forms their system of reception and detection of persuasive attempts in messages.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) shows that modern audiences are no longer passive but endowed with "persuasive knowledge" that influences the reception of advertising messages. When content is perceived as artificial or overly commercial, cognitive resistance is activated, which reduces the effectiveness of the message ([Boerman et al. 2017](#)).

There are two other theories in the literature on why users tend to trust influencers more than any other type of testimonial. One is the two-step flow of communication, already presented in the last passage, and the second is the Parasocial Relationship. Originated with the study of the relationship between endorsers and audiences in the era of mass-media communication alone, this relationship is defined as a one-sided socio-emotional bond that is created between consumers and the endorser. With the arrival of social media, however, this bond becomes more refined, because through comments and direct messages, users can finally connect with the endorser, in this case the influencer, bringing illusory social experiences or pseudo-friendships where followers feel a sense of intimacy and companionship with the media persona, despite the lack of true reciprocity.

The "parasocial relationship" theory is now central to the study of emotional engagement between influencers and followers. [Horton and Wohl (1956)](#) defined these relationships as unidirectional and illusory, but with social media the line between real and fictional has blurred, generating a feeling of intimacy and closeness that reinforces trust and perceived influence ([Tsiotsou, 2015](#)).

The last topic to be covered in this passage explains how a celebrity's attributes and public image influence the attributes of the brands it sponsors, emphasizing the

importance of this technique for a brand manager in managing a brand's image and reputation.

This is a cognitive bias known as the Halo Effect ([Thorndike, 1920](#)), which causes people to make general judgments about someone based on certain traits or qualities they have: a phenomenon that psychologists and marketers' study extensively. In particular it means that if you think someone has good qualities, you might also think that the things or brands that person is associated with have good qualities. [McCracken (1989)](#) demonstrated that the symbolic traits of the endorser, including authenticity, elegance, and rebelliousness, are conveyed to the endorsed product, thereby affecting its perception. When this concept was first introduced in marketing, it referred to how qualities of a single product could extend to an entire brand and all its products. The same was then applied for celebrity or influencer endorsement; the perceived characteristics of a celebrity, in fact, can influence the perception of everything the influencer promotes, and in this case, the brand and its products.

### 2.1.3 Findings from the literature and critical issues: loss of trust and credibility

While the previous passage highlighted the tools and theories that have brought Influencer Marketing to success, this one will show the current state of the phenomenon and how it, despite increased investment, is experiencing a moment of crisis.

Despite the apparent expansion of the industry and growing investment, influencer marketing is facing a phase of profound transformation. The most recent data show that its impact is no longer linear and obvious: market saturation, declining trust, and growing audience awareness have led to a shift in the perception of this content ([John & Supramaniam, 2023](#)).

Over the past 2 to 3 years, influencers, especially the larger ones and those who make more endorsements, have begun to lose their effectiveness on the users who follow them. One of the reasons why this phenomenon is experiencing a downturn is due to Audience Fatigue. In fact, sometimes it also happens that a single influencer in a single day publishes between posts and stories several pieces of

sponsored content (#adv) related to different brands; this, multiplied by the number of influencers around, together with the average hours spent on social media by each person (2h 21min), creates a huge stream of sponsored content that, from day to day, leads to a weakening of the influencer's impact. Users begin to feel overwhelmed by all the ads, decreasing the engagement of this content but also the trust towards the creator and the brand.

Audience fatigue is thus a widely recognized concept today. When users perceive an excess of sponsored content, which is often repetitive and not very distinctive, they develop a form of disinterest or even annoyance, which results in a drastic decline in engagement (Hughes et al., 2019). In this way, trust, which was the foundation of the influencer-follower relationship, is gradually eroded.

Users became increasingly aware that influencers, from trusted people whose suggestions and opinions suggested brands or products that they truly valued, became true endorsers whose opinions were influenced by the financial compensation behind the content. As a result of this, users have raised the barriers of the Persuasion Knowledge Model, becoming increasingly skeptical and negatively impacting both their attitudes toward creators and their behavioral engagement, lowering the perceived trustworthiness of the influencer.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) helps explain how this growing awareness leads users to develop cognitive resistance. The perception of authenticity, a cornerstone of influencers' success, is undermined when users sense the prevalence of economic interest over the genuineness of the recommendation (Boerman et al., 2017). As a result, the trustworthiness and effectiveness of the message are lowered.

Another reason why trust toward this marketing strategy has declined for brand management is the various scandals surrounding influencers and celebrities. Recently, many events related to influential figures in the social world, but also in the entertainment, fashion, or business world, have led to serious consequences of image and trust towards a brand or product. This is due to the diminishing halo effect studied by Cui et al. (2025). Recent scandals involving public figures, such as the Ferragni-Balocco case in Italy, which will be explored in more detail in the following pages, have thus shown how fragile the link between influencer personal

image and brand is. Therefore, that Halo Effect that once guaranteed the transfer of positive value from the testimonial to the brand can now become a reputational boomerang when negative qualities prevail (Cui et al., 2025).

As mentioned earlier, through the halo effect, the perceptions one has toward an influencer can also be transmitted to the sponsoring brand, and this applies not only to positive perceptions but also to negative ones. Through the causal attribution model, it is shown that internal attribution of blame by consumers drastically reduces the effectiveness of the celebrity endorser and the credibility of the brand itself. These dynamics are amplified by the social media ecosystem, which accelerates and polarizes reactions and generates enormous reputational crises.

Causal attribution theories indicate that when consumers directly blame the influencer, and by extension the brand, for scandals or controversial behavior, the damage to credibility can be immediate and profound (Dean, 1999). Social media, with its viral and polarizing mechanisms, acts as an amplifier of reputational crises, making it difficult for companies to disassociate themselves in time.

In addition, another data point on the trend of Influencer Marketing, especially regarding the big names of the web, comes from a study DeRev, a strategy, communication and digital marketing company, which has compiled again this year a list of the fees of influencers in Italy, pointing out that the fees of big influencers have dropped dramatically in the last two years, especially after Pandorogate, putting the focus on micro and nano influencers who, according to DeRev CEO Roberto Esposito, "are able to offer more profiled targets and a higher degree of trust from their community, which translate into an authority of merit, based on the quality and value of the content they produce, and not on fame".

The DeRev report confirms a relevant trend, already anticipated in the pages above: the market is gradually shifting its focus to micro and nano influencers. These figures, despite having a smaller audience, enjoy greater trust and credibility, thanks to a more authentic and less commercial relationship with their audience (Casaló et al., 2020). This makes them ideal for targeted and relational communication strategies.

In addition, Esposito further states that "the fact that they are not particularly well-known and exposed limits the risk of reputational crisis. Finally, this way of

distributing the budget favors long-term collaborations based on the storytelling of brands and products on a recurring basis throughout the year, while the cost of a celebrity forces, in most cases, the activation of spot partnerships for single pieces of content that sell out within 48 hours of publication."

Continuous collaborations, distributed over time, are now a more effective strategy in terms of brand awareness and loyalty. Micro and nano influencers perform well in this type of storytelling, contributing to the construction of a more solid and consistent brand image because of the lower exposure risk reduces the possibility of sudden reputational damage (Marques et al., 2022).

### 2.1.4 Successful case studies

This section will describe four case studies on recent Influencer Marketing scandals and how these have also brought backlashes on the companies these influencers sponsored or owned.

The first case study is one of the most recent and famous, especially for the Italian scene, the Ferragni-Balocco case (Pandorogate).

Chiara Ferragni is one of the first influencers, born exclusively on social media, to become internationally famous and also create her own brand, Chiara Ferragni Brand. Ferragni began her journey on the web by opening the blog "The Blonde Salad" in 2009; this one was focused on fashion and lifestyle, gaining great success. Soon thereafter she would enjoy great success by launching a line of shoes in 2010 and also participating in television products such as Project Runway or the MTV TRL Awards. After also managing to collaborate with illustrious brands such as Steve Madden or Barbie with a doll dedicated to her, in 2016 she was included by Forbes in the list of the thirty "Art & Style" Under 30 influencers of the year, and in 2017 she was listed again by Forbes as the world's most important woman influencer. Over the years, she continues to ride the wave of success, even going so far as to become a member of Tod's board of directors, produce a series aired on Prime Video about her relationship with her ex-husband (Fedez) called "The Ferragnez," and co-host the 2023 Sanremo Festival. The scandal in question took hold in the summer of 2023 when the AGCM (Italian Antitrust Authority) launched an investigation against Balocco S.p.A. and the companies that manage the

trademarks and rights related to Chiara Ferragni, Fenice S.r.l., and TBS Crew S.r.l., for "unfair business practice." The practice in question relates to the initiative of Ferragni-themed Balocco Pandors put on the market that Christmas season to support the Regina Margherita Children's Hospital in Turin. The case came up when it was found out that, contrary to what the ads suggested, buying the Ferragni-branded pandoro did not directly affect the amount of money given to the hospital: in fact, months before the product launch, Balocco had already given a set amount of 50,000 euros. However, the advertisement implied that the donation would increase based on sales, leading consumers to think they were actively participating in the charitable cause with their purchase.

The Competition and Market Authority (AGCM) deemed the communication "likely to mislead consumers" and fined Chiara Ferragni more than 1 million euros, as well as fining Balocco as well (AGCM, 2023).

The reputational impact was significant: there was a massive wave of hate on social media, culminating in an image crisis for the influencer and the brands involved. Several brands have discontinued ongoing collaborations, public trust has declined, and pressure for greater transparency in influencer marketing has increased.

This case has shed light on the extent to which the perceived responsibility of the influencer, even in charitable initiatives, can reflect negatively on the companies with which he or she collaborates, opening up an important debate about ethics in commercial communication and consumer expectations of public figures of reference.

Another emblematic case concerns Elon Musk, an entrepreneur, innovator, and extremely influential figure on social media. While not an influencer in the traditional sense, Musk exerts a direct and powerful influence on his companies through his online activity, particularly on X (formerly Twitter), which he also owns (Corte, 2020).

Over the years, his social media posts have had immediate and sometimes destabilizing effects on financial markets. In particular, Tesla, the company of which he is CEO and main public face, has been repeatedly embroiled in controversies caused by impulsive or unverified statements posted by Musk. A relevant example is the 2018 tweet in which Musk stated that he wanted to privatize

Tesla at $420 per share, claiming that he had the necessary funds already secured. This announcement provoked an immediate reaction from the markets, a surge in the stock price on the stock market, and subsequently an investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) that led to a $40 million fine and Musk being forced to temporarily step down as chairman of the company's board of directors.

In other words, Musk's public identity and his online activity can have tangible and sometimes unpredictable effects on the reputation and financial stability of his companies (Frick, 2021). Unlike the Ferragni case, where the influencer is external to the sponsored brand, Musk represents a case in which the influencer coincides with the company itself, amplifying the intermingling of personal and institutional communication and raising questions about governance, communicative reliability, and the boundary between personal branding and corporate responsibility.


## 2.2 Employee Generated Content

### 2.2.1 – ECG: Definition and reference scenario

As shown in this thesis, especially in the previous section, communication has changed a lot in recent years, driven by a growing need for authenticity, trust, and engagement. The same principle has driven the growth of Influencer Marketing (see section 2.1.1), where the credibility of influencers, perceived as "ordinary people," has gradually replaced the credibility of traditional endorsers. However, for companies, alongside Influencer Marketing (external subject), a new form of communication operated from within has established itself: Employee Generated Content (EGC).

When talking about EGC, people refer to the production of textual, photographic, and multimedia content created directly by a company's employees, who narrate personal experiences within the company, moments from their working lives, company initiatives, the internal climate of the company, or how certain products work.

This content can be shared on the company's official channels (such as the intranet or newsletter) or spontaneously shared on employees' personal social media

accounts, such as LinkedIn, TikTok, or Instagram. The uniqueness of EGC lies in its testimonial value: it is not content made up by marketing, but authentic voices that emerge from below.

As in the case of influencers, whose communicative effectiveness derives largely from the perception of authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020) and from the sense of closeness built through direct dialogue with their audience, EGC is also based on the same relational dynamic. Employees, in fact, do not act as testimonials but as "internal opinion leaders," capable of conveying a credible and authoritative image of the company. This mechanism is in line with the Two-Step Flow model, which is the basis of influencer marketing, in which opinion leaders filter and rework the message, amplifying its communicative effectiveness.

An experimental study by Saleem and Hawkins (2021) showed that content voluntarily posted by employees on social media, such as an Instagram post showing the use of a company product, has a positive impact on consumers' purchasing intentions. In particular, the study shows that employees who publish content on a personal basis are perceived as individuals with a high level of Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB), i.e., as people who are committed and loyal to the company, going beyond their contractual role. This behavior increases users' perception of competence, which in turn strengthens both trust in the content and persuasive effectiveness. The study also highlighted that, contrary to what happens with influencers, where it has been seen that the perception of sponsorship can reduce consumer trust, in the case of employees, the transparency and spontaneity of EGC content does not generate the same negative effect. In fact, even when consumers are aware of the professional role of the content creator (the employee), perceived authenticity remains high, especially if the content does not appear forced or institutional.

Logically, the result achieves maximum effectiveness when content is conveyed through employees' personal channels. Over the past year, however, companies have realized the great communicative power of this tool and, trying to maintain its authenticity, have begun both reposting content created by employees on their official channels and creating new content using the employees themselves as testimonials, as in the case of Wurth Italy, which has chosen to publish videos on

the company's official social media channels in which its employees follow trends or showcase products or tutorials, accompanied by bloopers and behind-the-scenes footage.

It is clear that the digital environment and the evolution of social networks contribute to giving visibility and potentially viral impact even to content created by employees, who, like influencers, exploit the power of visual storytelling to convey a corporate image that is personally experienced rather than constructed. This approach has strategic value both for employer branding (Universum, 2023) and for building brand trust in the long term.

That said, it should be remembered that the EGG phenomenon is relatively recent and constantly evolving, making it difficult to define its boundaries. For this very reason, particularly now that companies have begun to use their internal resources (their employees) as a channel of communication, many aspects remain to be defined and regulated, such as:

- the employee's consent to use their image: the company cannot use content (photos, videos, posts) without the employee's explicit permission. For this reason, many companies are creating internal policies to define clear rules and obtain written and informed consent;

- remuneration adjustment: this aspect is still unclear. Unlike influencers, employees do not usually receive direct compensation for content created spontaneously.

Furthermore, it should not be underestimated that the spread of EGC within the company can expose employees to both positive effects (the employee can become a point of reference in their sector, improving their "employer branding") and negative effects (repercussions for lack of consent or messages that are not in line with the company's communication strategies). In particular, to maintain the authenticity of the message, employees must be free to participate or not in EGC campaigns promoted by the company, without fear of repercussions on their work. It is essential that the company manage this process transparently, ensuring a clear boundary between professional and personal life to protect its employees.

In summary, although the literature on the subject is still in its early stages, Employee Generated Content is now considered a highly credible communication

resource that companies can cultivate not so much through editorial impositions but rather by promoting participatory work environments where employees truly feel like brand ambassadors. Furthermore, EGC is a strategic lever not only for marketing activities but also for employer branding, talent acquisition, internal engagement, and institutional reputation objectives.

Figure n.4: *EGC post on a company official profile*



Source: *Wurth Italy Instagram profile*

In an increasingly competitive job market, EGC is a key resource for building trust, transparency, and appeal among internal and external stakeholders.

### 2.2.2 – Prospects, benefits, and limitations

As stated previously, EGC is now an increasingly central communication tool in corporate strategy, which focuses on the perception of authenticity and the positive impact that voices considered reliable (those of employees) have on shaping public opinion and consumer decision-making processes. However, while the EGC offers

numerous strengths, it also has some critical issues that limit its effectiveness and require strategic reflection.

In terms of perceived credibility and authenticity, employees, just like micro and nano influencers, benefit from a double advantage. As internal members of the organization, they enjoy an aura of reliability that reinforces the communicative value of the content (Saleem & Hawkins, 2021). At the same time, because of their status as ordinary people, they enjoy a sense of closeness to the end consumer, which increases their resonance and impact (Saleem & Hawkins, 2021). The content produced by those who experience the company's reality on a daily basis is seen as spontaneous, genuine, and free from exclusively promotional purposes, increasing trust in the brand (Edelman, 2024).

In this sense, EGC can therefore strengthen employer branding and increase employee engagement. When an employee shares positive content about their company, they act as a spontaneous brand ambassador, generating positive WOM among their personal network (Universum, 2023). This reminds us of what happens with influencers, where the parasocial relationship and sense of community increase users' positive response.

In terms of costs, compared to traditional advertising campaigns or collaborations with macro-influencers, EGC stands out for its low production and publication costs, leveraging personal channels and organic dynamics (Freberg et al., 2011). Furthermore, in a communication context dominated by short, viral content, like on TikTok or Instagram Reels or even a simple post by an employee can gain wide visibility if it is perceived as authentic and useful.

The study by Saleem and Hawkins (2021) showed that EGC content reinforces the perception of Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB) and employee competence, who then becomes an authoritative figure in the eyes of consumers. This dynamic effectively responds to the Source Credibility Model, which seeks competence, reliability, and attractiveness to increase the communicative effectiveness of the source (Lou & Yuan, 2020).

It must be said, however, that the spontaneity and authenticity that characterize EGC content carry with them the risk of creating messages that are inconsistent with or counterproductive to the corporate image. (Dreher, 2014). While

encouraging this initiative, companies must strike a balance between authenticity and message control, avoiding prescriptive approaches that would negate its value. Furthermore, not all employees possess the communication or digital skills required to create quality content. This can lead to variability in effectiveness or the publication of content that is too unprofessional.

Unlike influencers, who cultivate their own "personal brand" (Khamis et al., 2017), most employees do not have reputational goals when communicating online

In fact, if EGC were perceived by consumers as an operation orchestrated by the company, it could trigger the defense mechanisms described by the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) (see section 2.1.3), reducing trust and undermining authenticity.

Furthermore, as we have already seen with scandals linked to influencer activities (e.g., the Ferragni-Balocco case or the Musk-Tesla case, discussed in previous paragraphs), even employee content can generate critical issues if their opinions, behavior, or online statements are harmful to the brand.

The risk of reputational dissonance is particularly high in highly regulated contexts or sensitive sectors (Cui et al., 2025).

Tab n.3: *Benefits and Limitations of EGC*

| Scope | Benefits | Limitations/Critical issues |
|---|---|---|
| **Authenticity/ Trust** | Content perceived as genuine by insiders generates greater credibility than corporate posts | If the content is perceived as too institutional, authenticity is reduced |
| **Engagement & Coverage** | Employee-generated content generates more engagement than the usual content | Possibility of isolation or poor outreach |
| **Cost & Sustainability** | Significantly more cost-effective than influencer or advertising campaigns | Risk of inconsistent quality among content generated by different employees |
| **Internal Employer Branding** | Stimulates a sense of belonging and employee engagement, strengthening employer branding | Lack of training leads to inconsistent or visually unappealing content |
| **Expertise Perception** | Increase the perception of competence and engagement through "pro-brand" behaviors | If the user perceives hidden commercial purposes, skepticism is generated |
| **Talents & Attraction** | Potential leverage to attract talent by showcasing genuine corporate culture | Reputational risk if employees express personal opinions that are negative or contrary to the brand's values |

Source: *our elaboration*

Tab n.4: *Influencer Marketing vs EGC*

| Aspect | Influencer Marketing | EGC |
|---|---|---|
| **Actors** | Influencers external to the brand | Brand's Employee |
| **Main Channels** | Posts & stories from the influencer profile or from brand's profile | Mainly posts from employee's profile and, since last year, from brand's profile too |
| **Costs** | High (fees for collaboration, production, campaign management) | Low (spontaneity and use of internal resources; possible training or coordination costs) |
| **Benefits** | High visibility, increased brand awareness, easy access to specific communities, positive halo effect | Authenticity, trust, brand image enhancement, employer branding, internal and external engagement |
| **Risks** | Loss of trust (audience fatigue, perception of sponsored content), scandals, and reputational damage linked to the influencer | Inconsistent or unprofessional content, reputational risks if employees share negative or critical messages |
| **Perceived Authenticity** | Often reduced by user awareness of sponsored content | Generalmente elevata, legata alla spontaneità e alla vicinanza dei dipendenti |

Source: *our elaboration*

EGC proves to be a tool with high communication potential, capable of humanizing the brand, strengthening internal and external engagement, and stimulating consumer confidence. However, even for EGC, the key to success is the strategic management of authenticity.

Companies should adopt a facilitative approach, offering training, ethical guidelines, and support, but leaving room for spontaneity. In this way, it will be possible to leverage human capital as a true narrative resource.

### 2.2.3 – Emblematic case studies

After examining the definitions, benefits, and limitations of EGC, it is useful to analyze some concrete cases that illustrate its application and effects, both in terms of branding and reputation. As in the case of influencer marketing (see section 2.1.4), EGC practices also take on very specific characteristics depending on the context: The effectiveness of EGC depends, in fact, on the corporate culture, the sector, the communication strategy, and the degree of autonomy given to employees.

One of the best-known cases is the employee advocacy program launched by Dell, designed to promote spontaneous content posted by employees on social media. Dell created a structured program that involved the entire organization with the objectives of training employees on corporate and personal social media channels (4 hours of training per participant), promoting voluntary content sharing through an organic and authentic approach, and generating traffic, awareness, and engagement through the real voices of employees.

Specifically, Dell provided resources and minimum guidelines, training over 10,000 employees, who upon completion of the training course received the title of "*Dell Certified Social Media and Community Professional.*" Participants are encouraged to share content that reflects their user experience, but with one rule: 80% of posts must be useful and personal content, while only 20% can explicitly refer to the Dell brand.

The result was surprising: over 150,000 content shares, with 45,000 clicks generated to the company website, demonstrating how EGC can have a tangible

impact in terms of conversion ([Everyonesocial, 2015](#)). Furthermore, the "80/20" approach reflects a conscious balance between spontaneity and control, which is essential for maintaining authenticity without compromising strategic alignment. In other words, Dell's employee advocacy program represents a virtuous model for large-scale EGC implementation because, thanks to targeted training, balanced guidelines, and a positive corporate culture, Dell has converted its employees into true brand ambassadors, achieving concrete results in terms of engagement, reputation, and economic return.

This example highlights what was discussed in the previous paragraph: content published by employees, if perceived as authentic, can have greater promotional power than institutional communication, at lower costs and with greater credibility. Another excellent example of the use of EGC for employer branding can be found at Starbucks. With the aim of humanizing the brand (showing the authentic, everyday side of its baristas and teams) and retaining and attracting talent (using spontaneous content that reflects the internal reality), Starbucks has built an employee advocacy strategy by giving a voice to its employees, known as "partners," encouraging them to share personal experiences related to corporate culture, daily work, and local engagement.

Specifically, through the hashtag #ToBeAPartner, employee partners publish posts on Instagram, X, and Facebook profiles, creating a feed of authentic stories motivated by the employees themselves. The company therefore encouraged baristas to share their daily lives, recounting personal anecdotes, customer interactions, or significant moments in the shop.

Since 2024, training courses dedicated to the production of TikTok and/or IG reels have been introduced, ensuring visual quality and narrative consistency within the advocacy program. In addition, Starbucks provides guidance on privacy, tone, and appropriate themes, while still allowing creative freedom to partners with the aim of maintaining authenticity and avoiding forced commercial messages. The generated content has taken on a very strong narrative value: not product promotion, but testimony to the corporate culture. This content, along with other content created specifically by the brand's marketing department but following the style of the content posted by employees, is posted and reposted daily on the brand's official

page, thus confirming the idea of an evolution of the phenomenon that also includes content not strictly created and published by the employee themselves but also products made by the marketing team that are as authentic and less institutional as possible, with the employees always at its core. This campaign helped increase employee engagement and attracted new talent, consolidating Starbucks' image as a great place to work. The campaign demonstrated the EGC's ability to strengthen internal and external reputational capital; in fact, it reinforced Starbucks' image as an inclusive and authentic environment.

Starbucks has successfully transformed its employees into authentic and creative brand ambassadors. The #ToBeAPartner model leverages spontaneity, everyday experiences, and corporate culture to generate content that has a greater impact than traditional campaigns. The strategy is effective in terms of brand visibility, engagement, and appeal but requires supervision and training to maintain consistency in communication. In this sense, the Starbucks case clearly shows the benefits: high engagement, strengthened employer branding, and low costs. However, it also highlights the risks associated with managing the program in the absence of clear guidelines or specific training.

Finally, another emblematic case (this time not in a positive sense) for ECG is that of a McDonald's employee and his viral TikTok video. Specifically, a McDonald's employee posted a video on TikTok showing behind-the-scenes footage of the restaurant, with images of the kitchen, sandwich preparation, and service under critical operating conditions.

The video went viral, gathering widespread attention on social media platforms, primarily TikTok. The post sparked strong reactions: on the one hand, gratitude and solidarity for the "heroic" employee, forced to manage the entire shift alone; on the other hand, widespread criticism of the company for its working conditions and understaffing.

This case confirms what has been discussed within the limits of the EGC: a lack of training, control, and a culture of responsibility can lead to content that damages the brand. Spontaneity, if not supported by a clear ethical and value-based approach, can backfire and damage reputation.

In general, however, these case studies confirm that EGC can be an effective and strategic tool, but only if used with narrative intelligence and internal support. The companies that achieve the best results are those that invest in employee training, promote an open culture, and leave room for people's authentic voices.

As with influencers, the balance between authenticity and consistency is the key to success here too.

Based on these considerations, the next chapter will focus on the research question that guides this work: *To what extent does the presence of different figures in brand communication, influencers or employees, affect consumer brand perception?* The experimental research methodology developed to explore these dynamics empirically will then be presented.

# Chapter 3

**Research and Analysis**

*Note on terminology*

Throughout the paper we adopt the following labels:

- Attitude Toward Brand (ATB),
- Purchase Intention (PI),
- Content Engagement (CE),
- and Word-of-Mouth Intention (WOM-I).

The independent variable is coded as 0 = Influencer Marketing (IM) and 1 = Employee-Generated Content (EGC).

## 3.1 Literature Gap and Research Model

In recent years, there have been many studies on the effect and effectiveness of influencer marketing on ATB, PI, CE, and WOM-I. However, in the recent past, scandals involving influencers, rising costs for sponsorships and collaborations, and the emergence of many new influencers have raised doubts about their credibility, persuasiveness, and economic and reputational risks for brands, encouraging companies to explore alternative communication strategies. As these events are recent, there have not been many studies on the evolution of this phenomenon, thus creating an initial gap in the literature on which this study is based.

One of the solutions that companies have adopted to begin finding communication channels that can be as effective as influencer marketing at its peak is EGC. However, EGC has only recently begun to gain popularity, so there is still little literature on the subject, making it fertile ground for new studies. The few studies conducted on EGC tend to focus on the impact of this phenomenon on employer branding; just one study brings out the effect on positive WOM and PI. Furthermore, none of these studies were conducted in Italy, and often the most important ones had a sample containing only one gender (women) or one age group (Generation Z).

This is the second gap found in the literature that will be covered by this study. In addition, at present, no study appears to have been conducted that directly

compares EGC and IM in terms of brand perception for consumers. This is, in fact, the final gap on which this study is based.

Once we have highlighted the gaps in the scientific literature, we must move on to the research question that guides the entire study (already shown at the end of the previous chapter).

Taken together, these dynamics reveal three gaps: (1) limited evidence on the recent evolution of influencer marketing; (2) scarce and geographically unbalanced research on EGC—mostly outside Italy and often with single-gender or single-cohort samples; and (3) the absence of direct comparisons between EGC and IM on consumer brand perception.

Building on these gaps, we ask (RQ): *To what extent does the presence of different figures in brand communication, influencers, or employees, affect consumer brand perception?*

Guided by the research question, we focus on four core outcomes that capture both evaluative and behavioral responses, ATB, PI, CE, and WOM-I, formulating the following hypotheses:

H1a: *EGC leads to a more positive attitude toward the brand compared to content with influencers.*

Attitude Toward the Brand was chosen as the variable to be studied because it is one of the key dimensions of brand equity and is considered a fundamental predictor of future behavior toward the brand.

H1b: *EGC leads to higher PI compared to content with influencers.*

PI is the variable that best measures the probability that an individual, in this case the survey respondent, will actually purchase the product/service shown. This is why it was chosen for this analysis, in addition to the fact that, until now, few if any studies had ever considered it for measuring the effectiveness of EGC.
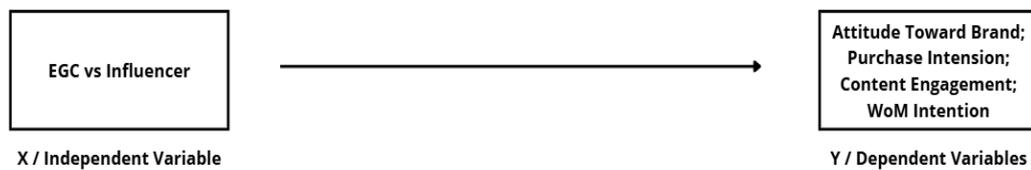
H1c: *EGC leads to greater CE compared to content with influencers.*

Content engagement is a variable that helps to effectively measure viewer engagement and sentiment toward content. Furthermore, this can also predict brand attitude. In fact, if content is liked, it is more likely to be remembered, shared, and positively influence attitudes toward the brand.

H1d: *EGC leads to higher WOM-I compared to content with influencers.*

WoM is one of the most common marketing outcomes tracked by marketers. Its strong and credible impact on consumers makes it essential for any campaign, as it can amplify the number of people reached by the content.

Chart n.1: *H1*



| EGC vs Influencer | | Attitude Toward Brand; Purchase Intension; Content Engagement; WoM Intention |
| --- | --- | --- |
| X / Independent Variable | | Y / Dependent Variables |

Source: *ns elaboration.*

All these hypotheses served to show the direct effects between content with employees and content with influencers. H2, on the other hand, investigates the psychological mechanisms that could explain these differences and, via a parallel mediation process, moderate these relationships.

The literature has always highlighted the importance of the speaker's trustworthiness for both EGC content and Influencer Marketing, which is why it was chosen as the first mediator. The second mediator chosen was Speaker's Favorability, which concerns the overall affective evaluation of the source.

Beyond mean differences, we test a parallel mediation model to explain how EGC may outperform IM. Specifically, we posit two mediators, Speaker's Trustworthiness and Speaker's Favorability, which map onto the Source Credibility Theory and Source Attractiveness Theory, respectively.

Accordingly, we expect EGC (vs. IM) to exert indirect effects on all dependent variables via both mediators (H2a–H2d).

Using these two mediators, it is possible to measure the dimensions of Source Attractiveness Theory and Source Credibility Theory. This is important because influencers may be more popular and attractive than employees but less reliable and trustworthy in the eyes of consumers or viewers. Therefore, if both mediators were to mediate the effect, then it could be said that employees not only surpass influencers in terms of reliability but may also be more likable. That said, H2 is divided into four points, one for each dependent variable.

Accordingly, we expect EGC (vs. IM) to exert indirect effects on all dependent variables via both mediators (H2a–H2d).

H2a: *The effect of EGC (vs. content with influencer) on attitude toward the brand is mediated by the speaker's trustworthiness and the speaker's favorability.*

H2b: *The effect of EGC (vs. content with influencer) on PI is mediated by speaker's trustworthiness and speaker's favorability.*

H2c: *The effect of EGC (vs. content with influencer) on CE is mediated by speaker's trustworthiness and speaker's favorability.*

H2d: *The effect of EGC (vs. content with influencer) on WOM is mediated by speaker's trustworthiness and speaker's favorability.*

Chart n.2: *H2*
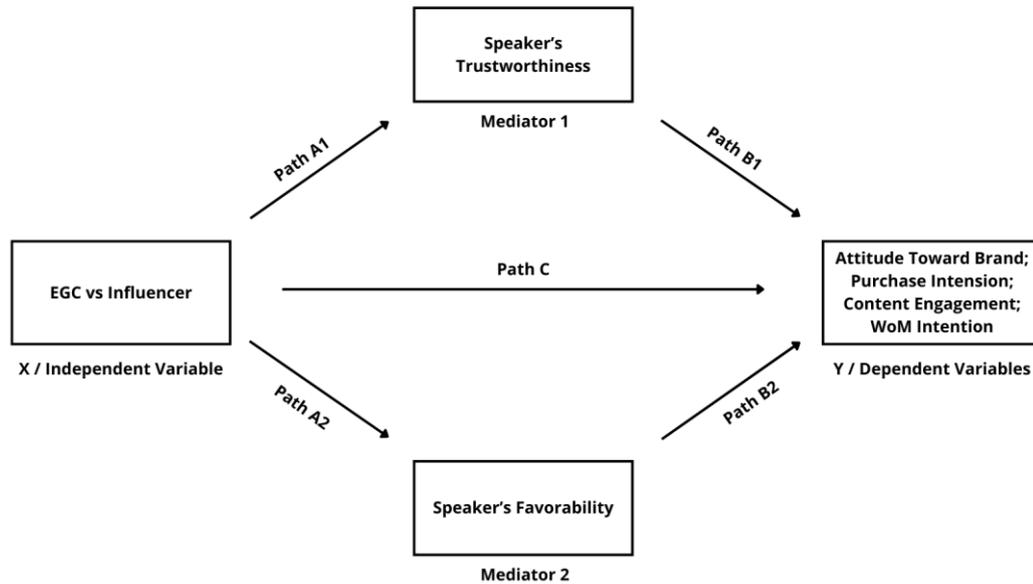


Source: *ns elaboration*

## 3.2 Survey Structure and Sampling Procedure

Data collection was carried out through a survey, designed as a between-subject design, with each participant able to view only one input (EGC or influencer). To prevent people from viewing content about a certain market that did not interest them, I decided to ask them to choose between beauty and DIY as their preferred market in the first question of the questionnaire. Once they had chosen their market, they would find themselves in front of a randomized input, a still image from a reel created with artificial intelligence, of an employee or an influencer, both fictitious, presenting a product from a brand, also fictitious, on the brand's official channels. Next to the image, they would find the video copy, which would help them identify with the scene.

We employed a between-subjects design: each participant was randomly assigned to view one stimulus (EGC or IM). To ensure topical relevance, respondents first selected a preferred category (Beauty vs. DIY). The decision to present the video on the brand's official channels was made because many companies have started

using this type of content as EGC, as mentioned in the previous chapter, and also due to a need for equal input. In addition, much of the content created in collaboration with influencers is published directly on the company's official and institutional profiles.

Presenting both conditions on the same owned channel holds the distribution context constant and reflects current industry practice.

Below are the visual inputs provided to the questionnaire participants.

Figure n.4: *Visual inputs for the survey*
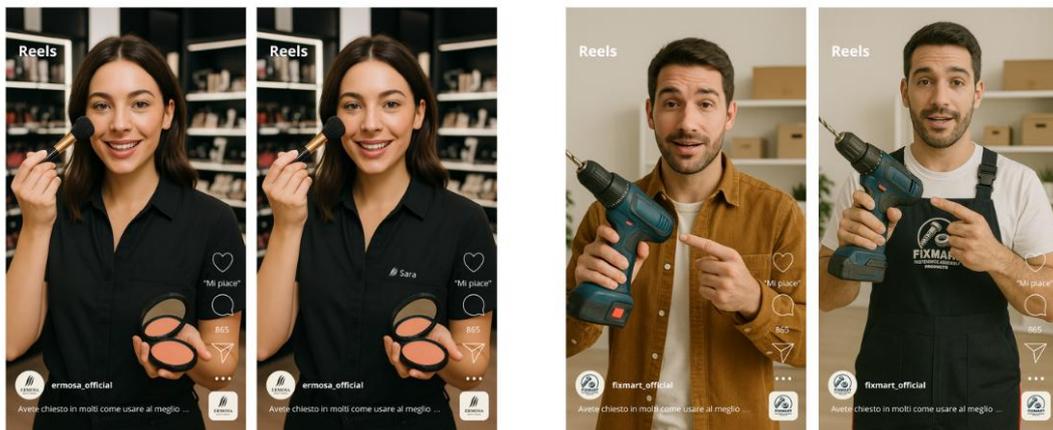


Source: *our elaboration*

After this section, respondents were asked questions about dependent variables, whose answers were based on 7-point Likert scales, not pre-validated, to be validated with the scale reliability test, which will be shown later.

Subsequently, again based on non-prevalidated Likert scales, questions were asked relating to the mediators highlighted in the hypotheses. Finally, the manipulation check question, "Was the reel presented by an influencer or an employee?" was asked, followed by two demographic questions regarding the respondent's age and gender.

The survey was submitted to 196 people of different genders and ages in August 2025, and there were 190 respondents with only 186 completed responses (97.9% valid responses). This result demonstrates strong and active participation by the people who were involved in the survey and who were reached via social media

(Instagram and WhatsApp) using a mix of convenience and snowball sampling techniques.

## 3.3 Data Analysis

Once the data were collected via Qualtrics survey, they were imported to SPSS statistical software to begin preliminary analyses (reliability and factorial) that will allow me to collect the items into a single variable to be analyzed when the hypotheses are tested.

Below are 2 tables concerning the Reliability Analysis using Cronbach's alpha. The first table analyzes the reliability of the Dependent Variable, the second one will concern the Mediators.

Tab n.5: *Cronbach's α and Items for Attitude Toward the Brand and Mediators*

| Dependent Variable | Cronbach's Alpha | Number of Items |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Attitude Toward Brand* | *0,892* | *3* |

| Mediator | Cronbach's Alpha | Number of Items |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Speaker's Trustworthiness* | *0,954* | *3* |
| *Speaker's Favorability* | *0,956* | *3* |

*Source: our elaboration*

We assessed measurement quality in SPSS via Cronbach's alpha (reliability) and KMO/Bartlett (factorability). Single-item outcomes (PI, CE, WOM-I) were excluded from alpha and factorability tests.

Reliability Analysis measures the accuracy of a questionnaire response, indicating the internal consistency among items that measure the same variable. The dependent variables PI, like and WoM, were not integrated into the table because, having only one item, they do not need this test.

Cronbach's Alpha is used to measure the consistency of the items that compose the scale. If the participants respond in a similar way, then it means that the items measure a given construct equally, and therefore the value of the α will be close to 1.

With an α value greater than 0.7, the reliability of the items can be affirmed, and then the various items can be merged (by averaging them together), creating a single value.

As can be seen on the table, every α in this dataset is greater than 0.89, thus confirming good consistency and coherence among the items and allowing them to be merged and prepared for the analysis of the hypothesis.

After the reliability analysis, two other preliminary analyses were conducted: the Bartlett's Test and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure (KMO). The KMO is used to test whether the data have high variance in common, and if so, whether they are adequate for factor analysis. Again, the closer the value is to 1, the more it confirms the adequacy of the items, which can then be grouped into a single scale, the value below which the data cannot be considered adequate is 0.5; any value above or equal to this makes the data adequate. In addition, as with the reliability analysis, all scales with only one item were excluded from these tests.

The KMO is paired with Bartlett's Test, which tests whether correlations between items are significant and thus whether there is a correlation that warrants a factor analysis. For this analysis to be significant, the p-value must be $< 0.05$; if so, it means that the presence of a strong correlation between the items admits the presence of common factors that allow for a factorial analysis.

Tab n.6: *Factorability checks: KMO and Bartlett's test for dependent and mediator constructs*

| Dependent Variable | KMO | Bartlett's Test |
|---|---|---|
| *Attitude Toward Brand* | 0,739 | <0,01 |

| Mediator | KMO | Bartlett's Test |
|---|---|---|
| *Speaker's Trustworthiness* | 0,776 | <0,01 |
| *Speaker's Favorability* | 0,768 | <0,01 |

*Source: our elaboration*

As can be seen in the table, each variable or mediator passed the KMO Measure. In fact, both the dependent variable and the mediators fall within an acceptable range (0.7 - 0.79), tending towards the optimal range (> 0.8), indicating that a factor analysis, with the aim of determining whether or not we have established what we intended to measure, can be fruitful with the data.

The same can be said for Bartlett's test of sphericity; each scale, in fact, has a significance of less than 0.01. This consequently indicates a strong correlation between the items on each scale, and thus that the data are suitable and ready for further analysis.

## 3.4 Hypothesis Testing

Once the preliminary analysis of the data collected is completed, hypotheses can be tested with the new scales.

The first test to be done to check the H1 is the Independent Samples t-test. In fact, this is used to check whether there are significant differences in the dependent variables between the two conditions of the independent variable.

For this test, one must use all the Dependent Variables to be tested (ATB, PI, Like, and WoM) and a grouping variable, which in this case was called "dependent" (our Independent Variable), that assumes value 1 when the content viewed by the respondent had the employee as a speaker and 0 when he or she encountered the influencer instead.

Tab n.7: Effects of EGC vs. IM on brand-related outcomes

| Dependent Variable | Mean EGC | Mean IM (SD) | t(184) | p | Cohen's d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Attitude Toward Brand* | 5.44 (1.14) | 4.77 (1.22) | 3.85 | < 0.001 | 0.57 |
| *Purchase Intention* | 4.48 (1.98) | 3.62 (2.04) | 2.92 | 0.004 | 0.43 |
| *Content Engagement* | 4.16 (1.73) | 3.60 (1.62) | 2.27 | 0.024 | 0.33 |
| *Word of Mouth* | 4.55 (1.60) | 3.98 (1.55) | 2.47 | 0.014 | 0.36 |

*Source: our elaboration*

After the first analysis, it was found that there are indeed differences between the two groups' means. The content with the employee as speaker has a higher mean on all dependent variables than the content with influencers.

However, this is only the beginning; to confirm the hypothesis, it is necessary to check that the p-value is less than 0.05 for these differences to be significant, and this is the case.

However, this is only the beginning; to confirm the hypothesis, it is necessary to check that the p-value is less than 0.05 for these differences to be significant, and this is the case.

The last value to check for a complete evaluation of the data is Cohen's d. This is used to measure the magnitude of the effect just studied; values between 0.20 and 0.50 indicate a small effect, between 0.50 and 0.80 a medium effect, and above 0.80 a large effect. All the values measured are in a range between 0.30 and 0.60, thus indicating a small-to-medium effect.

Nonetheless, this initial analysis suggests that the contribution of employees as testimonials is consistent and statistically significant on multiple dimensions of brand perception. This goes to confirm hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d.

A second analysis is needed instead to test H2a, H2b, H2c, and H2d, and that is the Analysis of Mediation.

Mediation analysis arises to explain a relationship between two variables, so in this case, how and why employees outperform influencers when they are used in the company's social media communication.

The model selected for the analysis is parallel process mediation, which analyzes the effect of two or more mediators explaining the relationship between

independent and dependent variables independently and simultaneously, thus not influencing each other.

The two following tables will report the results that 2 mediators (Speaker Favorability and Speaker Trustworthiness) have on the relationship of the independent variable (EGC vs. Influencer) and four dependent variables (ATB, PI, CE, WoM-I).

Tab. n.8: Paths and mediation results for ATB, PI, CE, and WoM-I

| Path | Attitude Toward Brand | Purchase Intention | Content Engagement | WoM |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → Speaker's Trustworthiness | 0.80 (p= 0.0002) | | | |
| X → Speaker's Favorability | 0.84 (p< 0.001) | | | |
| Speaker's Trustworthiness → Y | 0.29 (p= 0.0002) | 0.46 (p= 0.0001) | 0.51 (p= 0.005) | 0.33 (p= 0.0056) |
| Speaker's Favorability → Y | 0.38 (p< 0.001) | 0.31 (p= 0.0132) | 0.52 (p= 0.001) | 0.56 (p= 0.001) |

Source: our elaboration

Tab. n.9: Relationships between the variables

| Dependent Variable | Direct Effect X --> Y (c') | Indirect Effect via Speaker's Trustworthiness | Indirect Effect Via Speaker's Favorability | Total Indirect Effect | Mediation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attitude Toward Brand | 0.16 (p=0.22) | 0.24 [0.08;0.45] | 0.32 [0.14;0.53] | 0.55 [0.28;0.85] | Full Mediaton |
| Purchase Intention | -0.05 (p=0.79) | 0.37 [0.13;0.69] | 0.26 [0.03;0.57] | 0.63 [0.32;0.96] | Full Mediaton |
| Content Engagement | 0.06 (p=0.80) | 0.41 [0.13;0.81] | 0.44 [011;0.82] | 0.85 [0.45;1.28] | Full Mediaton |
| WoM Intention | -0.13 (p=0.51) | 0.27 [0.07;0.57] | 0.47 [0.20;0.81] | 0.74 [0.40;1.12] | Full Mediaton |

Source: our elaboration

The first table shows all the paths of the mediation model with X (IV) → M indicating paths A1 (Speaker's Trustworthiness) and A2 (Speaker's Favorability), and M → Y (DV) indicating paths B1 and B2. All paths are significant, so we can proceed with the analysis and move on to the second table.

The results of the second output show that the relationships between the dependent variable and the four independent variables are entirely explained by the two mediators. In fact, the first column shows the direct effects of X on Y, which are not significant, while the following columns show the indirect effects of paths A and B of each mediator on Y and, finally, the total indirect effects of the model for each Y, which are all significant.

To explain these differences, we estimated a parallel mediation with Trustworthiness and Favorability as mediators. Paths X→M and M→Y were significant, whereas the direct effects X→Y were not, indicating full mediation. Indirect effects were deemed significant when the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals did not include zero.

However, to confirm the significance of these effects, it is not necessary to check the p-value as has been done so far, but rather the bootstrap results. In order to confirm the significance of the data, it is necessary to check that the bootstrapping confidence interval, shown in squared brackets in the second table, does not contain 0. The results show that all effects are significant, thus demonstrating that both mediators work and that we are dealing with complete mediation.

### 3.5 Discussion of the Analysis

Overall, EGC outperforms IM on every outcome (ATB, PI, CE, WOM-I). Crucially, EGC's advantage emerges indirectly: audiences rate employees as more trustworthy and more favorable, which in turn elevates attitudes and intentions.

The results of this study highlight the superior performance of EGC content compared to that conveyed by influencers, thus confirming all of H1.

In particular, the independent samples t-test shows that the best results obtained by EGC concern all dependent variables:

- ATB (M_EGC = 5.44, M_IM = 4.77; t(184) = 3.85, p < .001, d = 0.57),
- PI (M_EGC = 4.48, M_IM = 3.62; t(184) = 2.92, p = .004, d = 0.43),
- CE (M_EGC = 4.16, M_IM = 3.60; t(184) = 2.27, p = .024, d = 0.33),
- WOM (M_EGC = 4.55, M_IM = 3.98; t(184) = 2.47, p = .014, d = 0.36).

Furthermore, mediation analyses highlight how the effectiveness of EGC is not linked to a direct effect but is strongly connected to two factors:

- Speaker's Trustworthiness (people seem to trust the employee more than the IM)
- Speaker's Favorability (the simplicity and ordinariness of the employee predispose the consumer to listen more empathetically.)

To support this, we can analyze, for example, DV ATB, where the direct effect is not significant (b = 0.16, p = .22), while the indirect effects are robust both via Trustworthiness (b = 0.24, CI [0.08; 0.45]) and via Favorability (b = 0.32, CI [0.14; 0.53]), with a total indirect effect of 0.55 [0.28; 0.85].

The same results are also found on other DVs, such as PI (total indirect effect = 0.63 [0.32; 0.96]), CE (0.85 [0.45; 1.28]), and WOM-I (0.74 [0.40; 1.12]), in which full mediation is always present. This means that EGC is perceived by users as more credible (X → Trustworthiness: b = 0.80, p = .0002) and more favorable (X → Favorability: b = 0.84, p < .001), generating an improvement in consumer responses.

## 3.6 Theoretical Contribution

This study provides several theoretical contributions to the field of digital marketing and communication. First of all, the study offers an in-depth analysis of EGC, a new communication channel that is still relatively unknown and whose potential has yet to be fully explored, unlike in the world of influencer marketing. The results of the survey described above, which aimed to compare the effectiveness of EGC content with that of content produced by influencers, clearly show that employees can represent the brand in an authoritative and positive way, ensuring authenticity and

credibility of source and content, even for content that is more outcome-oriented on the sales side, such as a product showcase.

Secondly, the survey results confirm what has already been highlighted in this chapter, namely the importance of Source Attractiveness Theory and Source Credibility Theory: in fact, those who produce and communicate content are evaluated both rationally, in terms of the reliability and trust they inspire in users (trustworthiness), and emotionally, in terms of their ability to generate empathy in listeners. This dual approach enriches the theory, offering a more complete view of the psychological processes that guide consumer choices and paving the way for future reflections on how these different dimensions can interact or prevail in different contexts.

The study advances theory by demonstrating that an emerging channel – EGC – can rival and surpass IM, and by integrating Source Credibility and Source Attractiveness perspectives: audiences' rational (trustworthiness) and affective (favorability) appraisals jointly account for EGC's impact. By drawing on an Italian sample, we also address a geographic gap in the literature.

Finally, by conducting research in an Italian context, this work fills a geographical gap in the literature and offers insights into understanding cultural differences in the acceptance of new communication strategies.

## 3.7 Managerial Contribution

From a managerial point of view, the survey results show that EGC has significant potential as a new communication channel, to the extent that it is more effective than IM: this evidence is confirmed across all variables analyzed, in which EGC content was rated higher, including the score achieved for DV PI (+0.86). Furthermore, indirect effects confirm that the strength of EGC derives from increased trustworthiness and favorability towards the speaker: for example, Speaker's Trustworthiness significantly predicts PI (b = 0.46, p < .001), while Speaker's Favorability influences WOM (b = 0.56, p < .001).

The findings suggest that companies could integrate EGC into their communication strategies, not only as an alternative but also as a complement to influencer marketing activities.

In particular, companies could plan campaigns in which EGC plays a central role: they could combine content published on employees' personal channels, which the company can then repost on its official profiles, with posts created directly by the brand, but which maintain the authenticity and spontaneity typical of EGC. All this requires companies to define editorial guidelines that encourage employees to spontaneously share their direct experiences, advice, and tutorials on their social channels, thus ensuring that this is done in harmony with the brand's positioning in the market.

Furthermore, the survey results show that employees are perceived as credible and favorable and that this has a direct effect on consumer attitudes and behaviors, generating a potential increase in value for the company. This means that in order to properly use employees as a communication channel, it is necessary to develop employee advocacy programs, offer training in digital storytelling, reward the most impactful contributions, and create internal communities that facilitate the production of authentic content. In this way, EGC not only becomes a marketing lever, but also an internal engagement tool, strengthening the corporate culture.

Managerially, firms should integrate EGC alongside IM by (i) issuing clear editorial guidelines for employee sharing, (ii) launching employee advocacy and digital storytelling training, (iii) recognizing high-impact contributions, and (iv) reposting high-quality EGC on owned channels. Monitoring ATB, PI, CE, and WOM-I as KPIs can guide optimization while containing costs and reputational risk.

These implications should be read alongside the study's limitations, outlined below. Finally, using EGC as a communication channel represents significant savings in terms of time and advertising costs, reducing dependence on influencers and limiting reputational risks linked to potential scandals or public statements made by external testimonials. Synergy in the use of EGC and IM would allow companies to maximize results in terms of communication, differentiate messages, make the most of the unique characteristics of both levers, optimize the time required to implement an advertising campaign, decouple themselves from the uniqueness of the testimonial, and reduce the overall costs associated with promotional activities.

## 3.8 Limitation & Future Research

Despite the solid and statistically positive results, the study has some limitations. First, the sample was obtained through convenience sampling, which could reduce its generalizability. Furthermore, the input used was a still image with text alongside it. For future tests, the integration of video could be considered to increase test engagement. To avoid anchoring and bias of any kind towards real influencers or real brands, the test chose to show fictional speakers and brands. It would be interesting to see in the future whether the results would change with real elements. Finally, the analysis focused on four dependent variables, leaving out other dimensions of brand equity such as brand loyalty.

Future research could test the effectiveness of EGC in different sectors (e.g., luxury, technology, healthcare), investigate mediators such as brand familiarity or personal involvement, and conduct longitudinal studies to assess the duration of effects over time.

**Conclusions**

This thesis developed a comparison between two crucial tools in today's digital communication strategies: Influencer Marketing and Employee Generated Content. The empirical analysis conducted confirmed that EGC produces more positive effects than IM on all the variables considered: Attitude Toward the Brand, Purchase Intention, Content Engagement, and Word of Mouth intention.

It also emerged that these results do not derive from a direct effect but are mediated by the perception of greater credibility and favorability attributed to employees compared to influencers.

From a theoretical point of view, the research contributes to filling a significant gap in digital marketing studies. If IM has been extensively analyzed, EGC instead represents an emerging field, still little explored and almost never investigated in direct comparison with influencers.

The results affirm the significance of the theories of Source Credibility and Source Attractiveness, emphasizing the role of source reliability and favorability in shaping consumer perception. Furthermore, the study offers a specific contribution to the Italian context, enriching a research panorama so far concentrated mainly on other markets.

On the managerial level, the evidence suggests that enterprises can benefit from integrating EGC into their communication strategies. Giving space to the voices of employees makes it possible to convey authenticity and transparency, reduce the reputational risks associated with the use of external figures, optimize costs, and, at the same time, strengthen employer branding, stimulating a greater sense of belonging and internal involvement. To fully exploit this tool, companies should adopt structured employee advocacy programs, offer targeted training, and define guidelines that foster spontaneity without compromising consistency with brand identity.

Of course, the study has some limitations. The sample, collected with non-probabilistic techniques, reduces the possibility of generalizing the results; the materials used, based on static images and fictitious brands, guaranteed neutrality but not full realism; furthermore, the analysis focused on a limited number of variables, neglecting other dimensions of brand equity such as long-term fidelity.

It will therefore be useful, in the future, to expand the survey to different sectors, use real content and testimonials, include new variables, and conduct longitudinal research to measure the persistence of effects over time.

In conclusion, the results obtained confirm that EGC represents one of the most promising frontiers of contemporary marketing. In an increasingly saturated digital environment, in which consumers show growing skepticism towards sponsored communication, the authentic voice of employees can restore trust and closeness, transforming human capital into a strategic communication resource and helping to build more solid and lasting relationships between brands and consumers.

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