

Social media influencer marketing: Collaborations between influencers and companies in the nutritional sector

What impact does social media influencer marketing have in the purchasing decisions of consumers in the nutritional sector, and what ethical implications should companies and influencers take into account?

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ABSTRACT,

Social media has now become a big part of our lives, and even though it has created many opportunities like the creation of jobs, it has also created many threats like the sharing of fake information or privacy issues. Since the rise of these platforms, influencer marketing has become a very popular way for companies to market their products, to target audiences and to raise awareness. Increasingly, companies are collaborating with celebrities and/or influencers through the use of social media as it is believed that these public figures will not only reach a higher number of people but it will also be a more effective and cost-efficient way to promote their products. Influencers have the ability to create connections and establish relationships with their followers, something companies take advantage of. This research focuses and examines the influence social media influencer marketing in the nutritional sector has on the purchasing decisions, and the ethical considerations companies and influencers should take into account in order to provide as much information as possible to consumers to allow them to make fully informed decisions over the products they purchase. Relevant concepts and theories are discussed in further detail to increase the reader's understanding on the subject matter, this is then followed by 3 examples of well-known social media influencer campaigns as well as an interpretation on the interviews carried out with customers to get a better understanding of their thoughts and opinions on influencer marketing. The main findings of this paper include, but are not limited to, the importance of influencer-customer relationships and the extent to which influencers can unconsciously impact our purchasing decisions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

Social media has revolutionized the way companies advertise and the way consumers behave. According to the Digital Marketing Institute (2021), 49% of consumers depend on influencers' opinions prior to making a purchase. Alongside this statistic, they also revealed that 40% of people have decided to purchase a product after seeing an influencer using it on Twitter, Youtube and Instagram (Blogger & Blogger, 2022). The era of virtual word-of-mouth recommendations is at its peak (Kowalewicz, 2022), and with people being so influenced by what they see on social media, it is clear why companies are using this tool to try and maximize the reach they have with their consumers. They would not be able to do this however without celebrity endorsements, collaborations with influencers or through the use of brand ambassadors. It could be argued that nowadays, influencer marketing has become one of the most popular ways to reach a target audience, all the way from TikTok to Instagram to Snapchat, you will see influencers endorsing products which they might not necessarily use for themselves. Social media influencers could be defined as third party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to influence on stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction and personal appearance on social web (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

In this paper, companies in the foods and beverages industry like McDonalds as well as social media influencers and celebrities will be studied. In the past, these types of companies would barely associate themselves with images of celebrities or influencers, however now it might seem like they are a big part of their marketing campaigns, and might even be too dependent on these influential faces, in fact the influencer marketing industry has reached a value of 21.1 billion USD in 2023 (Geysler, 2023). These campaigns typically involve influencers promoting the companies' products on their social media accounts in exchange for payment or other non-monetary incentives like free products.

Considering whether influencers are advocating healthy or unhealthy items is crucial from an ethical standpoint. Responsible influencers have an obligation to advocate goods that are good for their audience's health and wellbeing (Garnès, 2020). However, some influencers might push unhealthy products despite understanding that they could be harmful and prioritizing profits over moral considerations.

Influencers employ a range of strategies, including product evaluations, endorsements, and sponsored postings, to affect consumer behavior. They frequently have a sizable following and can utilize their power and relationship to impact their audience's thoughts and behaviors. However, if the marketed products are not in the best interests of the buyer, this effect could be negative. Then comes the question from an ethical point of view, should companies and influencers not put their clients' needs and well-being first? They ought to be open about their partnerships and declare any potential conflicts of interest. Additionally, they ought to only endorse goods that are safe for their audiences' health and supported by research.

1.2 Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to gain knowledge about the effects of using social media influencers in marketing campaigns when promoting unhealthy products, as well as looking at it from an ethical point of view. There will be an analysis of 3 campaigns when food & beverage companies like McDonalds or Burger King promoted generally known as unhealthy products with the contribution of influencer marketing, and the impact it had on customer behavior. It will also be analyzed from an ethical point of view, however, this time looking at whether influencers break their moral code when promoting unhealthy and health detrimental products.

1.3 Research Question

The research question addressed in this paper is: *What impact does social media influencer marketing have in the purchasing decisions of consumers in the nutritional sector, and what ethical implications should companies and influencers take into account?*

In order to properly address this question, some important concepts need to be defined. This will be done in the next section, the literature review, and it will provide a better understanding of the topic. After that, we will identify the theoretical framework used for this paper, and the remainder of the paper will consist of the methodology chapter, followed by a chapter where cases and results will be presented and continued by a discussion. Finally, a conclusion and the acknowledgments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review section, certain definitions and relevant concepts used in this thesis will be explained. Firstly, customer behavior is the decision-making process and physician activity involved in acquiring, evaluating, using and disposing of goods and services. It consists of how consumers' emotions, attitudes and preferences affect the buying behavior (Khan, 2007). This could be all the way from building product/brand awareness to aspects like following their social media. However, during this study customer behavior will be referred to as the purchase of an actual product.

Health has been defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 2023). The term “Healthy” however, is very subjective to everyone, the health needs of someone vary from person to person. Therefore, in order to determine a baseline of health for all, the nutritional value of the product will be put to use. As an unhealthy baseline, we will depart from those products that, per serving, have an equal or higher value than 50% of the daily recommended intake of saturated fats.

For a clearer understanding, the meaning of ethics versus moral standards will also be defined and compared.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy which is concerned with human conduct, specifically about the behavior of individuals in society, it examines the justification of our moral judgements, what is morally right versus what is morally wrong, just or unjust (Rogelberg, 2015). In contrast, moral standards tend to have to do with an individual's own principles regarding what is right and what is wrong (*Ethics Vs Morals*, 2023).

Therefore, in order to fully understand the relationship between social media marketing, ethics, and customer behavior some theoretical frameworks based on these just mentioned concepts will be used.

The first idea to take into account is social media influencers' involvement in marketing. The social influence theory (Kelman, 2014) allows us to understand how individuals are influenced by people around them. It suggests that people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are shaped by the influence of others, either through direct interpersonal interactions or through media channels, and with social media influencers' massive following, they have the capacity to alter their audiences' ideas, emerging as a significant form of social influence in the digital era (Kelman, 2014). It is therefore of great importance for brands and influencers to establish a trusting relationship in order for the user to be impacted by the influencers content, according to Martins (2022), 62% of consumers trust influencers more than A-list celebrities. And another 56% of consumers between the ages of 18 to 44 have made a purchase after seeing an influencer feature the product (Woods, 2023). Robert Cialdini published his book in 1984 called "Influence: The psychology of Persuasion", where he explores the factors that affect the decisions that people take, in particular with relation to sales and purchasing. One of the factors he identified was Liking. He explained that we are more likely to be persuaded and influenced by those that they like, than those that they don't. Influencers often cultivate a persona that appeals to their target audience, making their recommendations more persuasive. Another identified aspect is Social Proof or Consensus, where humans often exhibit a herd behavior, meaning that they are social by nature. They often feel important to conform to the norms of a social group, so when it comes to the decision making, they often look around to see what the rest is doing before making a decision for themselves. Influencers, with their large followings and perceived expertise, can provide social proof by endorsing specific nutritional products, leading consumers to trust and adopt their recommendations.

Regarding the ethical considerations, for these relationships between influencers and users to be truthful and honest, both companies and influencers should be mindful of the following two aspects:

1. Transparency and disclosure - It is illegal for influencers not to disclose their relationship with the company and indicate when the content they are promoting has been sponsored by a company (Truth in Advertising, 2022). This transparency

will help the customer take informed and educated decisions in order to prevent deceptive practices

2. Authenticity and integrity - When we consumers follow an influencer, we tend to build up some sort of relationship with them. Most of the time the thing that connects us with them is the similarity in values and beliefs. When we see content sponsored by someone we admire, we hope that their endorsements are aligned with their genuine set of values and beliefs, that they are not solely promoting the product for financial gain, something that could lead to a loss in trust among its followers.

The ethical obligations of businesses and influencers are another aspect to take into account. Ethics can be defined as the moral standards that guide behavior, the principles of right or wrong (Rogelberg, 2015). When we think about companies and social media influencers, we would think that they have our best interests in mind, but do they? According to the stakeholder theory, firms should create value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders (*Stakeholder Theory*, 2010), meaning that companies have obligations to their customers, employees, and the larger community as well as to their owners and shareholders. It would seem logical then that companies indeed have the best interest for their customers, however, the national institute of health shows that those who consumed junk food 2 or more times a week, would have an increase of 50% chances of suffering from obesity ("Fast-Food Consumption and Obesity Among Michigan Adults," 2011), a life-threatening disease which 41.9% of adults in the US suffer from (Laurence, 2023).

Another idea to take into account is the customer purchasing behavior, there are many aspects that drive this sort of behavior like psychological, personal or social factors. According to the theory of planned behavior, there are three core components that link an individual's behavioral intentions, those being attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Knowing the amount of influence these celebrities have on creating trends and setting the norms, it is no doubt that people feel the pressure to indulge in these trends.

These ideas and theories will be included into this thesis' theoretical framework as it examines the connections between nutrition businesses, social media influencers, and consumer behavior. The framework will look at the moral obligations of businesses and influencers, how social influence affects consumer behavior, and the variables affecting consumer attitudes and intentions toward items that influencers support. This thesis attempts to offer a thorough understanding of the function of social media influencers in nutrition marketing and the moral ramifications of their partnerships with businesses by examining these concepts and theories.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between influencers and the campaigns they do with companies where they promote unhealthy products and the impact these can have on the purchasing behavior of the consumer. I believe it is therefore important that in order to address this impact, to use qualitative methods for the investigation. Qualitative research will be able to answer the how, the why and the aftermath of the reason and the impact of these campaigns. In order to obtain this type of information, different data will be gathered and analyzed, ensuring an in-depth analysis of 3 campaigns in the nutritional sector that made use of social media influencers.

The proposed study will therefore have a mixed-method approach to investigate the impact that social media influencer marketing in the nutritional sector is having on the customer behavior, and the ethical considerations that should be taken into account. The study will consist of two phases: the first one will be an in-depth analysis of 3 different campaigns and the second will be through semi-structured interviews done to regular consumers of these products.

The interviews will be used to understand the consumers' attitudes towards social media influencer marketing, the impact it currently has on their purchasing behavior, and their ethical considerations on the matter. The interviews will be carried out among 5 different people in the younger demographics (ages 21 to 24), the digital natives.

All this data, once collected will be analyzed and a conclusion will be derived. In order to carry out the interviews; a set of interview questions to answer the research question "How does social media influencer marketing impact purchasing decisions in the nutritional sector, and what ethical considerations should companies and influencers take into account?" were formulated (Appendix A). These questions have been developed to uncover valuable insights into consumer behavior, the role of social media, the impact of health and lifestyle choices and the ethical considerations that surround social media influencer marketing campaigns.

3.1 Interview Questions

By developing this set of questions (Appendix A), we aim to dive deep into several aspects of consumer behavior and opinions in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the consumer perceptions and actions. Specifically, these research questions will allow us to explore the following areas:

1. Consumer behaviour and social media usage:
Understanding how consumers behave with regards to social media is crucial in today's digital era. By investigating their social media habits, interactions and preferences we can have a better idea on the impact of social media influencer campaigns on their purchasing decisions. This will also allow us to get insights into the extent to which social media actually influences people's choices and how it shapes their perceptions towards a specific brand

2. Influence of Health and Lifestyle:
Considering the health habits and lifestyle choices is important when assessing the effectiveness of influencer campaigns, especially in the nutritional sector. By asking about the healthy eating practices and their fitness level consumers incorporate in their daily lives, we can get a better understanding on whether there is a relationship between their own lifestyle and their degree of influence. It will give us an understanding whether individuals with healthier lifestyles are less likely to be influenced by these campaigns.
3. Ethics and Consumer Opinion:
Investigating consumer opinions on ethics and its relation to influencer marketing campaigns is crucial in understanding the wider implications of such marketing strategies. By researching consumer perspectives on the ethical considerations associated with influencer marketing in the nutritional sector, we can better determine whether these campaigns influence their opinions of the brand or the influencer, and whether or not they have a deciding factor on the purchase of that product. This information will also provide us with information on how ethical concerns impact consumer trust, purchasing decisions and the brand perception.

We will now analyze 3 campaigns that fast-food companies McDonalds and Burger King have done in collaboration with celebrities and/or social media influencers. This will allow us to better understand the impact these public figures can have on the purchasing behaviour at a world-wide level. In this study we assume that fast-food chain restaurants like McDonalds or Burger King are a primary source of unhealthy food. Even though with time, these companies have become much more health conscious, still, many of the products offered by these companies are considered unhealthy. This does not mean, that in the future these companies will not transition into offering healthy meals.

McDonalds Study

McDonalds is one of the most important companies worldwide, in fact, it is the largest restaurant chain in the world, with more than 38,000 locations distributed throughout the world (*Corporate McDonald's Franchising*, 2023). It is therefore no surprise that McDonalds knows how to properly launch marketing campaigns reaching millions of potential customers and driving millions of people into its establishments. The fast-food giant has heavily invested in social media influencer marketing with the aim of gaining immense popularity as a powerful tool for companies to engage with their target audience, it has done collaborations with world-wide artists like Travis Scott, J Balvin or BTS. All influencers that allow McDonalds to target different demographics and expand their customer base as well as enhancing its brand image. The brand utilized various marketing techniques, including limited edition menu items, exclusive merchandise and engaging social media content

and being able to generate a certain “hype” and drive sales. It is obvious that McDonalds is now committed to this new promotional strategy, investing in digital campaigns using social media influencer marketing, but what are the returns of these highly costly campaigns?

The first campaign in the influencer series was with Travis Scott, an American rapper who has gained widespread recognition for his chart-topping albums and energetic live performances, establishing himself as a prominent figure in the music industry and with almost 50 million Instagram followers. According to Pathmatics Explorer data, the fast-food chain spent more than 6.8 million USD on digital and social advertising during the period the meal was available in stores (Sensor Tower & Hockenson, 2021, August). This collaboration included the creation of McDonalds x Travis Scott merch as well as the Travis Scott Meal, which was based on already existing products, just not as a combination. This campaign has significant effects on the company, even resulting in some franchises facing ingredient shortages for the Quarter Pounder within days of the campaign's launch (Wiener-Bronner, 2020). The collaborations impact extended far beyond inventory problems, as the mobile app registrations experienced a significant increase of 46% in comparison to the previous month, additionally the campaign caused national Quarter Pounder sales to double during the first week (*Famous Orders - the Travis Scott Meal - the Shorty Awards*, n.d.). There is therefore no denying that the Travis Scott partnership played a crucial role in driving year to year monthly comparables sales for September, achieving the best monthly sales performance in almost ten years (*Famous Orders - the Travis Scott Meal - the Shorty Awards*, n.d.). This campaign shows the power that influencers can have when influencing that sales of a company and how easily they can change the consumers behavior.

Another McDonalds campaign following the success of the Travis Scott Meal was the collaboration with BTS, a South Korean boy band who has achieved global recognition and success from their music and have a high influence in the culture of pop. This collaboration is a remarkable example of how much power social media influencer marketing has over the customer behavior. This campaign was a global success, leaving a lasting impact on both brands and their audiences. From the moment the campaign launched, it was evident that BTSs popularity and fan base had a crucial role. McDonalds had an underwhelming engagement across various social media platforms, including twitter which the launch tweet summed up a total of more than half a million likes and almost 200,00 retweets (*McDonalds Twitter*, 2021), in google they managed to break records in the google searches by having their most ever searches right after the launch of the collaboration (*BTS Google Trends*, 2023).

Financially, the collaboration yielded exceptional results for McDonald's. The campaign generated a staggering potential reach of 74.6 billion people, with 11.5 million social mentions (*McDonald's - the BTS Meal - the Shorty Awards*, n.d.). Such massive exposure translated into a significant 40.5% increase in global sales of the second quarter of 2021

(*BTS Meal Drives McDonald's 40% Increase in Q2 Sales*, 2021), underlining the campaign's ability to drive consumer interest and boost revenue.

In addition to the financial gains, the collaboration garnered significant media coverage. McDonald's earned an impressive 2,316 media placements, indicating the campaign's widespread appeal and newsworthiness. This extensive media coverage not only boosted brand visibility but also provided valuable earned media, which further amplified the impact of the campaign.

The BTS collaboration also showcased McDonald's ability to penetrate and resonate with specific target segments. The BTS meal by itself brought in 98 million USD in incremental sales, allowing McDonalds to grow in the youth market, with an increase of 14% for the 18 to 24 age group and a 69% increase for the Asian, Hispanic, Black and Multiracial segments (*McDonald's - the BTS Meal - the Shorty Awards*, n.d.). This highlights the campaign's ability to forge connections and resonate with diverse audiences, solidifying McDonald's position as a brand that embraces cultural diversity and inclusivity.

Burger King Study

After seeing the success of the previously mentioned campaigns, it is no surprise that other companies in the same sector have adopted similar marketing strategies, in fact more than 75% of brands have a dedicated budget for influencer marketing (Leung, 2022). Burger King was not late to the game, collaborating with three major influencers; Chase Hudson counting with almost 23 million Tik Tok followers, Cornell Haynes Jr with 4 million Instagram followers and Larissa Machado, more commonly known as Anitta with over 60 million Instagram followers. This multi-influencer campaign was aimed to appeal to several diverse demographics and create buzz around the brand and its products. Each influencer involved in this company had different target audiences and different fan bases, therefore the strategic choice of choosing three completely different influencers allowed Burger King to expand its reach and enhance brand visibility among different target segments. And it worked, according to YouGov, this campaign resulted in a 24% increase in positive consumer perception of Burger King during the campaign period, a campaign which used several different strategies. These include several social media posts, challenges and limited time offers. Even though financial details about this collaboration were not published, campaigns involving high profile influencers often require substantial financial investments, bringing however a positive return on the investment through increase in sales, brand awareness and customer acquisition.

4. RESULTS

In order to evaluate the data collected from the interviews previously carried out, a transcript of all the data collected through the recorded interviews was created and written up,

something that allowed familiarization with the information and eased the creation of the analysis.

Coming into this experiment, it was expected that mostly all respondents would be somewhat influenced by social media campaigns seen in their social media, leading to a change in customer behavior and being more recipient to the purchase of the promoted product. Even though the expected behavior was mostly positive towards the company and the influencer, it was also expected that these endorsements could highly damage the image of the brand as well as the influencer/celebrity if the consumer did not like the values of the brand the influencer/celebrity was endorsing.

First of all, we will start by discussing the definition of health, not the rationalist view which is backed by science, but the definition that has been socially constructed. Social constructivism is a theoretical perspective which states that individuals actively construct their knowledge and understanding of the world through social interactions and cultural influences (Lohman & Hurst, 2021). Participants were asked what they considered the definition of health to be and what they considered to be a healthy lifestyle, and even though there were some small differences, they all agreed upon one thing, it is individualistic. Meaning that *“whatever suits that person in the best way either mentally or biologically”* (interviewee 2, 2023) is considered to be healthy, always with a *“balance”* (interviewee 2, 2023). We had previously defined health, as *“a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”* (World Health Organization, 2023), however we can now see that it might not always be the case, and that health might not always be about optimally having a complete physical, mental or social well-being.

After conducting the interviews, there were some similarities and some differences in the experiences interviewees have had when it came to their experiences and the influence that they had been under through social media influencer campaigns. One interesting finding was that social media influencer marketing proves to be highly effective, yet quite dangerous. When companies collaborate with influencers, they have to really take into account who they are collaborating with. This is because, as shown by Interviewee 2 and 4, if the consumer disagrees with the values represented by the campaign, it could damage the relationship and the trust previously established by the influencer and/or the campaign, ultimately damaging how the consumer views these two entities and plausibly affecting that trust they previously had. *“If I become aware of the manipulative tactics that they are using, it will reduce my trust in both the company and the influencer. It makes me question their commitments to their public's well-being and their intentions”* (Interviewee 4, 2023). Many of the interviewees believed however, that these campaigns were influencing customers without them even knowing it, as *“these companies have professionals behind those campaigns to promote and convince the audience to purchase that product, and most of the time they don't even know it”* (Interviewee 4, 2023). This means that even though some consider these practices to be unethical and potentially damaging to their relationship with that company or

influencer, it is only once they stop, consider and analyze the values that are being transmitted through that campaign and whether or not it aligns with their own personal values that they will re-evaluate their relationship with that company or influencer. These campaigns are done to promote certain products, and most of the times to drive sales, something that it is effectively achieved according to my interviewees (2023) and to the figures shown in the McDonalds study, where after the BTS collaboration, there was an increase worth 40.5% in global sales of the second quarter of 2021 (*BTS Meal Drives McDonald's 40% Increase in Q2 Sales*, 2021). All of the interviewed people agreed that seeing someone they recognized and admired in a promotion, was a spark of interest not just in that specifically promoted product, but in the brand as a whole, *“If I see someone that I admire and have some sort of relationship with that person and I trust them, then I definitely would say that that has an impact on me and I am going to be more likely to get more interest into the product, I'm going to be researching a bit more on the company and I might even purchase”* (interviewee 4, 2023). One of them even claimed that they made a direct purchase because of the presence of their favorite artist in the promotion *“for instance Rosalia did a collaboration with Coca-Cola, I generally don't like Coca-Cola but because I really like Rosalia I bought that product to try it out”* (Interviewee 4, 2023). These claims just show the power of influencers and the actual influence they have on us, as consumers. This however is not the only tactic companies use to engage with customers through these campaigns, according to interviewee 5 (2023) the creation of limited time menu items and merchandise create a sense of urgency and a fear of missing out, which usually translates to consumers rushing to the stores to purchase those unhealthy products in order to possess the merchandise or those limited items. The use of these practices then raises the question of whether or not this was entirely ethical, to take advantage of the image an influencer has and the relationship they have with their fans/customers to increase the sales of an unhealthy product. This question is a hard one to answer, even though many thought that it was not entirely ethical, others defended the right to freedom and the fact that it is *“the responsibility of the customer to inform themselves about the products”* (Interviewee 4, 2023). Several subjects agreed that promoting unhealthy products that are harmful for one's health using public figures to be quite unethical, this opinion however changes if the consumers were to be fully informed when making these types of purchases. *“It is essential to find a balance between the business objectives and the ethical implications of the marketing strategies”* (Interviewee 5, 2023), a balance that could potentially be found through the use of guidelines and regulations to govern social media influencer marketing in the nutritional sector, as interviewees agreed. As previously mentioned in page 3, both companies and influencers should be fully transparent with the information they are disclosing, and they all believed that the use of regulations and guidelines could be beneficial in order to provide clarity on what is acceptable and what is not when it comes to promoting food products, especially those that have a negative impact on consumers health.

Some potential guidelines include:

1. Clearly disclose requirements for sponsored content, influencers should be transparent about their relationship with the brand and therefore clearly label their content on social media as advertisements or collaborations. This measure will allow customers to distinguish between genuine recommendations and paid endorsements, allowing them to make fully informed decisions.
2. Limitations to the amount of promotion vulnerable populations like children or adolescents are under, as this subgroup is easily influenced by their environment and more prone to impulsive behavior (B. RUDER, 2008). It is therefore important to protect them from potentially harmful messages regarding nutrition. Interviewee 3 (2023), a Psychology student, for instance explained how influencer Nikocado Avocado, who currently has 3.61 million Youtube subscribers (*Nikocado Avocado YouTube*, 2023) and got to fame by binge eating and making extreme and unhealthy Mukbangs, is showing its followers to not care about their nutrition and their health, it is normalizing some very unhealthy habits among the younger demographics.
3. Guidelines should emphasize responsible and transparent product promotions, influencers should be encouraged to provide accurate and reliable information about the nutritional value and the potential health consequences of the products they are promoting. This will ensure that consumers have complete access to truthful information, allowing them to make informed decisions about their dietary habits.

Having established the importance of guidelines is important because all interviewees agreed that both companies and influencers/celebrities should have the best interests of their consumers.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary of this project, we highlight the significance of relationships, specifically those of trust and admiration, that we, as individuals and consumers, establish with online figures who we may not necessarily have a personal relationship with. It has been shown the great power influencers have in moving masses, so, going back to the original research question:

What impact does social media influencer marketing have in the purchasing decisions in the nutritional sector, and what ethical implications should companies and influencers take into account?

The first aspect that answers the research questions has no concrete answer, there are many different ways that an

influencer can influence consumers. However, one thing is clear, they will influence, and most of the time, as supported by the McDonalds collaboration figures as well as my research, they will directly influence the customer into considering the completion of the purchasing of a product, even if it means disregarding their own health benefits. Every interaction we, as social media users, have with a specific social media influencer or celebrity, whether on social media or beyond, will strengthen or weaken our existing relationship we have with them. Each influencers's relationship with their audience is unique and invaluable; it is something that companies cannot buy. Due to this uniqueness, companies cannot guarantee a high conversion rate for their campaigns. However, they can ensure that, if executed correctly, the brand and/or product awareness among customers will increase, as well as the curiosity to try out the promoted product. In conclusion, influencers possess something that companies lack; a personal connection. Companies often lack a persona or a representative to connect with their customers, which can be achieved through the utilization of social media influencers or celebrities. Companies have now recognized this and are collaborating with these celebrities and/or influencers to leverage the connections influencers have with potential customers to drive sales.

The second aspect of the research question refers to the ethical implications that both companies and influencers take into account when promoting these types of products. Various guidelines were discussed that both parties could adhere to, ensuring that products are promoted in an ethical manner while prioritizing the best interests of consumers. There are always new ways to promote certain products while ensuring that customers have all the information needed for them to make a decision where they are fully aware of the benefits, drawbacks and risks involved. Consequently, it is concluded that although customers may not always be aware that they are being subconsciously influenced, it is crucial to explicitly inform them to prevent susceptibility to the influence exerted by celebrities or social media influencers, especially when promoting products that may pose risks if consumed excessively. By following specific guidelines, companies can promote responsibly, providing potential customers with all the necessary information to make informed and responsible decisions.

5.1 Implications

5.1.1 Academic Implications

With the development of this research paper I hope to encourage other researchers to further investigate the deep impacts that social media and social media influencers are having on the decision making and the development of consumers. By fully understanding these relationships, companies and society will be able to fully exploit the potential of social media influencer marketing campaigns for the greater good.

5.1.2 Practical Implications

The results show how easily some people can be influenced, with the conduction of this research I hope to raise awareness

on the subliminal impact social media campaigns can have on consumers, to raise awareness so that consumers can critically evaluate those campaigns and make informed decisions based on their needs and wants. Moreover, this paper was done so that consumers can go through social media and realize that not everything they see is real, or is in their own personal benefit.

5.2 Limitations

After the finalization of this study, there were some limitations which limited the ability of deeper research. There are three main limitations, the first one being the short time frame in which the study was conducted, which caused time pressure and a limited sample, something that relates to the next limitation. There were only 5 participants in this study and it is therefore not generalizable, all data was collected from them and from the internet, where impact of social media campaigns was also limited. Lastly, I believe the active implication of companies and influencers in this research would have given more insights, however due to my lack of professional network in this regard and the limited time frame, this was not able to be done.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Would you say that you are an active social media user? Which platforms do you use? In which one do you personally see more celebrity/influencer endorsements?
2. Do you consider yourself an easily influenced person? Do you believe that the degree of influence has changed over the course of your life?
3. Do you consider yourself to be healthy? Do you consider yourself to have a balanced diet and to include Sport/exercise in your daily activity?
4. What is your definition of health and healthy lifestyle?
5. How often do you see brands using celebrities/influencers to promote their products? Can you name an example?
6. When you see someone you are a fan of promoting a product, are you more likely to gain interest in the brand/Product?
7. Are you more moved towards a product because of the association of that influencer?
8. Have you ever considered purchasing a product because you liked the influencer/Are you more open to the idea?
9. Are you more open to buying a product that you have seen an influencer advertise online? Makeup, clothing, restaurants etc.
10. How do you perceive the role of social media influencers in shaping consumer behavior and purchasing decisions in the nutritional sector?
11. In your opinion, to what extent does social proof or consensus play a role in consumers' choices when influenced by social media influencers in the nutritional sector?
12. Can you share any examples or experiences where you believe social media influencer marketing has significantly influenced consumers to purchase unhealthy food products in the nutritional sector?
13. From an ethical point of view, what responsibilities do you believe companies and influencers have when it comes to promoting unhealthy food products through social media influencer marketing?
14. Are there any specific guidelines or regulations that you believe should be in place to govern social media influencer marketing in the nutritional sector, particularly regarding the promotion of unhealthy food products?
15. Do you believe consumers are aware of the potential impact that social media influencer marketing can have on their purchasing decisions in terms of unhealthy food products?
16. In your opinion, do you believe it is ethical for companies to use social media influencers to promote unhealthy food products in the nutritional sector? Why or why not?
17. Do you believe, after considering the unethical practices these brands/followers are doing, that that views affect your relationship with that company?
18. Do you believe that brands and influencers should have our best interests in mind?