# THE ROLE OF INFLUENCERS AND OPINION FORMERS MARKETING ON CREATIVE BRAND COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract.** The growing power of social media and the fast change of communication forms encourages marketers to explore new ways for brands to communicate creatively and effectively. The aim of this study is to determine how to reveal the involvement of influencers in creative forms of brand communication by analysing (comparatively) the expression of Lithuanian and foreign influencers in social networks. Research methodology and results: analysis academic literature and quantitative content analysis in social networks. Literature analysis reviled, that the main dimensions of communication strategy with influencers involves four stages: setting the objectives of the campaign; setting the criteria to find out right influencer; setting campaign duration and platform; influencer performance analysis. The results of the study showed that one of the most important and most inclusive step is choosing the right influencer. It is important to choose not only based on brand profile, but also to evaluate the potential risks when working with one or another influencer. Brands are recommended to choose those influencers that are not overloaded with another brands, integrate advertising into video format and reveal that their integration is brand advertising, because consumers tend to choose the products or services which are chosen by the celebrities they follow.

**Keywords:** brand, creative communication, influencer, online brand marketing and communication, online opinion leader.

## Introduction

With the development of technology and innovation, companies and brands face new challenges, so they must strive to stand out from other brands and be a noticeable and well-known brand to the consumer. Due to the vast amount of information, attracting and attracting new users becomes a complex process, and new solutions are being sought. With the popularity of social media, everyday use has become not only a part of our modern lifestyle, a way of communication, but also provided an opportunity to promote ourselves, our product,

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highlight, show brand uniqueness, message content, so today brands want and want to stand out from other brands and be noticed.

Authors Shahira Fahmy, Mary Angela Bock, and Wayne Wanta in their book *Visual Communication Theory and Research: A Mass Communication Perspective* (2014) discussed that every mode of communication needs dissemination channels as a means of communicating the right content in the right direction and in the right ways. As a result, companies and brands increasingly choose opinion formers to implement their communication and reach their audiences, in line with brand values, image and worldview, and can enhance and/or enhance brand image, awareness and popularity with their authentic content, self-created image, communicating with the audience. According to Lu et al. (2019) opinion leaders could be divided into three subgroups: opinion followers, positive opinion leaders, and negative opinion leaders according to the opinions update manner and influence. Meanwhile Ouvrein et al. (2021) suggest classifying them as top social media influencers and potential social media influencers based on their level of online admiration and the presence of social media entrepreneurship: 1) passionate business influencers; 2) passionate influencers; 3) celebrity influencers; 4) passionate topic enthusiasts; 5) dreaming business dormants. From the scope of influence point of view, there are two categories of opinion leaders: local and global one. Unlike the local opinion leader, the global one has more aptitude to wield a whole influence on the international markets (Oueslati et al., 2021). When looking at opinion leaders in ads with a variety of content, consumers see heroes they seem to want to emulate, especially now that social media has given us, *i.e.* consumers, the opportunity to interact with opinion formers, get to know them more closely and observe their daily habits: what image details do they use, what do they recommend, offer, *etc.* It is for this reason that brands are increasingly choosing opinion leaders to implement their communication.

Influencers create a connection between buyers and brands, as their main goal is to increase brand awareness, increase sales and thus attract a larger target audience (Černikovaitė, 2018). For these reasons, it is vital for businesses and brands to communicate correctly with existing and potential consumers. This work will be interested in the communication of influencers, according to which opinion formers are classified, as well as brand communication, which used (is) used opinion formers and their images, theoretical models and image formation aspects, so it is important to define brand functions and image, to analyse theoretical models and to present how communication is formed through the marketing of opinion formers. The paper also examines the creativity communication of opinion formers, in particular to determine whether the content of the message they communicate is effective or whether the personal characteristics of the opinion maker communicated through the communicated message affect consumers' perceptions of their identity, image and purchasing and/or purchasing behaviour motives. Opinion formers in the scientific literature referred to as influencers. So both concepts are used in parallel.

The aim of the work: to determine how to reveal the involvement of influencers in creative forms of brand communication by analysing (comparatively) the expression of Lithuanian and foreign influencers in social networks.

Paper *tasks:*

1. To reveal the involvement of influencers in creative forms of brand communication;
2. To identify the brand promotion methods used by Lithuanian and foreign influencers.

The *method* of analysis of scientific literature was chosen for the theoretical part of this paper, using both deduction (a new statement is formed from several statements) and induction (reasoning-based logic) and comparison, and qualitative (expert interview) and quantitative (questionnaire survey) research methods were used for the research part, as they allow a full and in – depth examination of both expert and consumer views on a given topic. Summarization and extrapolation methods were used to draw the available conclusions. Research methodology and results: analysis academic literature and quantitative content analysis in social networks.

## 1. Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing has become one of the most sought-after marketing communication tools in the last decade to directly influence consumers making purchasing decisions (Byrne et al., 2003; Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Khamis et al., 2017; Klepek & Starzyczná, 2018; Moreira et al., 2017).

The emergence of influencers has been driven by the emergence of social networks, online discussions, forums, *i.e.* the development of social media and the growing impact of marketing communications. In the scientific literature, influencers are defined as individuals who have brought together a significant audience of followers, specializing in one or more niches in which they are considered reliable advisors (Abidin, 2016; de Veirman et al., 2017).

In modern markets, these influencers typically operate in a virtual, online, social space to influence their followers (van den Bulck et al., 2016; Hsu et al., 2013; Tsang & Zhou, 2005). Influencer marketing has emerged as an effective approach for brands to connect with customers through social media influencers (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Social media influencers are increasingly employed as product endorsers, and a growing body of academic research confirms that influencers are an effective advertising instrument (Janssen et al., 2022). The emergence of social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* has played an important role in expanding e-commerce, changing the way people interact and creating new platforms for influencers to act (Lin et al., 2018). On these platforms, influencers are free to share information about the brands that followers crave, which means influencers in social space are well informed and therefore respected by their followers. Brand presence on social media can take many forms, including paid display advertising (paid media), brands participating in social networks as a brand persona, publishing branded content (owned media), and branded engagement opportunities for consumer participation (earned media) (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Analysing the activities of influencers in social space, it is observed that they have less power to influence one particular user, but it should be emphasized that they can reach a much larger audience through social media, *i.e.* thousands or millions of fans (Lin et al., 2018). It is said that influencers are those people who have a higher social status that gives them the power to influence followers. For these reasons, influencers are easily recognisable and respected sources of information. When celebrities, famous people recommend a product or service on their social network, they also pass on their social status and personal image to the brand being promoted (Thomson, 2006). For example, if Oprah Winfrey publicly says

that she particularly liked one book, includes it in the *Oprah's Book Club*, she immediately provides great value to the book through her personality, and women following her will definitely want to buy and read a book.

Such social media as *Facebook* and *Instagram* today became the best tool for electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Jansen et al., 2009; Lyons & Henderson, 2005). The emergence of influencers is also linked to the fact that users are not only sceptically viewing the traditional measures of advertising, but also can avoid, circumvent and block them, making it increasingly difficult for brands to reach the user. For this reason the brands have focused their attention to influencers and indirectly promote their products or service through them. In this context, a new concept of influencer emerges, which can be defined as content creators with a large number of followers on their social account, such as *Facebook* and *Instagram*, where every day moments of life are shared, opinions are expressed on various issues. An action where brands offer the influencers with a large number of followers to take advantage of their services, try out their products, and share experiences with fans by paying an amount of money (or not necessarily) is called marketing of influencers (de Veirman et al., 2017). According to Abidin (2016), unlike ordinary celebrities who hide their personal lives from the media, influencers reveal more details of their lives to their followers, sharing everyday experiences and various other experiences.

It should be emphasized that in scientific literature the definitions of opinion former and influencer are used as synonyms, but Lin et al. (2018) and Penfold (2004), provide a breakdown of influencers that highlights differences between these two definitions. Influencers could be distinguished into celebrities, micro-celebrities, micro-influencers, experts and high-reputation informants, market mavens, early adopters and product enthusiasts according to their roles.

According to this breakdown the celebrities and experts are characterised by such traits as talent and charisma, as well as the ability to perform both main functions of opinion formers. Experts mostly communicate on blogs (Hsu et al., 2013), they have useful and reliable information about the product or service, but they act only in one certain field linked to their lifestyle. Celebrities are the stars with huge fan base. Microstars are people who have become popular in virtual space (Khamis et al., 2017). They can be healthy lifestyle or fashion bloggers with millions of views or followers. Micro-influencers are people who have a relatively small number of followers (around 10 000) on any platform (*Instagram*, *Facebook*, *YouTube*), but these influencers are extremely active and attentive on their accounts. The main difference between celebrity (including microcelebrity) and micro-influencer is geographical and social distance between their followers. Celebrity can be famous in the whole world, but micro-influencers are acting more on a national level, so they can communicate with the user both in virtual space and reality. The mentioned early adopters are those influencers who are the first ones to try the new product or service and share their experience with the followers. Market mavens are people with knowledge of prevailing market trends, and discussing with the users. Enthusiasts are the fans of one certain brand. Yiyi et al. (2018) write: the simulation results show that, in order to maximize the influence power in e-commerce, enhancing opinion leaders' credibility is crucial.

Although the social media measures can be very various, but in the context of opinion formers, several main platforms are singled out as the most popular: social network sites (*Facebook*), blogs, microsites (*Twitter*), video content sharing platforms *YouTube* and *Instagram* (Lin et al., 2018).

In an attempt to capitalize on this intense usage, almost every consumer brand is present on social media and advertisers and marketers are eagerly integrating social media in their digital strategies (Voorveld, 2019). According to Woods (2016) influencers are such an important part of the brand that the question is not that whether influencers today are necessary for brand communication today, the question is – what strategy shall be created using influencers.

Lin et al. (2018) present a strategy outlining five main steps that should help organisations plan a marketing strategy to work with influencers. These steps are for both large and small businesses and include the following key steps: planning, recognition, alignment, motivation, coordination (Lin et al., 2018).

Brown and Fiorella (2013) provide one more strategy of influencer marketing which is called 4Ms. 4Ms is 4 main steps creating the marketing campaign of influencers:

*Step 1 – make*: Development consists of two main stages: identification and activation. Identification is linked to the selection of audience. Activation means the selection of influencer suitable for the campaign. According to Brown and Fiorella (2013), when selecting influencer it is important to pay attention to such aspects: demography, scale of time, platform, history of reactions, influencer;

*Step 2 – manage*: According to Brown and Fiorella (2013) management consists of seven main elements: product, knowledge, platform, message, calendar, alternatives, feedback, and influencer;

*Step 3 – monitor*: According to the authors of the strategy, when monitoring the progress and success it is important to pay attention to three main indicators:
   – Awareness: How much did the campaign get attention from the audience, how many posts have been shared, have there been new posts?
   – Reaction: How many new followers did the brand receive, how many times the site was subscribed to?
   – Action: How did the sales change, or how did the campaign promote the target audience for action?;

*Step 4 – measure*: It is important for each campaign to measure its success in order to learn from the mistakes in the future, to know where sides of strengths and weaknesses of the campaign have been. According to Biaudet (2017) there are two main indicators that can be used to measure the results of the campaign:
   – Investments, resources, product (indicator calculates how much resource the organisation needed to manage the campaign);
   – Relation, attitude, effect (measures the activity of the influencers themselves).

Summarising the arguments of the scientists for the more effective cooperation with opinion formers, the following strategy for working with influencers is offered to communication specialists (see Figure 1).
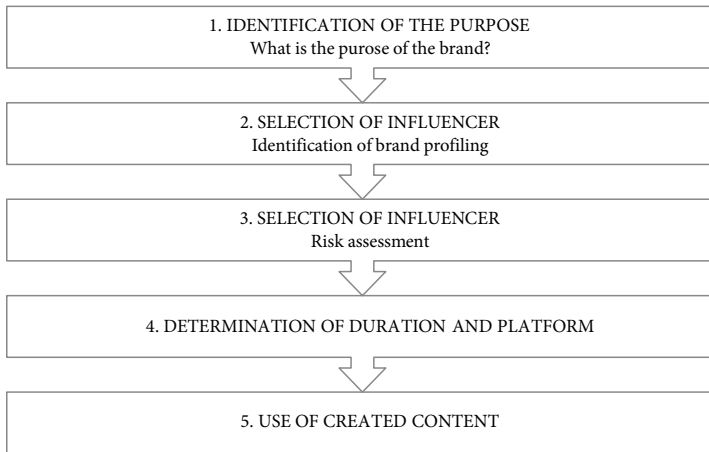
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│          1. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PURPOSE             │
│            What is the purose of the brand?           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│              2. SELECTION OF INFLUENCER               │
│            Identification of brand profiling          │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│              3. SELECTION OF INFLUENCER               │
│                    Risk assessment                    │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│       4. DETERMINATION OF DURATION AND PLATFORM       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│               5. USE OF CREATED CONTENT               │
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Figure 1. Strategy for working with opinion formers (source: created by the authors)

By summarising, it can be noticed that the inclusion of celebrities into the brand communication is noticeable from the early times, but today celebrities have been replaced by influencers who unlike celebrities act on social network platforms and advertise the brand through their personal experience.

## 2. Methodology

The aim of this study is to determine how to effectively and appropriately exploit the growing influence of opinion leaders by involving them in brand communication, what aspects need to be considered when planning a marketing strategy and what tools used by influencers prevail in Lithuania and abroad.

In order to compare foreign and Lithuanian influencers, a quantitative study was selected, content analysis that analyses the content of influencers on the social network *Instagram*. Using the content analysis method, meaningful units and their use presented in the information array and useful for their study were calculated.

A thematic analysis was used for the quantitative research. According to Shapiro and Markoff (2009), content analysis as a term can be defined as any systematic reduction of the flow of text into a set of statistically processed symbols that include the presence, intensity, or quantity of certain socially significant characteristics. According to Pukelytė (2016), quantitative content analysis studies can analyze video and audio, illustrations, pictures, websites, social media materials. According to Morkevičius (2005), quantitative content analysis undoubtedly reveals its strong qualities where it is necessary to carry out a broad, detailed, long-term, past event, non-interfering in the social world, and/or repeated research of the content of seemingly abundant social communication and social meanings.

Accordingly, the influencer activity analysis and the analysis of the content of the social network *Instagram* posts were chosen. Method of data collection and analysis. According to

Rupšienė (2007), in quantitative research, the researcher chooses one or more units of the general set (specific case, organization, phenomenon, and subculture) and seeks to understand them comprehensively.

The analysis of the content of the posts of the *Instagram* social network was chosen for the influencer analysis activity, based on the answers given by the respondents of the quantitative research, questionnaire survey. Research time: 9 January, 2020 – 12 January, 2020, describing 301 posts on *Instagram*. The *Instagram* platform was chosen considering that it is one of the most popular influencer platforms. Also, the communication of influencers on this social network is constant, every day, so brands often choose to integrate their advertising into this platform of opinion formers. The aim of this study is to compare the content created by Lithuanian and foreign influencers with integrated brand advertising, to reveal trends, forms, tools, main differences and similarities.

One of the significant areas of opportunity in digital marketing is influencer marketing, but identifying these influencers from big data sets is a continual challenge (Harrigan et al., 2021). In order to reflect the main standards on a global scale, and to reveal the diversity and versatility of the data for quantitative content analysis, not only Lithuanian but also foreign influencers were selected. So according to the latest data of 2020 published on the *Ranking of Lithuanian Influencers* (Lietuvos influencerių reitingas, 2022), three top Lithuanian influencers on *Instagram* were selected: Karolina Meschino – 282 000 followers, Naglis Bierancas – 255 000 followers, Žydrūnas Savickas – 455 000 followers. Also, three influencers were selected globally according to data of 2020 published on *Influencer Marketing Hub* (2022): Cristiano Ronaldo – 190 0000 followers, Selena Gomez – 161 0000 followers and Lionel Messi – 136 0000 followers. It should be emphasized that these influencers were selected not only in terms of the number of followers, but the studies analysed the authenticity of the content and the engagement rates.

## 3. Research instruments

The posts of influencers on the social network *Facebook* were evaluated according to the established categories and subcategories of communication tools and their characteristics, based on the previously defined analysis of scientific literature. In the theoretical part of the work, categories were distinguished that reflect the main goal of qualitative content analysis. In order to reveal the similarities and differences between Lithuanian and foreign opinion formers, content forms and ways of brand integration, the following essential categories are distinguished:

- – Total number of records;
- – Total number of entries with integrated brand advertising;
- – Advertising tagging in the content;
- – Content submission form;
- – Diversity of brands in the content of opinion formers;
- – The way the brand is integrated into the content.

## Discussion and results

The study revealed that the strategy for working with opinion formers, the campaign begins with the identification of the purpose of the brand, what is the foundation of all strategy, and ends with the measurement of results. However, one of the most important and most comprehensive stages in the strategy is the selection of appropriate influencers. In order to reveal tendencies of influencing in Lithuania and abroad, the article further performs the quantitative content analysis, studies the integration of the brands in the content of opinion formers.

Six influencers being examined (three top influencers in Lithuania and three top influencers abroad) have posted 301 entries in total on social network *Instagram* within two months period (1 September, 2020 – 1 November, 2020). Lithuanian influencers posted 191 entries out of which 76 (33%) are with integrated brand advertising. Meanwhile during the same period, foreign influencers have posted 110 entries in total, out of which 30 (27%) with integrated brand advertising. Number of entries show that Lithuanian influencers were more active during the analysed period than foreign ones. Lithuanian influencers shared a larger amount of entries from everyday life. The significant difference can be seen when analysing the tagging of advertising in the entries (see Figures 2–3).

The analysis revealed that foreign influencers are much more likely (63% of 30 commercials with an advertising tag) to reveal that their entry is an advertisement. Influencers usually tag "Paid partnership with". Lithuanian influencers much less often reveal that the brand integrated in their entries is advertising (out of 76 advertising entries, only 22% with an advertising tag). However, it should be noted that Bierancas states in all posts promoting the international brand *HUAWEI Lietuva*, as well as Meschino working with international brands *H&M Hennes & Mauritz AB* or *Daniel Wellington* that it is "Paid partnership". This shows that international brands, whether working with local or international influencers are not afraid to show followers that it is the advertisement of their brand.

When studying advertising entries of Lithuanian and foreign influencers there one more important difference was determined – the form of advertising presentation (see Figures 4–5).

Lithuanian influencers most often integrate advertising in photos (92%), and less often in video format (7%) or boomerang (1%). Advertising content of foreign influencers is more complete with video formats (63%). Analysing the entries, a general tendency of both Lithuanian and foreign influencers was observed, that in the centre of most entries there is the opinion-former himself, who, for example, is wearing the advertised brand's clothes or the product advertised in his/her hands.

During the analysed period, Lithuanian influencers advertised a total of 38 brands, of which 61% are Lithuanian brands and 39% are international brands (see Figure 6). A total of 19 brands were advertised by foreign opinion formers, of which only 11% were local and the remaining 89% were international brands (see Figure 7).

The diversity of brands in the content of influencers shows that influencers tend to accept different proposals and do not shy away from working with different brands. It can be assumed that brand partnerships are short-term or even one-time.
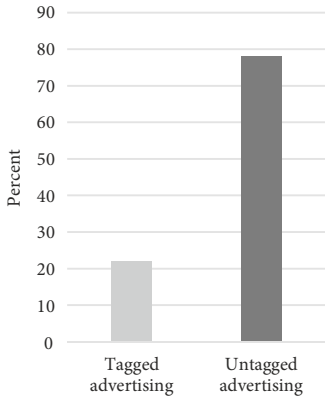
Figure 2. Tagging of advertising in the content
of Lithuanian opinion formers
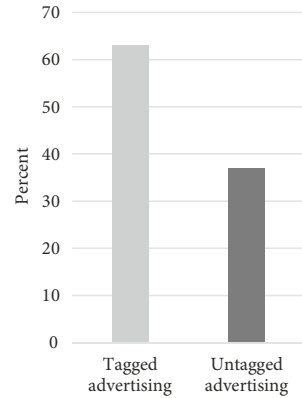(source: created by authors)



Figure 3. Tagging of advertising in the
content of foreign opinion formers
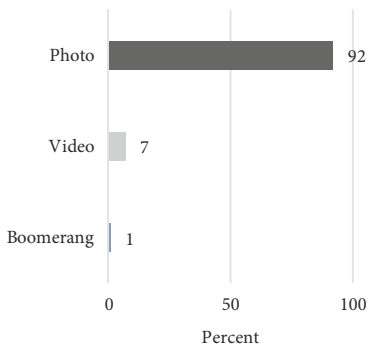(source: created by authors)



Figure 4. Form of advertising in the content
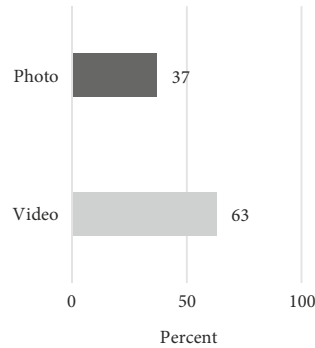of Lithuanian opinion formers
(source: created by authors)



Figure 5. The form of advertising in the
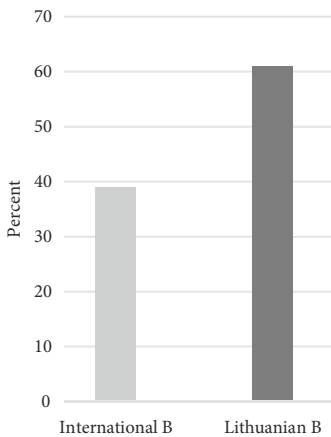content of foreign opinion formers
(source: created by authors)



Figure 6. Variety of brands in the content
of Lithuanian opinion formers
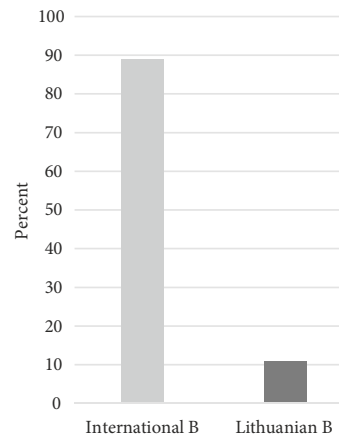(source: created by authors)



Figure 7. Variety of brands in the
content of foreign opinion formers
(source: created by authors)

In summary, the content of Lithuanian and foreign influencers with integrated brand advertising differs. Lithuanian influencers tend to cooperate with more brands and hide advertising, while foreign influencers cooperate with fewer brands and their advertising is clearly visible and marked.

## Conclusions

The emergence of celebrity phenomenon can be related to earlier times when heroes played an important role in the society, but its activation according to most of analysed authors, is noticeable with the beginning of media development. Modern users are generally more likely to choose those products and services that are chosen by the celebrity than those which do not have the latter's approval. Celebrities can advertise the brand in various forms – the use of a face in advertising or the appearance of the celebrity at the events organised by the brand.

In 21st century a new definition has emerged in the marketing which changed the definition of a celebrity and the role in the brand communication – it is opinion formers. The development of this phenomenon has been greatly influenced by the rise of social network and the opportunity provided for the users to directly follow celebrities they are interested in, follow their published content, comment, react, and so on. This is how word-of-mouth advertising was transformed into eWOM. We would highlight two main differences between involvement of the celebrities and influencers into the brand communication, which are the following: (1) influencers are acting on social media different than celebrities; (2) unlike ordinary celebrities who hide their personal lives from the media, influencers reveal more to their followers details of their lives, share their everyday experiences and advertise brand through their own personal experience.

Based on the analysed theoretical models of the strategy and performed empirical study, the conclusions are constructed that strategy for working with influencers must include the main stages: (1) identification of the purpose; (2) selection of influencer; (3) determination of duration and platform; (4) the use of created content. The study revealed that the foundation of all strategies is the purpose of the brand, and the comprehensive stage is the selection of influencers where it is first important to assess the brand profile (audience and values) and select influencers who may be suitable for the campaign. However, before concluding the agreements with the influencers it is necessary to assess the possible risks such as false followers or unreliability of the product to the opinion former.

The analysis revealed that foreign influencers are much more likely (63% of 30 commercials with an advertising tag) to reveal that their entry is an advertisement. Influencers usually tag "Paid partnership with". Lithuanian influencers much less often reveal that the brand integrated in their entries is advertising (out of 76 advertising entries, only 22% with an advertising tag). This shows that international brands, whether working with local or international influencers are not afraid to show followers that it is the advertisement of their brand.

One of the tasks of the research was to reveal the form of communication of influencers, so it was found that Lithuanian influencers most often integrate advertising in photos (92%), and less often in video format (7%) or boomerang (1%). Advertising content of foreign influencers is more complete with video formats (63%). Analysing the entries, a general tendency

of both Lithuanian and foreign influencers was observed, that in the centre of most entries there is the opinion-former himself, who, for example, is wearing the advertised brand's clothes or the product advertised in his/her hands.

According to the study, it is recommended for the brands in Lithuania to observe those opinion formers, whose content is not overloaded with large number of other brands because in this case their integrated advertising may disappear in the flow. In order to more effectively analyse the involvement of influencers into brand communication, it would be worthwhile to perform qualitative analysis of influencers' content, which would reveal what kind of content is the most attractive to the users.

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