Social media influencers in the time of COVID: How a pandemic has thrown a spotlight on the ethics of influencer engagement and public relations practice

The role and influence of social media influencers (SMIs) have been emphasised with the COVID19 pandemic, as people seek answers to the cause of the pandemic and search for solutions to the vast challenges it has brought their everyday lives. Health authorities and governments are beginning to recognise the power of these social media influencers as authorities grapple with the best way to communicate with diverse audiences, to minimise the impact of the pandemic on the populations' health and wellbeing, as well as the economy. This presentation will focus on the behaviour of influencers in the Middle East (particularly the UAE) during COVID19, and the authorities' (and brands') responses, and some of the challenges and opportunities of working with influencers, during a pandemic, including the thorny questions of regulation and ethics.

Within public relations, advertising and marketing, influencer engagement has gained much interest and attention over the past decade, certainly in industry but also, more recently, in scholarship. The discipline of public relations in some ways appears to have been bypassed, as the term 'Influencer Marketing' has been adopted and 'influencer agencies' have sprung up to serve both brands and influencers within this continuously evolving new paradigm of engagement. Codes of practice across the world are typically just guidelines – with limited enforceability and apparent limited appetite on behalf of brands and influencers to have them enforced. The concept of a code of conduct is complicated by the fact that 'influencer' is such a broad descriptor for a wide range of activities, ranging from nano-influencers with dedicated groups of followers to traditional celebrities, but also including different approaches to seek to influence, including cash for comment but also true influencer driven/empowered collaborations.

However, the UAE was one of the first countries in the world that has implemented a social media influencer licence (the new law came in during 2018), where any influencer who is paid has to register with the National Media Council. In September this year, the UAE introduced a new rule that social media influencers need to obtain permission from the Ministry of Health before posting paid advertisements that promote medicines, pharmaceuticals or health-related products. Influencers have been arrested in the UAE for promoting behaviour that could increase the risk of the spread of COVID.

One thing most pundits agree on is that influencer engagement, from both the brand and individual influencer side, is fast and ever-evolving, with rules of play being 'made up as they go along' or ignored. Recent developments under COVID19 have illustrated the issues related to influencer engagement and this paper will explore these examples within a mainly Middle Eastern context to highlight the worldwide issues relevant to influencer engagement. A typology of approaches to influencer engagement, including recommendations for practice, will be proposed. We position this paper as a discussion starter to highlight ethical concerns in the influencer engagement space within the current (COVID) context to drive discussion regarding ethical implications and requirements for public relations practitioners in this dynamic and challenging environment.