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Influencer Marketing in Building Coffee Communication: a Case Study of GBS Coffee

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ABSTRACT
Influencer marketing is redefining the way brands communicate with consumers, especially in our digital era. The following article presents a case study of the Polish GBS coffee brand, which effectively used cooperation with online creators in its market entry strategy. The aim of the work is to analyse the key elements of the brand strategy, such as product personalisation, selection of influencers and the use of non-standard communication platforms, including social media and internet platforms. Content analysis research, including literature and digital content analysis, shows that authenticity, transparency and matching the values of the influencer with the brand are key to the effectiveness of a campaign. The results of the work indicate that a strategy based on online creators allows not only high brand recognition to be achieved, but also redefines rituals related to coffee consumption. The article fills the research gap regarding the use of influencer marketing in the Polish coffee market, while providing practical tips for other companies planning similar activities.

Keywords: influencer marketing, GBS coffee, product personalisation, social media, authenticity in marketing, coffee market

JEL Classification: D12, M31, M37, L66

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Introduction

In the third decade of the 21st century, influencer marketing continues to be a dynamically developing marketing communication tool, redefining traditional relationships between brands and customers. The increasingly rapid development of broadly understood social media, such as Instagram, YouTube, X or Tik Tok, creates unique opportunities to reach the audience in a more engaging and, at the same time, more authentic way. Online creators, thanks to their authenticity and closeness to the community, have the ability to not only shape the opinion of their audience, but also to potentially increase brand awareness and to influence consumers' purchase decisions (Boerman, Willemsen & Van Der Aa, 2022).

At the same time, the dynamic development of this tool raises a number of challenges. Organisations using this tool often struggle

with difficulties in selecting influencers who are consistent with the values and strategy of a given brand. In addition, consumers are increasingly sceptical of sponsored content, which in turn leads to questions about the authenticity of the message, as well as the effectiveness of the campaign (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2022).

It is therefore crucial to deepen the knowledge about the effectiveness of influencer marketing and to describe effective practices, taking into account the perspective of both consumers and brands. Research in this field has not only academic but also practical importance, as it allows companies to better adapt their activities to the expectations and needs of recipients while increasing their engagement and loyalty.

The literature on influencer marketing focuses on three key aspects:

1. **Effectiveness of influencer activities:** in this respect, research shows that authenticity, transparency and trust are the key determinants of online creators (Boerman, Willemsen & Van Der Aa, 2022). The literature particularly emphasises the importance of parasocial relationships that strengthen the emotional engagement of recipients and the propensity to make purchase decisions (Labrecque, 2021).
2. **The relationship between influencer and brand values:** research indicates that matching the values of the influencer with the values of the promoted brand increases consumer identification with the brand, as well as consumer loyalty (Jin & Phua, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).
3. **Visual and substantive quality of content:** publications show the phenomenon in which the aesthetics of materials, as well as the expertise of the influencer, increase the perceived value of the content and its impact on purchase decisions (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Despite the rich literature, there is a research gap in the area of the effective use of influencer marketing tools on the Polish market in the instant coffee segment. This publication aims to fill this gap.

The aim of the article is to present a case study of the effective use of online creators in the market entry strategy of the GBS coffee brand, with particular emphasis on the analysis of personalisation and communication activities aimed at specific target groups, such as gamers and young adults. The following research questions were asked in terms of the aim of this work:

1. **What elements of the GBS coffee brand's influencer marketing strategy of contributed to its effective market entry?** (focus on activities, including product personalisation and selection of creators).
2. **How did cooperation with influencers affect the involvement of the gamer community and other target groups?** (analysis of parasocial relations, value matching and influencer authenticity).
3. **What long-term effects can the influencer marketing strategy bring in the context of brand recognition and loyalty?** (subjective assessment of the effectiveness of activities in building the brand image and its market position).

The research focused on analysing the effectiveness of the GBS Coffee brand's influencer marketing strategy, with particular emphasis on (1) cooperation with influencers

representing different audience segments; (2) product personalisation and the possible effect of consumer engagement; (3) the potential effect of promotional content, such as reviews, music videos and multimedia campaigns, on building brand recognition; (4) the unusual use of platforms and social media, including YouTube, Twich and Pornhub, in order to achieve various communication goals.

The presented work is based on a critical literature review and a qualitative approach involving the analysis of a single case study, which involved the following data collection techniques: (1) qualitative content analysis; (2) analysis of pop culture products.

Evolution of social coffee rituals and their impact on shaping identity in gamer communities

Over the years, society has changed its habits regarding behaviour in local communities, and also in online communities. It is worth noting that previously coffee was mainly used in Poland to celebrate meetings between people. In the third decade of the 21st century, people increasingly associate coffee with an effective stimulant.

The situation is slightly different in the gamer community, because coffee is considered as both an effective stimulant, and also an element of gaming culture. A study conducted by John A. Smith and Robert T. Brown (2022) on gamers showed that caffeine has a positive effect on the cognitive abilities of gamers, especially in terms of reaction speed and concentration in the context of long-term gaming sessions requiring high concentration. Lucy Garcia and Ethan Thompson (2023) speak in a similar tone, drawing attention to the role of coffee as a means of improving attention and concentration among gamers, especially those engaging in high-intensity games. On the other hand, the work of Samuel Martinez and Karen Evans (2020) showed that coffee among gamers plays not only the role of an energy drink, but is also an important element of social ritual. Their research revealed that coffee is an inseparable element of preparation for long gaming sessions, and coffee breaks during the game are a “ritual” enabling the mind to be reset and regain energy. Interestingly, the culture of drinking coffee was also a determinant facilitating integration in online groups, because on certain forums, gamers exchanged opinions about their favourite drinks or ways of preparing them. Coffee has become a symbol of a certain community of experiences in these communities, which strengthens the bonds between players and allows for establishing deeper relationships in gamer communities.

Gamers' behaviour corresponds to the results of a report by ABC Rynek i Opinia, according to which almost half of freshly prepared coffees are bought outside the home, and are mainly sold at petrol stations. The second place is occupied by grocery stores, and the third by cafes, restaurants and fast food bars. The 2023 International Coffee Organization report indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the change in our behaviour towards coffee. It turns out that coffee consumption at home has increased, which has boosted interest in coffee-making machines and home brewing products

for coffee. It is worth noting that, at the same time, the number of visits to coffee shops has decreased (see egospodarka.pl, 2023).

Changes in purchases in relation to coffee, and also in the way it is prepared and consumed, are directly related to changes in content consumption and the use of the network understood as the Internet. The most popular concept explaining the networking of online communities is the idea of the Network Society by Manuell Castells. It assumes that this community enables the flow of information in an unprecedented way, which, in turn, influences behaviour on the broadly understood Internet. What is more, the Internet itself has become a forum where people express their identities and build intercultural relations. The researcher emphasises that people are increasingly gathering around topics that connect them, creating online communities based on shared interests. This means that classic territorial structures are becoming less important, while shared interests and statuses within the community are becoming more important (Castells, 2021). Jan Van Dijk (2023) complements Castells's concept by pointing out that digital media and social media have become some of the most important tools for influencing the identity of network users. He emphasises that it is thanks to constant contact with trends, social groups and cultural fashions that social media consumers often adapt their behaviours to fit the social expectations prevailing in the social network. The author also notes that this process leads to a phenomenon more widely known as "personal branding", although he understands it not only in a business context, but rather in an identity context that leads to building one's status within the community. This "personal branding" is a result of striving for acceptance and this, in turn, is the result of pressure imposed by the community itself.

It can therefore be concluded that drinking the desired coffee with specific behaviours in a specific community can be considered a status symbol in the group, as well as a level of initiation. At one time in Poland, the Żołądkowa Gorzka vodka brand invested in the segment of popularised Hip-Hop music, creating the habit of drinking vodka in specific situations by e.g. placing its product in the music videos of Polish rappers who, at that time, were considered the influential voice of their generation. Colloquially called "red" vodka, it was an element of the subculture and an indicator of the status and degree of initiation among members declaring their affiliation with the Hip-Hop subculture during social gatherings or concerts. Coffee therefore had the potential to be an element of the gamer subculture.

Definition and role of the influencer in brand communication

In the 2020s, introducing a new product to the market and triggering a related trend is possible thanks to engaged communities built around influential people, who are called influencers.

The term "influencer" and the related phenomenon of influence have been defined in science in various ways. Marijke De Veirman, Veroline Cauberghe and Liselot Hudders (2017) define such an individual as a credible medium for recipients and believe that they

play the role of a spokesperson for their communities. Catherine Lou and Shupei Yuan (2019) consider an influencer as a person who is able to influence purchase decisions because they have authority and a position in the community, as well as a relationship and common knowledge with the recipients. Ebru Uzunoğlu and Sema Misci Kip (2014) define an influencer in a similar tone, considering them as a marketing entity able to influence consumer groups through engagement and authority. They believe that influencers can do this because they are credible in a specific industry and have access to a wide audience, and therefore, thanks to their credibility and reach, they can convince others. Researchers Luis V. Casaló, Carlos Flavián and Sergio Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) see an influencer as an intermediary between consumers and brands using the trust of the recipients. Karen Freberg, Kristen Graham, Karen McGaughey and Laura A. Freberg (2011) reduce the creator to a generator of advertising content. For the purpose of this paper, an influencer is understood to be a creator who creates content on social media and who has an impact on communities resulting from their authority, credibility and the reach of the content they produce. In this article, the terms "influencer" and "creator" will be used interchangeably according to the definition above.

A digital creator, similarly to a celebrity, uses or – to put it more economically – monetises their popularity by recommending their own or commissioned products. Their effectiveness in reaching and convincing target groups depends on their authority, reach and probably expertise in a given field. Researchers point out that what increases the engagement of users who are more likely to trust recommendations is the knowledge, authenticity and transparency of the creator. They believe that credibility builds a sense of security, and this makes recipients perceive the brand as more trustworthy. This is the case especially when the influencer strives for authenticity and also avoids intrusive commercialisation of the message (Hwang & Zhang, 2020). Lucille I. Labrecque (2021) draws attention in her work to parasocial relationships understood as emotional bonds between the influencer and the recipients in the context of the creator's advertising effectiveness. The researcher believes that they are the key to the effectiveness of the campaign and emphasises that the closer the parasocial relationship, the greater the emotional engagement of the recipients, and as emotional engagement increases, so does their willingness to undertake purchasing actions based on the influencer's recommendations. The author suggests that such relationships are particularly beneficial for brands that want to increase the engagement and trust of recipients in their products. Katerina Sokolova and Hana Kefi (2020) emphasise that trust in the creator acts as a mediation between promotional content and the perceived value of the brand. Buyers who trust the influencer are more likely to perceive the brand positively, as well as to manifest their readiness to make a purchase, which, according to the authors, seems crucial for the effectiveness of an advertising campaign. On the other hand, Seung-A Jin and Jin Phua (2014) indicate values as a key factor in the effectiveness of a campaign for an influencer and the promoted product, because when they match, recipients are more likely to identify with the brand and are more loyal. The researchers note that matching in terms of values strengthens the bond between the buyer and the brand, and increases the long-term

value of the relationship. Marijke De Veirman, Veroline Cauberghe and Liselot Hudders (2017) point to yet another factor of influence in their work, namely visual appeal and expertise. The results of their research showed that the aesthetics of published posts, and the level of influencers' knowledge about a given product, increase their influence on recipients. The authors emphasise that users consider more aesthetic and professional content as more credible and more valuable. On the other hand, Ismail Erkan and Chris Evans (2016) draw attention to the role of social proof. The conclusions from their work indicate that the more reactions the creator generates, the greater the trust of the recipients and their willingness to make a purchase. The authors believe that social proof acts as a tool strengthening the authority of the influencer and also their marketing effectiveness.

To conclude the foregoing considerations concerning influencers, it is worth emphasising that they are online creators who usually generate a relatively large reach, have credibility and authority that allow them to influence online communities, and monetise their status within the community. The sales effectiveness of an online creator is influenced by the expertise in a given field, represented values identical to the values of the product, authenticity and transparency (while avoiding intrusive commercialisation), the aesthetics of the influencer's materials, the number of interactions with the material, the trust of the recipients in the creator, and above all, their emotional relationship with fans.

Case study of the communication of the GBS coffee brand

GBS coffee is a Polish brand that offers coffees with a high caffeine content. The product is aimed at people looking for intense stimulation. GBS products are distinguished by a caffeine content five times higher than in traditional coffees, which, according to the manufacturer, make them one of the strongest on the market. The brand offers many coffee flavours, including white chocolate, tiramisu, vanilla, brownie or coconut with white chocolate (mmaniak.pl, n.d.). This coffee is available as instant coffee, ground coffee and in beans (gbs.pl, n.d.). As the brand itself declares, it emphasises the quality of its products, also offering exclusive coffees such as Kopi Luwak, which is known as one of the most expensive coffees in the world. According to the brand, coffee is gaining popularity among consumers looking for an intense flavour and a strong stimulating effect (gbs.pl, n.d.)

The project was led by Mikołaj Jurkiewicz and Mateusz Jurkiewicz. On the YouTube channel Golden CEO, Mateusz Jurkiewicz talks about the launch and development strategy of the GBS coffee brand. From the very beginning, the company's CEO assumed cooperation with influencers as the main driving force of growth (Golden CEO, 2024). However, the Golden CEO project was completed after releasing three films on the channel. There are mentions on the Internet that show that the company's management knew what sales power influencers had in communities. Before building the company, Mateusz Jurkiewicz was involved in creating music, building his brand on collaborations with famous influencers and Polish rappers such as Young Multi, Kaen or Tetris (Prawdziwy Trap, n.d.). It is worth noting that Golden Bow Solutions campaigns were built

from the very beginning on the involvement of the influencer community related to or directly derived from the computer games segment.

The first mentions on the Internet concern a campaign that personalised coffee flavours, matching them to influencers promoting individual variants. An example of this approach are flavours such as Kokosanka (coconut) Masny Ben, Brownie Nitrozyniak or Masło orzechowe (peanut butter) Xayo, which were supposed to reflect the character and preferences of individual creators, encouraging their fans to try these proposals. They were then reviewed by another influencer called Mr Krycha, known for his food reviews and tests. The video, which lasts less than one minute, was viewed over 320 thousand times (MrKryha, 2023).

The company used a similar strategy in cooperation with rapper and influencer Sentino and the freak fight federation Fame MMA. As part of the promotional activities, a dedicated ad was created, which was then reviewed by the influencer Young Multi (Ebe Ebe, 2024; Multi & Yfl Shoty, 2024). The collaboration resulted in two music videos by the artist, entitled "Midas" and "45". The first song compares the artist to King Midas, capable of transforming any piece of music into a commercial success, while the second compares him to Michael Jordan, the legendary basketball player and symbol of success for both Nike and the Chicago Bulls. In both videos, Sentino appears with GBS coffee, which is presented in the context of the luxury fashion brands worn by the rapper. In the "45" video, coffee appears in a new context, as a stimulant and an addition to whisky. The first of the videos, "Midas", was viewed 16 million times, and the second, "45", 2.2 million. These data include only direct views on the rapper's channel and do not include the so-called reactions to the music videos published by other internet users, including famous influencers. These reactions generate additional reach, thus increasing the impact of the campaign (Sentino, 2023; Sentino, 2023a). Both "Midas" and "45" are songs and music videos produced in collaboration with GBS coffee. Their goal is to promote a lifestyle associated with premium coffee.

Table 1. List of influencers with whom the GBS coffee brand has officially collaborated

Influencer's name	Content topics	Number of followers
Xayoo (Marcin Majkut)	Computer game broadcasts, League of Legends, game analysis, interactions with viewers	Twitch: 1.5 million YouTube: 1 million
TheNitroZyniak (Sergiusz Górski)	Vlogs, automotive, computer games, online commentary	YouTube: 2 million Twitch: 500 thousand
Masny Ben	Humorous films, parodies, music projects, entertainment content	YouTube: 300 thousand; Instagram: 200 thousand
Sentino (Sebastian Enrique Alvarez)	German-Polish rapper, creates his songs in four languages: German, Polish, Spanish and English	Instagram: 353 thousand; YouTube: 288 thousand
ZeboPL	Polish YouTuber known for creating humorous and commentary content. He comments on various events, social phenomena and the activities of other online creators.	YouTube: 1.67 million

Source: own research.

It is worth noting that Golden Blow Solu-tions has previously collaborated with the Fame MMA federation, creating a dedicated ad, embedded in memetic culture. This ad referred to the beginnings of computer games, presenting coffee as a game character (Szperk00, 2022).

One of the brand's unusual marketing activities was a social campaign conducted on one of the online platforms for adults. The official goal of this initiative was to draw attention to the negative consequences of using pornographic content and to promote opening up to new interpersonal relationships, as well as deepening the existing bonds in the real world. However, the real goal of the campaign was to generate additional discussion in the online space, both about the product itself and the communication strategy used (Chowratowicz, 2024).

The campaign used advertising messages characteristic of this channel, such as: "Hot coffees in your city will make the first step easier" and "Do you want to meet? Let's start with coffee". The main message of the creation was to encourage recipients to take the first step in establishing a relationship in reality, while the main theme was a proposal to drink coffee together, intended to symbolise a simple way to start a conversation and build relationships (NowyMarketing, 2022).

Figure 1. Advertising banners in the GBS coffee campaign on the website

Source: own research.

The campaign was aimed at the Polish market, which is the brand's key target area, and was organised in the period preceding Valentine's Day, which additionally strengthened its message and adequacy to the needs of recipients at that time. Below is a list of influencers taking part in the discussion about the brand's campaign on the website addressed to adults.

Table 2. List of influencers taking part in the discussion about the GBS campaign

Influencer's name	Medium	Reach (number of followers/subscribers)
Krzysztof Gonciarz	YouTube	1.5 million subscribers
Sylwester Wardęga	YouTube	3.6 million subscribers
Maffashion	Instagram	1.4 million followers
Jessica Mercedes	Instagram	1 million followers
Michał Sadowski	Twitter	150 thousand followers

Source: own research.

Golden Blow Solutions, when introducing its products to the FMCG market, used strategic influencer-based activities to expand its consumer base. In the initial phase, the focus was on cooperation with creators directly or indirectly associated with broadly understood gaming. This activity was aimed at attracting an engaged community of players who had already identified with the ritual of drinking coffee. In the next phase, the communication strategy was expanded to include cooperation with a controversial musician and a federation known for being founded on the basis of influencer fights. Thanks to this, the company successfully moved its products beyond the current gaming segment, reaching a wider audience. In the final phase, a social campaign was implemented, the aim of which was to provoke a broad discussion among pop culture influencers. This activity allowed for a further increase in the reach of communication, posi-tioning the product as a mainstream element and increasing its recognition among consumers. It should be noted that the strategic use of influencers by Golden Blow Solutions is an example of the effective use of social media marketing, where activities were gradually scaled in order to achieve the maximum reach and diversity of recipients.

Discussion

This article discusses the case of the launch of coffee by Golden Blow Solutions, a company whose strategy was based on cooperation with online creators. It seems that the marketing specialists conducted detailed literature research indicating coffee as both a stimulant and a companion to computer games (Smith and Brown, 2022; Garcia and Thompson, 2023). By identifying this anchor point, it was possible to appropriately position the brand in the coffee market.

It is important to emphasise that the communication strategy evolved over time. At first, coffee was promoted as a product with a five times higher caffeine content, then as an element of everyday luxury available to everyone, and finally as a key element of social gatherings.

It is worth noting that the seemingly unrelated communication activities had a common denominator in the form of a core, which was the gamer community. It was this community that was the central point from which marketing activities spread outwards, covering increasingly wider groups of recipients.

The most interesting issue that connected the gamer community and young adults, and at the same time sparked a broad discussion among online creators, turned out to be the issue of pornography. While the brand built its recognition through communication about being an effective stimulant, in this case it took on the role of an effective companion for social gatherings, which was a response to the challenge of excessive and unfavourable con-tact with pornography among young people and adults. A study conducted on a group of almost 6,500 Polish students aged 18-26 showed that 80% of respondents come into contact with pornographic content every day, and over 15% of them show signs of addiction (UMCS, 2021). Using a non-standard medium to promote the product and initiating a social debate contributed directly to increasing brand recognition.

It should be emphasised that the brand used creators who are advocates for their communities and act as a media for them (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). That is why they were able to influence their communities (Lou and Yuan, 2019). The foregoing conclusions correspond to the results of a study conducted by Natalia Hatalska (2016) almost eight years ago, which indicated that online creators in Poland have significant influence on their communities, also in terms of shopping. It is also worth noting that when selecting influencers in campaigns, three key factors were taken into account: (1) reach (number of subscribers and the ability to generate discussion); (2) authority; (3) credibility in their community.

Conclusions

The GBS coffee brand's market entry strategy based on collaboration with influencers has shown that brand communication based on online creators is an effective tool for building brand recognition. Undoubtedly, product personalisation, adaptation to the nature and values of influencers contributed to a deeper involvement of the creator community. In addition, the use of various social formats – from personalised campaigns, through reviews, to music videos – resulted in the effective reach of promotional content to various target groups with a particular focus on gamers and young adults. It is interesting that GBS coffee campaigns not only influenced the brand's positioning, but also contributed to redefining rituals related to coffee consumption, which has become an element of lifestyle in the target groups.

This study fills the research gap in the area of influencer marketing application in the Polish coffee market, paying special attention to unique target groups, including gamers and young adults, as well as the use of non-standard marketing communication channels for this market.

Companies that want to use the influencer marketing tool should pay attention to several issues. The first issue is the selection of influencers for the campaign who have credi-bility in specific communities. Each of the creators who were involved in the Golden Blow Solutions campaign had characteristics that matched the characteristics of the coffee being promoted. The second issue is the matching of the products and promotional content to the characteristics of the community. The messages on the adult website and the rapper Sentino's music videos would not have achieved their effective-

ness if they had not been embedded in the cr-creator's unique "world". They caused resonance among recipients because the creators of the campaign consciously selected influencers, media and topics that aroused strong emotions and engaged the audience. The third issue is the fact that the GBS coffee brand also increased its reach and the diversity of recipients with each subsequent step through multimedia campaigns and cooperation with such catalysts of popularity as the Fame MMA federation. The fourth and final issue is the ability to find a balance between achieving reach and audience engagement through cooperation with controversial creators and the risk of potential hate from their opponents. It is common knowledge that every creator has both their supporters and opponents, which means that the product promoted by the influencer can be seen as an integral part of their image, and can be subject to similar evaluation.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that there are serious limitations to this study. The focus was on only one case study, which is rather exploratory than representative, limiting the possibility of extrapolating the results to the entire population. In addition, the foregoing analysis mainly concerns the short-term effects of the campaign. There is also a lack of precise company data on the sales of its products.

Future research should focus on how influencer marketing affects sales results in the long term, and therefore how long the creator's influence is effective, as well as how it affects long-term brand and product recognition. It would also be interesting to examine the long-term effects of cooperation with online creators, which include the impact on consumer loyalty and maintaining the brand image in a rapidly redefining digital environment.

Declaration of competing interest

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