The career path of digital influencers
A trajetória de carreira dos influenciadores digitais

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ABSTRACT

The article's objective was to understand the career development of digital influencers. To this end, testimonials were collected from 9 influencers, who spoke about their experiences, according to the constituent stages of their professional trajectories. The survey results revealed that the majority of respondents began their influencer career as a hobby, and with the gain in visibility and financial return, they saw a job opportunity. Furthermore, it was found that an influencer career involves many challenges, such as pricing, understanding how algorithms work and the intense work routine. In the end, some advice for those who want to invest in their career was provided by the interviewees. Given the constant expansion of the digital influencer market, this article contributes to career studies with information about the trajectory of these professionals.

Keywords: Career. Career developmental theory. Digital influencer.

RESUMO

O presente artigo objetiva entender a construção de carreira de influenciadores digitais. Para isso, recolhe depoimentos de nove influenciadores, que falaram sobre as suas vivências, de acordo com as etapas constitutivas das suas trajetórias profissionais. Os resultados da pesquisa revelaram que a maioria dos entrevistados começou sua carreira de influenciador como um hobby *e, com o ganho de visibilidade e retorno financeiro, vislumbraram uma oportunidade de trabalho. Ademais, verificou-se que a carreira de influenciador envolve muitos desafios, como a precificação, a compreensão do funcionamento dos algoritmos e a intensa rotina de trabalho. Ao final, alguns conselhos para quem deseja investir na carreira foram mencionados pelos entrevistados. Tendo em vista a constante expansão do mercado de influenciadores digitais, este artigo contribui para os estudos de carreira com informações acerca da trajetória desses profissionais.*

Palavras-chave: *Carreira. Teoria desenvolvimentista de carreira. Influenciador digital.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the seamless connection between personal computers and the availability of user-friendly applications has facilitated the sharing of information by ordinary citizens. Individuals with specific opinions or skills can influence others and gradually gain prominence on social networks (CHAU; XU, 2012; CRESCITELLI; TAGAWA, 2015). This communication occurs directly, swiftly, with minimal creation costs, extensive dissemination, and without direct oversight from public bodies or companies (CRESCITELLI; TAGAWA, 2015). As a result, users can share personal stories, ideas, opinions, and emotions, thereby transforming social networks into a highly valued form of media (CHAU; XU, 2012).

With the ability to evaluate products and brands and sway their followers with their opinions, "digital propagandists" have piqued companies' interest in compensating them for promoting their products (CHAU; XU, 2012; CRESCITELLI; TAGAWA, 2015). This phenomenon has given rise to digital influencers, who capitalize on their presence on social networks for monetization. These influencers can be found on popular platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, as well as on channels like YouTube or blogs.

In Brazil, the digital influencer market is experiencing rapid growth. According to a study by Nielsen Media Research (2023), there are over 500 thousand individuals acting as influencers, each with at least 10 thousand followers. This popularity is further evidenced by data from Statista Consumer Insights (2023), which revealed that Brazil leads in terms of digital influencers' impact on consumers. Approximately 45% of individuals surveyed reported purchasing products or services recommended by influencers (BUCHHOLZ, 2023). Consequently, three bills have been proposed to the Chamber of Deputies, currently under review in respective committees: numbers 929/2020, 1.282/2022, and 2.347/2022, which aim to regulate the profession of digital influencer in the country.

Given the burgeoning market for digital influencers and the limited exploration of their career trajectories in existing studies, this article sought to understand how the career of a digital influencer is cultivated. To achieve this goal, qualitative research was conducted, involving gathering testimonies from nine digital influencers, who elucidated the motivations driving their pursuit of this profession, outlined their daily routines, discussed the challenges they encountered, and shared strategies they employed to attain success.

In crafting the career trajectories of digital influencers, Super's (1957, 1990) career development theory was employed as a framework. Although originally devised to delineate traditional and linear career paradigms, this theory was selected for its capacity to furnish a conceptual foundation for analyzing professional pathways, which aligns with the ultimate objective of this study.

TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY CAREERS

The definition of a career has evolved significantly over time, rendering it a complex concept to encapsulate. In the 1930s, Hughes and his colleagues at the

Chicago School defined a career as encompassing all experiences that occur in an individual's life, whether work-related or not. Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989) conceptualize a career as the accumulation of professional experiences undergone by an individual over time. While this definition acknowledges upward, downward, and lateral career trajectories, it confines the scope of research to work-related experiences.

Sullivan and Baruch (2009, p. 1543) define a career as a collection of "relevant experiences, whether work-related or not, both within and outside organizations, that form a distinctive pattern throughout an individual's lifecycle." While this definition does not confine careers solely to professional experiences, the notion of a singular pattern of experiences throughout an individual's life may not be entirely clear.

More broadly, De Luca, Oliveira, and Chiesa (2016, p. 472) define "career" as "a retrospective and prospective trajectory, dynamic and mutable, of an individual or collective, unveiling negotiations between objectivities and subjectivities." This definition integrates past, present, and future, endorsing the "future trajectory" within the "reciprocal influence among individuals and between individuals and their environments." Furthermore, they emphasize the significance of contemplating careers collectively, underscoring both the material and symbolic dimensions involved.

While the concept of a career extends beyond an individual's path in the realm of work, in this article, the term was confined to the professional trajectory. This limitation stemmed from the acknowledgment that career studies, including those within organizational and management fields, typically adhere to this convention, thereby restricting their focus to the realm of work (GUNZ; MAYRHOFER, 2015).

During the period spanning from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, career studies were characterized by a focus on traditional organizational careers. These careers were predominantly pursued by men from socially dominant groups (CHANLAT, 1995) and were shaped by economic and work environments undergoing technological advancements (SULLIVAN; CROCITTO, 2007). They were characterized by a degree of stability, a linear vertical structure, and typically defined in relation to an individual's affiliation with an organization (SUPER, 1957).

Events such as increased diversity in the job market, rising education levels, rapid technological advancements, economic restructuring, and the growing prevalence of outsourcing and temporary work have ushered in a series of unpredictable behaviors, giving rise to a new model of career (SULLIVAN; BARUCH, 2009). Contrary to the traditional model, as described by Chanlat (1995), the new career paradigm is characterized by its instability, discontinuity, and horizontal progression. In this context, workers are required to pursue continuous learning, adeptly utilize sophisticated technologies, demonstrate flexibility, sustain their employability, and proactively create opportunities (DUARTE, 2004). Among the emerging concepts of the new career model, borderless careers and protean careers are particularly prominent in scholarly studies on the subject (SULLIVAN; BARUCH, 2009).

The protean career, coined by David Hall in 1976, entails a professional's ability to adapt their knowledge, skills, and attitudes over time to personal and environmental changes, emphasizing that career progression is driven by the individual rather than the organization (HALL, 1996). Borderless careers, on the other hand, represent an individual's professional trajectory, comprised of experiences in various organizations and diverse work contexts. The traditional notion of upward mobility within a single organization is giving way to individuals who actively manage their own careers, driven by the pursuit of new professional challenges. In these evolving career paradigms, individuals bear sole responsibility for navigating, sustaining, and advancing their careers in the ever-changing landscape of work.

CAREER STAGES ACCORDING TO DONALD SUPER

The author most commonly associated with the career development approach is Donald Super. He is best known for his developmental career theory, which aims to explain the choices and transitions individuals make throughout their careers (MAGALHÃES, 2005). His career stage recital highlights changes in goals across five life periods as an individual moves from one stable condition to another. Each stage has a different objective, and the name of the stages indicates that objective: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement.

For Super (1957, 1990), careers develop as a person faces the challenges inherent to psychosocial maturation. These challenges may stem from a linear developmental model, wherein tasks are traditionally associated with specific age periods, or they may arise from adaptive tasks that lack predictability or correlation with age or stage linearity. Therefore, the age boundaries outlined by Super are approximate and can vary from person to person.

The career stages developed by Super (1957, 1990) are as follows:

1. **Growth** – encompasses four primary tasks of professional development imposed by society on children: developing concern about future employment; enhancing personal control over vocational activities; forming conceptions regarding educational and vocational choices; and gaining the confidence to make and execute career decisions. Throughout elementary school, students acquire skills and attitudes vital for work and cultivate self-assurance to make autonomous decisions. This phase expects children to navigate social interactions, striking a balance between competition and cooperation. Over time, they assimilate adult perspectives, growing more cognizant and invested in future-oriented matters.

2. **Exploration** – at this stage, young individuals gather information about themselves and various occupations to inform their career decisions. This stage involves three key tasks: crystallization, specification, and realization. Crystallization entails broad exploration to form initial ideas about societal roles, fostering the development of attitudes, beliefs, and competencies necessary to shape a vocational self-concept. Individuals begin to identify with a subset of occupations at a certain skill level. Specification involves delving

deeply into preliminary preferences to prepare for declaring a career path. The final task, making an occupational choice, requires individuals to commit to a decision and take action to actualize it. By pursuing relevant education and entering a professional role, a young person transitions from a specified preference to a concrete reality.

3. **Establishment** – this stage encompasses three vocational development activities reflecting societal expectations regarding employment and community integration: stabilization, consolidation, and vocational advancement. Stabilization involves securing a position, assimilating organizational culture, and performing job duties proficiently to ensure job security. Consolidation entails refining one's self-image and seeking a suitable environment to solidify and enhance career achievements, forming a career trajectory. This trajectory may manifest as conventional (stability), unstable (instability followed by stabilization), or a pattern of multiple career (continuous shifts without stabilization). Finally, vocational advancement entails assuming new or expanded responsibilities, seeking better opportunities within current or alternative organizations, and exploring different occupations. As individuals enter middle age, they may prioritize maintaining established achievements over pursuing new directions, signaling the transition to the maintenance stage of their career.

4. **Maintenance** – this stage underscores the preservation of attained achievements. Society expects mature adults to maintain steadfastness in their positions, retaining interest in their work and loyalty to their organization. Super (1984) delineated three modes of positive functioning during this stage: security, updating, and innovation. Security necessitates awareness of challenges posed by competitors, evolving technology, familial responsibilities, and diminishing resilience. Failure to enhance one's position risks being surpassed by others. Updating extends beyond task execution; it entails striving for improved performance and renewing skills and knowledge. Conversely, innovation involves forging new paths, altering tasks, engaging in diverse activities, or embracing fresh challenges. Contemporary organizational structures have shifted from lifetime employment models to embrace flexible approaches like protean and boundaryless careers, emphasizing adaptability and new beginnings over static maintenance.

5. **Disengagement** – this stage entails a gradual reduction in tasks and the initiation of retirement plans, aiming to transition into a retired lifestyle. Following an extended period of maintenance, individuals often experience a decline in energy and interest in their occupation.

THE CAREER OF A DIGITAL INFLUENCER

Information technology has revolutionized the dynamic between communicators and the public. Previously monopolized by large media entities, the power to communicate is now decentralized, empowering individuals (SHIRKY, 2011). Unlike the

conformity enforced by traditional media channels, the internet has bestowed individuals with unprecedented legitimacy and freedom of expression. The advent of online platforms facilitating interpersonal connections has birthed online social networks, effectively erasing spatial barriers in communication (ZANETTE, 2015).

The availability of a diverse array of user-friendly applications played a pivotal role in fostering this type of engagement, initially perceived by many as a leisure pursuit (SHIRKY, 2011). As noted by Sibilia (2008), the emergence of new resources opened previously inconceivable opportunities, presenting promising prospects for both creation and interaction.

In this context, detached from physical confines yet linked by social platforms, the phenomenon of digital influencers arises. Abidin (2016) characterizes them as ordinary internet users amassing sizable followings on social media platforms by narrating their personal and daily lives through textual and visual content. They leverage technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites, along with platforms such as YouTube, to engage with their audience.

According to Karhawi (2016), social actors transition into digital influencers for two primary reasons: a. they occupy a niche within the digital landscape, disseminating specialized information sought by certain individuals; and b. they possess qualities that confer credibility, reputation, and prestige. Building reputation hinges on the influencer's consistent publication of high-quality content, catering to the demands of their audience. This audience, in turn, legitimizes the influencer by fostering a sincere, genuine, and intimate connection (KARHAWI, 2016).

Influencers have the flexibility to communicate with either a highly targeted audience or a broader one. Some exclusively engage with teenagers, while others reach out to a more diverse demographic. While certain influencers specialize in specific subjects such as gaming or cooking, leveraging their expertise to connect with enthusiasts, others excel in communication skills and master techniques like camera positioning, public speaking, and narrative scripting. They foster engagement by stimulating debates, reflections, and dialogues within the communities they cultivate (KARHAWI, 2016).

Senft (2008) associates certain influencers with the concept of microcelebrities, contrasting them with traditional entertainment celebrities. Microcelebrities can achieve widespread fame among large-scale followers and become public icons within specific niches. Their activities center around curating a persona that resonates authentically with their audience. Allsop, Bryce, and Hoskins (2007) support this perspective, contending that information exchanged among consumers carries greater credibility than information sourced from traditional media or conventional advertisements.

The direct engagement between digital influencers and their audience fosters trust among users, endowing their opinions and recommendations with the potential to sway perceptions of products, brands, and companies, thereby directly influencing sales (CRESCITELLI; TAGAWA, 2015). Recognizing these attributes, companies and agencies invest in influencers to promote their products or services. In Brazil,

there exist firms specializing in image management, consulting, advertising, and tailored projects for digital influencers. For instance, the YouPix platform is dedicated to professionalizing and enhancing the digital influencer market (KARHAWI, 2016).

As per Karhawi (2016), the prevailing communication trend entails influencers evolving into brands and even media platforms themselves. Beyond digital environments, influencers with symbolic capital engage and influence niche markets. "The contemporary influencer is on magazine covers, in television advertisements, on bookstore bestseller lists, starring in campaigns for big brands" (KARHAWI, 2016, P. 42). Sibilia (2008) underscores that "each person's image is their own brand, a capital so valuable that it requires nurturing and cultivation to present an appealing persona in the competitive market of appearances." (SIBILIA, 2008, p. 225).

Currently, digital influencers are classified into five large groups, according to the number of followers they have on social media: 1. nano-influencers, who have between one thousand and 10 thousand followers; 2. micro-influencers, ranging between 10 and 100 thousand followers; 3. macro-influencers, who have between 100 thousand and 500 thousand followers; 4. mega-influencers, who vary between 500 thousand and 1 million followers; and 5. celebrities, who generally have more than 1 million followers (INSPER, 2022). Nano-influencers, despite their smaller number of followers, are often able to have greater engagement with their audience. In contrast, celebrities and mega-influencers have greater reach, but higher costs and lower engagement (INSPER, 2022).

According to Vilicic (2019), while the careers of digital influencers may seem glamorous, they encounter numerous challenges. "Going viral" on the internet has its dark side, including the constant pressure to maintain presence and swiftly produce content aligned with the influencer's brand; the risk of oversharing and tarnishing one's image and income; navigating the ever-changing algorithms of social networks and other platforms; managing offensive and malicious comments from internet users; staying abreast of new channels and competitors; dealing with intense fan harassment at inconvenient times; and contending with heightened anxiety and psychological strain exacerbated by these stressors.

Despite the challenges outlined, Fialho and Lütz (2011) emphasize the continual expansion and growing significance of social networks as communication platforms and sources of information on the internet. Consequently, the authors assert that there are promising opportunities for individuals aspiring to pursue careers in this field.

METHODOLOGY

To attain the study's objective, semi-structured interviews were conducted with digital influencers. The aim was to comprehend the trajectory these professionals traversed to reach their current status, along with identifying key characteristics and challenges encountered along the way. The research subjects were selected based on the following criteria: individuals whose primary source of income is derived from being a digital influencer, irrespective of age or educational background.

Through the researchers' social network and supplemented by the snowball technique, nine influencers were recruited to participate in the study. The interviews, averaging 35 minutes each, adhered to a structured script outlined in Figure 1. Figure 2 provides a summary of the interviewees' profiles.

1 – Where did the idea of becoming a digital influencer come from and how did it all begin?
2 – What were the main challenges you faced until reaching the current stage of your career, and how did you overcome them?
3 - What or who helped you along the way?
4 - How did the contacts and partnerships come about, and what is your work routine like?
5 - How do you earn your income?
6 - How do you organize yourself financially?
7 – What do you like and dislike the most in this activity?
8 - What are the professional plans for the future?
9 - What advice would you give to someone who wants to become a digital influencer?

Source: Compiled by the authors.
Figure 1. Interview script.

Interviewee (fictional names)	Age	Qualification	Activity	Start date
1- Jéssica	31 years	Marketing	Travel Blog	2010
2- Alessandra	29 years	Computer Sciences	Travel Blog	2013
3- Rebeca	33 years	Industrial Design	Youtuber	2009
4- Mario e Lucas	21 years	No qualification	Instagram, Youtuber, and Twitter	2013
5- Leandro	29 years	Administration	Youtuber	2012
6- Michelle	25 years	Journalism	Travel Blog and Instagram	2012
7- Ana	32 years	Cinema	Instagram	2015
8- Felipe	31 years	Environmental Engineering	Facebook and Instagram	2012

Source: Compiled by the authors.
Figure 2. Characteristics of the interviewees.

All interviews were transcribed and subjected to analysis. The analytical framework was structured around Super's career stages model (1957, 1990), aiming to elucidate the various phases of the influencers' careers. This approach facilitated the exploration of each stage, spanning from the inception of their careers to their current status. It is important to underscore that this analysis does not presuppose any inherent relationship with age or linearity of stages, as suggested by Super (1957, 1990).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In this study, Super's model (1957, 1990) served as a guiding framework for mapping and analyzing the stages of a digital influencer's career. It is noteworthy that while the model delineates age-based periods and associated challenges in professional maturation, the author emphasizes that these age boundaries are

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approximate and may vary from person to person. Therefore, the present analysis did not adhere strictly to the specified age groups or all characteristics of each phase. Instead, it focused on the moments of maturation signified by each phase. Consequently, the analysis presented below is structured around three themes derived from Super's five-stage model (1957, 1990): exploration, establishment, and maintenance. Although originally designed for traditional careers, adapting the Super model to map the trajectories of the professionals interviewed provided valuable insights into the construction of an influencer's career.

EXPLORATION PHASE

In the initial stage of analysis, the inception of the interviewees' journey was addressed, aiming to comprehend their motivations for becoming digital influencers, delving into their efforts and experimentation prior to committing to this career path, as well as identified factors that facilitated their journey.

Regarding their motivation to embark on this endeavor, the majority of interviewees expressed a profound personal interest in the topics they communicate about on social media. They noted that they initially pursued this activity as a hobby, without initially considering the notion of making it their primary source of income:

> When I started making videos, I was passionate about makeup... I began on YouTube doing makeup tutorials as a hobby (Rebeca).

> We used to play a game because we enjoyed it and had fun. At that time, recording gameplays on YouTube was very common... We didn't envision to create our own channel, it was like: we sat down, goofed around, and recorded the game in our style (Mario and Lucas).

As elucidated by Shirky (2011), the current revolution hinges on the integration of amateurs as content producers. With the accessibility of user-friendly applications, individuals no longer rely on communication or marketing professionals to disseminate information publicly, empowering everyone to become content creators. This accessibility was a significant catalyst for engaging in such activities, initially pursued by many as a hobby (SIBILIA, 2008). Felipe's testimony aligns with this narrative: "I used to take photos and started posting them [...] I actually wanted to show my family where I was [...]. People started commenting and sharing with others... After a while, I had a lot of followers and started investing in it."

The absence of professional support and the experimental nature of their endeavors were not perceived as difficulties by the interviewees, given that, for the majority, it was initially a hobby. Therefore, the easy accessibility of tools enabling content production and dissemination fostered their dedication to an activity that ultimately evolved into a profession.

Although the majority of interviewees initially embarked on their professional activities without intending to make it their primary source of income, two participants indicated that there was an initial objective of monetizing their endeavors. Alessandra, who runs a travel blog, shared that due to her passion for traveling and

dissatisfaction with her job in São Paulo, she viewed investing in her blog — originally started as a hobby — as an opportunity to potentially transition to a livelihood based on her dedication to this activity. She remarked, "Tripadvisor will buy it one day, who knows, maybe it won't work out (laughs)." In Alessandra's case, despite the experimental start, there existed a desire to turn the hobby into a financially viable pursuit.

The notion of professionalizing an initially unassuming activity was also evident in Leandro's account. Upon mentioning his decision to move in with his successful influencer friends Mario and Lucas, Leandro disclosed his intention to transition his DJ hobby into a pursuit akin to that of his friends: "I already wanted to have a strong YouTube channel, but I didn't have the knowledge they have. [...] The idea was to get closer to them so we could grow together." In Leandro's case, forging closer ties with friends served as the pathway to professionalization.

Based on the insights gleaned from the interviews, it can be inferred that the decision to pursue a career as a digital influencer evolved through experimentation with the activity and the gradual acquisition of necessary skills and attitudes. This process ultimately led to a commitment to this pursuit as a profession. The increasing demands associated with influencer activities prompted interviewees to fully dedicate themselves to this endeavor, motivating them to pursue it as a career. This was the case for Jéssica, who disclosed: "there came a moment when I had to choose, and I decided to believe in the blog. I chose to quit the other job and dedicate myself solely to it, to professionalize it and make it grow." Similarly, the decision to abandon previous jobs, as seen in the cases of Jéssica and Alessandra, or discontinue ongoing courses, as experienced by Mario and Lucas, marked a pivotal moment in their professionalization journey. At this juncture, being a digital influencer ceased to be a mere hobby and became a significant source of income for the interviewees, motivating them to depart from their employment and/or academic pursuits. It is posited that at this stage, the interviewees effectively made an occupational choice (SUPER, 1990), ushering them into the next phase of establishment, in which they endeavored to seize and consolidate the positions they had attained (SUPER, 1990).

It is noteworthy that among the nine interviewees, two individuals, Leandro (a YouTuber DJ) and Michelle (a travel blogger), have not yet transitioned to the next phase. Despite earning income from their activities, it is insufficient for their sustenance. Consequently, Leandro is compelled to undertake an internship in his field of study (administration), while Michelle resides in her parents' house.

ESTABLISHMENT PHASE

This stage is characterized by the digital influencer's transition to a consolidated, stable profession with an income sufficient to sustain their livelihood. As emphasized by Super (1990), it is during this stage that professionals cultivate a repertoire of attitudes and activities that solidify their vocational commitment. This transition mirrors Alessandra's experience, who remarked:

> Some big accounts on Instagram started reposting some photos from my trip, and when I saw it, we already had 100 thousand followers. From that moment on, it became a real business... My differentiator was being a real person, giving tips that I know are worthwhile. I wasn't just a space for advertising anything without much filtering (Alessandra).

In this stage, the quantity and consistency of followers, coupled with the attainment of a reliable income stream through online presence on various networks and digital channels, are paramount. This marks the transition from an activity with hobbyist undertones to a livelihood, a full-fledged profession. Mario and Lucas, entertainment influencers, underscore the significance of follower metrics in this transition: "We hit some trends in a month, which we called the golden month. We went from 600 thousand subscribers to 1.2 million! We never imagined it would boom like this. We used all the money we earned this month to professionalize the business and live off of it."

The growth in the number of followers played a fundamental role in the professionalization of the interviewees. This metric defines them as "influencers" and enables them to monetize their platform through advertising, whether through personal testimonials or editorial opinions (ABIDIN, 2016).

In terms of financial gains, a significant milestone in the transition from hobby to professional activity, Jéssica emphasizes that: "In 2012, the blog started making money. 2013 and 2014 were very good years for us, as we earned a lot, and after that, it just kept growing."

The establishment phase also entails the refinement of the professional's self-concept, aimed at imbuing greater depth into their life narrative (SUPER, 1990). In the case under examination, it was noted that following an unassuming start, during which the interviewees did not perceive themselves as professionals but rather as individuals sharing their creations and interests, they gradually began to define themselves as digital influencers. This transition occurred after monetizing their posts and other activities:

> When I started the videos I was passionate about makeup [...]. People trusted me a lot because of my familiarity with videos, they said they felt more intimate [...]. At the time, I also worked at a publishing house and produced jewelry on weekends. Only after some time did I realize that I could make money from it. Today, 100% of my income comes from my work as a digital influencer (Rebeca).

Despite the enthusiasm for embracing this career, the professionals interviewed encountered numerous challenges. What was once not a source of concern when the activity was pursued as a hobby becomes a significant hurdle when it transforms into a source of prestige and income. The lack of technical expertise to produce content and limited understanding of the dynamics of the chosen channel were obstacles that interviewees had to overcome at this stage. As noted by Vilicic (2019), this is one of the primary challenges faced by influencers, even those with extensive experience on the platform. Michelle, whose primary platform is Instagram, highlighted this difficulty: "Instagram has a lot

of algorithm changes, and that makes me very anxious. If a photo I post today gets 2,000 likes and reaches 20,000 people, another photo I post the next day may only get 300 likes and reach 4,000 people." Since the number of views and followers is central to influencers' remuneration across various channels and social networks, dealing with constantly evolving and often complex metrics becomes a source of stress and anxiety for interviewees, posing a daily challenge to be navigated.

Having access to and establishing partnerships with companies, which are important sources of revenue for influencers, was another major challenge faced at this stage. Alessandra's account reflects this difficulty: "I didn't know how to position myself in this digital world, how to get in touch with companies, or which companies would be open to this, so I kept researching other people's larger blogs to try to understand."

Organizing their routine emerged as another challenge reported by the interviewees, given the demanding nature of the activity that necessitates frequent presence on their chosen channels. It is noteworthy that this profession requires professionals to be constantly connected and attentive to developments around them, necessitating round-the-clock availability and the development of effective organizational strategies. Jessica noted that the absence of a fixed work routine is both enticing and anxiety-inducing for her:

> The lack of routine appeals to me a lot because I hated the office life, having a boss, and being in a closed place. At work, I have a lot of flexibility, I travel the world... but I'm always swamped and owing a lot of content because if I come back from a trip, I need to write a lot about it, fulfill the obligations to the hotels I stayed for free (Jessica).

Contacts and partnerships emerged as strategic elements that significantly contributed to advancing the profession. Companies specializing in enhancing influencers' careers also played a pivotal role. Ana, for instance, highlighted the impact of her agent who had existing relationships with brands. This was the case of Ana, who said: "I had an agent who already worked with brands. She started taking me to some big gigs, to some cool brands. At these events, influencers would meet and there was some good networking going on."

According to Karhawi (2016), as digital influencers cultivate a loyal audience, they can forge commercial partnerships with companies within their industry. This enables them to enhance the monetization of their content, effectively transitioning into communication professionals.

Finally, emotional balance was mentioned as key to deal with the dynamics of social media. Mario and Lucas mentioned: "you have to have a very strong mindset. It's a business that messes a lot with your emotions. Especially us, who post two videos a day, when the channel is going through a rough patch, your life becomes horrible."

This issue is extensively examined by Vilicic (2019), who delves into the pressures experienced by influencers, encompassing both the pressures of achieving

success and coping with criticism, as well as the fear of fading into obscurity. According to the author, these professionals often find it necessary to seek support from psychologists and psychiatrists to navigate such pressures. Among the interviewees, frequent mentions of "anxiety," "emotional," and "psychological" challenges indicate that the profession of a digital influencer is indeed fraught with pressure.

In summary, Karhawi (2017) asserts that to become a digital influencer, one must undergo a progression: content production; maintaining consistency in production (both thematically and temporally); nurturing and updating relationships; establishing and sustaining prestige within a community; and ultimately, wielding influence. This array of requirements characterizes both the establishment phase of the careers studied and the subsequent phase, which focuses on sustaining a career as a digital influencer.

MAINTENANCE PHASE

This stage pertains to the current phase of the majority of interviewees, delineating the actions undertaken to sustain their digital influencer activities and their endeavors to innovate and evolve. As previously noted, not all interviewees have reached this stage in their careers: Leandro and Michelle are still in the exploration phase, while Ana, despite earning significant income from her Instagram posts, is contemplating transitioning from the beauty sector (the current theme of her posts) to the gastronomy sector. Conversely, the remaining interviewees have already arrived at a juncture where their focus is on preserving their achievements, a task fraught with challenges due to the dynamic nature of the environment. According to Super (1990), maintenance entails efforts geared toward security, updating, and innovation.

In terms of security, this poses perhaps the foremost challenge encountered by the interviewees. Regardless of the size of their follower count and revenue, the digital landscape remains volatile, with new competitors emerging daily, posing a constant threat to the space acquired by the professionals.

The update that characterizes the maintenance stage is associated with the nature of the activity that requires constant content production. Mario and Lucas spoke about the need to organize their routines to ensure this production: "we created a strategy: when Sunday comes, we plan the week. We record two videos daily, and to keep up with that, we need to plan in advance."

Alessandra also noted that, despite not being bound by conventional corporate norms and rigid schedules, her routines are nonetheless quite intense:

> I'd say that my basic activities are: researching which destinations are popular, what people are searching for the most, packing, booking hotels, searching for flights, and producing content to clarify these doubts. It's about finding ways to monetize the work. So, I look for partners, potential clients, and present proposals to them. Editing photos, managing finances, responding to emails... I keep an eye on the access reports... Additionally, there's also the maintenance of social media (Alessandra).

Even though they have already overcome the establishment phase, the interviewees stated that they still face obstacles when closing deals and dealing with competition. This was the case for Alessandra, who reported: "Nowadays, the difficulties lie in showing these companies that I am a professional, that my blog brings returns, that it works, and what to propose to them to make them want to close deals with me." Jessica also commented that the difficulties intensify when competition cannibalizes the profession: "Recently, there has been a boom of blogs. People want to have a social media channel just to travel for free. The biggest challenge for those who make a living from this is for companies to see us and recognize a differentiated work."

Another difficulty reported by Alessandra is understanding how pricing works:

> A constant challenge I face is pricing because companies sometimes want to charge only for the media. They try to pay us as they would pay a magazine, for example. But we are everything, we are scriptwriters, content creators, photographers, video editors… so it's very difficult to have to charge for all of that (Alessandra).

Given its competitive nature and appeal to numerous individuals, particularly the younger demographic, maintaining one's position and fostering innovation emerges as a challenge for the interviewees, constituting an integral component of their routines:

> Always keeping an eye on new trends, being on all social networks, everywhere, and being present. Working on all fronts to be in the minds of all companies and people. You have to study a lot about digital marketing, new forms of advertising, and how to monetize in this environment. Investing heavily in the website, interface, site navigation, and contact is everything in life (Jessica).

> Staying updated is mandatory at this stage: "This is my job, so I need to stay updated all the time. I have daily contact with friends in the same profession, and we exchange a lot about what's happening in the market. Technology changes exponentially, and it's necessary to stay connected and keep up (Felipe).

Influencers' revenue, at this stage, comes from various advertising sources, as Alessandra says:

> The main income basically comes from advertising, but there are also affiliates, so anyone who books a hotel through the blog earns me a commission, anyone who rents a car through the blog earns me a commission, anyone who rents an international chip, anyone who buys insurance, and so on… I also sell e-books, so we always have to keep inventing to keep the momentum going and continue monetizing (Alessandra).

The experience of establishing their YouTube channel enabled Mario and Lucas to venture into another business derived from this activity: "We created a company, akin to an incubator, to facilitate the entry of newcomers into this sector.

We faced numerous challenges along the way, but we also gained invaluable insights. Thus, our aim is to streamline the process for them by offering professional assistance." In this manner, the duo forged a new revenue stream stemming from their influencer work. Moreover, through this incubator initiative, they envisioned an alternative professional path that is less susceptible to the constant pressure of maintaining visibility as successful influencers, thereby offering a viable career option for aspiring individuals.

In terms of learnings and strategies for growth and sustainability in this environment, the most commonly repeated tip among influencers is to only post content that authentically reflects your thoughts and preferences. According to the interviewees, discussing topics that genuinely interest you is the most effective way to earn the trust of your followers while also helping to sustain the demanding routine of an influencer. Thus, authenticity emerges as a pivotal factor in maintaining the activity:

> At the beginning, you might be desperate for money, and a company you don't trust may come along, promising to pay you a certain amount, and you might be dazzled by the money and want to close the deal. Don't do it at all because the trust of your audience is your main asset. They are the ones who will help you make money, they are the ones who will make your business work, they are your most valuable asset. So don't sell yourself for something that is false to your audience (Alessandra).

> Always be yourself. It's the originality that attracts the audience. Post things that you believe in and that are in line with your theme. Be close to your followers (Michelle).

As previously mentioned, despite having established their presence across various digital channels and media, maintaining a secure position is an ongoing challenge for all interviewees, necessitating a perpetual struggle to uphold their prominent positions in the digital landscape. By cultivating profitable businesses reflective of their own identities, they demonstrate entrepreneurial prowess within the current unpredictable and uncertain professional climate. Despite these challenges, Fialho and Lütz (2011) underscore that social networks continue to expand, gaining prominence and assuming a crucial role in communication and information dissemination on the internet. Consequently, the authors posit that the future appears promising for individuals aspiring to pursue careers in this field, as social networks increasingly solidify their foothold and emerge as prominent job markets.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The aim of this research was to scrutinize the construction of a digital influencer's career, delving into the various stages that delineate this trajectory, the challenges encountered along the way, strategies employed for career development and sustenance, financial gains, routines, and future expectations.

Most interviewees share a common trajectory of starting their careers as digital influencers as a hobby. However, as they witnessed their content gaining visibility and unexpectedly generating financial returns, they began to perceive this activity as a viable job opportunity. Nevertheless, the construction of this professional journey was far from straightforward despite its modest beginnings. Among the challenges they encounter in their careers are: setting prices for various activities; staying updated constantly; comprehending the dynamics of algorithms governing social networks, which dictate their popularity and amplify their earnings; establishing a work routine; and maintaining prominence in an intensely competitive environment with low entry barriers for new competitors. Furthermore, financial gains are precarious, necessitating financial planning skills to avoid compromising the economic viability of the activity, while the dynamism and volatility of the environment serve as stress-inducing factors.

Among the primary pieces of advice, the interviewees emphasize the importance of being authentic from the outset, only presenting content that genuinely reflects their thoughts and preferences. They stress the necessity of providing differentiated and high-quality content, staying abreast of developments on social networks, and underscore the misconception that success will be swift and financial returns instantaneous. With over six years of experience in the field, some interviewees boast a significant following on their social networks. However, not all have reached the same professional level: two interviewees still rely on additional income sources, while others, despite earning a living from this activity, have yet to achieve the millionaire earnings of celebrity influencers. Despite harboring insecurities about their roles as influencers, the interviewees are optimistic about the future of the profession, believing that the social media and online media market will continue to grow progressively, presenting promising prospects for those who distinguish themselves and maintain their presence in this environment.

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