

EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCERS ROMANIAN YOUTHS LIVE BY: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW RELIGION IS SHARED THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract:

Romanian celebrities on social media (influencers) have begun to exert persuasion on a massive scale, potentially influencing the young people who follow them while pursuing individual profit. This study sets out to investigate the content shared by such educational influencers (edu-influencers) on three popular social media platforms (Instagram, Tik-Tok and YouTube) where influencer culture has been rife in recent years. In so doing, it seeks to examine how religion (often combined with personal development content) is shared through social media and whether edu-influencers' behaviour is predominately promotional, thereby failing to link to important societal issues. The religious content of edu-influencers will be investigated along two themes: encouraging education and fostering participation. The results will facilitate a better understanding of influencer culture and will emphasize the need for developing critical digital literacy among youngsters who use social media for communication, education, and individual purposes.

Key words:

Social media, educational influencers, religion, personal development, engagement, social-media followers, Romanian.

1. Introduction

As a new, convenient means of communication, social media (SM) has become an essential and almost indispensable part of modern society. The main SM consumers are digital natives (a.k.a, Google generation, millennials, or more recently, the Z generation) who understand the digital world and stay hyper-connected online as part-and-parcel of their daily work and leisure patterns. Whether as Millennials - people born between 1981 and 1996 - who seek interaction and information to get updated and entertained or as Generation Z youngsters - born after 1997 – who have become the largest

cohort of consumers - these natives are often framed within certain social stereotypes such as excessive reliance on technology, less social interaction, and a strong inclination towards advocating for social justice causes. Generally, they are commonly regarded as possessing traits such as tolerance, optimism, restlessness, civic-mindedness, conscientiousness, individualism, technological proficiency, sophistication, maturity, and, most importantly, a strong sense of personal identity (Dabija et al., 2018).

This paper aims to investigate the content of *Religion and Personal Development* (RPD) shared by Romanian edu-influencers on popular SM platforms (Tik-Tok, YouTube and Instagram). In particular, it will seek to identify the main profile features of Romanian educational influencers and examine the communication and engagement strategies used in engaging with new audiences through their RPD content. Following an introductory part, the first two sub-sections will address social media (1.1.) and educational influencers (1.2.). Section 2 describes the corpus and research methods, and Section 3 presents the findings, structuring RPD channel-wise (3.1.) and content-wise, respectively. Finally, the conclusion of the study (section 4) restates the main findings and outlines the implications for further research.

1.1. Social Media (SM)

The use of Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter has exploded among young people in recent years and has emerged from a strong desire for communication, self-expression, personal branding, and socialization, bringing about a fundamental change in the way young people communicate, socialize, and ultimately learn.

“In 2023, the number of internet users worldwide was 5.18 billion, around two thirds of the global population being currently connected to the world wide web. In 2022, over 4.59 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost six billion by 2027” (Statista, 2023).

In particular, Facebook and Twitter boast a substantial user base. Instagram has also emerged as a more prevalent choice among the younger demographics due to its captivating nature as a social network that facilitates the generation and composition of content in visual, audiovisual, and

hypertextual formats. Additionally, Instagram is widely acknowledged as the foremost social network that prioritizes visual content, providing its members with regularly updated material derived from their interactions with other accounts, profiles they follow, and their engagement through likes, among other factors. This platform seamlessly integrates static photographs with both brief and extended video clips.

In Romania, out of nearly 17.82 million internet users in 2023, well over 15.13 million are social network users (Statista, 2023). Being the second most widely adopted social media application, Facebook boasts a substantial usage rate of 87 percent and a potential advertising reach of approximately 9.55 million individuals. Yet, since March 2022, the total number of Romanian Facebook users has been on a downward trend while Instagram and/or TikTok users have registered a constant upward trend (Statista, 2023).

1.2. Educational Influencers (EI)

Research has shown that social media can influence a person's innovative capacity (Eickhoff & Muntermann 2016), performance (Ali-Hassan et al., 2015), perception and knowledge, online shopping (Zhang et al., 2017; Martínez-López et al., 2020), and learning behaviour (Abbas et al., 2019), which subsequently impacts students during their transition to adulthood (Zhu et al. 2017; Shelton et al., 2020), heightens depression (Vernon et al., 2016) and/or leads to distraction and decreased productivity (Emerick et al., 2019; Koessmeier & Büttner, 2021).

Within the context of web-based social network use, social media influencers (SMIs) are producers of content who enjoy extensive authority on their social media as digital opinion leaders and moderators. With an impressive number of followers and engagement power in their shared transmedia content (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020; Lajnef 2023) they project themselves as trendsetters of the new audiences. Their opinions are commonly perceived as honest, which is why SMIs often evince a strong persuasive power capable of impacting even political attitudes and behaviour (Naderer, 2023). While engaging in frequent interactions with social media users, SMIs share details of their everyday life through posts and/or videos, thereby creating the perception of participating in a close dialogue with their viewers and developing a perception of mutual tastes and common interests

with their followers (Hudders & De Jans, 2021). Followers actively respond to the interactions established by SMIs through various digital behaviours, including liking, commenting, and sending direct messages. Socially, since social media usage remains a fundamentally individual media consumption act, the imagined connection between the SMI and media viewer is apt to determine a wide array of complex psychological processes, attitudes, and behaviours (Balaban et al., 2022).

In its incessant quest for new technologies, innovation, and adjustment to the digital realm, the educational world could not remain alienated from the digital age and has been therefore continuously looking for its own modes to adapt to the new globalized forms of communication and environments to disseminate and emphasize the significance of any pedagogical elements that may be of interest to educational stakeholders. Hence, a special subtype of SMIs has emerged, that of educational influencers (EIs), who share notes, didactic resources, educational reflections, and book recommendations with their audiences, operating as learning mediators and supporters of the teaching and learning process. Benefitting from large and captive audiences, many of them have seized the opportunity to create and promote paid apps that support informal learning. These apps provide access to exclusive content, such as live Q&A sessions, personalized feedback, quizzes, and interactive challenges, all designed to motivate and engage users while making learning more enjoyable. Additionally, being widely consumed on the internet, educational influencers are often actively engaged in the mercantilist phenomenon within the media landscape by leveraging their online platforms to display products and services - offered by companies or themselves - and by influencing the purchasing decision-making of their respective audiences (San Miguel, 2017).

2. Corpus and Research Methods

This study employs mixed analytic models, which involve the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods. To facilitate progress systematically and empirically, two distinct categories have been delineated, prioritizing an improved approach to data analysis. These two distinct analysis categories concern (a) *educational influencers and new audiences* on the one hand, and (b) *content* on the other.

The corpus consists of top 40 Romanian EIs (Instagrammers, YouTubers, TikTokers) who are ranked by StarNgage+, a platform that facilitates the acquisition of insights for brands and influencers, enabling them to have a better understanding of their followers' preferences and the topics being discussed by influencers.

Our research objectives are: 1) to identify the profile and features of the Romanian educational influencers within the SM landscape in Romania; and 2) to analyze the RPD content they share on SM platforms. Within a preliminary stage, the quantitative analysis reviews the study results of a 2022 analysis conducted by the Media Education Program of the Center for Independent Journalism, together with a series of updated StarNgage+ rankings of the corpus described above. Subsequently, as part of our qualitative analysis, which allows us to employ several descriptive analysis techniques, the study analyzes various variables within the two-mentioned categories. These variables include characteristics of EIs such as followers' number and profile, account type, engagement rate, average number of likes, and content category. ('Clickbait' and manipulation of EIs to keep their followers engaged remain outside our research concerns.) Additionally, our qualitative methodology facilitates our content analysis, showcasing the generation and development of transmedia RPD content by the Romanian EIs.

3. Findings

The profile of Romanian social media users is vague and much understudied. A 2022 analysis conducted by the Media Education Program of the Center for Independent Journalism (CJI) found that out of the 894 surveyed students - aged between 10-20 years, of which 70% live in urban areas - 77.18% follow web pages frequently, while 12.97% do not follow web pages frequently. In what follows, we will detail the study's results.

Based on the diversity of young people's responses and the content of web pages, their preferences for certain pages were analyzed according to the purpose and type of content associated with the page: information, education, entertainment, and socialization. More specifically, out of the 690 respondents who provided at least one example of a frequently viewed web page, 42% follow pages with associated informational content; 30% follow

pages with entertainment-related content; 16% opt for social media pages; and 12% identified pages with associated educational content.

Regarding their preferences for informational web pages, young individuals favored Digi24.ro, Vice.ro, and Recorder.ro. For entertainment purposes, the most frequented platforms were YouTube, Netflix, and Animekage. In terms of social networking sites, students predominantly engaged with Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Lastly, concerning educational web pages, the most cited resources were Wikipedia, Dexonline.ro, and Brainly.ro.

Furthermore, the features of the groups with which the surveyed young people and children interact most often online are as follows: 61% of young people belong to at least one group made up of people with common interests, usually large groups, in which the members have not necessarily met each other outside the virtual environment, but have common interests (for example: they like movies, they like video games, they like a certain party, they like a certain influencer/star, etc.). Among the most frequently mentioned groups in the category of common interests are those related to video games (Discord), groups for high school or college admissions, and GirlUp. Specifically, 21% of young people belong to groups, usually of medium size, in which group members are peers and know each other outside the virtual environment, whereas 18% of students belong to friends/family groups, which are usually small and exhibit a close connection between the members of the group.

Next, we mapped the presence of Romanian EIs in the online environment by identifying them and by analyzing their social media presence, their reach and influence within the online space. We thus found the top 10 Romanian EIs (Table 1) listed on SM (Instagram, YouTube, Tik Tok and Threads) by topics of education addressed, number of followers and engagement rate (which represents total engagements divided by number of followers).

Influencer	Content	Nr of followers	Engagement Rate	Nr of Average Likes
@radu.co	Acting and Drama; Education	494.4K	0.39%	1.9K

Influencer	Content	Nr of followers	Engagement Rate	Nr of Average Likes
	Celebrity; Marketing and Advertising			
@andreeaibacka	Acting and Drama; Family Education; Celebrity	576.9K	0.43%	2.4K
@andreizbir	Education; Upskilling	600K	2.26%	13.5K
@gabriel.rolon	Education; Automotive; Actors	1.2M	2.36%	27.2K
@xgilham	Education; Luxury	678.6K	0.83%	5.5K
@reflexion.diaria	Education; Life and Society	2.7M	0.7%	19.6K
@addabaladda	Education; Moms	788.2K	0.92%	7.2K
@lucianbusuioc	Beauty and Self Care; Education; Styling; Hair Salons	279.4K	0.54%	1.4K
@catalin maruta	Education; Upskilling	801.6K	2.07%	16.4K
@christina_ich	Education; Upskilling; Lifestyle	827.9K	2.68%	22K

Table 1. Top 10 Romanian EIs listed on Instagram, YouTube, Tik Tok and Threads by topics of education addressed, number of followers, and engagement rate *Source: Author*

All these findings describe the Romanian SM environment and facilitate a comprehensive landscape for each social media (SM) platform. Furthermore, our mapping process has enabled us to determine the extent of RPD content and draw some preliminary conclusions.

3.1. Channels: Religion and Personal Development

The first surprising aspect in our search was the missing religious content shared on Instagram and YouTube by Romanian EIs. Given the large number of audiences and the type and extent of the visual content that they are apt to disseminate, Religion as part of the Education content is absent on Instagram and YouTube as compared to the newly emerged TikTok platform. This finding is also confirmed by recent statistics. According to Statista (2023), the year 2022 saw the decline of the total number of Romanian Facebook users by almost one million users, from 13.03 million to only 12.24 million beginning in March 2023. Such a gradual decline has been determined by the Romanian users' increased interest in Instagram and/or TikTok, platforms which seem to exhibit far greater levels of engagement in terms of photo and story sharing.

The examination of the EIs' activity on TikTok relative to media impact provides a clearer view on the features of the channel, communication pattern, as well as audience engagement, highlighting values that are closely associated with the impact of EIs on TikTok. This impact is achieved by examining the reception and response of audiences to RPD content published on their channels. Table 2 below shows data correlating the number of followers with the rate of engagement and the number of average likes. In what concerns the audiovisual content, it is important to note that the EIs that garner the maximum number of reproductions of audiovisual content are those who possess a substantial number of followers.

Influencer	Content	Nr of followers	Engagement rate	Nr of Average Likes
<u>@andratwork</u>	Education	1.4M	0.1%	2.1K
<u>@coloab</u>	Product Education	430.7K	-	55
<u>@elena.urdu.speaker</u>	Education	427K	-	38
<u>@alinchiforej</u>	Education	317.1K	0.1%	330
<u>@trinitas.tv</u>	Education	48.2K	0.4%	146
<u>@tutorialepenet</u>	Education	15.9K	0.7%	84
<u>@bookminutes</u>	Education	15.6K	0.1%	14
<u>@theonabalan</u>	Education	13.9K	0.4%	37
<u>@patriciapruneanu</u>	Education	11.6K	1.1%	85

Table 2. Top 10 Romanian EIs listed on Tik Tok by nr of followers and engagement rate *Source: Author*

In terms of engagement rates, the first four positions (patriciapruneanu, tutorialepenet, theonabalan, and trinitas.tv) indicate that audience engagement is largely determined by the purpose and use of information provided, in close relationship with the transmedia content developed and shared by EIs. The results also show that TikToking EIs with the highest engagement rate are almost in reverse proportion with their number of followers, pointing out that the EIs' relationship with their audiences is stable, targeted and interest-based, addressing a well-defined segment.

3.2. Content: Religion and Personal Development

The analysis of the SM landscape has allowed for the identification of several characteristics based on the objectives and content types associated with the webpage, including information, education, entertainment, and socialization. Thus, out of the total sample size of surveyed participants, 42% engage with pages that offer informational content, while 30% prefer pages that provide entertainment-related content. Additionally, 16% of the respondents indicated a preference for social media pages, while 12% identified pages that offer educational content. It can be thus seen that the purpose of surfing the Internet to seek educational content comes last across the general spectrum of youth's preferences. Here, a distinction should be made between those accessing informational content (of any sort) and those specifically looking for educational content, which could be didactic educational resources, various educational reflections and/or book recommendations. In such cases, EIs operate as learning mediators and educational supporters for youngsters who use social media predominantly for socialization, communication, and individual purposes.

The utilization of content analysis using the StarNgage+ platform metadata has additionally provided important data on the most frequent practices of EIs on Instagram, YouTube and Tik Tok platforms. The scrutinization of the EIs' accounts has revealed insights into the posts design, message features and codes utilized (Table 3).

Characteristics of the message	
Visual feed	81%
Codes	82%
	hashtag
	95%
	mentions
	72%
	emojicons
	87% links

Table 3. Features of posts by EIs *Source: Author*

Considering the visual appeal of the posts, the attributes of the content produced, and the coding techniques employed, we notice that education content is shared in combination with maternity, automotive, celebrity, memes and commercial content (Table 4).

Influencer	Content
@radu.co	Acting and Drama; Education, Memes, Celebrity; Marketing and Advertising
@andreeaibacka	Acting and Drama; Memes, Family Education; Celebrity, Commercial
@andreizbir	Education; Upskilling
@gabriel.rolon	Education; Memes, Automotive; Actors, Commercial
@xgilham	Education; Memes, Luxury, Commercial
@reflexion.diaria	Education; Life and Society
@addabaladda	Education; Moms, Maternity
@lucianbusuioc	Beauty and Self Care; Education; Styling; Hair Salons, Commercial
@catalin_maruta	Education; Upskilling
@christina_ich	Education; Upskilling; Lifestyle, Commercial

Table 4. Top 10 StarNgage+ ranked Romanian EIs and their profile content

Source: Author

This finding - that educational content is disseminated alongside themes of maternity, automotive, celebrity, memes, and commerce - suggests that EIs utilize a hybrid content strategy. Educational discourse is integrated within larger lifestyle and entertainment contexts, enabling EIs to increase engagement and expand their audiences. The integration of educational and non-educational content is indicative of how pedagogical objectives are increasingly influenced by the aesthetics and principles of the attention economy. Furthermore, when engagement rate is correlated with the purpose of sharing (see Table 2 on TikTok ranking), it can also be noticed that, in the majority of instances, they disseminate concepts about tangible resources, which can be utilized within educational settings by their followers (as in the case of @tutorialepenet). Certain EIs possess a distinct purpose of deriving economic gains from such content through the sale of materials on their respective websites. Other EIs may not aim to generate direct monetary gains

through the dissemination of these materials on social media platforms, nonetheless they do engage in sharing sweepstakes or offering discounts on materials and items from other accounts or firms. In addition to providing educational resources, certain EIs, such as @tutorialepenet, also offer diverse educational training opportunities to their subscribers. In other cases, such as @andratwork, a business model to provide services is evident by utilizing SM as a means of promoting these services. On the other hand, @trinitas.tv incorporates a theological purpose, serving as a platform for disseminating religious instruction and promoting awareness of Orthodox Christianity in a wide array of forms of expression.

4. Conclusions

SM influencer education has emerged as a new way of consuming educational content through SM platforms, where individuals with a significant wake of followers and expertise in a certain subject share their knowledge and resources with their followers.

This study set out to examine three popular social media platforms (Instagram, Tik-Tok and YouTube) with a view to analyzing the RPD content shared by Romanian educational influencers. We have looked at ways of audience engagement, preferred content, posts and account designs in an attempt to determine whether RPD content is predominantly promotional and hence fails to link to important societal issues or alternatively, encourages youth's education while being connected to significant societal concerns.

The results of this study demonstrate that a considerable percentage of Romanian youth utilize social media predominantly for socialization, communication, and personal expression rather than for educational objectives. In this setting, Romanian EIs have become important figures who often mix educational content with lifestyle, business, and self-improvement topics. Most of them are actively working to promote products and services that make money, which shapes the consumption patterns and purchasing decisions of their audiences. Social media influencers' educational content can therefore be useful and highly motivational, but at the crossroads of entertainment, personal branding, and business, it can hardly be a replacement for formal youth education.

This study also looks at how religion, which is often linked to stories about personal growth, is shared on social media. The analysis indicated that religious content disseminated by Romanian EIs predominantly centers on two principal themes: the promotion of education and fostering participation, frequently integrated within motivational or self-help narratives. This combination, however, tends to be mostly promotional, with little mention of larger social or moral issues.

Subsequent research may thus benefit from a comprehensive analysis of edu-influencers' rhetorical and linguistic tactics designed to attract new audiences, alongside a more profound discourse analysis of the utilization of religious and educational narratives to boost engagement, promote interaction, and optimize online influence. These inquiries would enhance comprehension of the interplay between knowledge, belief, and commerce within Romania's digital media environment.

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