

Importance of Personal Branding on Social Media: A Communicological Perspective on the Role of Academic Education in Influencer Credibility and Reach

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ABSTRACT

The development of social media has led to the rise of influencers as key actors in shaping public opinion and consumer behaviour. At the same time, the spread of misinformation and generative artificial intelligence has increased the demand for verified, expert and authentic content, particularly in the beauty sector, where consumer decisions are closely linked to health and well-being. This paper examines the influence of academic education on the credibility, reach and market effectiveness of influencers in the beauty industry. Using a mixed-method design – storytelling campaign analysis, two semi-structured interviews and two surveys among marketing professionals and the general population – the study shows that academically educated influencers achieve higher conversion rates, greater audience trust and more favourable market outcomes, although they are still less frequently engaged by the domestic marketing sector. The findings highlight the growing strategic value of expert KOL influencers in digital communication.

Key words: academic education, beauty industry, communication, influencers, personal branding, social media, storytelling

Introduction

The digital transformation of the media environment over the past two decades has fundamentally altered the ways in which content is created, distributed and consumed, and has redefined relationships between individuals, media and market actors. Social networks have become the dominant communicative space in which social trends, identities and consumer habits are shaped. Global research indicates a continuous increase in the number of social media users and a high level of daily engagement, particularly among members of Generation Z.¹ In parallel, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube have become primary sources of information about products and brands.²

Within this communicative ecosystem, the phenomenon of influencers has emerged. Influencers are individuals who possess the ability to shape audience attitudes and consumer decisions through the content they produce and distribute on social media. Their effectiveness derives from a combination of visibility, perceived authen-

ticity and relational closeness with followers, making them some of the most influential actors in contemporary digital marketing. Research confirms that influencer marketing significantly affects brand strengthening and consumer behaviour.³ This effect is particularly pronounced in the beauty industry, where the visual nature of products and the potential for demonstrating results naturally align with social media formats.⁴

Although influencers are often perceived as a product of the digital era, the concept of personal branding has deep historical roots. Long before the rise of digital platforms, public figures actively constructed their identities through visual, performative and communicative strategies. Salvador Dalí represents an illustrative historical example of early personal branding: his public persona was a result of deliberate construction encompassing visual symbols, narrative framing and media strategy. Contemporary literature identifies Dalí as a precursor to modern influencer marketing practices.⁵ Although he did not operate in a virtual environment, Dalí's under-

standing of personal representation conceptually aligns with the identity-building techniques employed by today's content creators.

The rise of expert influencers; such as dermatologists, pharmacists and other professionals formally qualified in the fields they communicate about; has become increasingly significant. Their role has intensified in the context of growing misinformation, media saturation and the widespread presence of generated content online. Audiences increasingly seek reliable and verified information, particularly in domains that may involve health or dermatological implications.⁶ Expert influencers combine professional knowledge with communicative skill, producing content perceived as more credible compared to that of traditional influencers whose communication is often based primarily on aesthetics, lifestyle or personal experience.⁷ Consequently, expertise has emerged as an important differentiating factor in digital environments.

The beauty industry is among the most dynamic and competitive sectors of digital marketing and is highly sensitive to issues of credibility. Products that affect skin health require clear explanations of mechanisms of action, usage protocols and potential interactions, which increases audience expectations regarding professional discourse. Marketing trends indicate a growing demand for expert influencers, particularly in campaigns requiring an educational component and scientifically grounded explanations.³ Expert influencers stand out through their consistent personal branding, which integrates professional legitimacy, ethical responsibility and a stable communicative identity.

Storytelling is recognized as one of the most effective communicative techniques in digital marketing. Expert influencers frequently combine scientific explanations of products with narrative representations of personal experience, thereby increasing audience engagement and facilitating the understanding of complex information. This communicative approach enhances perceived reliability and strengthens the relationship between influencers and their audiences.

Considering these theoretical foundations, the present study examines the role of academic education in shaping influencer credibility, market effectiveness and personal branding within the beauty industry. The analysis explores differences between traditional and expert influencers in terms of audience engagement, commercial outcomes and consumer trust, while also addressing the perceptions of marketing professionals and social media users. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of structural changes within influencer marketing and highlight the importance of expertise in contemporary digital communication.

Methodology

The methodological framework of this study is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach-

es in order to enable a multi-layered examination of the influence of academic education on the perception, reach and market effectiveness of influencers in the beauty industry. By using different data sources, it was possible to compare the results of storytelling campaigns, the perceptions of marketing professionals and the attitudes of social media users. Such an approach allows for an integrated understanding of the phenomenon and the verification of the proposed hypotheses.

The aim of the research was to examine how the level of formal education of influencers affects credibility, audience engagement and market outcomes. In line with this aim, four hypotheses were defined: expert influencers achieve greater market effectiveness than traditional influencers; marketing professionals prefer influencers with academic education; audiences show greater trust in influencers with formal professional qualifications; academic education has a positive impact on the financial performance of influencers in the beauty industry.

The first part of the research comprised an analysis of storytelling campaigns by two influencers with different profiles. One influencer was a traditional lifestyle creator, while the other was a dermatologist with academic education and the status of an expert communicator. Both published content based on an identical creative brief on TikTok and YouTube. Reach, number of clicks, audience engagement, conversion rate and generated revenue were analysed. This segment enabled a direct test of the hypothesis regarding the influence of expertise on market effectiveness.

The second segment of the research included semi-structured interviews with two marketing experts working on international campaigns and with many years of experience in collaborating with influencers of different profiles. The interviews were conducted to gain insight into the criteria used when selecting influencers, the perceived importance of education, the differences between expert and traditional content creators, and the specific features of working on the global market. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify dominant patterns in expert experience.

The third segment comprised a survey among marketing professionals employed in Croatian agencies and companies. The survey was conducted online, and participants answered questions regarding the importance of education when selecting influencers, their experiences of working with influencers, their perceptions of expert communicators and trends on domestic and international markets. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods.

The fourth research segment included a survey among social media users in Croatia. The survey involved respondents of different ages and educational levels, and its aim was to examine perceptions of influencer credibility, the role of education in building trust, awareness of expert influencers and attitudes towards the recommendations of traditional content creators. Particular attention was

paid to perceived risks associated with skin-care advice and the health implications of products.

The combination of these methods enabled the testing of all research hypotheses on the basis of data triangulation. Campaign analysis provided a quantitative verification of the effect of education on market results, interviews offered insight into professional perspectives within the industry, while the surveys provided an overview of user preferences and attitudes. In this way, a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between influencer education, content credibility and market performance in the context of the beauty industry was ensured.

Results

The findings of the study illustrate the influence of academic education on the credibility, audience engagement and market effectiveness of influencers in the beauty industry. The results are organised into four parts, in line with the methods used: analysis of storytelling campaigns, analysis of market data on influencers, thematic analysis of interviews and the results of two survey studies.

Analysis of storytelling campaigns

The analysis of storytelling campaigns conducted on TikTok and YouTube revealed clear differences between the traditional influencer and the dermatologist as an expert influencer. Although the traditional influencer achieved a higher number of clicks due to a larger follower base and broader visibility, the results suggest that the dermatologist achieved greater market effectiveness. The audience perceived her content as more informative and trustworthy, which was reflected in higher engagement, a larger number of comments and a more favourable ratio of positive reactions. The dermatologist also achieved a higher conversion rate and greater overall revenue, indicating that expertise represents an important differentiating factor in communication about products with dermatological implications.

On YouTube, the results were similar. The dermatologist achieved a longer average retention rate, demonstrating that the audience remained engaged with her content for a longer period of time, particularly in segments explaining ingredients and mechanisms of product action. The lifestyle influencer achieved greater overall visibility, but without a comparable market effect. These results indicate that reach is not a key predictor of market effectiveness and that audience trust is a more important factor in consumer decision-making processes.

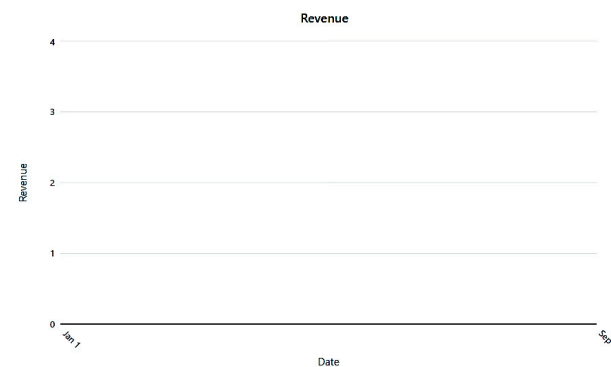
The results of the campaign analysis confirm the first research hypothesis: expert influencers achieve greater market effectiveness than traditional influencers. This difference is manifested through conversions, engagement and financial outcomes, while reach remains a secondary category that does not reliably predict market results.

The text references graphical representations (Figure 1 and Figure 2) that show key performance indicators for the two influencers on TikTok and YouTube.

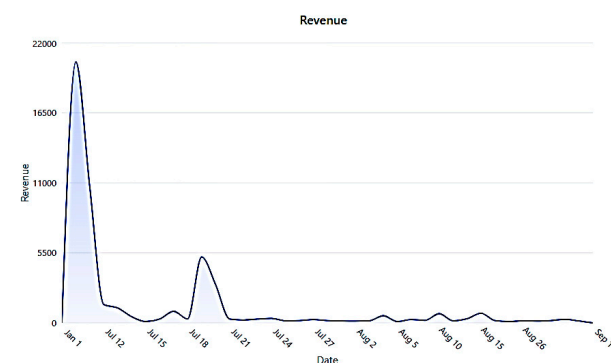
Analysis of influencers' market performance

The analysis of data on the ten most successful influencers in the beauty industry in the period from 2021 to 2024 revealed additional patterns supporting the conclusions drawn from the storytelling campaign analysis. According to sales and revenue indicators, the most successful influencers were dermatologists and skincare experts. Despite lower overall visibility, their results showed higher conversion rates and a stronger impact on purchasing behaviour.

The most successful dermatologist in the analysis generated more than 300,000 US dollars in revenue and over one thousand confirmed product sales. In contrast, traditional influencers with a multiple-fold larger number of followers achieved significantly lower revenue and fewer sales. These findings confirm that expertise acts as a key predictor of market effectiveness in the beauty industry.

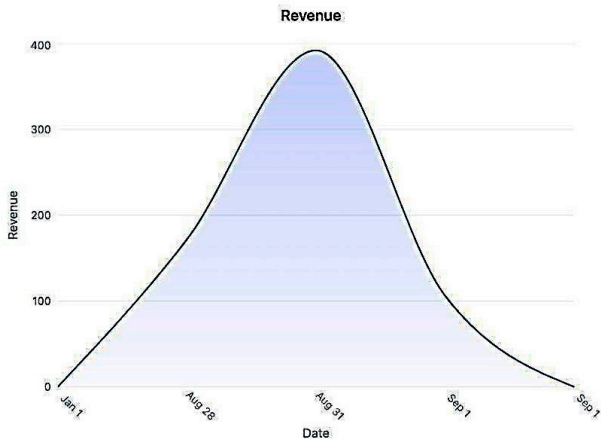


A traditional influencer's report, 2024
Source: Social Snowball, 2024

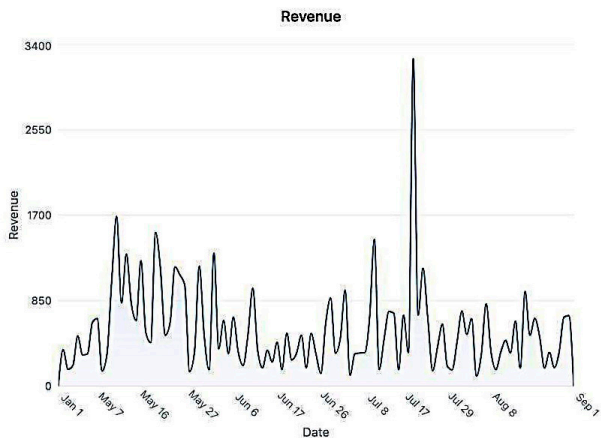


KOL influencer's report, 2024
Source: Social Snowball, 2024

Fig. 1. Performance of the TikTok storytelling campaign by two influencers with different profiles. The chart shows reach, engagement, clicks, conversion rate and revenue for the traditional influencer and the expert influencer.



A traditional influencer's report, 2024
Source: Social Snowball, 2024



KOL influencer's report, 2024
Source: Social Snowball, 2024

Fig. 2. Performance of the YouTube storytelling campaign by two influencers with different profiles. The chart shows retention rate, engagement, conversions and corresponding revenue.

The market analysis confirms the fourth research hypothesis, which posits that academic education has a positive effect on influencers' financial performance, especially in industries that rely on scientific or medical information. Table 1 presents the differences between influencer categories in terms of reach, sales and revenue.

Interview findings

The thematic analysis of two semi-structured interviews revealed several consistent patterns in expert viewpoints. According to the interview participants, expertise and professional credibility are key elements of successful influencer marketing in the beauty industry. The experts emphasised that dermatologists and other specialist influencers bring added value to campaigns because their educational role positively affects audience perceptions and the effectiveness of communication.

TABLE 1

TOP BEAUTY INFLUENCERS BY SALES PERFORMANCE, REACH AND REVENUE IN THE PERIOD 2021–2024

Influencers	Sales	Reach	Revenue
Dermatologist 1	1156	478.185	\$311.512
Dermatologist 2	1032	187.905	\$223.839
Master of Medical Aesthetics	1011	870.774	\$183.671
Dermatologist 3	282	822.556	\$48.817
Dermatologist 4	218	10.714	\$45.613
Dermatologist 5	171	31	\$29.579
Skin Expert	165	13.187	\$26.031
Beauty influencer 1	163	1257	\$27.885
Beauty influencer 2	154	13.904	\$40.383
Beauty influencer 3	144	272.1	\$24.879

LEGEND: The table presents three categories of influencers: dermatology experts, skincare experts and traditional influencers, together with their key market indicators.

The interviewees also noted that global brands have preferred to work with expert influencers for many years, based on the results of previous campaigns and audience expectations. Although there is still a strong inclination towards traditional influencers on the domestic market, trends indicate a gradual increase in demand for expert communicators.

In addition, the participants highlighted differences between platforms. TikTok is recognised as a space for rapid virality and short formats, while Instagram remains dominant for visually appealing and aesthetic content. YouTube and Instagram are considered suitable for expert and educational analyses, which helps explain the greater effectiveness of expert influencers on these platforms.

Results of the survey among marketing professionals

The survey conducted among twenty marketing professionals revealed heterogeneous views on the role of education in influencer marketing. Half of the respondents believe that formal education is not a key criterion in selecting influencers, while 35% report that education has some importance. Around 20% of respondents consider education a crucial category in the beauty segment, particularly when communicating about product ingredients and dermatological procedures.

Participants with international experience highlighted that the engagement of expert influencers in global campaigns is standard practice. Their views suggest that the domestic market may lag behind global trends, although perceptions are gradually changing. Respondents expressed the belief that the educational value and professional credibility of influencers will become increasingly important selection criteria in the future.

A graphical representation (Figure 3) summarises the distribution of respondents' views on the importance of education in influencer selection.

Results of the survey among social media users

The survey among social media users in Croatia included 115 participants of different age groups and educational levels. The results show a strong impact of education on audience trust. Almost half of the respondents report greater trust in influencers with academic education. More than 60% believe that influencers who recommend skincare products should possess formal professional qualifications, while over 80% emphasise authenticity as a key component of personal branding.

The survey findings confirm the third research hypothesis: audiences show a stronger preference for content created by influencers with an expert background. Respondents also expressed scepticism towards content produced by influencers who use unverified claims, especially when products related to skin health are concerned. Graphical representations (Figure 4 and Figure 5) show the distribution of respondents' key answers.

Discussion

The discussion focuses on interpreting the obtained results in relation to the proposed hypotheses and on understanding their significance in the context of contemporary influencer marketing in the beauty industry. The findings obtained by combining qualitative and quantitative methods enabled a multidimensional view of the influence of academic education on influencers' market effectiveness and credibility.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that expert influencers would achieve greater market effectiveness than tradition-

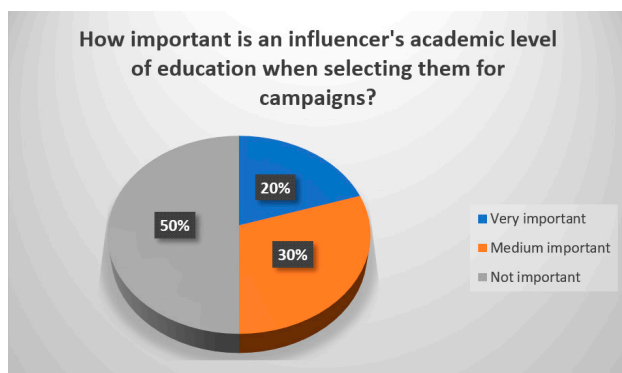


Fig. 3. Marketing professionals' views on the importance of influencer education.

Legend: The chart presents the distribution of survey responses regarding perceptions of the importance of formal education in influencer marketing.

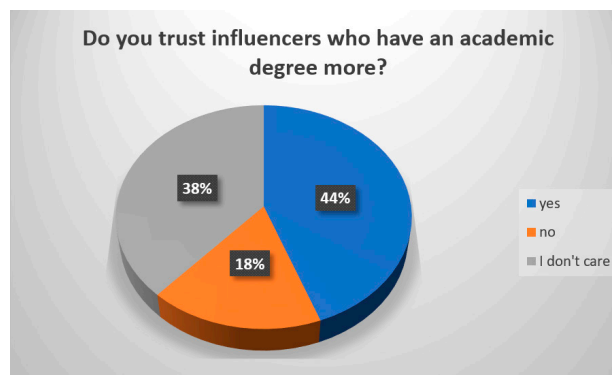


Fig. 4. Perceived credibility of influencers by level of education. The chart shows the level of trust audiences attribute to expert and traditional influencers.

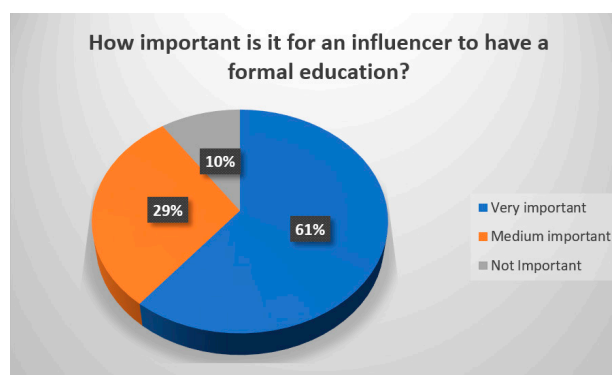


Fig. 5. General public attitudes towards the need for formal education among influencers in the beauty industry. The chart shows respondents' assessments of the importance of formal education in the context of recommending skincare products.

al influencers. The analysis of storytelling campaigns on TikTok and YouTube confirms this assumption. The dermatologist achieved a higher conversion rate, greater overall revenue and stronger audience engagement, while the traditional influencer achieved greater reach but without a corresponding effect on sales. This finding confirms that expertise plays a crucial role in shaping audience trust, particularly in relation to products associated with skin health. The audience responds more strongly to content that includes professional explanation and reasoned recommendation, which indicates that professional expertise has become an important differentiating factor in digital marketing. Available market data on the most successful influencers further supports this pattern, as dermatologists and expert influencers achieve higher revenues and more sales despite smaller reach. Thus, the first hypothesis is fully confirmed.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis assumed that marketing professionals would prefer influencers with academic education. The survey results show divided opinions: half of the

respondents believe that education is not a decisive criterion in influencer selection, while some recognise the importance of expertise, particularly in product categories involving medical or dermatological information. Professionals with international experience reported that working with expert influencers is standard practice in global campaigns, indicating a possible discrepancy between domestic practice and international trends. Differences in perception may be the result of varying levels of market maturity and the long-standing dominance of lifestyle influencers in domestic content production. Although the hypothesis cannot be fully confirmed, the findings point to a gradual shift in perception and a growing awareness of the importance of expertise in influencer marketing.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicted that audiences would show greater trust in influencers with formal professional qualifications. The survey among social media users confirms this assumption. Respondents expressed a clear preference for content created by academically educated influencers and noted that the educational component of content increases credibility and reduces the risk of perceiving information as inaccurate. Almost half of the respondents displayed a preference for expert influencers, while more than 60% stated that influencers in the beauty industry should possess appropriate education. These results underline the importance of expertise in the context of increasing exposure to inaccurate, oversimplified or commercially motivated information. The hypothesis is confirmed.

Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis assumed that academic education positively affects influencers' financial outcomes. The results of the quantitative analysis of market performance provide strong support for this assumption. Dermatologists and expert influencers achieve the highest number of sales and the highest revenues, while traditional influencers, despite greater visibility, achieve significantly weaker market results. This finding confirms that education functions as a key component of professional capital and contributes to the effectiveness of influencer marketing in industries that require expert argumentation and detailed explanations of products. The hypothesis is fully confirmed.

The results indicate that expertise and professional legitimacy are key dimensions of personal branding in the beauty industry. Expert influencers create additional value in the communication process through their knowledge and educational approach, contributing to the formation of a more informed market environment. Their role becomes particularly important in the context of increasing misinformation, rapid content dissemination and the growing complexity of skincare product markets.

The findings of this study can be linked to theoretical concepts of personal branding and historical examples of managing public perception, such as the case of Salvador Dalí. Although Dalí did not operate in a digital environ-

ment, his strategic identity construction points to the long-term importance of consistent narrative, visual identity and clear communication strategies. In the contemporary context, influencers apply these principles in the digital sphere, with expert influencers distinguishing themselves through their ability to combine professional knowledge and communication skills.

The results also point to a gap between audience perceptions and the views of part of the marketing profession. While audiences clearly prefer expertise, some industry actors still prioritise reach and popularity. It is expected that further market development and increased availability of campaign performance data will contribute to expertise gaining more weight as a selection criterion. Such developments could lead to a more stable and responsible influencer scene and to higher professional standards in digital marketing within the beauty industry.

Conclusion

The research presented in this paper has shown that academic education is an important factor in shaping the credibility, audience engagement and market effectiveness of influencers in the beauty industry. The results of the analysis of storytelling campaigns, market data, interviews and two survey studies confirm that expert influencers achieve a more stable relationship with audiences, a stronger impact on purchasing behaviour and a higher level of professional authority than traditional influencers.

The findings indicate that expertise contributes to the perceived reliability of content, which is particularly important in product categories linked to health and dermatological aspects. Campaigns featuring expert influencers resulted in higher conversion rates and greater revenue despite lower overall reach, suggesting that market effectiveness stems from trust rather than visibility alone. The survey among social media users further supports this conclusion, as respondents demonstrate a clear preference for content that has an educational component and is grounded in professional expertise.

Although part of the marketing profession still does not consider education a key criterion in influencer selection, responses from participants with international experience indicate that global trends strongly favour expert communicators. It is expected that further market development and greater availability of campaign performance data will contribute to stronger recognition of the value of expertise in the domestic context.

This study contributes to understanding the mechanisms that shape influencers' personal branding and highlights the importance of professional legitimacy in the digital space. The findings point to the need for a more responsible approach to communication in the beauty industry, particularly in the context of spreading inaccurate information and the increasing presence of generated content. The role of expert influencers is especially important

in this regard, as their communication combines educational, ethical and promotional elements.

In conclusion, it can be stated that expert influencers are likely to play an increasingly important role in the future development of influencer marketing. Their contri-

bution is based on the synergy of professional knowledge and communication skills, which enables the creation of more credible and effective marketing narratives. The beauty industry, as a highly competitive and information-sensitive field, particularly benefits from such an approach, as confirmed by the results of this research.

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VAŽNOST OSOBNOG BRENDIRANJA NA DRUŠTVENIM MREŽAMA: KOMUNIKOLOŠKA PERSPEKTIVA ULOGE AKADEMSKOG OBRAZOVANJA U VJERODOSTOJNOSTI I DOSEGU INFLUENCERA

SAŽETAK

Razvoj društvenih mreža doveo je do uspona influencera kao ključnih aktera u oblikovanju javnog mnijenja i potrošačkog ponašanja. Istodobno, širenje dezinformacija i pojava generativne umjetne inteligencije povećali su potrebu za provjerenim, stručnim i autentičnim sadržajem, osobito u beauty sektoru, u kojem su potrošačke odluke usko povezane sa zdravljem i dobrobiti. U ovom se radu ispituje utjecaj akademskog obrazovanja na vjerodostojnost, doseg i tržišnu učinkovitost influencera u beauty industriji. Primjenom mješovitog metodološkog pristupa (analize storytelling kampanja, dvaju polustrukturiranih intervjua te dviju anketa provedenih među marketinškim stručnjacima i općom populacijom) utvrđeno je da influenceri s akademskim obrazovanjem ostvaruju više stope konverzije, veće povjerenje publike i povoljnije tržišne ishode, iako ih domaći marketinški sektor još uvijek rjeđe angažira. Dobiveni rezultati upućuju na rastuću stratešku vrijednost stručnih KOL influencera u digitalnoj komunikaciji.

