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# THE LEADER AS INFLUENCER

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**Keywords:**
leadership,
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***Abstract***
*This study examined the role of leaders as influencers on social media, with a particular focus on the synergy between personal branding and influencer marketing. Based on an illustrative, small-scale analysis of three Hungarian and three international executives, the research revealed highly diverse social media usage patterns. Some leaders, such as Elon Musk and Levente Balogh, actively embrace an influencer role, integrating their personal brand with corporate image, while others, like Satya Nadella and Tim Cook, primarily communicate within professional, corporate frameworks. Among Hungarian executives, Levente Balogh demonstrated the most pronounced influencer characteristics. Limited or absent social media presence, as in the case of Zsolt Hernádi, may also reflect a deliberate strategic choice.*
*The findings suggest that a leader's online presence can significantly impact their personal brand, the organization's reputation, and its perception in the labor market. The study highlights the importance of digital competencies and strategic social media engagement for effective leadership. Although the small sample limits generalizability, the research provides valuable insights into the interplay between personal branding, influencer roles, and corporate impact, offering a foundation for future, larger-scale studies.*

## 1. Introduction

Influencer marketing has brought a new perspective to the world of personal and corporate branding with the rise of social media. The role of influencers is not limited to promoting products and services but has a deeper impact on consumer decision-making and brand identification. According to the definition provided by the Hungarian Competition Authority (2022), influencers, as opinion leaders, influence their followers, build engaged communities, and serve business interests. The foundation of successful influencer activity is authentic self-representation and the conscious development of one's personal brand.

At the same time, increasing attention is being paid to leaders' personal branding and communication on social media platforms. As leaders become more visible in the online space, their activities, style, and values not only affect the internal workings of the company but also have a direct impact on its market perception. The leader's role as an influencer presents an opportunity to make the company more human-centered and authentic, but it also poses challenges in terms of transparency, credibility, and managing negative feedback.

The purpose of this study is to explore the significance of the leader as an influencer in social media, with a focus on the synergy between influencer marketing and personal branding. The research examines how leaders can apply influencer strategies to achieve organizational goals, the competencies and communication skills required, and the impact of leadership presence on the organization's reputation and employee engagement.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The meaning of influencer and influencer marketing

Social media has become a key component of marketing activities across almost every industry today. It has also become a valuable tool for personal brand development and maintenance (Jacobson, 2020). In this context, the concept of the influencer becomes important, as they have the ability to significantly influence a specific target audience. Influencer marketing, where individuals test and promote products, has become increasingly widespread. According to the Hungarian Competition Authority's 2022 communication, "An influencer is a person, even a minor, or a thing, a virtual entity (such as an animal, mascot, digital character, avatar) capable of exerting influence in a digital environment and shaping consumer opinions. They create and publish online content on their own website, social media platform, video-sharing or other online platforms, whether the content is their own or a guest post; in most cases, the influencer has an engaged following." Influencers typically receive compensation for the content they create. The communication also highlights that their recommendations cannot be considered entirely objective and independent, as they are often driven by business considerations. The Hungarian Competition Authority classified as an influencer an individual who promotes third-party products on their social media platform for compensation. (Hungarian Competition Authority, 2022) In these cases, the product is often chosen not for the product itself, but because of the person associated with it, where the advertiser's personal characteristics, beliefs, and features are visible. In light of the appropriate follower base, "the individual's brand" can become a corporate brand, with a focus on conscious self-branding. Influencers owe their success to effective personal brand building, whereas, for example, athletes may gain popularity based on outstanding performance in a specific field (Nagy et al., 2018). While these platforms have many advantages, it is important to consider that negative impressions on the web can harm the reputation of a brand (Jacobson, 2020).

Today, we can say that influencers are part of our daily lives, present on almost every social media platform, with Instagram and TikTok being the most prominent examples (John & Shyamala, 2019). According to John and Shyamala (2019), we can distinguish five types of influencers:

Celebrity influencers, who, thanks to their fame and financial background, can reach and attract people,

Authority influencers, who are experts in a particular field, thereby reaching their audience,

Social media sensations, who express opinions about products or services,

Micro-influencers, who have a smaller but more loyal following,

Bloggers.

Campbell and Farrell (2020) created a framework for classifying influencer types to provide a comprehensive picture of the appeal of different types of influencers and the impact of their campaigns. The classification is based on the size of the influencer’s following and includes the following:

Celebrities, who have more than 1 million followers and became famous through their activities or professions beyond social media,

Mega influencers, who have more than 1 million followers but owe their popularity solely to their social media presence,

Macro influencers, who have a following between 100,000 and 1 million,

Micro influencers, whose followers range from 10,000 to 100,000, typically "Instagram celebrities" (Boerman, 2020),

Nano influencers, who have fewer than 10,000 followers, often with close, personal relationships with their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, Ryding et al., 2023)

The figure below (Figure 1) shows the classification of influencer types according to Campbell and Farrell (2020).

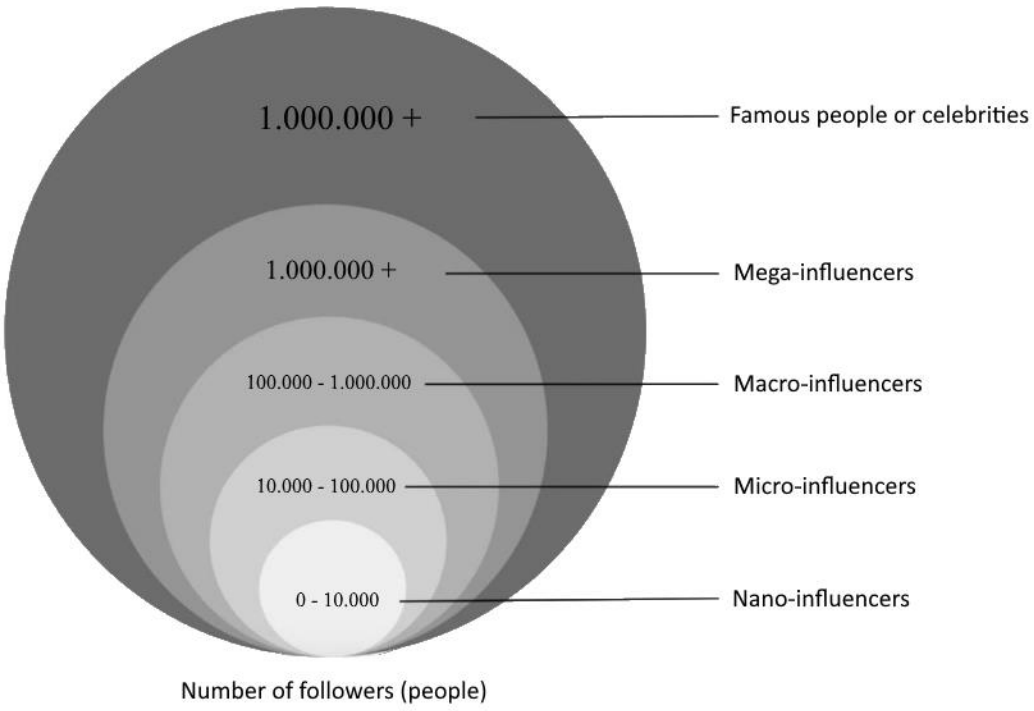


*Figure 1. Classification of Social Media Influencer Types based on Campbell and Farrel. (2020) Source: Ryding et al. (2023)*

### 2.2. The impact of influencer marketing

The development of information technologies impacts every aspect of the world, gradually eliminating the spatial and temporal limitations of individuals. The internet, as a medium, no longer serves just as a communication tool, but also as a purchasing medium, thus enhancing the significance of digital marketing. Influencer marketing has become the key to successful social media marketing (Ade et al., 2024).

It now serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a catalyst for building deeper and more authentic brand-consumer relationships. For consumers, it has become increasingly important to engage with brands in some way. Influencers play a key role in bridging this gap by providing reliable and credible content. Furthermore, companies are focusing not only on one-time campaigns but also on long-term partnerships with influencers to reflect shared values and resonate with consumers through sustained collaborations. The future of influencer marketing lies in its ability to positively influence consumers by fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty, particularly through specific product categories (Joshi et al., 2023, Tabellion & Esch, 2019, Ifeanyi & Emmanuel, 2023).

Online shopping continues to grow in popularity, mainly due to its convenience, offering a wide range of products almost continuously on discount without the need to leave home. Social media platforms have become primary sources of information for those looking to learn about brands and products. Influencers typically possess expertise in a specific area and often work within a certain industry. Zhao et al. (2018) highlighted that consumers are more likely to welcome opinions and suggestions from influential figures before making decisions about a product or service. This has led to a growing expectation from followers that influencers will showcase, test, and influence their purchasing decisions. This can also result in consumers becoming biased toward certain products or services in their opinions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Thus, celebrities or opinion leaders can significantly impact their followers' decisions and purchasing intentions. Influencer promotions can

notably influence consumer behavior and decisions, both positively and negatively (Ade et al., 2024, Geng et al., 2020, Chu, 2024).

### 2.3. Companies and social media

According to the study by Ansari & Philips (2011), customers are more trusting and more likely to purchase from companies whose leaders are also present on social media. In her research, Girginova (2015) examined the reasons why company leaders use the social media platform Twitter/X. She found that they primarily aimed to position themselves within their industry, expand their network, and focus on building their personal brand. The content they shared on the platform was mostly professional or hybrid (i.e., a mix of personal and professional content). Cheng (2012) studied the role of social media in organizational internal communication. Based on the interviews conducted, the most common social media platforms were Facebook and Twitter/X, which were mainly linked to human resource management activities such as recruitment, employee engagement, and communication. The use of social media in the workplace has both advantages and challenges. Among its advantages, we can mention its ease of use and real-time communication, which can result in closer working relationships; however, its significance in leadership communication should not be overlooked. On the other hand, productivity may be affected by the personal use of social media during working hours, and there is also a risk of private and confidential information being leaked. It is important to note that social media serves as an informal channel (Cheng, 2012).

### 2.4.The leader and social media

Personal branding encompasses both offline and online self-representation, making social media an effective tool for this purpose (Venciute et al., 2023).

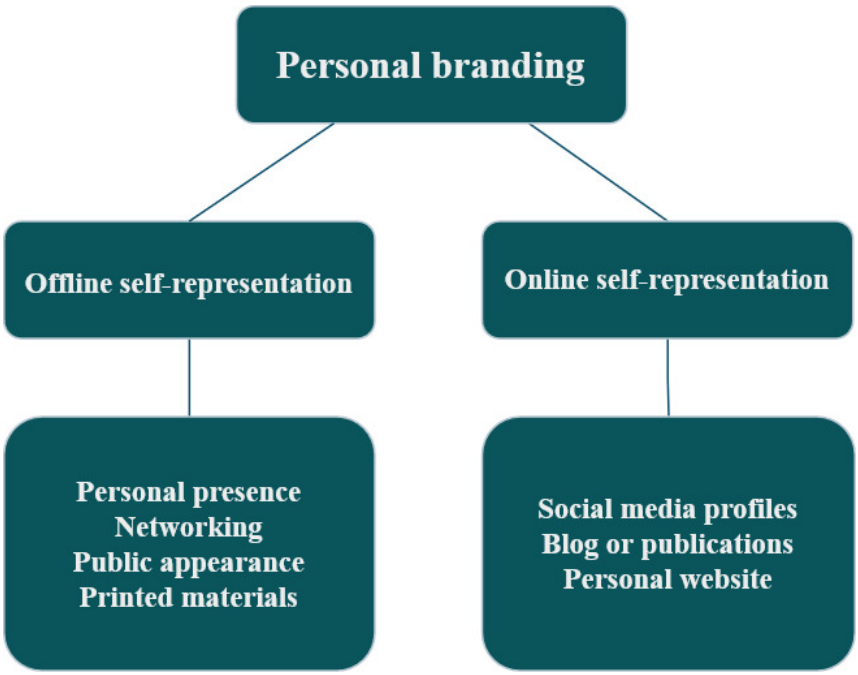


*Figure 2. Personal Branding Forms Based on Domynika et al. (2023)*
*Source: own editing*

Personal branding has become a priority for many professionals. It holds particular appeal for bloggers and influencers, but over time, it has become increasingly important for leaders and job market entrants, regardless of their field of expertise (Khedher, 2019). A leader's personal brand can positively impact and directly influence the organization's reputation and image (Venciute et al., 2023).

In their study, Dominyka et al. (2023) mention that, based on previous research, leaders who are directly present and participate in social media, sharing the company's core objectives, values,

and vision, are perceived as more reliable by their audience. Building a personal brand is not always a simple or natural process; it requires numerous interaction, technical, and digital skills (Pagis & Ailon, 2017). Leaders who possess these competencies, such as digital skills, can identify their own unique traits and distinguish themselves from others, and with creativity, strategic tools, and effective communication, they are more likely to achieve professional success (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Self-awareness and a deeper understanding of oneself are key elements in personal branding, and leaders must engage in and master this process. Schawbel (2009) outlines four steps in his book: First, it is important to recognize one's strengths and passions, followed by the establishment of short- and long-term goals. Afterward, content should be created that aligns with the image we want to project to others. The next steps involve communicating and maintaining this image in a way that accurately reflects both our personal identity and brand. The importance of personal branding among organizational leaders in social media is widely recognized. However, there is a lack of deeper understanding regarding the factors behind such behavior, the process of personal branding, and its impact on the organization. (Venciute et al., 2023, Cederberg, 2017, Schawbel, 2009).

## 3. Methods

The aim of the study was to examine the role of leaders as influencers. The research was based on a review of existing scientific findings and professional sources related to leadership personal branding and influencer marketing. In selecting the literature, particular attention was paid to the relationship between leaders, their organizations, and social media. The review analyzed the concept of influencers, their types, and marketing impact, as well as how social media affects leaders' visibility, the role of digital competencies, and the conscious process of building a personal brand in the online environment. However, the available literature proved to be limited, and therefore no tangible results could be found regarding the influencer role of leaders. The investigation was conducted using keyword-based searches, relying on the most relevant and accessible sources.

The literature review was complemented by a small-scale, illustrative study aimed at demonstrating how domestic and international business leaders utilize social media and how these practices align with the manifestations of leadership personal branding and influencer roles. The study involved the selection of three Hungarian executives (Zsolt Hernádi – MOL, György Wáberer – Waberer's International, Levente Balogh – Szentkirályi) and three international leaders (Elon Musk – Tesla/SpaceX/X, Satya Nadella – Microsoft, Tim Cook – Apple).

*Table 1. Description of the sample*

| *Examined executive* | *Company* | *Industry profile* |
|---|---|---|
| Zsolt Hernádi | MOL Hungary | Oil and gas industry |
| György Wáberer | Waberer's International | Logistics |
| Levente Balogh | Szentkirályi Mineral Water | FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods) |
| Elon Musk | Tesla, SpaceX, X | Automotive, energy, aerospace, social media |
| Satya Nadella | Microsoft | IT, technology |
| Tim Cook | Apple | Technology, consumer electronics |

*Source: own editing*

The selection criteria required that they be key figures within their respective industries and maintain an active presence on at least one social media platform. Data collection was conducted through targeted online searches focusing on the social media profiles of the selected business leaders, using publicly accessible and verifiable sources. The analysis considered the number of

followers, posting frequency, types of posts, and the nature of shared content. The examination primarily focused on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and TikTok platforms; however, special emphasis was placed on Facebook activity, as this platform provides a particularly relevant space for analyzing leaders' influencer roles toward a broader audience. Moreover, Facebook remains the most widely used platform among the general public, thus offering valuable insights into leadership communication visible to everyday users.

# 4. Results

## 4.1. The leader, as influencer

The connection between personal leadership branding and business success is supported by numerous studies. Nowadays, it is evident that leaders are not only responsible for the strategic direction of companies but their personal brand and the activities they undertake are intrinsically linked to the brand of the company they represent. The presence, impact, and strength of this connection can be a crucial factor in a company's long-term success. For example, we can mention Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, where the names of both individuals immediately bring to mind the brands they represent, such as Apple and Tesla. The personal charisma, presence, and thinking of these leaders are reflected in the quality of the products they endorse, and they have also earned significant trust from the community as representatives of their respective industries.

The role of the leader as an influencer and the intertwining of personal brand building has become a key factor for companies and their leaders in today's social and economic environment. The increasing role of social media and the impact of influencer marketing have brought significant changes to corporate and leadership strategies. Today, a leader's personal brand is not only about maintaining individual reputation but has also become a crucial element of corporate image and consumer relationships. Influencer marketing is increasingly building not only the promotion of products but also strengthening personal connections.

Leaders can leverage the opportunities offered by social media to build closer relationships with their audience and strengthen their company's brand through their personal presence (Venciute et al., 2023). Influencers, especially those with medium to large followings, can significantly impact purchasing decisions, as the audience increasingly expects product recommendations to be presented as personal endorsements (Boerman, 2020, Ade et al., 2024).

For leaders, using social media and influencer marketing as tools can not only aid in brand building but also contribute to leadership effectiveness and corporate success. According to the literature, leaders who actively build their personal brand and communicate their values on social media platforms can become more reliable and credible in the eyes of consumers, leading to long-term engagement and brand loyalty (Girginova, 2015, Venciute et al., 2023).

Therefore, the role of leadership branding and influencers is becoming increasingly indispensable for companies, as a leader's direct influence on the brand and corporate culture is a key factor in maintaining competitiveness. Leaders with digital skills can build stronger relationships with their audience and have a greater impact on consumer decisions through their personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018, Schawbel, 2009). An active social media presence by leaders is thus not only important for brand building but also essential for business success, as consumers and market players increasingly seek the human factor in corporate communications.

## 4.2. Small-Scale Examination of the Social Media Activity of the Selected Business Leaders

The focus of the analysis was placed on Facebook activity; however, it is important to note that several international leaders are considerably more active on other social media platforms. Elon Musk primarily builds his personal brand on X (formerly Twitter), where he has more than 226 million followers and engages in daily activity. His posts combine professional and personal elements, often conveyed in a provocative tone through visual content and memes. Satya Nadella is most active on LinkedIn, where he reaches approximately 11.6 million followers. His posts are regular and predominantly professional in nature, emphasizing topics such as ethical leadership, corporate innovation, and artificial intelligence. Tim Cook's social media presence is limited, as he

is not particularly active on most platforms. His activity is mainly concentrated on the Chinese platform Weibo, where he maintains an official profile and shares content on a regular basis.

Among the Hungarian leaders, Zsolt Hernádi's online presence is also limited: although the MOL Group's official LinkedIn page (with over 160,000 followers) features frequent posts, the CEO's personal profile is less active, and there is no publicly accessible communication on other social platforms. György Wáberer, in addition to Facebook, is present on Instagram, where he has around 2,900 followers, while his LinkedIn profile is less curated; his communication appears mainly through the company's official channels.

*Table 2. Research findings based on Facebook activity*

| | | *followers* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Zsolt Hernádi | No official profile | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| György Wáberer | Wáberer György | 36000+ | Regular | Visual content | Professional/Personal |
| Levente Balogh | Balogh Levente Hivatalos Oldala | 104.000+ | Regular | Visual content | Corporate/Personal/Marketing |
| Elon Musk | No official profile | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Satya Nadella | No official profile | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Tim Cook | No official profile | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |

*Source: own editing*

Levente Balogh is the most prominent multi-platform communicator among the Hungarian executives. In addition to his Facebook and Instagram presence, he has nearly 93,000 followers on TikTok and maintains his own website, although his LinkedIn profile plays a lesser role. Appearances in televised business programs—which in recent years have provided several Hungarian business leaders with significant public exposure—may substantially increase their media visibility and social media reach. Such appearances not only enable access to a wider audience but also foster increased activity and follower growth across social platforms, thereby strengthening the impact of personal branding in the digital sphere.

## 5. Discussion

While some leaders (e.g., Musk, Balogh) employ these platforms explicitly as influencers, others (e.g., Nadella, Cook) communicate primarily within professional, corporate frameworks. Among the Hungarian executives, Levente Balogh exhibits the most pronounced characteristics of an influencer role, whereas the example of Zsolt Hernádi illustrates that the absence of social media presence can also represent a deliberate strategic choice.

This small-scale study indicates that leaders' social media activity can influence not only their personal brand but also their company's image and labor market perception. Due to its illustrative and limited-sample nature, further research on larger samples and across multiple platforms is warranted. Future studies should examine the interactions associated with posts (such as reactions, shares, and comments) and assess how executive social media presence affects corporate employer attractiveness and organizational culture.

The present investigation carries several limitations. First, it is an exploratory, small-sample study and therefore not suitable for drawing generalized conclusions. The selection of six executives was purposeful, meaning that the findings cannot be considered representative of the entire domestic or international leadership landscape.

Second, the data collection relied exclusively on publicly available social media profiles, the content of which is often consciously curated and managed. Consequently, these posts may not fully

reflect the leaders' genuine personal communication, as they are frequently supported by professional communication teams.

Another limitation is that the analysis focused primarily on Facebook activity, although other platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter/X, TikTok) may, in many cases, be more relevant from the perspective of leadership personal brand building. The study therefore provides a single—albeit popular—yet not comprehensive perspective.

The main value of this research lies in its illustrative demonstration of the diverse patterns of leaders' social media usage, showing how personal brand building and influencer roles may manifest in practice. Comparing three Hungarian and three international executives helps to highlight the differences between digitally active, strategically brand-building leaders (such as Levente Balogh or Elon Musk) and those communicating more conservatively within corporate frameworks (such as Satya Nadella, Tim Cook, or Zsolt Hernádi).

Furthermore, this research contributes to bridging theoretical literature and practical phenomena by illustrating the relationship between leadership personal branding and social media through concrete, real-world examples. The small-scale, exploratory approach serves as a foundation for future, larger-scale studies and can guide the refinement of subsequent research questions.

## 6. Conclusion

The study highlighted that the social media usage of leaders exhibits highly diverse patterns. Some leaders, such as Elon Musk and Levente Balogh, explicitly assume an influencer role and actively engage in personal brand building, while others, including Satya Nadella and Tim Cook, communicate primarily within professional, corporate frameworks. Among the Hungarian executives, Levente Balogh demonstrates the most pronounced characteristics of an influencer, whereas the absence of social media presence in the case of Zsolt Hernádi may also reflect a deliberate strategic choice.

These findings suggest that personal branding strategies can vary considerably, and the intensity and style of social media activity are integral to shaping a leader's personal brand. An active online presence allows leaders to connect their personal brand with the corporate brand, enhance company image, and strengthen audience relationships. Conversely, limited or conservative online activity can also reflect a conscious strategic decision that contributes to personal brand building in a different manner.

Due to the illustrative and small-scale nature of the study, the results cannot be generalized. However, they provide valuable insights into the potential patterns of leadership personal branding and social media use, highlighting how leaders' online presence can influence not only their personal brand but also their company's image, employee engagement, and labor market perception. Future research should focus on larger samples, multiple platforms, and interactions with posts (e.g., reactions, shares, comments) to better understand how executive social media activity affects organizational attractiveness, culture, and long-term competitiveness. Overall, the research confirms that the interplay between leadership personal branding and influencer roles is increasingly crucial, and an active online presence is essential not only for brand building but also for sustaining competitiveness and achieving long-term business success.

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