BUZZOOLE
∞

# The Battle for Authenticity: Fighting Influencer Marketing Fraud

**How Buzzoole's technology is arming marketers in the battle against fraud and in safeguarding brand value**

# Contents

# Introduction 1

Influencer marketing is proving itself to be an increasingly strategic marketing lever for companies. **It is estimated that a total of 3 billion dollars was invested in this sector in 2018 and that the figure is set to reach 10 billion on a global scale in 2020.** However, like in all media sectors, growth leads to market distortion. For example, within the field of online advertising, we have witnessed several players attempt to alter the game by artificially increasing the number of visits, impressions, clicks and video views. In the same way, influencer marketing currently has to contend

**"Our aim is to help companies identify transparent creators who are in line with their brand values through a data-driven approach"**

Fabrizio Perrone, *CEO Buzzoole*

@eat.wear.travel

## 200 Million

Facebook has revealed to its investors that between 6% and 10% (around 200 million) accounts are duplicate and that around 3% to 4% are fake (60 million) [1]

## 15-20%

A sample analysis revealed that between 15% and 20% of Instagram accounts may have engaged in fraudulent activity

## 2 Billion

**In the first 9 months of 2018, Facebook deleted more than 2 billion fake accounts [2]**

with a parallel market of players who sell and buy non-genuine followers, likes, comments and views.
How did it even get to this? The "original sin" of this market distortion can be traced back to social media platforms giving consideration to so-called "vanity metrics", i.e. the number of fans and followers accumulated by a page or profile. This prompted companies and individuals to look for shortcuts that would allow them to stand out from the crowd, selling their own activities to brands who want to work with the most popular creators.
The aim of a firmly established player like Buzzoole is to help

## 9-15%

**Between 9% and 15% of Twitter profiles are bots [3]**

companies safeguard their brand reputation, offering its expertise to help them select which creators to work with in their influencer marketing campaigns. To this end, we have developed a data-driven approach, integrated into a robust system designed to analyse insights related to the accounts of the creators who are signed up to our platform.
By way of this white paper, we aim to clarify the fraudulent methods used by the protagonists of this parallel market, to explain the traditional methods used to identify dishonest creators, and to share the methodology used by Buzzoole to guarantee brand safety in influencer marketing.

[1] [Source: Business Insider https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-raises-duplicate-fake-account-estimates-q3-earnings-2017-11?IR=T]
[2] [Source: Facebook https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/11/enforcing-our-community-standards-2/]
[3] [Source: University of Southern California and Indiana University, https://arxiv.org/pdf/1703.03107.pdf]

# 2 Authenticity: a common challenge

In early 2018, the New York Times published *The Follower Factory* - an in-depth investigation into social media's so-called black market, contributing to the creation of a documented image of the fraudulent activity conducted in order to inflate social media vanity metrics. In particular, the piece explored the selling of bots on Twitter, stimulated by companies like Devumi, and the purchasing of followers and engagement by well-known faces in the fields of entertainment and politics.

In June of the same year, Keith Weed (Chief Marketing Officer of Unilever) adopted a clear stance on the debate, announcing that the multinational company would no longer work with dishonest

@emmal_

@laurajaneatelier

Creators. This statement received wide media coverage and acted as a wake-up call for the entire industry: all players were prompted to strive for maximum transparency.

**"There are lots of great creators out there, but there are a few bad apples that contaminate the rest. We need to act fast, as once the trust is gone, it never comes back."**

Keith Weed, *CMO Unilever*

Today, the fight for authenticity involves all actors along the social media marketing chain:

**Social networks**, which previously relied on vanity metrics to increase their customer base, are now trying to mend their ways by cleaning up fake or duplicate profiles.
**Facebook**, with more than 2 billion active monthly users has revealed to investors that between 6% and 10% of profiles are duplicate and that around 3% to 4% are fake (i.e. do not belong to real people). To combat these phenomena, which have also had political repercussions, the social networking service has developed a "machine learning" system, which resulted in more than 2 billion actions taken against fake accounts in the first nine months of 2018. Last November, after reaching the milestone of 1 billion monthly active users, **Instagram** announced that it was clamping down on accounts that use applications designed to artificially inflate followers and engagement.
**Twitter**, which has 326 million users, is said to have deleted 70 million fake accounts and to have deactivated over 142,000 apps in 2018, which were responsible for more than 130 million spam tweets.

**ZN8**

**transparency, authenticity and measurability** of results. In the absence of advanced technology, the majority of operators have to resort to relying on their own intuition or on trusting relationships with very few creators. Platforms such as Buzzoole use a data-driven approach to uncover fraudulent activity and only suggest reliable creators.



@katie_did_what

Following **Unilever's "call to arms"**, brands are becoming more sensitive towards the subject of quality, conscious that using dishonest creators in their influencer marketing campaigns could have a boomerang effect on their reputation. This is because any creator who promotes a product is seen as a "spokesperson" for the company in the eyes of the public. Leading on from this is the increasingly pressing requirement to ask creators to use so-called transparency hashtags (e.g. #ad #adv #sponsored #promoted), in order to be as clear as possible about their underlying business relationship.

In turn, creators are beginning to understand the importance of adopting **ethical behaviour** in order to strengthen trusting relationships with their audiences and brands. Clearly marking personal posts from those requested for commercial purposes is a way of communicating honesty and transparency. These values are becoming an increasingly competitive advantage for those who aspire to collaborate with serious brands.

Influencer marketing operators (agencies, media centres, platforms) that position themselves as mediators between companies and creators must demonstrate that they are able to meet these new requirements in terms of

# 3 Fraudulent methods

The most commonly used fraudulent method for contaminating the market is buying followers and engagement (interactions). You only have to do a quick keyword search to be presented with dozens of websites selling fraudulent services that can be used to obtain these results. With about one hundred Euros, you can buy about 50,000 followers or, for the same amount, about 100,000 likes or views. Originally, the purchaser would receive the followers or likes upon payment, however, this made the fraudulent activity easily detectable via the analysis of the performance data for a given account. Today, these services have become more sophisticated and now offer staggered delivery, making it easy to fool companies and brands if they are not attentive. This is why using simple tools to view the development of followers and engagement over time is not effective.

But how are followers and engagement actually delivered? In some cases, companies use automated systems, namely botnets (fake accounts created ad hoc) to carry out programmable actions (following a profile or interacting with a profile). In other cases, companies have a community of individuals (for example, people living in countries such as India or Pakistan), who provide their own accounts in exchange for a few cents. Unfortunately, these accounts are of very little value as they are created solely for this purpose: getting a like from one of these accounts does not represent a real sign of interest in the content posted.

Whatever the technique used, whenever brands use creators with fake audiences, they are paying for non-valuable interaction.

## 83% of marketers state that they need better metrics and data on creators in order to achieve better transparency and authenticity[1]

[1] [Source: Influencer Marketing 2020, study by EConsultancy]

@cosa_mi_metto

@natanja

# 4 Traditional methods used to identify fake accounts

In the absence of technological support, it is extremely difficult to be completely sure of fraudulent activity carried out by creators. It involves viewing and analysing all the followers of every single creator that a company aims to work with, on the lookout for suspicious signs.  This requires much time and patience, without any definitive results. Signs analysed manually, and often on small samples of followers, by agencies and freelancers that operate in this sector primarily include the following:
profile photo: if the user's profile photo is missing, if it is a generic image (a picture, an animal, a flower)  published posts: if the account publishes few posts, it could be indicative of a cover-up activity ratio of following/followers: if the account follows a large number of other profiles but is followed by very few other profiles, this could give rise to suspicion of fraudulent activity.

Nevertheless, these methods, as well as being highly ineffective, given that they are based on observations limited to one sample, are also highly inefficient in that they require a huge number of working hours.  Moreover, these methods are forced to compete with the high level of professionalism of fraudsters who are becoming increasingly sophisticated.
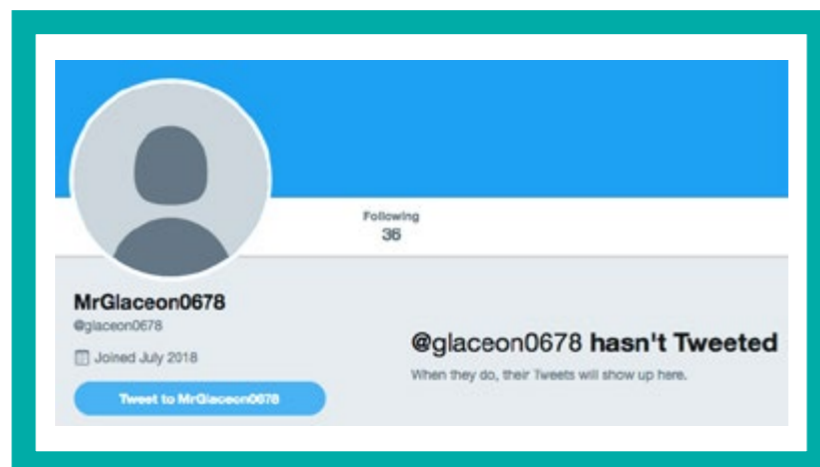


# 5 How Buzzoole identifies fake accounts

The advantage that Buzzoole has over other influencer marketing platforms and agencies lies in its ability to analyse so-called "first-party data", i.e. real performance data relating to creators' channels. When creators join the Buzzoole community, they link their social media accounts and blogs, including access to all related information (e.g. Google Analytics data for their blog or Facebook and Instagram Insights for Zuckerberg's two social media platforms). Voluntarily providing this information is essential for influencer marketing campaigns. In so doing, they are offering full transparency, encouraging brands to trust their activity and to want to work with them.
This "social big data" is used for three main purposes:
to provide creators with a comprehensive vision, on one single dashboard, of their performance across all channels, so that they can make improvements by analysing their progress and identifying their best content to help Buzzoole's GAIIA (Growing Artificial Intelligence for Influencer Affinity) algorithm identify the creators that are most suitable for a specific campaign to give companies comprehensive information about the potential creators they could get involved with and a clear picture of the results obtained at the end of the campaign.

What's more, Buzzoole uses such large quantities of real-time data to improve companies' grasp of the authenticity of the profiles that they want to use in their influencer marketing activity.
Given that there is no standard indicator to identify authentic profiles, Buzzoole uses several methods to achieve a clear and comprehensive vision:

Public Data | Data from Instagram Insights

**Islayomeister** • Segui
Bali, indonesia

**Islayomeister** #amazing #travel #waterfall

snowgraphs 💧💧💧
**marcallcock** Awesome! Congrats man!!
**firmansananda** Cool mate. 👌
**lucasmelk** We expected it to be better
**muroadriano** It's just too iOS for Android. And the other one was too iOS6-... Keep thinking
**jleet._** Wow, nice try at damage control. WE DON'T CARE! Give us the old logo back, and keep the black

20.157 likes
3 HOURS AGO

Aggiungi un commento…  …

Followers: **107,731**
Engagement: **20,157**
Reach: **953**

**0.88%**

Reach/Followers

Poche persone vedono i post rispetto al numero di follower.

## REACH/FOLLOWER:
the number of followers an account has is visible to everyone, however the reach, i.e. the number of people who actually see a post, can only be viewed by the owner of the account and by Buzzoole. An analysis of the reach-to-followers ratio is the main indicator of authenticity. If after analysing several posts this ratio should prove excessively low, it could suggest that the creator has a high percentage of fake or inactive followers, possibly purchased "illegally". This indicator is also useful for brands, as the higher the reach-to-followers ratio, the greater the value of the creator.

## ENGAGEMENT/REACH:
the reach value of each post published by the creatorinfluencer can also be used to measure the rate of interaction generated. Given that each person reached can only leave one like and one comment, if the number of interactions is much higher than the number of people actually reached, it points towards the automated generation of engagement. Obviously, for a more accurate diagnosis, Buzzoole will then examine a wider sample of published content.
This indicator is also particularly useful in analysing the level of appreciation of the posts by those who have actually seen them.

## GEOGRAPHY:
information about which countries an creator's audiences are based in is extremely useful in gaining insights into any activity that is unclear. For example, if an Italian profile has an audience chiefly or largely from countries that do not match its country of origin or in which fake server farms operate, the algorithm will flag it as suspicious, providing a "suspicious audience" percentage.

A sample of **suspicious audience**



**Islayomeister** • Segui
Bali, indonesia

**Islayomeister** #amazing #travel #waterfall

snowgraphs 💧💧💧
**marcallcock** Awesome! Congrats man!!
**firmansananda** Cool mate. 👌
**lucasmelk** We expected it to be better
**muroadriano** It's just too iOS for Android. And the other one was too iOS6-... Keep thinking
**jleet._** Wow, nice try at damage control. WE DON'T CARE! Give us the old logo back, and keep the black

20.157 likes
3 HOURS AGO

Aggiungi un commento…  …

Followers: **107,731**
Engagement: **20,157**
Reach: **953**

**2115.11%**

Engagement/Reach

Troppo engagement rispetto alle persone che hanno visto il post.

ANNA BIANCHI
 Add to network

**61,9k** Combined Followers

Italia - Lombardia - Castiraga Vilardo

User geolocalization: **Italy**
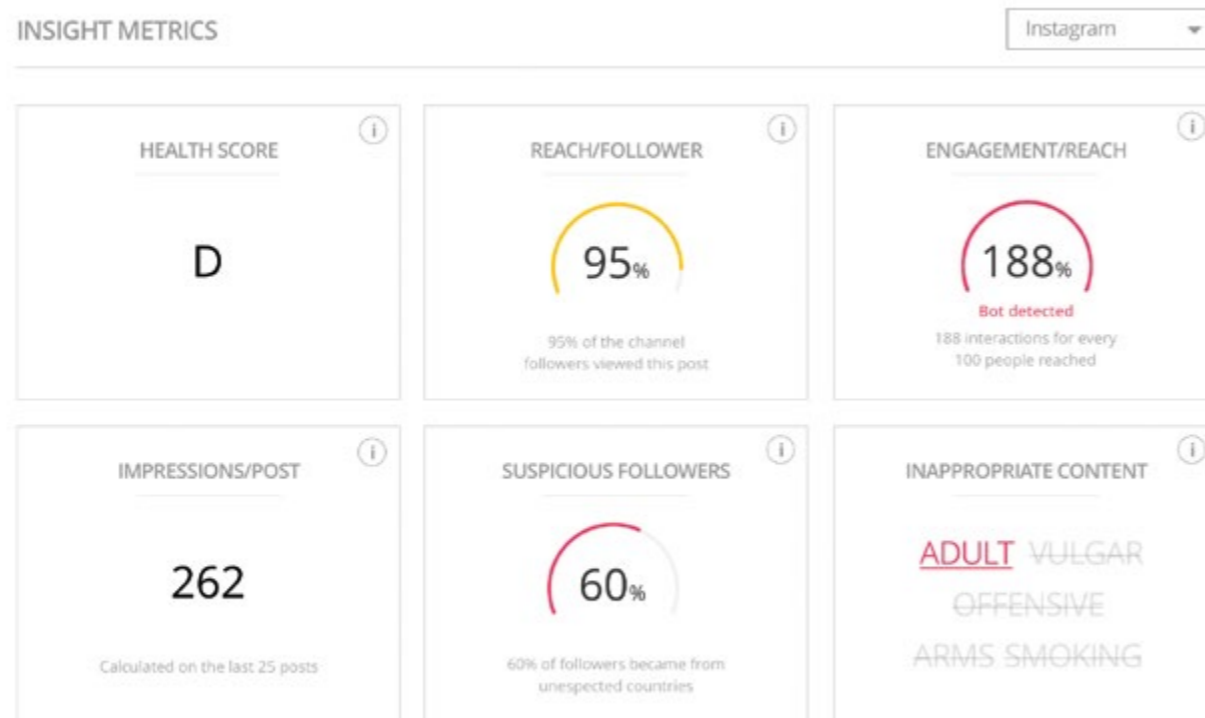Posts language: **mostly italian**

LOCATION

59,6% | 12,0% | 8,0% | 5,2% | 2,4%
BR | UA | RU | US | IT

Audience geolocalization:
**59,6% from Brazil**
**2,4% from Italy**

Buzzoole quality score **dashboard**

INSIGHT METRICS

Instagram ▼

| HEALTH SCORE ⓘ | REACH/FOLLOWER ⓘ | ENGAGEMENT/REACH ⓘ |
|---|---|---|
| **D** | **95%**<br>95% of the channel followers viewed this post | **188%**<br>**Bot detected**<br>188 interactions for every 100 people reached |
| IMPRESSIONS/POST ⓘ | SUSPICIOUS FOLLOWERS ⓘ | INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT ⓘ |
| **262**<br>Calculated on the last 25 posts | **60%**<br>60% of followers became from unexpected countries | ADULT VULGAR<br>OFFENSIVE<br>ARMS SMOKING |

suggest that bots are being used. This is because the most common way of becoming a follower of an account is by visiting the profile and clicking "follow".

Ultimately, Buzzoole is unique in its use and combination of different methodologies to understand whether a creator is reliable or if using them in influencer marketing campaigns could risk harming the reputation of the company.

**"Our technology is able to collect insight data from social media platforms and to jointly analyse different parameters to establish whether a creator is authentic or not"**

Gennaro Varriale, *CTO Buzzoole*

**ONLINE FOLLOWER/FOLLOWER:**
Insights collected by Buzzoole reveal exactly how many followers are online at any given time during the day. A comparison of online followers and followers accumulated by an account provides a useful indication as to approximately how many inactive followers (i.e. those who do not use Instagram) a creator might have. For instance, if an account with 33,000 followers has just 2000 daily online followers, its percentage of active followers would be 6%. At this point, the algorithm would

then compare this percentage with that of similar accounts, showing that it is particularly low, and therefore suspicious.

**PROFILE VIEWS/FOLLOWER GROWTH:**
Buzzoole uses Insights to calculate the number of visits to a given creatoinfluencer's profile. When used in conjunction with an analysis of growth of followers over time, this information can be very useful. For example, if an account gains 100 followers in a given day, but only has 10 visits, it could



@giorgiadibasilio

# 6 Conclusions

According to a recent EConsultancy study entitled "Influencer Marketing 2020" (carried out on 1,173 marketers), the main challenge for marketers using influencer marketing is obtaining genuine, transparent creators via the use of data. Specifically, the majority of respondents (42%) of respondents said that they prioritise making sure that followers have not been bought.

Fraud is an issue that can no longer be underestimated: it invalidates campaign results and can have a boomerang effect on a company's reputation.

As we have seen, a manual approach towards detecting dishonest creators is an arduous task, since it requires hours of work, thus affecting company costs.
Luckily, a range of technologies and methodologies areis currently available and can be used to analyse the behaviour of creators and identify those who are influential and transparent.
The days of trading your company's reputation for a few extra interactions are over. It is time to place your trust in an influencer marketing company like Buzzoole, using innovative technology and extensive experience to select only the creators who are able to guarantee absolute brand safety.

@alwaysmelliss

## BUZZOOLE

### About us

Technology driven Influencer Marketing that works for every strategy. Buzzoole offers a 360 degree solution for brands, agencies and media partners.

We work across all Creator tiers and platforms to deliver long-term and campaign specific impact.

A technology powered marketing services company that uses cutting-edge Artificial Intelligence and data to automate, manage and measure investments with Creators.

## Get in touch

**Our office**
London
Palladium House,
1-4 Argyll Street,
England, W1F 7LD

**Contact**
info_uk@buzzoole.com

**Follow us**