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The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: Understanding Preferences and Purchasing Behaviour Among Gen Z Males

Examiners:

Postdoctoral Researcher Heini Vanninen &

Assistant Professor Jenni Sipilä

ABSTRACT

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

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International Marketing Management

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The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: Understanding Preferences and Purchasing Behaviour Among Gen Z Males

Master's thesis

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Keywords: Influencer marketing, influencer, social media, gen z males, consumer behaviour

In the digital era, influencer marketing has become a primary tool for brands, especially among younger demographics. This qualitative study examines the preferences and behaviours of Generation Z (Gen Z) males in influencer marketing, aiming to bridge a gap in understanding their influence on consumer behaviour. Through semi-structured interviews with nine Gen Z males, insights were gathered on their content preferences, purchasing habits, and views on influencer authenticity.

The findings indicate that Gen Z males favour diverse content on social media platforms, gravitating towards influencers who share their interests, like fitness, fashion, and outdoor activities. Authenticity and relatability emerged as critical factors shaping their engagement with influencer content, highlighting the importance of genuine endorsements and personal narratives. While influencer marketing impacts product awareness and consideration, participants expressed scepticism towards overly promotional or inauthentic content.

Limitations of the study include a small sample size and convenience sampling, potentially limiting the broader applicability of the findings. Future research could explore longitudinal trends in Gen Z male consumer behaviour and gather insights from other stakeholders, such as brands and influencers. Nevertheless, this study offers valuable insights into the preferences and behaviours of Gen Z males in influencer marketing, providing practical implications for marketers seeking to effectively engage this demographic online.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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LUT-kauppakorkeakoulu

International Marketing Management

Laura Koivula

Vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin dynamiikka: Z-sukupolven miesten mieltymysten ja ostokäyttäytymisen ymmärtäminen

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Digitaalisella aikakaudella vaikuttajamarkkinointi on noussut tärkeäksi brändien työkaluksi, erityisesti nuorten keskuudessa. Tämä tutkimus selvittää z-sukupolven miesten mieltymyksiä ja käyttäytymistä vaikuttajamarkkinointiin liittyen. Yhdeksän z-sukupolven miehen puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla kerättiin tietoa heidän sisältömieltymyksistään, ostotottumuksistaan ja näkemyksistään vaikuttajien aitouden suhteen.

Tulokset osoittavat, että sukupolvi z miehet suosivat monipuolista sisältöä sosiaalisen median alustoilla ja ovat kiinnostuneita vaikuttajista, jotka jakavat heidän kiinnostuksensa. Aitous ja samastuttavuus ovat tärkeitä tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat siihen, kuinka paljon tutkimuksen kohderyhmä reagoi vaikuttajasisältöihin. Vaikka vaikuttajamarkkinointi vaikuttaa tuotetietoisuuteen ja harkintaan tehdä ostopäätöksiä, osallistujat ilmaisivat epäilyksensä yli markkinoivan tai epäaitojen sisältöjen suhteen.

Tutkimuksen rajoituksiin kuuluvat pieni näytekoko ja mukavuusotos, joka saattaa rajoittaa löydösten laajempaa sovellettavuutta. Tulevaisuuden tutkimuksessa voitaisiin tutkia z-sukupolven miesten kuluttajakäyttäytymisen pitkittäistrendejä ja kerätä näkemyksiä muilta sidosryhmiltä. Silti tämä tutkimus tarjoaa arvokkaita oivalluksia z-sukupolven miesten mieltymyksistä ja käyttäytymisestä vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin kautta, tarjoten käytännön tietoa markkinoijille, jotka pyrkivät tehokkaasti vaikuttamaan tähän demografiseen ryhmään.

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I am also thankful to those who generously dedicated their time to participate in the interviews, which enabled this study to come to completion. Their willingness to share information and provide intriguing insights was helpful to the research.

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ABBREVIATIONS

KIP	Key performance indicator
WOM	Word of mouth
eWom	Electronic word of mouth
WOMM	Word of mouth marketing
SMI	Social media influencer
SCT	Source credibility theory

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1 Introduction

The introduction chapter provides an overview of the thesis's focus and objectives, discussing the impact of digital and social media on marketing and the emergence of influencer marketing. It examines changes in consumer behaviour in the digital era, emphasizing the role of user-generated content and the influence of influencers. Additionally, it underscores the importance of understanding Gen Z males' preferences and behaviours in influencer marketing, filling a research gap. The introduction outlines research questions, methodology, and the thesis structure, guiding following chapters in exploring influencer marketing dynamics among Gen Z males.

1.1 Background & Preliminary literature review

The landscape of marketing has been significantly transformed by digital and social media (Kozinets et al. 2010). Nowadays, individuals have the ability to generate and distribute their own content across platforms such as TripAdvisor, Amazon, Facebook, and Instagram. This user-generated content is valuable because it offers genuine opinions about products and services. People trust and follow these recommendations more than communication that is generated by brands. (Ye et al. 2021) The fast adoption of social media means there is a lot of content being created, shared, and consumed by users (Ho & Ito 2019). This change has made communication and information sharing easier allowing people to share knowledge more effortlessly. It's interesting to note that empirical data suggests that users frequently almost blindly trust the information offered in social media groups. (Vrontis et al. 2021) Word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) involves using professional marketing strategies to influence consumer-to-consumer communications intentionally (Kozinets et al. 2010). For over fifty years, marketers and sociologists have acknowledged the significance of word-of-mouth (WOM) as a naturally occurring and growing phenomenon. It has been suggested that WOM influences the majority of purchase decisions (Kozinets et al. 2010).

The Internet has evolved from one-way communication to interactive platforms like social media. This shift has led to online influencer marketing (OIM) gaining traction, especially as consumers grow wary of traditional advertising. Influencers provide authentic

endorsements at a lower cost compared to celebrities, making them a popular choice for firms seeking efficient marketing strategies. (Leung et al. 2022) Social media's rise is reshaping how we consume media, blurring the lines between social and traditional platforms. Understanding how influencers are portrayed across platforms is crucial, as is exploring their practices across different social media platforms. Digital methods like Social Media Analytics are increasingly used to study influencer marketing. That helps to analyse future trends. (Alvarez-Monzoncillo 2023)

According to Glenister (2021) influencing people with popular characters is old news. Using recommendations or endorsements is not a new strategy in marketing. The advertising industry has effectively used characters for this purpose for a long time he claims. Some examples about the phenomenon are African-American model Aunt Jemima giving pancake mix the identity in 1889. Second relevant example is Coca Cola starting to use santa Clause in their campaigns already back in 1931. Why do we trust and follow content creators? YouTube and Google have become synonymous with search phrases like "I'll Google it" or "YouTube it". The wealth of content available on YouTube is truly remarkable. Content creators are often viewed as experts in their chosen fields, which explains why many people are keen to follow them in order to learn something new. (Glenister 2021) Influencers can be categorized based on the size of their communities, helping companies better assess influencer quality and avoid issues like fake followers. Although having a big following or being a celebrity doesn't make someone an influencer, actual influencers are people who are well-known in their target community and have the ability to influence the choices of others within that group. (Backaler 2018)

Today, most brands use Influencer Marketing. Millennials and Gen Z, who grew up in the digital age, have changed how consumers behave (Glenister 2021). As more people share their experiences on social media, some become popular creators. These creators are called "social media influencers" (Masuda et al. 2022). An influencer is someone with dedicated followers on social media (Haenlein et al. 2020). Social media influencers are commonly seen as small celebrities also called micro-celebrities. (Gaenssle & Budzinski 2020) Traditional marketing is being challenged as people trust influencers more. Influencers, with followers ranging from a few thousand to millions, share two key traits: authenticity and the ability to engage with their audience. (Glenister 2021) The size of the global influencer marketing market has tripled since 2019, reaching a record of $24 billion USD in 2024

(Statista 2024), and organizations operating especially in the business-to-consumer sector began to see its increasing importance. Marketers frequently collaborate with well-known figures from industries like fashion, beauty, travel, cuisine, and drink on sites like Instagram and TikTok. However, it is difficult for many marketing managers to understand new platforms as well as they understand traditional media channels, which makes it tricky for them to adjust to this rapidly evolving environment. (Haenlein et al. 2020)

What sets micro-celebrities apart from traditional A-list celebrities is their close connection with their audience. To establish this connection, micro-celebrities share aspects of their personal lives (Hudders et al. 2021). Companies use online influencer marketing to recruit and compensate influencers who connect with their social media following. The purpose is to use these influencers' distinctive characteristics to promote the company's goods or services, with the ultimate goal of increasing the company's performance. (Leung et al. 2022) When executed effectively, influencer marketing can yield remarkable results. For instance, big fashion houses have been very successful with influencer marketing campaigns and strategies by raising awareness of their brands. (Haenlein et al. 2020)

Study seeks to find what kind of preferences and purchasing behaviour applies to gen z male audiences through influencer marketing. All the marketing professionals will point out that data and measurement are key to effective marketing and that applies also to influencer marketing. (Glenister 2021) Strategic influencer communication hinges on creating engaging, authentic, and relevant content. It's the vehicle that carries the message, builds relationships, and ultimately influences audiences. (Sundermann & Raabe 2019).

I have chosen to focus on Generation Z as a key demographic for this study. Generation Z stands out as an ideal target due to their tech-savvy nature and significant presence in the consumer market. With their adeptness in digital technologies and active participation on social media platforms, position them to influence and shape consumer trends and preferences (Kahawandala et al. 2020). These are the people born between 1995 and 2010 (Mahapatra et al. 2022). This makes them the newest generation to join the workforce. They're digital natives, fluent in technology and deeply interconnected through social media. (Mahapatra et al. 2022) Anderson (2023) claims that their spending power is expected to reach $143 billion in the United States alone by 2023, creating a sizable market for companies. They also rule dating apps and social media, having the ability to impact a brand’s reputation positively or negatively. Therefore, it's critical for businesses to interact

with Gen Z in a meaningful way by catering to their preferred channels and terms. (Anderson 2023)

1.2 Purpose of the thesis and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore into the dynamics of influencer marketing, with a specific focus on understanding content preferences and purchasing behaviour among Gen Z males. In the current digital environment, influencer marketing has become a prominent strategy for brands to engage with their desired audience, especially among younger demographics. However, there remains a gap in understanding how influencer marketing impacts Gen Z males and their consumer behaviour. Existing research about the whole Gen Z consumer behaviour can be found, but marketers are looking better ways to understand specific target groups and audiences deeper to create better campaigns and marketing strategies for specific target groups. There is a noted lack of research concerning how male audiences perceive influencer marketing. Strategically targeting this demographic could be beneficial for marketers, provided it is done ethically and responsibly. I aimed to focus this study on Gen Z due to their dominant usage of social media, significant purchasing influence, and their reputation as digital natives.

According to Digital Marketing Institute (2022) reveal that women tend to rely more on social media for product research before making a purchase compared to men. Devin (2019) discovered on Power Digital Marketing that 41.8% of surveyed women expressed a higher likelihood of trying a new product through influencer posts, whereas only 30.6% of men shared the same interest. Geyser (2024) stated in Influencer Marketing Hub that women across different age groups tend to follow influencers more than men do. This data supports the fact that there is significant potential to engage male audiences more effectively through influencer marketing strategies. To do so it needs to be explored what resonate with the male audience in influencer marketing, what do they value and what channels they prefer to use.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the following research question:

How does influencer marketing influence the purchase behaviour of gen z males?

Main question is split into three sub-questions:

1. *What types of content do Gen Z males prefer and engage with when influenced by influencer marketing and what kind of influencers they prefer?*
2. *What kind of influencer campaigns and adds resonate with Gen Z males?*
3. *How does influencer marketing impact the purchasing decisions and behaviours of Gen Z males in relation to the promoted products or services?*

The sub-questions help break down the main research question, assisting in gathering existing literature and analysing empirical research in the thesis.

For marketers and brands aiming to engage effectively with this demographic, grasping the influence of influencer marketing on Gen Z males is essential. Through analysing their content preferences and purchasing behaviour, this study aims to offer insights that can guide the creation of more focused and effective influencer marketing strategies. Additionally, by focusing specifically on Gen Z males, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of a demographic that is often overlooked in marketing research but holds significant purchasing power and influence in today's consumer landscape.

To conclude, it is important to narrow down the research problems for improved outcomes. Focusing on specific research issues is essential for meaningful exploration. The purpose statement clearly states the main research goal. (Creswell 2020)

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underlines "The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: Understanding Preferences and Purchasing Behaviour Among Gen Z Males" is based on a theoretical framework that includes important ideas that are essential to the investigation of the study. Drawing from influencer marketing theory, social media marketing dynamics, and consumer behaviour principles, this framework how brand engagement, content preferences, and purchase choices among Gen Z males interact. Furthermore, the framework offers a comprehensive understanding of how influencer-driven content affects consumer behaviour within the Gen Z demographic and brand perception by combining theories of brand image, brand communication and social media. The objective of this thesis is to offer practical insights for marketers aiming to utilize influencer marketing to engage and connect with Gen Z male audiences in the digital landscape.

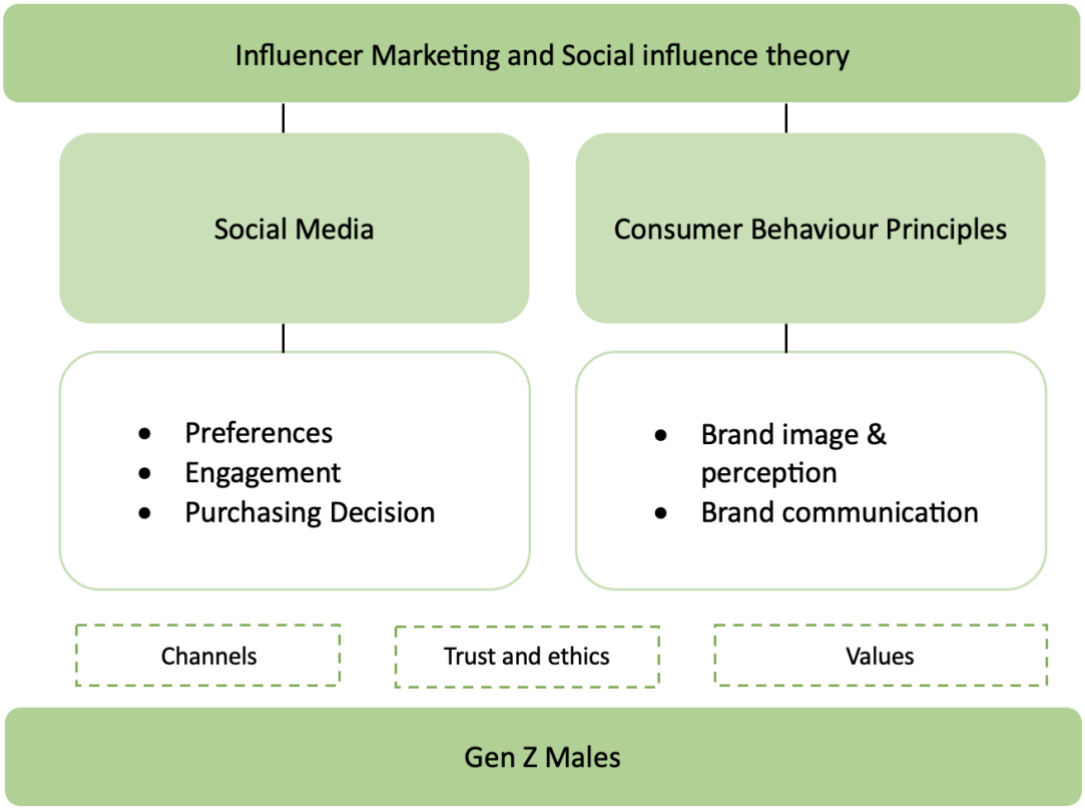

Figure 1. *Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework explores how influencer marketing and social media influence consumer behaviour principles. Social media platforms serve as channels where influencers engage with their audience. Consumer behaviour principles cover aspects like brand image, perception, purchasing decisions, and trust, all influenced by social media and influencers. Influencer marketing is collaborating with social media personalities to promote brands and companies. The framework suggests a mutual influence: social media provides a platform for influencer marketing to reach audiences, while influencer marketing shapes consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions through strategic content and messaging, ultimately building brand image and loyalty.

1.4 Definition of the key concepts

This chapter defines the key concepts that are used in this study. Understanding key concepts is crucial in academic research as it provides a foundation for discussion and analysis. Different sources may offer varying definitions or interpretations of these concepts,

highlighting the dynamic nature of knowledge and the importance of critically evaluating information.

Influencer Marketing involves companies partnering with individuals or entities who have a dedicated following and significant influence within a specific target audience (Dagmar 2024). In today's business landscape, most companies are diving into influencer marketing. This shift underscores how consumers now rely more on endorsements and third-party reviews, evident in the surge of online rating platforms. Nowadays, influencer marketing empowers everyday people to resonate with their audiences effectively. (Glenister 2021)

Social Media Influencer is an individual who gains popularity and has a significant following base on various social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or personal blogs. In contrast to conventional celebrities, social media influencers are ordinary individuals who have risen to online fame by producing and sharing content on social media platforms. They often specialize in specific areas like healthy living, travel, food, lifestyle, beauty, or fashion, and their followers trust their recommendations and opinions, sometimes as much as they trust someone they know. (Lou and Yuan 2019)

Word of Mouth Marketing (WOM) is about intentionally influencing consumer conversations using professional marketing methods. It includes strategies like social media marketing and viral campaigns. Marketers invest heavily in WOMM to shape purchase decisions. The Internet has transformed WOMM, offering new ways to engage and monitor consumer interactions. This concept explores how marketers use WOMM, both online and offline, to connect with consumers. (Kozinets et al. 2010)

Gen Z consumer defined as those born between 1995 and 2010 (Mahapatra et al. 2022). Some sources define gen z starting from the year 1996. Gen Z is the generation after millennials and before Generation Alpha. Gen Z's behaviours reflect the challenges and influences of their era, including climate concerns, pandemic experiences, and economic uncertainties. Born into a world where the internet was already widely used, they are often referred to as "digital natives" who crew up with the internet as everyday part of their lives. (McKinsey & Company 2023)

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is all about using online social platforms to promote a company and its products. It involves activities aimed at increasing brand awareness among consumers in online spaces, often by tapping into word-of-mouth (WOM) principles. While

SMM definitions often focus on its promotional aspect, it also entails engaging in conversations with consumers on social media to build relationships and gain associated benefits. (Sharma & Verma 2018)

Brand image is defined by Kottler & Keller (2016) as the collection of perceptions, beliefs, and associations that consumers hold about a particular brand. These associations are formed based on the experiences, attributes, and benefits that consumers attribute to the brand. For instance, Apple's brand image is linked with concepts such as creativity, innovation, ease of use, and enjoyment, along with iconic products like the iPod, iPhone, and iPad. (Kottler & Keller 2016)

1.5 Delimitations

This chapter provides particular delimitations of the study and defines the restrictions within which the research will be done. Delimitations establish the scope and focus of the study, providing clarity on the target population, methodology, and contextual factors that may impact the findings.

The primary focus of this study is on Generation Z (Gen Z) males. The research excludes other demographic groups within Generation Z, as well as individuals from other generations. By concentrating solely on Gen Z males, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of their preferences and behaviours regarding influencer marketing. This targeted approach allows for a deeper exploration of the unique characteristics and trends within this specific demographic segment. By focusing entirely on preferences and purchase behaviour, this study aims to provide thorough insight into how influencer marketing effects consumer decision-making among Gen Z males. It does not extend to examining broader aspects of influencer marketing or consumer behaviour beyond this specific scope.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews are the method of data collection for this study. This delimits the research to qualitative insights gathered through interviews, which do not capture quantitative data or perspectives from a larger sample size. The qualitative method enables thorough investigation into participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding influencer marketing. (Saunders et al. 2016)

The research is conducted in Finnish language and located geographically in Finland. The study doesn't set boundaries on location or time, but it recognizes that cultural and temporal factors can affect how people behave. The study's goal is to investigate general themes and trends in influencer marketing that apply to a variety of industries, without concentrating on any one area in particular.

These delimitations define the scope and boundaries of the study, providing a clear framework for research on influencer marketing and its impact on Gen Z males' content preferences and purchasing behaviour.

1.6 Research methodology

The qualitative method was chosen because it offers rich and authentic insights. Qualitative data capture the full picture of the phenomenon (Miles 1979), how influencer marketing is perceived by gen z male audience.

Qualitative research is used to understand how people's lives and social environments are shaped (Fossey et al. 2002) by influencer marketing strategies. It focuses on uncovering the values, actions, and social contexts as perceived by participants. This method allows for a deep exploration of human experiences and perspectives, revealing the complexities of individual lives and social interactions. (Fossey et al. 2002)

The semi-structured method is used in this study because it allows for flexibility and depth in exploring the research topic (Saunders et al. 2016). With semi-structured interviews, the of themes is prepared and to cover key questions, but these may vary depending on the specific context encountered during the interview process. This flexibility enables this study to adapt the interview content to suit the structural context and explore relevant aspects of the research topic more deeply. (Saunders et al. 2016)

9 representatives from the target group of Gen Z males have been selected to be interviewed for this study. The interviewees are not connected to each other and have been chosen randomly.

1.7 Structure of the study

The paper is divided into five parts. The introduction sets the stage by providing the rationale behind exploring influencer marketing dynamics, particularly concerning the content preferences and consumer behaviour of Gen Z males. It outlines the significance of influencer marketing, social media marketing, and Gen Z demographics. This section discusses about previous research about the topic, motivation behind the study and the methodology used for the research. The second chapter conducts a comprehensive review of the literature on influencer marketing, social media influencers, social influence and Generation Z characteristics. Chapter three dives in depth on research design and methodology used to investigate influencer marketing dynamics among Gen Z males. In the fourth chapter, the empirical findings concerning influencer marketing dynamics, content preferences, and consumer behaviour of Gen Z males are presented and analysed. The final chapter provides a comprehensive conclusion to the study. It combines the study's findings with current research on influencer marketing and Gen Z consumer behaviour. The chapter concludes the main study findings and underscores the study's constraints and offers recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review

This literature review delves into the increasing field of influencer marketing, exploring its growing power in shaping consumer behaviour and the diverse types of social media personalities brands leverage. The review examines the factors contributing to the rise of influencer marketing, including consumer scepticism towards traditional advertising, the democratization of influence on social media, and the continuing power of word-of-mouth communication. Ultimately, it sheds light on how influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for brands in the digital age.

2.1 Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour, as defined by various researchers, covers the why and how individuals choose to consume products or services. While some focus on consumption choices and attitudes, others consider cultural influences and societal contexts. (Nassè 2021) It's influenced by personal preferences, societal trends, and other people's opinions. Brands need to understand this to tailor their marketing strategies (Gómez-Rico et al. 2022). Different demographics, like Generation Z, have unique preferences, so businesses must adapt to different demographics and target groups. (Berg & Behrer 2016). Social media influencers play a big role in shaping consumer choices nowadays (De Veirman et al. 2017). Understanding consumer behaviour is crucial for businesses to succeed in today's competitive market.

2.1.1 Brand Image and communication

Brand knowledge consists of two main aspects: brand awareness and brand image, widely discussed in marketing literature. Brand awareness includes recall and recognition, while brand image refers to consumers' positive, strong, and unique perceptions of a brand stored in memory. (Barreda et al. 2016) The brand develops as one of a company's most important assets, and it has a big impact on customer decisions. Customers may use it as a tool to identify the uniqueness and difference of a product, which builds confidence and trust. This helps the decision-making process for customers and addresses problems with credibility and experience. (Sasmita & Mohd Suki 2015) Marketing research recognizes brand image

as another crucial aspect of how consumers understand a brand. Building upon the associative network memory model, brand image captures the way consumers perceive a brand based on the mental connections they form with it. These connections encompass the various thoughts, feelings, and experiences that consumers associate with the brand. (Barreda et al. 2016) The trust and preference people have for a particular brand over its competitors, which raises greater brand loyalty and a willingness to pay a premium price for that brand, is known as brand equity. (Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015).

A brand is "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from competitors," according to the American Marketing Association (AMA). (Wijaya 2013) Effective brand communication and image reinforcement are critical factors in shaping customer preferences, and strong brands increase brand preference. In order to translate the value of a product into customer behaviour, organizations must establish marketing strategies that turn around brand communication. This is essential in order to fulfil organizational goals. In addition to providing several advantages for company growth, brand image increases the way customers recall products or services. (Gómez-Rico et al. 2022) E-commerce experts are eager to learn how companies can build the online brand awareness and brand image they desire, similar to what's done in traditional marketing. The key lies in interactive features created online that directly engage consumers, creating unique and personalized connections. (Barreda et al., 2016) According to Rungtrakulchai (2021) the concept of brand image transfer refers to transforming meaning from its source to the approved brand. Previous research has indicated that a celebrity endorsement could carry the brand image to the endorsed product. This transfer is essentially the transfer of brand meaning. (Rungtrakulchai 2021)

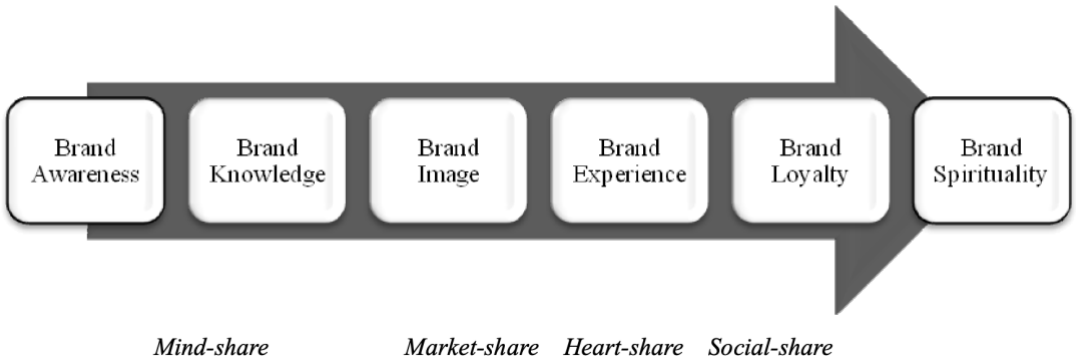

Figure 2. *Hierarchy of branding* (Wijaya 2013)

Picture visualizes brand development progresses from brand awareness to brand knowledge, then to brand image and brand experience. Eventually, it leads to brand loyalty and brand spirituality, where consumers deeply connect with the brand, influencing their values and fostering a sense of community. These stages encompass gaining mind-share, market-share, heart-share, and social-share. Mind-share is the awareness of a brand, market-share is its market presence in terms of sales, heart-share is the emotional connection with consumers, and social-share is the spread of brand values within communities. (Wijaya 2013)

2.1.2 Generation Z Consumer Behaviour

Mahapatra (2022) define this generation born between 1995-2010. Various sources have different definitions for the first year of Generation Z, ranging from 1996 or 1997 to 2011 or 2012. Generation Z is the first generation to grow up in a world that is mostly digital and linked to the global community. They live mostly online and are unable to imagine a future without computers. In today's world, traditional toys have given way to electronic devices like smartphones, tablets, and other linked devices that dominate daily life. Further research performed in Australia indicates that the greatest amount of money spent on "toys" is related to electronic equipment. (Berg & Behrer 2016)

Understanding the distinctive social media engagement of Gen Z involves identifying their primary interests, as they show a strong preference towards accounts that resonate with their interests or introduce them to new ones (Kastenholz 2022). TrueList (2024) website states that Gen Z makes up 26% of the global population. Stores wanting to connect with Gen Z, who have $143 billion to spend and make up about 40% of global shoppers, need to invest in learning how they shop (Davis 2020). 97% of Gen Z consumers report that they currently rely on social media as their primary source of shopping inspiration (Kastenholz 2022). To attract Gen Z, brands should implement strategies that connect with this generation, like crafting entertaining, interactive, and easily shareable content. As Gen Z is accustomed to social media, many find pleasure in sharing content that resonates with them. (Anderson 2023) Niche targeting is adapting marketing efforts to meet the special demands of well-defined group or demographic, such as Gen Z males. It is similar with targeted, concentrated, or micromarketing. Niche marketing seeks to establish a separate position in the market by meeting the specific needs of this specialized group through creative methods and

specialization tactics. This approach focuses on developing long-term client connections in order to maintain profitability and a competitive edge. (Dalgic 1998)

The shorter attention span of Gen Z has changed how they seek information. Compared to other generations, they are the quickest at finding relevant information. Growing up with Google has improved their online search skills, leading them to visit fewer pages, fewer websites, and conduct fewer searches overall. (Berg & Behrer 2016) If a Gen Z individual disagrees with a company's morals, they often boycott its products and persuade friends to do likewise (Fromm 2022). Gen Z values diversity and inclusivity, often seeking representation of themselves and their peers in the brands they support. Consequently, more platforms are striving to foster safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ users by expanding in-app gender options, aiming to ensure broader inclusivity. (Anderson 2023) Gen Z kids strongly influence their parents' buying decisions due to their financial power, trend awareness, and close family ties. Research shows children as young as 18 months recognize brands. Almost all parents let their children choose purchases for themselves, and over 75% value their input on family purchases. (Berg & Behrer 2016) A strategy that resonates well with Gen Z is user-generated content. Many in this generation enjoy feeling included and being part of a community. By facilitating opportunities for user-generated content, brands can interact with Gen Z and nurture a sense of belonging. Genuine communication is essential when connecting with Gen Z. They frequently seek the authentic side of the brands they engage with and make an effort to make sure that their values are aligned. (Anderson 2023)

2.1.3 Social Influence Theory

Social influence has been a central focus in experimental social psychology from early on. It includes three main areas of research: studying how social influences affect judgments, looking at influences within small groups, and exploring influences from persuasive communications (Kelman 1961). Every day we are either trying to influence others or being affected by them, and social influence is a regular element of life. This power may be felt in everything from minor actions like picking a restaurant to major ones like participating in demonstrations to alter laws. When someone is influenced by others in their ideas, feelings, or behaviours, this is known as social influence. (Smith et al. 2011) Smith et al. (2011) highlight three areas in their study. Social Change, Changing Behaviour, and Identity

Processes. Identity Processes investigate how norms and internal processes impact behaviour. Changing Behaviour examines the process of altering behaviour through social influence. Wider effects are taken into account by social change, such as increasing promotion among supported and privileged groups. (Smith et al. 2011) “Kelman's theory (1958) explains” (Hwang 2014) how people change their attitudes towards certain behaviours through commitment mechanisms. Compliance happens when individuals seek positive reactions from others, Identification when they aim for a meaningful relationship with a group, and Internalization when behaviours align with personal values and essential motivation. (Hwang 2014) The figure below illustrates Kelman's Social Influence Theory (SIT), which suggests that behavioural changes arise from three levels of psychological attachment: compliance, identification, and internalization (Yi et al. 2021). Research indicates that "Informational social influence" refers to changing opinions or behaviours by conforming to individuals seen as having accurate information, like reporters, scientists, and lawyers (Hoos 2022). Hoos (2022) raises a question: “What if we applied this idea to influencers?” Today, influencers are often trusted sources across different areas of expertise, similar to specialists with expert knowledge in other fields (Hoos 2022).

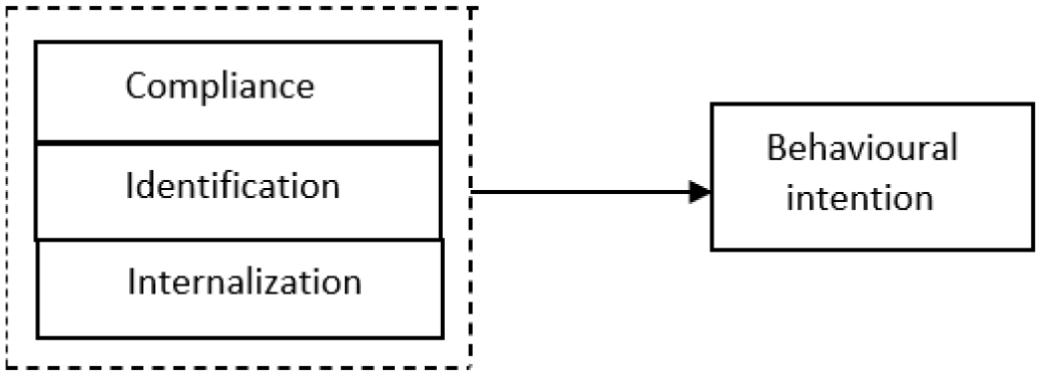

Figure 3. *Kelman’s Social Influence Theory (SIT)* (Yi et al., 2021, 181)

2.1.4 Source effects

The way a message is delivered can be just as important as the message itself. In communication and persuasion research, source effects refer to the influence a communicator (the source) has on how a message is perceived by a receiver (the audience). Source credibility, attractiveness, and expertise can all play a role in how persuasive a message is seen. (Wilson & Sherrell 1993) Source effects refer to how the source of a

message influences people's perception and understanding of that message. In today's digital age, with the vast amount of content available online, particularly digital product reviews, these source effects are crucial for consumers. Given the extensive information available, individuals rely on cues from the source, such as its perceived trustworthiness, to determine the credibility of the content. Even when the source's identity is unclear, understanding how people assess sources helps to grasp how they interpret online reviews and other online content. (Dou et al.,2012)

2.1.5 Credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness

Credibility refers to how trustworthy and reliable individuals are perceived to be when endorsing brands or products. Consumers tend to view endorsements more positively when they come from sources, they consider credible, such as celebrities or influencers who are seen as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Factors like trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness play key roles in determining the credibility of an endorser and their impact on consumer behaviour. (Nugroho et al. 2022) Source credibility is a crucial aspect in communication, influencing how a message is received. It covers qualities like expertise and trustworthiness, which affect the communicator's perceived authenticity. Additionally, the attractiveness of the source is another dimension that plays a role in message effectiveness. Trustworthiness, for instance, significantly influences attitude change, with highly trustworthy communicators being more persuasive. This highlights the importance of establishing credibility in effective communication. (Ohanian 1990) Expertise refers to the knowledge, skills, and experience that a source such as influencer possesses regarding a specific topic, influencing their ability to form opinions, express views, and make claims (Munnukka et al. 2016). In the context of endorsements, it relates to the perception of the endorser's qualifications, skills, and knowledge in recommending a brand or product, as perceived by consumers (Ohanian, 1990). Expertise is identified as another influential attribute of influencer credibility on Gen Z purchase intention (Nugroho et al. 2022). Expertise is vital in persuasive communication. It reflects the perceived knowledge or qualification of the communicator. Research consistently demonstrates that perceived expertise positively affects attitude change. When a communicator is seen as knowledgeable, people are more likely to follow their recommendations and agree with their viewpoints. (Ohanian 1990) However research indicates that regular people also known as peer endorsers

endorsing products might work better in some cases than celebrities or experts, especially for simple and low-risk product ads, because people feel more connected to them and see them as knowledgeable due to similarities. (Mannukka et al. 2016) Nugroho et al. (2022) demonstrated in their study that influencers perceived as experts in their fields have a positive and significant effect on purchase intention compared to other attributes like attractiveness and trust. New rules require influencers to clearly label sponsored content, like using "sp" or "ad." Research found these disclosures did not change how much people trusted influencers. Consumers already knew influencers promote products and did not trust them blindly. Even highly trusted influencers did not affect how credible people thought they were or their intention to buy. (Raja 2021)

Trustworthiness is vital in communication since it reflects listeners' faith in the speaker and their message. This concept, frequently referred to as "source credibility," results in beneficial effects such as psychological security and perceived support. Research repeatedly shows that trustworthiness influences attitude change. Highly trustworthy communicators are more effective in influencing attitudes, particularly when expressing opinions. Trustworthiness, along with experience, has the greatest influence on influencing attitudes, emphasizing its importance in persuasive communication. Likable celebrities are also seen as trustworthy, emphasizing the relationship between trust and popularity. (Ohanian 1990) Trustworthiness is identified as a crucial influencer credibility attribute impacting Gen Z purchase intention. Previous research shows that increased trust in influencers results in a higher purchase intention among Gen Z consumers. (Nugroho et al. 2022) Trustworthiness refers to an endorser's honesty, integrity, and reliability, crucial for how messages are received online. It reflects the ethical standards of the information provider, ensuring the validity of shared information. Influencers must be transparent about both informational and functional products to cultivate trust with customers, thus increasing the likelihood of them accepting future information. Consumers are easily influenced by reliable information sources, highlighting the importance of influencers establishing honesty and trustworthiness. (Pham et al. 2021)

While the exact definition of "attractive" can be tricky and differ across studies, research consistently shows a clear pattern: attractive communicators are generally better liked and make products seem more appealing. (Ohanian, 1990) Nugroho et al. (2022) found out in their study that the attractiveness of social media influencers directly influences the purchase

intention of Gen Z consumers. The research indicated that increased attractiveness of influencers correlates with increased intention to purchase among Gen Z consumers. (Nugroho et al. 2022). The appeal of influencers greatly impacts how people respond to their messages. Research suggests that more attractive influencers tend to be more popular and have a stronger influence on community behaviour. People often have high expectations for attractive influencers within their social circles. Studies indicate that attractiveness is linked to increased social influence and trust from others. Therefore, influencer attractiveness plays a significant role in shaping societal influence. (Pham et al. 2021) Physical attractiveness is known to influence how we perceive others, especially in advertising and communication.

2.1.6 Authenticity

Authenticity is essential in influencer marketing for Generation Z. Social media users interact with influencers mostly through sites such as TikTok and Instagram. They must evaluate influencers' honesty and reliability based on short interactions. Trust developed via perceived authenticity is critical for marketing success and customer buy intentions. Authenticity, which includes elements such as uniqueness and trustworthiness, is a core of modern marketing, influencing customer views and actions. (Singer et al. 2023) Utilizing social media influencers is a common approach to reach Gen Z consumers. However, relying solely on influencers may not secure purchases from this demographic. Gen Z prioritizes credibility, authenticity, and genuine skills in the influencers they follow. They prefer individuals with established talent, distinctive perspectives, and direct engagement with promoted products or services. Quality, authenticity, and uniqueness are essential considerations for Gen Z when making consumption decisions. (Nugroho et al. 2022) Authenticity is crucial in influencer marketing, fostering genuine connections between brands and consumers. As social media platforms continue to evolve, influencers play a critical role in engaging target audiences authentically. Crafting effective campaigns involves selecting the right influencers, creating engaging content, and measuring success beyond vanity metrics. (Okonkwo & Namkoisse 2023)

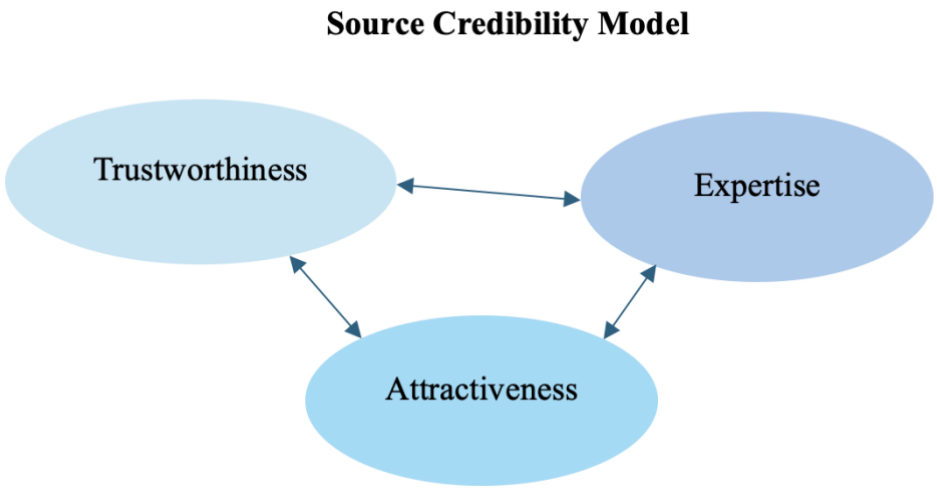

Figure 4. *Source credibility model* (adapted from Ohanian 1990)

The attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness of the endorser collectively contribute to the endorser's credibility as demonstrated in figure 4. The source credibility model investigates how the competence and trustworthiness of a communicator influence message effectiveness. It implies that influencers who are seen to be knowledgeable and trustworthy are more convincing. Furthermore, the influencer's similarity to the target demographic, as well as attractiveness, might have an impact on credibility and ad effectiveness. Peer endorsements increase credibility, especially when they are alike to the target audience. (Munnukka et al. 2016) The source credibility theory (SCT) typically considers expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as important. Extending SCT to include influencers' sociological positions, such as ethnicity and gender, indicates differences in credibility and follower growth rates. This emphasizes the need of using a broader perspective when measuring influencer performance. (Wellman 2023)

2.2 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a field that taps into the power of influence to shape consumer behaviour in a dynamic landscape (Yesiloglu & Costello 2021). Social media influencers have become popular marketing tools for brands. Influencers can naturally incorporate brand messages into their content, making it feel authentic. Influencers have a power to integrate brand messages seamlessly to their own authentic content. That builds trust and resonates

with followers. (Hudders & Lou 2022) Influencer marketing involves compensated partnerships between individuals who have substantial social media followings, aimed at promoting products, services, and brands. (De Veirman et al. 2017). Influencer marketing is an effective way to reach a large audience and has become a popular choice for advertisers. (Hudders & Lou 2022) This strategy leverages the trust and influence these individuals have with their audience to promote brands authentically. Influencer marketing has a noticeable effect since a significant portion of internet users base their purchase decisions on the recommendations of influencers. As a result, companies are starting to include influencer marketing in their all-inclusive communication strategies and this trend is expected to continue. (Vrontis et al. 2021)

Research on how new ideas and products spread highlights the important role of opinion leaders. An opinion leader is someone in a social group who others listen to and follow. (Alvarez-Monzoncillo 2023) Sport stars, celebrities, and models often serve as opinion leaders, drawing attention from crowds. Organizations play a crucial role in influencer marketing by creating effective communication strategies with social media influencers (SMIs). Extensive research and models highlight the importance of organizational influence on the success of influencer campaigns. (Sundermann & Raabe 2019) The internet's borderless nature and global social media use are breaking down geographic barriers. People can access information from anywhere, allowing influencers to reach global audiences and marketers to partner with influencers in foreign markets. (Backaler 2018) What influencers truly do is one of the key questions in influencer marketing. Certain viewpoints in areas like strategic management believe that strategy should be seen more as a practice than as a strict science. (Alvarez-Monzoncillo 2023) Instagram increased its emphasis on sponsored content tools in 2019 to help companies reach a wider audience with their influencer marketing initiatives than they did with their first organic reach. This strategy involves collaboration with creators and influencers, utilizing the official branded content tool, and getting approval from the brand to promote the creator's posts or stories. (Levin 2020)

Influencer marketing is gaining more importance due to several key factors. Firstly, consumers are increasingly sceptical of traditional advertising methods and are using ad-blocking software more frequently. Secondly, brands are finding it harder to achieve significant returns on their advertising investments, leading them to focus more on engaging communities and generating positive word-of-mouth through influencers. Thirdly, social

media has democratised influence, allowing ordinary people to build followings based on their interests and expertise, expanding the range of potential influencers beyond just celebrities. This shift has been facilitated by technology, which has made it easier for individuals to showcase their talents and gain recognition. (Backaler 2018) Millennials and Gen Z largely avoid traditional advertisements. Consumers find conventional advertisements to be annoying intrusive, or disruptive to their activity, according to eMarketer market research. Consumers, particularly Generation Z and millennials, respond positively to advertising that resonates with their perspective. When brands understand this, they have the chance to achieve significant success. (Levin 2020)

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are critical for determining how effective influencer marketing is. However, it is difficult to assess influencer partnerships since we cannot control what influencers share. While people frequently look at the number of followers and interactions, it's unclear whether they truly indicate a campaign's success. According to studies, we should pay more attention to measures such as how people react to content in the comments. This demonstrates the need of properly selecting KPIs while taking into account the content to truly determine whether influencer marketing is effective. (Gräve 2019) The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) has launched Influencer Marketing Measurement Guidelines, a innovative framework aiming to address the challenges of measuring influencer marketing effectiveness. These guidelines cover essential aspects such as awareness, engagement, and conversion metrics, providing advertisers with a standardized approach to evaluating campaign impact. By adopting these guidelines, marketers can enhance collaboration with platforms and agencies, ensuring transparency and optimizing return on investment. (ANA 2022) New ways of looking at influencers and influencer marketing have emerged thanks to improvements in digital data sources and methods. Given that these data sources can reveal the real actions of influencers, this may present additional perspectives that are practice-oriented for influencer marketing study. (Alvarez-Monzoncillo 2023)

2.2.1 Word of mouth

Marketing research has given individual traits and customer networks a great deal of attention. Research has repeatedly shown how crucial consumer word-of-mouth (WOM) communication is for changing attitudes, influencing purchases, and lowering purchasing

risks. WOM involves informal exchanges among consumers regarding their experiences with services, products, or provider attributes. (Kiss & Bichler 2008) According to Emerald Group Publishing (2015) eWOM, or electronic word-of-mouth, is when consumers share information online. This exchange affects customer loyalty, which in turn impacts a company's overall value. Unlike commercial ads, eWOM consists of non-commercial messages created by consumers themselves, sharing their experiences and influencing other consumers' purchasing decisions. (Wu & Wang 2015) The existing method of influencer marketing, which relies on social media endorsements, presents consumers with challenges in distinguishing between paid brand promotions and genuine electronic word-of-mouth or product reviews. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines emphasize that influencers must openly and clearly reveal their connections to brands when endorsing or promoting products via social media. (Shan & Lin 2019)

Consumers engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) communication to share information and opinions about products, brands, and services. This form of communication, which can occur in person or through various mediums, is a key aspect of relationship marketing efforts. While prior research has linked brand image to WOM there is also positive relationship between brand love, excitement, brand personality, and WOM, highlighting the importance of emotional connections in consumer recommendations. (Rageh Ismail & Spinelli 2012) Word-of-mouth marketing and influencer marketing are both powerful strategies for businesses in the digital age (Rizvi 2022). People buy things and use services. They help spread the word about new brands and join together for causes. People build communities, chat, and share information, which boosts businesses. Essentially, people are the ones behind word-of-mouth marketing. (Phillips 2013) Rizvi (2022) states that influencer marketing harnesses the power of personal recommendations, driving user acquisition and brand loyalty. Similarly, influencer marketing leverages the vast reach and trust of online creators to promote products or services to engaged audiences. With billions of people active on social media, influencer marketing has become a cornerstone of digital advertising, offering brands access to targeted audiences and driving significant sales growth. As social commerce continues to expand, influencer marketing will remain a key strategy utilizing word of mouth for businesses looking to capitalize on digital platforms and reach new customers effectively. (Rizvi 2022)

2.2.2 Social Media Influencer

Social media celebrities are often distinguished from traditional celebrities and are sometimes called micro-celebrities. Influencer celebrities can be described as individuals who have cultivated extensive follower networks and are considered influential tastemakers within one or more specific areas. (Alvarez-Monzoncillo 2023) Social media influencers, with their large followings and niche expertise, are often preferred by brands over traditional advertising methods. These influencers seamlessly integrate product endorsements into their daily posts on platforms like Instagram, creating highly credible electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM) (De Veirman et al. 2017)

2.2.2.1 Micro Influencer

Brands view micro-influencers as more engaging and reliable than mega-influencers, even if they have less followers. This is a result of their strong fan connections (10 000 to 50 000) and attention to niche interests. Research indicates that 82% of buyers are more inclined to purchase goods that micro-influencers promote. (Sanders 2024) These people may not have that many online followers, and some might not even be active online. However, they have strong opinions about subjects, companies, or goods. They may be passionate about certain industry or topic, and they spread the word about these things to everyone they know, online and off. (Backaler 2018)

2.2.2.2 Macro Influencer

A macro influencer is someone with a large following on social media, often reaching hundreds of thousands of followers. Macro influencers have a greater influence on consumer behaviour than micro influencers with smaller audiences. Compared to micro influencers, macro influencers may be less successful in capturing audiences' attention with their high-arousal language in sponsored postings. Consumers might perceive this type of language as too commercial and less reliable, which could impact their interaction with the content. This highlights the importance of understanding how language arousal influences consumer responses in influencer marketing. (Cascio Rizzo et al. 2023) Macro-influencers are those who have a large following (500,000–1 million), such as athletes, TV personalities, celebrities, or other prominent people. Owing to their well-established reputation, they have the ability to gather a small following on social media not quite as large as mega-influencers which means marketers should expect to pay a high fee for their partnership. (Sanders 2024)

2.2.2.3 Celebrity influencer

Celebrity influencers have wide fame and influence large audiences. They range from online personalities to traditional celebrities like singers, actresses, and athletes. Online influencers may gain similar influence through their industry or traditional recognition. Those who are famous only for their notoriety without influence are celebrities, not Celebrity Influencers. (Backaler 2018) Celebrities often promote products without expertise, whereas Influencers, whether macro or micro, are typically experts in their fields. They cultivate communities in their niche areas and actively participate in marketing campaign planning, unlike celebrities. Influencers manage the entire process, from creative aspects to strategic planning, when collaborating with brands. (Ekşioğlu 2021)

2.2.2.4 Category influencer

Category influencers are real enthusiasts for things like cars, music, beauty, or beauty. They may be passionate enthusiasts, such as a committed food blogger, or they may be professionals in the industry, such as a chef creating cooking films. Even if they are not very well-known, they have enough impact in their industry to affect attitudes and behaviours. (Backaler 2018)

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and data collection techniques utilized in the study of influencer marketing dynamics among Gen Z males. The study explores different research approaches and explains the selection of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews. Through these methods, the study aims to uncover insights into the preferences, purchasing behaviour, and perceptions of influencer marketing strategies among Gen Z males.

3.1 Research Design

Identifying a topic or issue is the initial stage of the research process. Commissioned research has specific questions, while researcher-initiated studies offer more flexibility. Defining the research purpose is essential before establishing goals. (Sue & Ritter, 2012) Research design, in general, describes the data sources, gathering techniques, and methods used in a study to answer its research questions (Saunders et al. 2016). Saunders et al. (2016) categorize research into four primary types: exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, and evaluative investigations. Research can use a mix of these types, leading to a combined study. Exploratory research forms hypotheses through qualitative data like literature searches and focus groups. (Sue & Ritter, 2012) This study employs an exploratory design, which is well-suited for qualitative research, the chosen method for this study. Exploratory research is suitable as it gives flexibility for study and the research can be adapted according to the data collection (Saunders et al. 2016). Exploratory research can be conducted in various ways, but for this study, data collection involves reviewing previous literature and conducting in-depth individual interviews within the target group of Gen Z males. In this study, data collection for research purposes defines Generation Z as those born between 1995 and 2010.

In qualitative research, researchers explore how new information affects previous findings by moving through different parts of the research plan until they achieve the study's goals. The key elements of a qualitative research plan include objectives, concepts, research questions, methods, and validity, all working together to create an interactive model. (Maxwell, 2012) Understanding the study's objectives helps the researcher shape the rest of the research design to correspond with those aims. The study's objectives address topics such

as the motivation for undertaking the research, the significance of its results, and the specific issues it seeks to clarify and affect. (Maxwell, 2012)

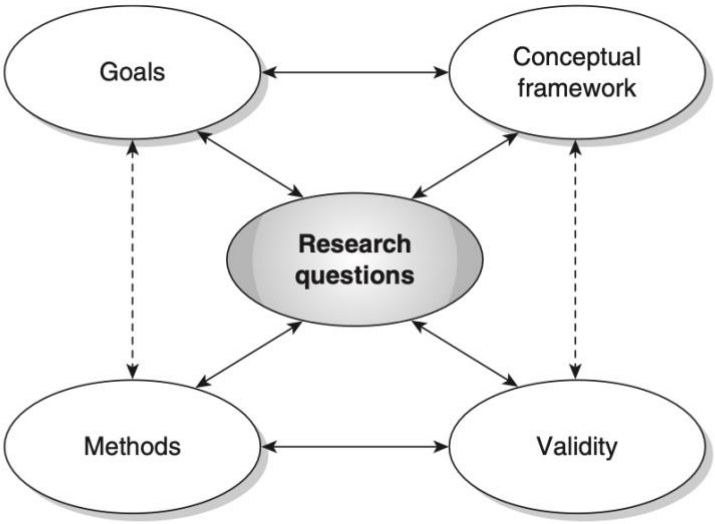

Figure 5. *An interactive model of research design* (Maxwell 2012)

This study aims to explore the details of influencer marketing, with a specific focus on comprehending content preferences and purchasing patterns among young male individuals from Generation Z. In the current digital environment, influencer marketing has become a key strategy for brands to engage with their intended audience, particularly among younger demographics. However, there remains a gap in understanding how influencer marketing impacts Gen Z males and their consumer behaviour. Moreover, by focusing specifically on Gen Z males, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of a demographic often overlooked in marketing research. Despite their significant purchasing power and influence in today's consumer landscape, male audiences remain underexplored in the context of influencer marketing. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap and provide valuable insights into the preferences and behaviours of Gen Z males in the field of influencer marketing.

Narrowing down the research problems and focusing on specific research issues is essential for meaningful exploration. This study aims to provide insights that can inform the development of more effective influencer marketing strategies tailored to Gen Z males, contributing to a deeper understanding of their consumer behaviour in the digital age.

3.1.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy covers the beliefs and assumptions guiding the development of knowledge in a particular field (Saunders et al. 2016). In this study, the aim is to enhance understanding of influencer marketing strategies, particularly regarding their effectiveness in engaging young male audiences. Researcher seeks to delve deeper into the types of strategies that can effectively capture the attention and interest of this demographic. A coherent research philosophy supports methodological choices, research strategies, and data collection techniques, ensuring a cohesive research project. Reflexivity, the ability to question and understand one's own beliefs and actions helps ensure a more objective and transparent research process. (Saunders et al. 2016) Researcher has chosen to conduct empirical research, which influenced the decision to gather data through interviews.

3.1.2 Research Approach

Researchers typically engage in three fundamental activities: theory testing, theory building, or theory modification. Regardless of whether theory is clearly named, its presence supports research study results. The chosen philosophy guides the approach, influencing how theories are developed or findings are reasoned. Moreover, the selected approach informs decisions regarding research design and methods. (Tengli 2020) In this study, an inductive approach was adopted, allowing for the exploration of research questions through existing theory. By combining various theories into a cohesive framework, the inductive approach makes it easier to extract of new insights from key data. (Saunders et al. 2016)

3.1.3 Qualitative approach

Qualitative research investigates phenomena, concentrating on their nature, numerous manifestations, contextual factors, and perspectives. A more general rule of practice is that qualitative research typically involves data given in words rather than numerical figures. (Busetto et al. 2020) In qualitative studies, reflection guides every step. Unlike traditional methods with strict steps, it is a more flexible process. Tasks like gathering data, analysing it, developing theories, and refining research questions happen at the same time and affect each other. Unlike traditional methods, qualitative research needs flexibility. Researchers must be willing to change their plans when they gain new information throughout the

investigation. (Maxwell 2012) Qualitative research uses theory to develop methodologies and study contexts. Scholars highlight the need of clearly incorporating theoretical frameworks into research assumptions. Theoretical frameworks are useful for refining questions, guiding techniques, and identifying validity risks. Despite conflicting viewpoints, theory provides practical benefits such as classification, larger perspectives, links to previous research, critical insights, and pathways for challenging ideas. Understanding this link improves researchers' capacity to use theory in their work. (Collins & Stockton 2018)

This study relies on qualitative methods to study influencer marketing among Gen Z males. Through interviews, it explores their content preferences and buying habits, offering valuable insights beyond numbers. By using flexible qualitative research, the study aims to understand how influencers, brands, and consumers interact digitally, contributing to better marketing strategies for this demographic.

3.1.4 Semi-structured interview

Saunders (2016) emphasizes that in semi-structured interviews, researchers develop a list of themes and likely some key questions to address, although the utilization of these themes and questions may vary across interviews. Interviews are the primary method for collecting data, with the semi-structured format being the most popular technique in qualitative research (Kallio et al. 2016). Qualitative interviews are informal interactions designed to gather subjective experiences, opinions, and motives. Semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions guided by literature or research, which allows for more flexibility during data gathering. Unlike surveys, they encourage participation and reveal unexpected themes, reducing researcher bias. Recording or documenting interviews depends on practicality. (Busetto et al. 2020) For this study, the data was documented by combining recording and manual transcription. All the interviews were recorded, whether they were conducted in person or online.

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher conducted a literature review, examining literature on influencer marketing, previous research, and other key concepts. The formulation of the research question influenced the selection of key themes in the interviews. Themes selected for interview are Social media usage, Following Influencers and Interaction, Interest and Reaction to Influencer Content, Consumer Behaviour, Impact of Influencer Marketing and Trust and Brand Image and Influencer Marketing.

Interview Themes	
Theme 1: Social media usage	Theme 2: Following Influencers and Interaction
Theme 3: Interest and Reaction to Influencer Content	Theme 4: Consumer Behaviour
Theme 5: Impact of Influencer Marketing	Theme 6: Brand Image and Influencer Marketing

Table 1*: Interview themes*

Semi-structured interviews are valued for their versatility and adaptability, allowing for both individual and group settings with flexible structures tailored to research needs. They raise interaction between interviewer and participant, facilitating follow-up questions and individual expression. While they appear simple, previous study is required to generate meaningful questions and successfully manage discussions. (Busetto et al. 2020) Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow for a more natural flow of conversation. This method aims to understand the viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives of interviewees. It goes beyond simply collecting facts and seeks to understand the "why" behind them. Researchers consider the context of the interview and encourage interviewees to share their experiences within that context. This helps build a deeper understanding of the topic. (Ruslin 2022) For this study, nine interviewees were recruited to form the research group. All interviews were conducted individually. The structured themes and initial questions were common to all interviews, however the discussions were open and free-flowing, including follow-up questions by the researcher.

3.1.5 Sampling and sample size

To answer the research questions, researchers don't collect data from everyone. Instead, they choose a smaller group from the larger population, called a sample. Sampling techniques help reduce the number of cases analysed due to time and resource constraints. (Taherdoost 2016) For this study the sampling technique used is non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling, often used in qualitative research like case studies, focuses on real-life phenomena with small sample sizes. Selection of cases or individuals does not require representativeness or randomness but needs a clear rationale. (Taherdoost 2016) This study employs convenience sampling, also known as hazard sampling, due to the absence of clear

organizational principles. (Saunders et al. 2016). Convenience sampling involves participants volunteering to take part in the research study (Gill 2020). According to Saunders (2016) suitable sample size for semi-structured interviews is 5 to 25. The determination of sample size relies on the research questions and objectives, specifically focusing on what information is necessary, valuable, and credible (Saunders 2016). For this research, the finalized sample size consists of 9 interviewees selected from the target group of Gen Z males through personal connections. The researcher does not personally know any of the interviewees; rather, they volunteered to participate through acquaintances of the researcher. Among them, two individuals work in the same company as the researcher.

Interviewees background is presented in the table below. The table demonstrates gender, year of birth, occupation, and location of the participants. Most of the interviewees were primarily working. Nearly all of them had completed or were about to complete a university degree in the near future. The sample size contains individuals of fairly similar ages, all being between 20 and 29 years old.

Gender& Interview number	Birth Year	Occupation	Location
Male 1	1999	Student, Computer Science, University	Jyväskylä
Male 2	1999	Student, Information Management/Designer of Electrical Grid Charging Network	Tampere
Male 3	1995	Cultural Producer, Production Manager	Tampere
Male 4	1999	Student, Automation Engineering, University	Tampere
Male 5	1997	Sales Manager	Helsinki
Male 6	1997	Investment Analyst	Helsinki
Male 7	1997	Student, Computer Science, University	Jyväskylä
Male 8	1999	Digital Planner Trainee/ Student University	Helsinki
Male 9	1998	Client Executive Trainee/Student University	Helsinki

Table 2. *Profile of Interviewees.*

3.2 Data Collection

Identifying the truth in qualitative research hinges on how well data is collected. This is because strong data collection methods are what make a study reliable and trustworthy.

Interviews are a common way to gather information in qualitative research, with semi-structured formats being particularly favoured. However, despite their widespread use, there's a surprising lack of standardized guidelines for developing semi-structured interviews. (Kallio et al. 2016). For this study semi-structured interviews were conducted between the end of February and the beginning of March 2024. They were held online via Teams or in person at the office premises. Guided by preselected questions and predetermined themes, the interviews followed a structured format. While the interviews were mainly based on 17 key questions, they also included follow-up questions and open-ended discussions within the thematic framework. All the people interviewed were Finnish from their nationality, so the interviews were held in Finnish. Using a common language enabled successful communication, reducing the possibility of language barriers and encouraging open and productive discussions. Although participants were informed about the study's topic before, they were not provided with the interview questions to prevent influencing their responses. To guarantee accuracy and clarity, the researcher made extensive notes during the interviews. Participants were given the option to share any further insights or comments on the topics and questions during the interview. All the interviews were recorded, and the interviewer used transcription software to document the interviews. Additionally, the recordings were manually reviewed by the interviewer. In total, there were 70 pages of transcribed material that was collected manually with the help of recorded transcription.

The table below outlines all the themes and key questions prepared for the interviews to steer the conversation. Each interview lasted between 25 to 40 minutes. Following nine interviews, it was considered unnecessary to continue interviewing more individuals, as it was concluded that there would be no additional value for the research results. The responses consistently followed clear trends, allowing for conclusions to be drawn from all the themes. The interviews were of high quality and stimulated insightful analytical discussions on the topic.

Theme	Interview Questions
Social Media Usage	1. What social media platforms do you use? 2. How much time do you spend on these platforms daily?
Following Influencers and Interaction	1. Which influencers do you follow? What appeals to you about them? 2. How often do you interact/react to content posted by influencers?
Interest and Reaction to Influencer Content	1. What types of content do you find interesting in influencer posts? 2. Could you share a memorable influencer post or campaign that caught your attention?
Consumer Behaviour	1. Have you ever made a purchase based on an influencer's recommendation or endorsement? If yes, what influenced your decision? 2. Do you believe influencers have a significant impact on your purchasing decisions? Why or why not?
Impact of Influencer Marketing and Trust	1. How does influencer-supported content influence your interest in exploring marketed products or services? 2. How do you perceive the authenticity of influencer-supported content?
Brand Image and Influencer Marketing	1. Are there specific types of products or brands you would like to see influencers market? 2. Do you consider influencer marketing a reliable source of information? 3. How do you think influencer marketing has changed the way brands communicate with consumers? 4. How important is transparency and disclosure of sponsored content to you? 5. Do you think influencers influence brand image? 6. What makes influencer marketing campaigns effective or ineffective? 7. What advice would you give to brands engaging with Gen Z consumers through influencer partnerships?

***Table 3**. Interview themes and key questions.*

3.3 Reliability and Validity

Quantitative researchers prepare controls early to assure validity, but qualitative researchers address validity concerns as they emerge, utilizing data to disprove alternative theories. Two common concerns in qualitative studies are researcher bias and reactivity. Bias arises when a researcher's opinions influence data collection or interpretation; while eliminating bias is difficult, the emphasis moves to understanding its impact. Reactivity refers to the researcher's impact on the study's participants or setting. Unlike quantitative research, which often aims to control researcher effects, qualitative research seeks to understand and use the researcher's influence effectively. (Maxwell 2012) The dependability of research refers to whether another researcher using the same study methodology at a different period would get consistent results. If they do, the study is considered reliable (Saunders et al. 2016).

Due to the research gap and the absence of prior studies on this topic, this study's approach is grounded in a review of existing literature and the consideration of various theories. This approach helps other researchers in comprehending the thesis's findings.

Researcher error means the researcher's understanding, and researcher bias is about things that might make the researcher record responses with bias. For instance, researcher bias happens when the interviewer shares their personal views during the interview. (Saunders et al. 2016) Researcher has prepared core structure about key questions for the interviews and prepared well for the interview situation. Most of the interviews needed to be help online as the participants lived in different cities. Researcher emphasised there is no goal or answers that are reached for to all the interviewees. The interviewees were not guided in terms of their responses or the conversation. The interviewer asked clarifying questions if uncertain about the interviewee's intentions behind their response. All interviews were recorded, and the transcribed material was carefully reviewed and structured for clarity.

The literature identifies two categories of validity: internal and external. Internal validity refers to how effectively study findings mirror reality without being impacted by external variables. External validity, on the other hand, considers how relevant study findings are to different groups. (Brink 1993) Researchers must ensure that their tests produce consistent and accurate results. However, it's important to note that reliability alone does not guarantee validity, which is another crucial aspect of measurement quality. (Golafshani 2003) Qualitative research involves addressing concerns as they arise throughout the study and using evidence to demonstrate the accuracy and trustworthiness of your findings. Researchers achieve this by considering alternative explanations, acknowledging other possible interpretations of their data, and providing evidence to support why their explanation is more credible. (Saunders et al. 2016) Data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews conducted online or in person, aim to gather comprehensive insights while addressing concerns about validity and reliability. The study acknowledges the importance of considering alternative explanations and providing evidence to support the credibility of the findings.

4 Findings and Analysis

This chapter explores the dynamics of influencer marketing and consumer behaviour among Gen Z males. It examines various aspects such as social media usage patterns, interaction with influencers, reactions to influencer content, consumer purchasing behaviour, and the impact of influencer marketing on brand image and trust. Through interviews and analysis, the chapter investigates how Gen Z males engage with influencer content, their preferences, and the factors influencing their purchasing decisions. Additionally, it highlights the importance of authenticity and transparency in influencer-brand partnerships for building genuine connections and improving brand image.

4.1 Social media usage

The interviews revealed a diverse range of social media platforms used by participants, with Instagram emerging as a common choice among respondents as well as Snapchat. Some respondents wondered is Snapchat social media platform as they use it for messaging and socializing. Instagram's visually oriented content seems to appeal to a wide audience, making it a popular platform for socializing and content consumption. Other platforms mentioned include Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn, and messaging apps like WhatsApp. Notably, Snapchat and Instagram emerged as the most actively used platforms for most of the participants, while others favoured TikTok and YouTube. Facebook has been used rather rarely.

> *"I use Snapchat, and I deleted Instagram last fall. I rarely browse Facebook, but I do have an account there." (Interviewee 1, 1999)*

> *"Well, actively, I use LinkedIn and Instagram, and then less actively, I have a Facebook account, but I haven't done anything there for years, maybe. And of course, nowadays, also TikTok if that counts as one, where I just consume content. I don't create anything there at all, but I watch videos." (Interviewee 6, 1997)*

> *I have Instagram. Instagram is something I use somewhat regularly, but I uninstall it from my phone almost every month or every couple of months for a while, and then I*

reinstall it. So, Instagram is one. Then I have Snapchat, Facebook. Those are the platforms I semi-actively use. And maybe TikTok, if that counts. (Interviewee 7, 1997)

The range of time people spend to connecting with social media platforms, ranging from one to four hours per day and some spending sometimes even six hours, demonstrates the significant time commitment involved in social media usage.

"Roughly 3 to 4 hours. I occasionally check my screen time on my phone, and it often falls within that range, especially in the evenings." (Interviewee 5, 1997)

"I would estimate about one and a half hours a day on my phone, totalling about 2 and a half hours. Most of it is likely spent on messaging." (Interviewee 1, 1999)

4.2 Interaction with influencers

Many respondents noted their passive exposure to influencer content via social media recommendation algorithms. For instance, one mentioned discovering fitness influencers on Snapchat, reflecting their interest in fitness-related topics. This underscores the importance of understanding individuals' preferences for effective targeting in influencer marketing campaigns. Consumer scepticism towards influencer content was evident, with doubts about authenticity attributed to increased commercialization and solid sponsored posts. Respondents showed a preference for influencers aligned with their interests and hobbies. like climbing, skiing, music, or fashion, emphasizing the importance of niche targeting. This highlights the role of audience segmentation in boosting engagement and relevance. Despite varying levels of engagement, many respondents mentioned occasional interactions such as liking posts or participating in giveaways, aligning with Social Influence theories. Marketers can leverage these behaviours influenced by peer recommendations, to drive engagement and persuasion in influencer marketing campaigns.

"I occasionally engage, especially in giveaways or contests mentioned by influencers. However, I don't engage extensively." (Interviewee 2, 1999)

" I'd say it's about hobbies, of course. It's nice to follow people who do the same things you're interested in. So, through that, I've probably ended up following both those who do the same things as me and those who do things I'd like to do. For example, especially on TikTok, I notice that I end up in an algorithm that recommends a lot of travel

destinations and such. Even though I'm not a very active traveller myself, I always dream of traveling, so I end up following those accounts." (Interviewee 6, 1997)

4.3 Reacting to Influencer content

The interviews revealed a clear preference for authentic influencer content, emphasizing personal experiences and genuine reviews over traditional advertising. This preference aligns perfectly with researcher's theoretical part about the authenticity theory in influencer marketing, which emphasizes the importance of building genuine connections with consumers. Additionally, the significance of influencer content resonating with individual interests, such as hobbies like frisbee golf or paddle tennis, underscores again the effectiveness of niche targeting strategies (Dalgic 1998).

"Probably similar to what I said earlier, it's whatever is currently relevant in my life, something that's currently a big thing for me. If, for example, I've been playing paddle tennis or snowboarding a lot and I watch a lot of those videos, then that's what captures my energy and thoughts." (Interviewee 7, 1997)

"I'm interested in fashion-related content, especially when it showcases clothing items styled in different ways. Surprisingly, I prefer still images over videos, as they allow me to focus more on the details. Additionally, high-quality and well-edited photos catch my attention." (Interviewee 5, 1997)

Moreover, the interviews uncovered varying levels of liability to influencer advertising among respondents. While some expressed scepticism, others admitted to engaging with content that matched their interests, highlighting the role of social influence and peer recommendations. Also, high-quality content and visual appeal were mentioned as important aspects of influencer content that capture the attention of the interviewees.

"I recall a campaign where a frisbee golf influencer provided tutorials and recommended products. It caught my attention due to its relevance to my interests." (Interviewee 2, 1999)

"Very rarely. If there's a clear indication of a sponsored post, I might find it interesting and check out the brand's page to learn more about the product." (Interviewee 5, 1997)

4.4 Consumer Behaviour

The analysis highlights that most participants do not recognize they have bought things because of influencer marketing. While some remember thinking about products suggested by influencers, they generally don't acknowledge the direct influence of influencer content on their purchases. This shows a gap between what people think about influencer marketing and what they actually do. Some interviewees acknowledge making purchases influenced by influencers, others express uncertainty or minimal influence. Additionally, many respondents indicate that influencer recommendations do not significantly impact their purchase decisions. Several respondents express that they primarily use influencer content as a reference and conduct their own research when they need to buy something new. Many interviewees mention considering products recommended by influencers but ultimately making decisions based on personal interest or further research. This suggests that influencer content may play a role in initial consideration but does not always lead to direct purchase decisions. The impact of influencer content seems to be more significant when it resonates with personal interests or when there is familiarity with the influencer. For instance, interviewees remember occasions when influencer content was connected to their hobbies or included athletes they look up to. Respondents' express annoyance with influencer content that is perceived as repetitive or overly promotional. This suggests that consumers may disengage from influencer marketing efforts and unfollow influencers if they feel overwhelmed by promotional messages.

> *"For example, there was this water bottle, the brand was a sponsor of a big tennis tournament, and all the players had those bottles, a limited edition. And a couple of influencers posted about it or ran a campaign at the same time, which led me to buy one." (Interviewee 9, 1998)*

> *"No, I feel like it doesn't have a significant impact, it's more like if I see something interesting or cool, then it might encourage me to make the purchase, but I don't make purchase decisions solely based on advertising." (Interviewee 8, 1999)*

> *"I've considered it but haven't made a purchase solely based on an influencer's recommendation. I prefer to explore other options and make informed decisions." (Interviewee 3, 1995)*

"Yeah, I have. Some literature, printed stuff and that sort of thing. So yeah, there's definitely been something. And maybe there are examples that don't come to mind right now, but yeah, you know, there's definitely something, but it's not like a constant thing." (Interviewee 4, 1999)

4.5 Impact of Influencer Marketing and Trust

The interview responses suggest that authenticity is key in influencer marketing. Interviewees prefer content that feels genuine and relatable, such as personal experiences or authentic reviews. When influencer content is too obviously sponsored, trust can reduce. While influencers can catch attention and guide interest in products, participants often conduct further research before making a purchase. Trust in influencer-generated content depends on factors like authenticity, transparency, and the perceived expertise of the influencer. Additionally, the visual appeal, credibility, and relevance of influencer content can influence interest and trust according to the analysis. Overall, influencer marketing is seen as relatively more authentic than traditional advertising methods like billboards, TV, or print ads, especially when influencers have a genuine connection to the products they promote and maintain consistency in their content. Several participants mentioned that when content is predominantly focused on collaborations and advertising campaigns, it diminishes credibility and gives the impression that the influencer is primarily motivated by financial gain. This damages trust and can be perceived as irritating.

"Well, if there's a lot of commercial collaborations, then it definitely affects the credibility, like if someone has a different collaboration every day with a different company, then it kind of makes it seem like they're doing it just for the money and not really because they're interested in that particular product or service." (Interviewee 8, 1999)

"I think it can be a reliable source of information to some extent, but I wouldn't solely rely on influencer recommendations when making purchasing decisions. I would still do my own research and consider other factors before making a decision."(Interviewee 7, 1997)

Previous research suggests that influencer attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness significantly influence Gen Z purchase intention (Nugroho et al., 2022). Interview results support this theory.

> *"Authentic content resonates better than traditional advertising. I prefer to see personal experiences or genuine reviews." (Interviewee 1, 1999)*

> *"Yeah, I would say it feels more trustworthy, and also, for example, specific wear and tear on clothes, it's more reliable than some traditional TV ad or some bus stop ad or something that just comes to mind." (Interviewee 5, 1997)*

> *"Yeah, this depends a lot on the influencer, but yeah, in these cases, I definitely trust them within those frameworks. And also, who the influencer is that I follow is also a pretty big factor in whether it feels like a reliable source of information to me. So, it kind of feels like getting information from trusted sources or something." (Interviewee 4, 1999)*

4.6 Brand Image and Influencer Marketing

The research findings indicate that interviewees do not demonstrate specific preferences for the types of products or brands they want to see influencers promote. However, they emphasize the importance of authenticity and relevance in influencer promotions, suggesting that genuine endorsements are valued in influencer marketing.

> *"I think authenticity is key. Gen Z consumers value authenticity and can easily detect when something is fake or forced. So, brands need to partner with influencers who genuinely believe in their product or service and can authentically promote it to their audience." (Interviewee 7, 1997)*

Authenticity emerges as a crucial factor in influencer marketing, with interviewees expressing a greater level of trust in influencers who genuinely use or believe in the products they promote. This highlights significance of authentic endorsements in shaping consumer perceptions and preferences. While influencer marketing is perceived as a reliable source of practical information, some participants express caution and often conduct additional research before making purchasing decisions. Based on the interviews, opinions regarding the reliability of influencer marketing are varied. While some interviewees express trust in

influencer content, citing the authenticity and expertise of influencers as factors influencing their perception, others approach influencer endorsements with caution, emphasizing the importance of verifying information from multiple sources.

> *"Well, I think it probably does, in the sense that, like I described earlier, things that interest me, when I see influencers using a certain version of products, for example, ski poles, then it probably increases the likelihood that I will research those. So, in that sense, if an influencer uses something interesting or talks about something in a way that makes it sound interesting, it probably affects my interest in researching those things." (Interviewee 6, 1997)*

> *"For the influencers I follow, yes. But I'm cautious because there's a wide range of influencer content, and not all of it is equally trustworthy. It ultimately depends on the influencer's credibility and the quality of their content." (Interviewee 5, 1997)*

> *"Yeah, I believe it's reliable because you get diverse information, like if an influencer tests a product and then tells their audience their opinion about it, then I feel like that's probably the most honest and accurate information about the product." (Interviewee 8, 1999)*

Transparency in sponsored content is believed to be essential for maintaining trust between influencers and their audience, with interviewees valuing honesty and authenticity in influencer endorsements and marketing.

> *"I think it's very important. Transparency is key in influencer marketing, and consumers have the right to know when content is sponsored. It helps maintain trust between the influencer and their audience." (Interviewee 7, 1997)*

> *"Absolutely, it's crucial that their brand advertising is transparent. Simply being advertised is no longer sufficient; trust is essential for me to consider purchasing or paying attention to it. Therefore, transparency is vital. Additionally, creative, and attention-grabbing brand advertising is also important. I've always believed that if there's something new and creative, it earns points from me, potentially influencing my decision to purchase the brand's products." (Interviewee 5, 1997)*

The impact of influencer marketing on brand image is significant, with interviewees acknowledging both positive and negative effects. Brands are advised to carefully select

influencers who align with their values and target demographic to ensure positive brand associations. Influencer marketing has transformed communication between brands and consumers, making it more direct, personalized, and approachable. This statement comes through from all the interviews. Interviewees appreciate human touch in brand communication through influencer partnerships, leading to stronger connections between brands and their audience. Also creativity is highly valued in influencers campaigns.

> *"It has made brand communication more accessible and relatable. When brands collaborate with influencers, it feels less like traditional advertising and more like a personal recommendation. This approach lowers the barrier for consumers to engage with the brand's content." (Interviewee 5, 1997)*

> *"Definitely. When an influencer's values or style align with mine, it positively impacts my perception of the brand they promote. However, if an influencer's content feels inconsistent or overly promotional, it can diminish the brand's credibility in my eyes." (Interviewee 9, 1998)*

The findings reveal that interviewees perceive influencer marketing as easily approachable and relatable. Effective influencer marketing campaigns target specific consumer groups and leverage the authenticity and expertise of influencers. (Nugroho et al. 2022) Transparency, authenticity, and relevance are identified as key factors in determining the success of influencer marketing campaigns among interviewees.

> *"I think if a campaign involves multiple influencers who present products in a way that aligns with their personal brand, it could be more effective. Having multiple influencers rather than just one could increase effectiveness. In contrast, inefficiency might arise if the campaign feels too much like a traditional advertisement, with only one influencer promoting it." (Interviewee 5, 1997)*

> *"The effectiveness probably stems from better targeting, especially if the advertisement message aligns with the recipient's interests or hobbies. Another factor is that when the ad reaches viewers who are genuinely interested in the topic or hobby, it can be more effective compared to traditional mass marketing." (Interviewee 4, 1999)*

Brands are advised to prioritize transparency, authenticity, and relevancy in their influencer partnerships to effectively engage with consumers. Following viewpoints arises from the interviews. Understanding the values and preferences of the target demographic, including environmental consciousness and ethical considerations, is crucial for the success of influencer marketing campaigns. While influencer marketing offers opportunities for brands to connect with consumers, challenges such as authenticity, over-transparency, and the risk of negative associations require careful consideration. From the interviews, it is evident that brands need to find a balance between transparency and authenticity when engaging in influencer partnerships, ensuring that these collaborations align with the values and preferences of their target audience.

> *"I would advise brands to focus on authenticity and transparency in their influencer partnerships. Gen Z consumers value honesty and authenticity, so brands need to ensure that their influencer partnerships reflect these values. Additionally, brands should choose influencers who align with their brand values and can authentically promote their products or services to their audience." (Interviewee 7, 1997)*

> *"Definitely, brands should have discussions with the influencers to understand their audience and how they react to their content. If the influencer's audience is different from the brand's target demographic, even if the influencer has a large following on Instagram, it might not be the right fit. So, both the brand and the influencer should have a similar target audience." (Interviewee 5, 1997)*

> *"I appreciate when influencers promote niche or smaller brands, especially local ones. It adds diversity to their content and introduces me to new products or services that I might not discover otherwise." (Interviewee 5, 1997)*

> *"Well, maybe it's a bit outdated now, but can they take young people seriously? We are intelligent actors, or citizens who have some level of media literacy. And especially in this marketing context. Many friends are, for example, very environmentally conscious, so perhaps that's a suggestion worth considering – taking environmental factors into account." (Interviewee 4, 1999)*

To conclude, the interviewees express a sense of caution regarding the reliability of influencer endorsements that are primarily motivated by monetary incentives. This scepticism underscores the importance of authenticity and transparency in influencer-brand

partnerships, aligning with established theories emphasizing the significance of trust and credibility in communication processes (Ohanian, 1990; Nugroho et al., 2022). Therefore, while influencer marketing provides brands with a valuable opportunity to connect with their target audience, prioritizing authenticity and transparency is crucial for building genuine connections and improving brand image in the eyes of consumers.

Overall, the interviewees recognize the impact of influencer marketing on brand image, with a general sentiment that it can have both positive and negative effects. Authenticity and transparency emerge as crucial factors influencing consumer perception of influencer content. While influencers can positively influence brand perception when their endorsements are genuine and aligned with their audience's interests, forced or inauthentic promotions may have opposing effects.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The discussion and conclusion section of this study explores how influencer marketing affects Gen Z males. It addresses the main research question and sub-questions, analysing interview findings about the types of content they prefer, the effectiveness of influencer campaigns, and their purchasing decisions. The section also considers theoretical implications and offers practical insights for marketers aiming to engage Gen Z males through influencer marketing. Additionally, this section covers the study's limitations to provide a comprehensive overview of its findings.

5.1 Discussion

The study investigated the intricate landscape of influencer marketing, specifically focusing on its impact on Gen Z males. Through in-depth interviews, the research revealed detailed insights into the preferences, behaviours, and perceptions of this demographic regarding influencer content and brand engagement. The findings illuminated the complex dynamics of social media usage, interaction with influencers, responses to influencer content, consumer behaviour patterns, and the overall influence of influencer marketing on brand image and trust. By exploring these dimensions, the study offers valuable insights for understanding the effectiveness and challenges of influencer marketing strategies aimed at

Gen Z males, providing implications for brands seeking to optimize their approaches in this rapidly evolving landscape. This section will explore how the primary research question, "How does influencer marketing influence the purchase behaviour of Gen Z males?" is addressed within the scope of this study. The findings will be examined in light of the three sub-questions formulated to guide the research:

1. *What types of content do Gen Z males prefer and engage with when influenced by influencer marketing, and what kind of influencers do they prefer?*
2. *What kind of influencer campaigns and ads resonate with Gen Z males?*
3. *How does influencer marketing impact the purchasing decisions and behaviours of Gen Z males concerning the promoted products or services?*

5.1.1 Gen Z Male Content Preferences and Influencer Alignment

Gen Z males prefer and engage with various types of content on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn. The variety of platforms underscores the complicated nature of social media engagement, catering to different preferences and needs. This aligns with the theoretical framework, highlighting the significant role of social media in shaping consumer behaviour and influencing purchase decisions (Kozinets et al. 2010; Leung et al. 2022). The interviews emphasize the importance of authenticity and relatability in influencer content, as well as the influence of peer recommendations and niche targeting strategies. The preference of Gen Z males for influencers who align with their interests and hobbies, such as fitness, fashion, and outdoor activities, aligns with the theory of niche targeting strategies in influencer marketing (Leung et al. 2022). Time spent in social media mirrors the rapid adoption of social media platforms and the explosion of user-generated content, contributing to the blurring of lines between traditional and social media (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). The interviews show on the complexity of social media usage, revealing that some participants uninstall and reinstall apps regularly to control their digital intake. This repetitive behaviour reflects the difficulties individuals encounter in balancing their online presence with other aspects of life, reflecting the theoretical framework's emphasis on strategic influencer communication (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019).

In conclusion, brands looking to engage with consumers through influencer marketing should prioritize authenticity, transparency, and relevance in their partnerships. By selecting

influencers who genuinely connect with their audience and promoting products in a transparent yet non-intrusive manner, brands can effectively enhance their brand image and engage with gen z male target demographic.

5.1.2 Effective Influencer Marketing for Gen Z Males

Influencer campaigns and ads that resonate with Gen Z males are those that feel authentic, relatable, and aligned with their interests. Content showcasing personal experiences, genuine reviews, and endorsements from influencers who genuinely use or believe in the products they promote are preferred. Interviewees express scepticism towards overly promotional or inauthentic content, emphasizing the importance of transparency and credibility in influencer-brand partnerships. The alignment between Gen Z males' preferences for authentic and relatable influencer content and the theoretical framework, particularly emphasized by Kozinets et al. (2010), underscores the importance of genuine connections in influencer marketing strategies. Analysis highlights the complex dynamics of influencer interactions and underlines the importance of understanding individual motivations, preferences, and behaviours in influencer marketing strategy development. By incorporating relevant theories and insights from communication and marketing research, brands can optimize their influencer marketing efforts to effectively engage and influence target audiences. Findings on influencer interaction can be linked with influencer credibility that aligns with the Source Credibility Model, emphasizing the importance of factors like expertise and trustworthiness in influencing consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. (Ohanian 1990) Gen Z consumers rely heavily on social media for shopping inspiration and are sensitive in their evaluation of influencers' authenticity and expertise (Kastenholz, 2022). The results are not perfectly aligned with this claim as the interviews show that while influencers are influential, none of the interviewees rely solely on them for buying decisions. They stress the importance of doing their own research and considering various factors before buying. This suggests that Gen Z male consumers are independent thinkers and don't depend exclusively on influencer recommendations for their choices.

5.1.3 Influencer Impact on Gen Z Male Purchasing Behaviour

Influencer marketing impacts the purchasing decisions and behaviours of Gen Z males by influencing their awareness, consideration, and perception of promoted products or services.

While influencer endorsements may influence initial consideration, consumers often conduct further research before making purchase decisions. The impact varies based on factors such as personal interests, familiarity with the influencer, and the perceived authenticity of the content. The observed influence of influencer marketing on the purchasing decisions and behaviours of Gen Z males aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Kozinets et al. (2010), emphasizing the significant role of social media in shaping consumer behaviour. However, the interviews also reveal a different perspective, suggesting that while influencer endorsements may stimulate initial consideration, gen z male consumers typically engage in additional research before finalizing purchase decisions, highlighting the importance of authenticity and personal interest in the influencer content, as discussed in previous research by Ohanian (1990). Varying levels of liability to influencer advertising illustrates the importance of understanding consumer behaviours and preferences in crafting effective influencer marketing campaigns that leverage concepts like authenticity and social influence to drive engagement and positive outcomes. (Smith et al. 2011) Overall, the analysis of the results highlights the nature of consumer responses to influencer marketing. While influencer recommendations may influence purchase decisions for some individuals, the impact is not universal and varies based on factors such as personal interests, familiarity with the influencer, and the perceived authenticity of the content. Analysis connects with social influence theory discussed is theoretical part, which suggests that people can copy behaviours or beliefs without realizing it, showing how influencer marketing quietly affects what people buy and like. (Kelman 1961)

To conclude, social media platforms play a significant role in Gen Z males' lives, with Instagram and Snapchat being commonly used for socializing and content consumption. The interviews highlight the complexity of social media engagement, with participants spending varying amounts of time on different platforms and demonstrating repetitive behaviour in managing their digital intake. The interaction with influencers is passive for many respondents, influenced by social media recommendation algorithms and preferences for content aligned with their interests and hobbies. Consumer scepticism towards influencer content is evident, emphasizing the importance of authenticity and relevance in influencer marketing campaigns. While influencer recommendations may influence purchase decisions for some individuals, others express scepticism and rely on their own research before making buying choices. Nevertheless, all interviewees are aware that influencer marketing has an unconscious impact on their consumption behaviour, even though many expressed

scepticism towards influencer content. Overall, authenticity and transparency are crucial in influencer marketing, with brands advised to prioritize these factors to enhance consumer trust and engagement.

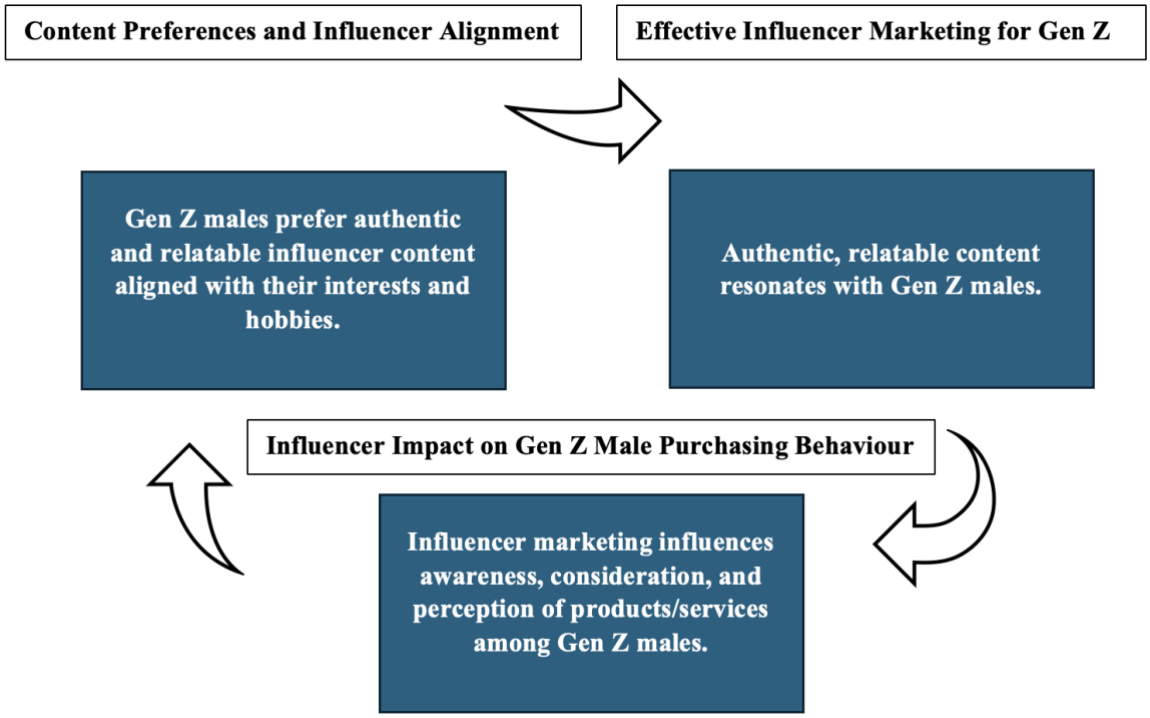

Figure 6. *Key findings of the study*

5.2 Theoretical implication

The theoretical framework presented in "The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: Understanding Preferences and Purchasing Behaviour Among Gen Z Males" in chapter 1.3 is deeply rooted in fundamental concepts crucial to the study's exploration. By drawing from theories of influencer marketing, dynamics of social media marketing, and principles of consumer behaviour, this framework illuminates the intricate relationships between brand engagement, content preferences, and purchase decisions among Gen Z males. Moreover, it provides a holistic understanding of how influencer-driven content shapes consumer behaviour within the Gen Z demographic and shapes brand perception by integrating theories of brand image, brand communication, and social media dynamics. This study was conducted with the aim of arming marketers with actionable insights to effectively leverage influencer marketing in engaging and resonating with Gen Z male audiences in the digital landscape. By aligning the study with this theoretical framework, we can delve deeper into

the mechanisms driving consumer behaviour and formulate strategies that resonate authentically with this target demographic.

The findings of the study exhibit alignment with various theoretical frameworks while also showcasing notable differences between theory and practice in the field of social media usage and influencer marketing. Firstly, the study's observation of diverse social media platform usage among participants resonates with the theoretical understanding of social media's complex nature, as highlighted in previous research (Kozinets et al., 2010; Leung et al., 2022). Similarly, the emphasis on authenticity and relevance in influencer content echoes the authenticity theory in influencer marketing, which underscores the importance of building genuine connections with consumers (Dalgic, 1998). However, the study also reveals differences between theory and practice, particularly in consumer behaviour regarding influencer marketing. While theory suggests that influencer attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness significantly influence purchase intention (Nugroho et al., 2022), the study's findings indicate that many participants do not recognize direct influence from influencer content on their purchasing decisions. This contrast underscores the intricate and diverse characteristics of consumer behaviour, illustrating that while theoretical models offer useful perspectives, actual practices may conflict due to individual preferences, scepticism, and the impact of various other factors.

The absence of research on Gen Z males highlights a significant research gap, contrasting with existing studies on Gen Z women. As evidenced by research on women, the purchasing behaviour of Gen Z males through influencer marketing may yield different results, emphasizing the need for targeted investigations to understand the details of their consumer behaviour in response to influencer campaigns. The study conducted by Tamara et al. (2021) demonstrates a positive impact on the purchasing behaviour of Gen Z women, with internet and social media usage consistently increasing over the years. With social media becoming a crucial source of information for consumers, marketers leverage influencer marketing on platforms like Instagram to enhance brand image and increase purchase intention among Gen Z women. The findings underscore the importance of utilizing social media influencers effectively to resonate with the target audience and drive purchasing decisions. (Tamara 2021)

5.3 Managerial implications

The study's findings hold significant implications for marketers aiming to refine their influencer marketing strategies to effectively engage with Gen Z males.

Firstly, it is beneficial for brands to tailor their content strategy to match the interests and hobbies of Gen Z males, including fitness, fashion, outdoor activities, music, and travel. Understanding these preferences allows brands to craft content that feels genuine and relatable, leading to increased engagement and responsiveness to influencer endorsements. Secondly, influencer selection is critical in the success of influencer marketing campaigns. Managers should accurately choose influencers whose content resonates with the brand's values and speaks to the target demographic. This alignment raises authenticity and credibility, increasing the impact of influencer endorsements on consumer behaviour.

Maintaining transparency in influencer-brand partnerships is another critical consideration. Brands must prioritize authenticity in influencer content to prevent consumer scepticism. Overly promotional or inauthentic messaging risks disconnecting Gen Z males and ruining brand reputation, underscoring the importance of genuine and relatable influencer endorsements. Furthermore, niche targeting strategies are essential for effectively reaching Gen Z males. Brands should collaborate with influencers who have dedicated followings within specific interest or hobby niches. This approach enables the creation of more personalized and relevant content, driving higher levels of audience engagement and brand attraction.

Lastly, frequent monitoring and evaluation of influencer marketing campaigns are essential to estimate their effectiveness and pinpoint areas for development. By tracking key performance metrics such as engagement rates and perception of the brand, brands can refine their influencer marketing strategies to better align with the evolving preferences of Gen Z males. Incorporating these managerial implications into influencer marketing strategies can help brands build meaningful connections with Gen Z males, raise engagement, and promote lasting brand loyalty in today's fiercely competitive digital landscape.

5.4 Limitations and future research

Despite the comprehensive nature of this research, several limitations should be acknowledged, offering valuable insights for future research actions. Firstly, the sample size for this study was relatively small, consisting of nine interviewees. Although the sample size worked well for understanding the details of the study, future research could improve how widely the findings apply by including more people from different backgrounds (Saunders et al., 2016). Moreover, the use of convenience sampling may have introduced bias into the sample selection process, as participants were recruited through personal connections (Taherdoost 2016). Future research could employ more thorough sampling techniques to ensure a more representative sample of Gen Z males. Besides, since all interviews were carried out in Finnish because of the participants' nationality, the findings might not be as relevant to other cultural settings. Exploring similar studies in various cultural environments could offer valuable comparative perspectives on the preferences and behaviours of Generation Z males from diverse cultural backgrounds. (Maxwell 2012) Furthermore, while efforts were made to minimize researcher bias during data collection and analysis, it is essential to acknowledge the potential impact of researcher subjectivity on the interpretation of the findings. Future studies could incorporate measures to improve the objectivity and reliability of the research process, such as independent coding of data by multiple researchers. (Saunders et al. 2016)

In terms of future research directions, several opportunities emerge from the findings of this study. Firstly, longitudinal research could investigate how the preferences and behaviours of Gen Z males in influencer marketing evolve over time, providing valuable insights into trends and changes in consumer behaviour (Bren 2018). Additionally, comparative studies (Saunders et al. 2016) could explore differences in influencer preferences and engagement across different demographics, such as gender or socioeconomic status, offering a more comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing dynamics Furthermore, exploring the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as brands and influencers themselves, could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and challenges of influencer marketing from multiple viewpoints. By considering the perspectives of both consumers and industry stakeholders, future research could offer broad insights into the complex dynamics of influencer marketing in the digital age.

Overall, while this study contributes valuable insights into the preferences and behaviours of Gen Z males in influencer marketing, acknowledging its limitations opens up exciting opportunities for future research to further explore and refine our understanding of this rapidly evolving field.

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Appendix 1. Haastattelukysymykset suomeksi teemoittain

Sosiaalisen median käyttö

1. Mitä sosiaalisen median alustoja käytät?
2. Kuinka paljon aikaa vietät näillä alustoilla päivittäin?

Vaikuttajien seuraaminen ja vuorovaikutus

1. Mitä vaikuttajia seuraat? Mikä heissä kiinnostaa sinua?
2. Kuinka usein vuorovaikutat tai reagoit vaikuttajien julkaisemiin sisältöihin?

Kiinnostus ja reaktio vaikuttajan sisältöön

1. Minkä tyyppistä sisältöä pidät kiinnostavana vaikuttajien julkaisuissa?
2. Voisitko jakaa muistettavan vaikuttajan julkaisun tai kampanjan, joka kiinnitti huomiosi?

Kuluttajakäyttäytyminen

1. Oletko koskaan ostanut tuotteen vaikuttajan suosituksen tai suosituksen perusteella? Jos kyllä, mikä vaikutti päätökseesi?
2. Uskotko, että vaikuttajilla on merkittävä vaikutus ostokäyttäytymiseesi? Miksi tai miksi ei?

Vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin vaikutus ja luottamus

1. Miten vaikuttajien tukema sisältö vaikuttaa kiinnostukseesi tutkia markkinoituja tuotteita tai palveluita?
2. Miten koet vaikuttajien tukeman sisällön aitouden?

Brändimielikuva ja vaikuttajamarkkinointi

1. Onko tiettyjä tuotetyyppejä tai brändejä, joita haluaisit nähdä vaikuttajien markkinoivan?
2. Pidätkö vaikuttajamarkkinointia luotettavana tiedonlähteenä?
3. Miten uskot vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin muuttaneen brändien kommunikointitapaa kuluttajien kanssa?

4. Kuinka tärkeänä pidät sponsoroidun sisällön läpinäkyvyyttä ja selkeyttä?
5. Uskotko vaikuttajien vaikuttavan brändimielikuvaan?
6. Mikä tekee vaikuttajamarkkinointikampanjoista tehokkaita tai tehottomia?
7. Mitä neuvoja antaisit brändeille, jotka haluavat sitoutua tai sitouttaa Gen Z -kuluttajia vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin kautta?

Appendix 2. Interview questions in English by theme

Social Media Usage

1. What social media platforms do you use?

2. How much time do you spend on these platforms daily?

Following Influencers and Interaction

1. Which influencers do you follow? What appeals to you about them?

2. How often do you interact/react to content posted by influencers?

Interest and Reaction to Influencer Content

1. What types of content do you find interesting in influencer posts?

2. Could you share a memorable influencer post or campaign that caught your attention?

Consumer Behaviour

1. Have you ever made a purchase based on an influencer's recommendation or endorsement? If yes, what influenced your decision?

2. Do you believe influencers have a significant impact on your purchasing decisions? Why or why not?

Impact of Influencer Marketing and Trust

1. How does influencer-supported content influence your interest in exploring marketed products or services?

2. How do you perceive the authenticity of influencer-supported content?

Brand Image and Influencer Marketing

1. Are there specific types of products or brands you would like to see influencers market?

2. Do you consider influencer marketing a reliable source of information?

3. How do you think influencer marketing has changed the way brands communicate with consumers?

4. How important is transparency and disclosure of sponsored content to you?

5. Do you think influencers influence brand image?

6. What makes influencer marketing campaigns effective or ineffective?

7. What advice would you give to brands engaging with Gen Z consumers through influencer partnerships?