HOW BRANDS CAN UTILIZE MICRO INFLUENCERS TO GROW THEIR SALES AMONG GENERATION Z IN FINLAND

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

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Examiner: Junior Researcher, Bimesh Shrestha

ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines how brands can effectively utilize micro-influencers to grow sales among Generation Z consumers in Finland. The study employs a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews to identify the attributes of micro-influencers that appeal to this demographic, their impact on purchase decisions, and strategies for successful brand collaborations.

Findings highlight the importance of authenticity, relatability, and shared values between brands and influencers. Micro-influencers were shown to build stronger audience connections, leveraging trust and engagement to influence consumer behavior. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok emerged as highly effective for reaching Generation Z, with long-term partnerships and authentic content identified as crucial for maintaining credibility and driving purchase decisions.

The study provides actionable recommendations for Finnish brands, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises, to optimize influencer marketing strategies. These findings contribute to existing literature by addressing gaps related to the preferences of Finnish Generation Z and the strategic use of micro-influencers in localized marketing.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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MITEN BRÄNDIT VOIVAT HYÖDYNTÄÄ MIKROVAIKUTTAJIA KASVATTAAKSEEN MYYNTIÄÄN Z-SUKUPOLVEN KESKUUDESSA SUOMESSA

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Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee, kuinka brändit voivat tehokkaasti hyödyntää mikrovaikuttajia myynnin kasvattamisessa Suomen Z-sukupolven keskuudessa. Tutkimuksessa käytetään laadullista tutkimusmenetelmää, ja aineisto kerätään puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla. Näiden avulla selvitetään mikrovaikuttajien ominaisuuksia, jotka vetoavat tähän kohderyhmään, heidän vaikutustaan ostopäätöksiin sekä onnistuneiden brändiyhteistöiden strategioita.

Tulokset korostavat aitouden, samaistuttavuuden ja yhteisten arvojen merkitystä brändien ja vaikuttajien välillä. Mikrovaikuttajien todettiin luovan vahvempia yhteyksiä yleisöönsä ja hyödyntävän luottamusta ja sitoutumista kuluttajakäyttäytymisen ohjaamisessa. Alustat, kuten Instagram ja TikTok, osoittautuivat erittäin tehokkaiksi tavoitettaessa Z-sukupolvea. Pitkäaikaiset yhteistyöt ja aidon sisällön tuottaminen nähtiin keskeisinä uskottavuuden säilyttämisessä ja ostopäätösten edistämisessä.

Tutkimus tarjoaa käytännön suosituksia suomalaisille brändeille, erityisesti pienille ja keskisuurille yrityksille, vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin strategioiden optimointiin. Tulokset täydentävät aiempaa tutkimuskirjallisuutta käsittelemällä Suomen Z-sukupolven mieltymyksiä ja mikrovaikuttajien strategista hyödyntämistä paikallisessa markkinoinnissa.

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1 Introduction

Influencer marketing has become an important segment of modern marketing, particularly in the rise of social media. According to statistics, the estimated value of influencer marketing has tripled between 2019 and 2024 (Barker, 2024; Dencheva, 2024). This growth is part of a larger digital development, which can be seen in the number of internet users. As of April 2024, there were around 5.4 billion internet users worldwide, which is around 66.66% of the world's population of 8.1 billion. Out of this number, 5.07 billion people are active on social media indicating that 62.6% of the world's population spends a significant amount of time on these platforms. (Barker, 2024) These figures highlight the increasing importance of social media and influencer marketing in connecting customers to brands.

Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook have transformed how brands and consumers engage with one another (Samarah, Bayram, Hasan & Elrehail, 2022). Influencers with large and active followings have been shown to have strong influence on customers' buying decisions and their brand view. This means they have greater ability to effect on consumers buying behaviour than traditional marketing. (Masuda, Han & Lee, 2022)

This thesis focuses on how brands can utilize micro- influencer marketing to grow engagement locally and increase their sales. As different generations have different preferences and behaviours, this study will specifically target Generation Z. Additionally, it will concentrate on the Finnish market, as the effects of influencer marketing has been studied globally previously. Within this context, the research will also narrow its focus to micro-influencers. With these factors, the aim of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive and valuable insights for brands that are looking to optimize their influencer marketing strategies to grow their sales.

1.1 Previous studies and their findings

Numerous studies have proven that influencers help brands to grow their brand awareness by creating authentic content that is relatable with the audience (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). It has also been proven that there is a positive correlation between influencer marketing and sales growth (Shepherd, 2024). Influencers are particularly effective in building trust and credibility among consumers. Research done by Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong (2017), indicates that consumers often view influencers as relatable figures, which can enhance their willingness to engage with the brand's content and eventually make a purchase. This connection really resonates with younger audiences like Generation Z since they prefer brands that are authentic and transparent (IBM, 2017).

For example, Nguyen, C., Nguyen, T. & Luu, V., (2022) conducted a quantitative study examining the impact of influencer marketing on purchase intentions among Vietnamese Generation Z consumers. The study showed that influencers have a significant effect on brand awareness and purchase intention, with their authenticity and trustworthiness. Their study found that when influencer has these attributes, there can be seen a notable rise in purchase likelihood. The influencers type was also highlighted, as the study showed that, micro-influencers, who typically engage with a smaller audience are more effective in building trust and stronger brand connections compared to larger scale influencers. (Nguyen et al., 2022)

In a study by Conde and Casais (2023), the effectiveness of micro-influencers and macro-influencers were compared. Micro-influencers, with followers between 1,000 and 100,000 had a stronger relationship with their audience, which resulted to a higher engagement and trust. Macro-influencers, with followers between 100,000 and 1,000,000, had larger reach with more diverse audiences, but their engagement rates were smaller. The study proved that a more authentic connection with micro-influencers often lead to a greater loyalty and trust among their followers, making them more effective for brands that want actual engagement and not just more visibility. (Conde & Casai, 2023)

1.2 Research Gaps

Even though there are previous studies about influencer marketing and its effect on brand awareness and purchase decision, there is not much research on how Finnish brands can utilize influencers as a part of their marketing strategy to grow their sales especially among Generation Z consumers. Previous studies lack of information, on how to choose the right influencer, build partnerships, or create content that resonates with target audience, when focusing on only Generation Z in Finland.

1.2.1 Generation Z

Generation Z is known for valuing authenticity and transparency (IBM, 2017). However, many studies on influencer marketing tend to not specify the strategies of influencer marketing on this generation. Given the fact that Generation Z spends more time on social media than any other generation, understanding their preferences is very important (Dixon, 2022). There is a need for research that studies Generation Z and delves into what types of influencer collaborations and content truly resonate with this audience and what are the key elements that effectively influence their purchase decisions. Filling this gap would help brands to create the right type of content to this generation, which would eventually affect to the increase of their sales.

1.2.2 Finnish Market

There is also a research gap when it comes to studying the Finnish market. While influencer marketing has been studied globally, they rarely consider the unique aspect of Finnish market. Finland's relatively small population of 5,6 million (Official Statistics Finland, 2024), and their culturally different consumer behaviour might require a different kind of approach. There is a need for research that adapts these global strategies to fit the context of Finnish brands and explores how these local brands can leverage influencer marketing to grow their sales.

1.2.3 Micro-Influencers

Most research has shown that influencer marketing is effective, but often it is not specified that what types of influencers are being used. This creates a gap in understanding how different influencer categories perform, especially micro-influencers. Influencers can be divided into different groups based on their follower count, with three main categories being commonly recognized: a) Micro-influencers [1,000 – 100,000 followers], b) Macro-influencers [100,000 – 1,000,000 followers], and c) Mega-influencers [over 1,000,000 followers] (Conde & Casais, 2023; Fernández-Gómez, Feijoo, & Morante Bonet, 2024; Hunter, 2023). Although there are different definitions for each category depending on how people choose to classify them, in this study, micro-influencers are defined as having 1,000 – 100,000 followers. Based on these criteria, it can be stated that the majority of influencers in Finland fall into the micro-influencer category (Statista Research Department, 2024a). This creates a gap in understanding how different influencer categories perform, especially micro-influencers, making it important to study their effect on brands sales.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

Main Research Question:

How can brands utilize micro-influencers to grow their sales among Generation Z consumers in Finland?

Sub-Research Questions:

What attributes of micro-influencers appeal to Finnish Generation Z consumers?

This question aims to identify the specific characteristics that will help micro-influencers to resonate with the Generation Z consumers.

How do micro-influencer partnerships influence Generation Z's purchase decisions in Finland?

This question aims to explore the effect of these collaborations on aspects like, brand perception, trust building, and their purchase decisions.

What strategies can brands implement to maximize the effectiveness of micro-influencers in Finland?

This question aims to explore effective strategies for Finnish brands to collaborate with micro-influencers, including content creation, campaign planning, and long-term relationship management.

By addressing these questions, we can learn how brands can use micro-influencers to reach Generation Z consumers in Finland. This will help us understand what attracts this audience and how influencer partnerships can influence their buying choices. With these insights, brands can create effective strategies to grow their sales and engage with Generation Z consumers better.

1.4 Limitations

This research faced several limitations that should be considered. While Generation Z is typically defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), this study only included participants who were aged 18 and older. This restricted the study to those born before 2006 and excluded over 30% of the Generation Z individuals who are still under 18. Given that this younger group is also highly active on social media and influenced by digital content, their exclusion may have limited the full understanding of Generation Z preferences on influencer marketing. As a result, the findings of this study may not fully represent the entire Generation Z population, particularly those still in their teenage years, who may have had different preferences on influencer marketing and purchase intentions.

As the study also focused only on the Finnish markets, it targeted people living in Finland. With the population of 5.6 million, it represented a relatively small market (Official Statistics Finland, 2024). While this provided specific insights to Finnish brands and consumers, it limited the generalizability of the findings to other countries brands. The consumer

behaviour, cultural factors, and economic conditions in Finland differed from those in larger or more diverse countries. This means that, even though the study provided valuable insights to Finnish brands, it may not have been directly helpful for brands operating in other countries with different market dynamics.

Focusing on micro-influencers with followers between 1,000 and 100,000 brought limitations to the study. By narrowing the focus to this category of influencers, the research did not consider the potential impact of macro- or mega-influencers, who have larger followings. While micro-influencers are known to create stronger connections with their followers, this limitation excluded the possibility of exploring how influencers with larger followings could impact a brand's visibility and sales. As a result, the study's findings focused on campaigns using micro-influencers and might not have worked for strategies involving influencers with a larger following.

The research used qualitative methods, specifically interviews, which also presented some limitations. The sample size of the interviews was relatively small, and the findings were based on the subjective views of the participants. The participants chosen for the interview were limited to individuals who had already made purchases because of influencer marketing. This focus helped to understand the strategies that brands should use to turn engagements into purchases, which is the main point of the study. However, this also created limitations by excluding people who hadn't bought anything from the influence of influencer marketing, which could have limited how widely the results apply. The interviews were semi-structured to get detailed answers while still following a clear format, and because of this, the interviews were done on a smaller scale. Using this method instead of large-scale data may have made the results less applicable to a wider audience.

1.5 Structure of thesis

This thesis is made up of five main parts: Introduction, Theoretical Framework, Research Methodology, Findings & Analysis and lastly Conclusion. The Introduction explains the topic, why it is important, the research objectives, and questions, and points out key research gaps. The Theoretical Framework goes over important ideas and theories about influencer

marketing, Generation Z, and micro-influencers, giving the background needed for the study. The Research Methodology explains the use of qualitative methods, such as the semi-structured interviews, and how the data was collected and analysed. The Findings and Analysis presents the results, focusing on how micro-influencers can connect with Generation Z. The Discussion explains the results, linking them to the theories and exploring what they mean for brands. The Conclusion sums up the main insights and gives practical advice for brands on using micro-influencers effectively.

Figure 1. *Structure of Thesis*

2 Theoretical framework

This part of the study explains the key ideas related to influencer marketing. First, it defines what influencer marketing is and why it is important for brands today. Then, it looks at how brands choose influencers, focusing on factors like the platform they operate on, and how many followers they have. After that, micro-influencers are defined in more detail, explaining how they can be effective for brands and how they are different from other influencer categories. After that the focus turns on to Generation Z, examining their social media habits, and why they are important for influencer marketing. Finally, the last section explains how brands can measure the success of their campaigns, looking at metrics like engagement, return on investment (ROI), and conversion rate.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has roots that extend far back into the history of advertising, even before modern social media existed. The earliest form of influencer marketing began when brands started working with famous people to help sell their products. One of the first examples was Nancy Green, who became the face of Aunt Jemima in the late 1800s. She helped to grow the popularity of the brand, even though she did not earn much from it. Another early example is Fatty Arbuckle, who promoted cigarettes in the early 1900s, showing how important celebrity endorsements could be. As time went on, big companies like Coca-Cola used well-known characters like Santa Claus to connect with customers. This approach worked well and continued with figures like the Marlboro Man in the 1950s. (Schwartz, 2023)

With the growth of digital media, influencer marketing has become an important strategy for brands, transitioning from working just with celebrities to doing partnerships with different kind of online personalities who have built large, engaged followings (Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). These influencers can be anywhere between micro- and mega-influencers, and they use their authentic connections with their audience to promote products

in a more modern way. This approach allows influencers to effectively influence the opinions and buying decisions of their followers (Yesiloglu & Costello, 2020).

The importance of influencer marketing can be seen in the growth of its usage. Brands are trying to utilize influencers more as it has shown to be more cost effective than traditional marketing (Skydeo, 2024). That's why many companies are investing larger amounts of their marketing budgets towards influencer marketing, seeing it as a way to maximize their return on investment. Compared to traditional marketing methods, which often comes with higher cost, influencer marketing allows brands to reach specific audiences with a smaller budget (Skydeo, 2024). Influencer collaborations often generate higher engagement rates, as consumers are more likely to interact with content that they find authentic and relevant. This means brands are focusing more on creating authentic content with influencer partnerships rather than investing large amounts on traditional marketing.

As previously mentioned, there are several brands that have succeeded in growing their sales with influencer marketing. Daniel Wellington, a luxury watch company, focused their marketing specifically on micro-influencers at the start of their journey. This helped to skyrocket their sales and was accomplished using a relatively small budget. Although, it has been said that similar numbers could have been achieved with traditional marketing, it would have required a much larger budget. (Megaphone, 2018)

As stated before, influencers have evolved from being just celebrities on television to being ordinary people on social media who connect with their audience through authentic content. With their authentic content they shape the opinions and purchasing decisions of their followers. However, influencers are not just marketers, their main goal is to entertain and engage their audience. For many, building a loyal follower base begins as an enjoyable hobby, sharing life on social media, discovering themselves and making new friends along the way. While shaping their community, marketing is often only a secondary pursuit. But as the time goes on, what started as a hobby can turn into their full-time job.

2.2 Influencer Selection

Selecting the right influencer is crucial for brands looking to connect with their target audience effectively. The choice of influencer affects the success of a campaign, as they are the ones who connect the brands to the potential customers. Brands need to evaluate influencers to make sure that their values, niche, and audience match their goals. (Esquivel 2024)

The growth of influencers has led to them being categorised in different ways. Influencers can be often categorised based on their niche, but more often they are categorised by their followings and based on which platform they create content on. By knowing these categories, brands can pick the right influencers for their marketing, who match their target audience and provide the content they need. This will help brands to make their campaigns engagement more effective.

2.2.1 Platforms for Influencer Marketing

Influencers can be categorized by the main social media platform they use, and this is often done because each platform has its own format, audience type, and way of engaging, which shapes how these influencers connect with followers and how brands use these connections for marketing. Based on statistics, the most used social media platforms for influencer marketing in the United States were Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube and Twitter (now known as X) (Statista research department, 2024b). These are also the social media platforms that Generation Z uses most globally (Dixon, 2024). Although these statistics are from the United States and other global sources, it can be assumed that most used social medias among Gen Z's and social media preferences for influencer marketing are quite similar in Finland. Therefore, this research will also focus on these same social media platforms.

Instagram: Instagram is a social media platform which is based on sharing images and using hashtags to create connections. It has grown its popularity since it was launched and in years between 2015 and 2017 it even doubled its user base from 300 to 700 million users.

Compared to other social media platforms like Facebook or X (before known as Twitter), Instagram has a higher level of user engagement. It is being used by over half of the 18 – 29 years old internet users. (Auxier & Anderson, 2021) As this study is focused on Gen Z and only to the ones who are over 18, it is clear that Instagram is a powerful platform to be used for influencer marketing for this generation.

Facebook: Facebook is a social media platform where users can share content such as posts, images, and videos and connect with others through groups, pages, and events. Since Facebook was founded in 2004 it has stayed popular and now has around 2.7 billion active users each month. While younger people are also using other platforms like Instagram and TikTok, Facebook still has a large and engaged audience across many age groups. It is one of the few platforms that attracts people from different generations, making it a strong choice for influencer marketing. (Glenister, 2021, 56-57) Although this study focuses on Gen Z users over 18, Facebook's large user base still includes many from this group, making it a good platform for influencer marketing while targeting them.

TikTok: TikTok is a social media app for creating and sharing short music videos. Like almost every social media platform, also TikTok uses hashtags, and this is done to help reach larger audiences. TikTok has grown in popularity over time and became the most downloaded app in 2020, attracting users of all ages. It started mainly as a platform for dance and entertainment, but it now attracts high-profile brands to use it for marketing. With its fast growth and strong engagement, TikTok has become an important platform for reaching younger audiences. (Glenister, 2021, 58-59) Statistics show that the most common age group on TikTok is 18-24, making it ideal for influencer marketing aimed at Gen Z (Ceci, 2024).

YouTube: YouTube is a video-sharing platform owned by Google, with over 2 billion active users each month. It allows users to upload and share videos on various topics. Unlike highly scripted and expensive content from traditional media, YouTubers, or "content creators," often produce more authentic content that resonates better with their audience. (Glenister, 2021, 50-51) This authenticity has helped YouTube remain a popular platform for influencer marketing, as it allows brands to connect with followers in a more genuine way.

X: X (previously known as Twitter) is a platform where users share short messages called tweets. Unlike Facebook, which is more focused on private conversations, X is designed for public sharing, which lets people express their ideas and thoughts with a larger audience. Tweets are designed to be posted in real time, and they are limited to 140 characters long which is done to keep the messages short and on point. As like other platforms, X also uses hashtags and has very high engagement rate. (Messier, 2014) This engagement helps connect brands and customers, making X a valuable tool for influencers to reach their audiences.

As also mentioned before, to choose the right influencer, brands need to understand the strengths and characteristics of each platform. Different platforms attract different audiences and offer unique ways for influencers to connect with them. By understanding these differences, brands can ensure they choose influencers who align with their marketing goals and effectively engage their target audience.

2.2.2 Influencer Categories by Follower Count

Influencers can be also categorized by their follower count. They can be divided into three main categories based on their followers, which directly impacts their engagement, audience connection, and role in brand partnerships. These categories are micro-influencers, macro-influencers, and mega-influencers, each offering different advantages for marketing strategies. (Conde & Casais, 2023)

When choosing an influencer for partnership, follower count does not tell everything, and other factors should be taken into consideration. These factors are for example, accessibility, authenticity and expertise. As a rule of thumb for brands, it could be said that influencers with larger followings are generally viewed as more knowledgeable and influential, while those with smaller followings often provide better access and a more genuine connection with their audience. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) By grouping influencers into micro, macro, and mega categories, brands can more easily choose partners that match their marketing goals, whether it is building trust in small markets or reaching a wide audience.

2.3 Micro-Influencer

Since this research focuses on micro-influencers, they will be analyzed in more detail. This study focuses on this type of influencer because they are the most common in Finland (Statista Research Department, 2024a). The follower limit that defines influencer categories can be unclear, especially when influencers are active on several social media platforms. For example, well known Finnish influencers Ilari "Kliffa" Mettälä and Nino Ärling use multiple platforms, with similar follower numbers on each. On YouTube, both have about 70,000 subscribers, and on Instagram, Mettälä has around 35,000 followers and Ärling about 24,000. Based on these numbers, both would be considered micro-influencers. However, on TikTok, both have around 180,000 followers, which would place them outside the micro-influencer category. In this study, influencers follower count will be calculated based on their main social media platform and the main social media platform will be considered as the one where they have the most followers. For these influencers, that platform is TikTok, so they are not counted as micro-influencers in our study since their follower count is over 100,000.

Examples of micro-influencers in Finland are for example, Ella Kangasalusta and Aleksi Hakanen, who both are active in many social media platforms, but their main platform is TikTok as they have most followers there. Kangasalusta has about 79,000 followers, and Hakanen has 55,000. Both have worked with different brands, and Kangasalusta even shows a long-term partner in her TikTok bio with a discount code. When analysing their videos, it is clear that the partnership videos are targeted at a specific audience, typically young Finns. Some partnership videos are done in a structured way, while others are more casual, but they all show the influencers' authenticity and provide useful information.

Micro-influencers compete with larger influencers for brand partnerships, but they have their own benefits. They usually cost less and connect more closely with their target audiences. In Finland, almost all (99.8%) companies are small or medium-sized (Yrittäjät, 2023), so micro influencers are a good option for advertising. Working with micro-influencers is more affordable and helps companies to stay connected with local customers, which is very important for businesses with smaller budgets and specific audiences.

For large Finnish companies that work internationally, like Supercell, using micro influencers may not be as effective. Bigger companies usually have wider, global audiences, so it makes more sense for them to work with macro- or mega-influencers who can reach people around the world. Micro-influencers are good at connecting with local or niche audiences, while large companies often need influencers who can reach bigger or international audiences.

Overall, micro-influencers have been found to be more effective than macro or mega-influencers. There have been mixed opinions and studies on the topic, with some suggesting that more followers is always better. In a study conducted by Kay, Mulchay, and Parkinson (2020), the results achieved by micro influencers were compared to the result of macro-influencers. The study proved that advertisements by micro influencers performed better than advertisements by larger influencers. Based on their conclusions and according to their words "less is more." Micro influencers with smaller follower and like counts were proven to be more effective in influencer marketing than macro influencers with larger followings and likes. The study also showed that consumer awareness of a product increased significantly when the advertised content was from micro influencers. The findings also indicate that disclosure of sponsorship increases the likelihood of purchase decisions, with this effect being significantly stronger for micro-influencers than macro-influencers. (Kay et al. 2020)

In another study by Park, Lee, Xiong, Septianto, and Seo (2021), the effectiveness of micro influencers was examined in comparison to mega influencers. Similarly, the study had same type of results, indicating that people were more likely to make a purchase decision based on a micro influencer's advertisement compared to one by a mega-influencer.

2.4 Generation Z

One common way to define Generation Z is by birth years from 1997 to 2012 (Dimock, 2019), but there is not an exact agreement on these years as it is not something officially set by any organization or law. In this study, Generation Z is identified as individuals born between the years 1997 and 2012. Social media began in the 1980s and 1990s with early

forums and online chat systems, but it became widely popular in the 2000s with platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Zeng & Tao, 2023, pp. 24-30). Gen Z's represent a generation that has mostly grown up with social media as part of their daily life. While some of the earlier individuals of this generation experienced part of their childhood without an access to smartphones and the internet, it is still true that most of them have grown in a digital world.

More Gen Z members are gaining access to smartphones and the internet, which makes digital interaction even more important for them. In 2014 only 73% of the teens had access to smartphones, whereas in 2018, just four years later, 95% of teens had access to smartphones. In this four-year period, the percentage of teenagers being online constantly has almost doubled. (Pichler, Kohli & Granitz, 2021)

As previously mentioned, Gen Z values authenticity and transparency in brands. This means they prefer brands that are honest and care about their customers. However, there are many other factors that brands should take in consider when planning marketing for Generation Z. One important factor is Gen Z's social media usage. Out of all generations, Gen Z spends most time in social media (Dixon, 2022), which means they pay close attention to the content, and tend to be more sceptical, making it hard to "fool" them with false or unsupported claims. As a result, they value brands that are trustworthy and have some level of engagement with their customers (IBM, 2017). Another key factor is their screen time, which is higher on average than other generations (Laricchia, 2024). A study by Betteridge, Chien, Hazel, and Simone (2023) found a strong correlation between digital media usage and attention deficit disorder or better known as ADHD. This means that Generation Z individuals' high social media usage affects their attention span. Taking this factor into consideration, companies should create marketing content that is quick, engaging, and visually appealing for this generation.

Although digital marketing to Generation Z is in many ways different, it also has many similarities with marketing to other generations. Munsch's (2021), study examined how well digital marketing works for Generation Z and Millennials. The results show that Millennials and Generation Z share similar digital consumption habits, and both groups have a distracted

online behaviour, which challenges digital marketing effectiveness. Both groups respond better to shorter ads, under 30 seconds, that include popular music, humour, and messages from trusted social media influencers. Social media influencers play a key role in capturing these consumers attention and help them see ads as more relevant and authentic. The study did not find major differences in how digital marketing impacts Generation Z and Millennials.

2.5 Metrics for Success in Influencer Marketing

Measuring the effectiveness of influencer marketing is an essential part of a company's marketing strategy, as it helps to evaluate the success of campaigns and ensures that the invested money bring in the desired results. One of the key metrics is ROI (Return on Investment), which shows how much profit a company has made compared to what they spent. In this case it will look at the money spent on influencer marketing. When calculating ROI, the costs of the whole campaign is taken in consideration, this includes costs such as the money paid for the influencer, other additional marketing expenses for the product or service and any other costs that is related to the campaign. Measuring ROI is important because it helps brands to decide whether influencer marketing is worth it, compared to other marketing methods. The ROI formula is:

$$ROI = Net\ Income \div Cost\ of\ Investment \times 100$$

This formula allows brands to see how much return they have gotten compared to the money and resources spent on the campaign. (Gillis, 2024)

Another important metric is the engagement rate, which measures how well the audience is engaging with the influencer's content. Engagement rate can be calculated by dividing the total interactions on the influencer's posts by their number of followers. This metric shows how actively the audience engages with the content, meaning it would show how strong the connection is between the influencer and their followers. A high engagement rate often indicates that the influencer has built a loyal and engaged following that is likely to respond

positively to brands collaborations. In the other hand low engagement rate means that influencer has probably a lot of followers but they are not engaging with the content.

Influencer marketing can also be measured using other direct metrics, such as conversions and sales tracking. Conversion refers to the actions consumers take after an influencer marketing campaign, such as making a purchase or just clicking a link (Rabhan, 2013). This can be tracked for example through a separate website or link created for the campaign. This allows brands to measure how many customers there are who came through the campaign link and ultimately made a purchase.

Another effective way to measure individual influencer performance is to use a discount code or a unique tracking link for that specific influencer. This allows for precise tracking of how much sales came through the influencer. Discount codes or campaign links are especially useful because they make it easy to track sales as customer are directly linked to a particular influencer. Influencers can share the code with their followers, making it easy to measure the sales generated by the campaign.

However, measuring influencer marketing is challenging in many ways because it is not always possible to directly track the sales generated by an influencer. For example, the purchase decision between an influencer and their follower might happen at multiple stages and on different platforms, making it very difficult to measure sales accurately. In these types of cases, it is important to use various metrics and focus on monitoring long-term effects, such as increased brand awareness or stronger customer loyalty. For contrast, 84% of marketers said it is hard to prove the ROI of individual influencer (Influencer Intelligence, 2020), but overall, measuring influencer marketing is an important part of a brands marketing strategy, but it is not always that simple. Choosing the right measurement methods, such as ROI, engagement rates, and conversion tracking, helps brands to optimize their campaigns and make better decisions regarding influencer partnerships.

3 Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological approach used in this study, focusing on the qualitative research design. It details the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, the sampling process, and the measures taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. The chapter also discusses how this approach supports a deeper understanding of the research problem and provides meaningful insights into the study's objectives.

3.1 Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research is suitable for this study because it focuses on understanding social situations from the participants point of view in their real-life settings, making it particularly suitable for investigating phenomena like the one addressed in this research (Flick, 2006). While quantitative research is centred on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasizes rich, descriptive data. This approach was selected because the study aimed to focus on a smaller, more specific sample that had already been defined. From this small sample, the goal was to gather more precise data on the research topic, and qualitative methods allowed for comprehensive and detailed responses. This method ensures that the collected data reflects the complexity and individuality of participants' responses, which is essential for achieving the study's objectives.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interview

The interviews used a semi-structured method because it was the best fit for this study. This approach was flexible since the questions were pre-planned, but the interviewer could explore new themes or dig deeper into the answers. This made it possible to gather consistent and detailed information about the topic.

The interview structure had three parts. The first part collected basic demographic information, such as the participants age, gender, and estimated monthly income (Appendix

1). The second part focused on their experiences and opinions about influencer marketing. Questions in this section looked at things like influencers trustworthiness, how influencers affected their view of brands, and the differences between micro-influencers and larger influencers. The third part focused on specific purchase decisions, exploring what kind of content is most engaging and what turned their interest into an actual purchase. The questions were carefully designed to move from general to more specific, making the conversation flow naturally and helping participants organize their thoughts. A complete list of interview questions is provided in Appendix 2.

The interviews were held in a place chosen by the participants, either in person or online through platforms like Zoom or Teams. This flexibility made it easy and convenient for participants to join. The interviews were on average 10 – 15 minutes long and they were recorded with the participants consent. The recordings were transcribed word for word to make sure no important details were missed during the analysis. Even though the interviews were relatively short, they provided answers to all the questions and deeper insights into the participants preferences.

Interview Details	
Interviewee 1.	Male, 22, Interview lenght ~ 12,5min.
Interviewee 2.	Male, 22, Interview lenght ~ 11,5min.
Interviewee 3.	Male, 22, Interview lenght ~ 8,5min.
Interviewee 4.	Male, 23, Interview lenght ~ 7min.
Interviewee 5.	Male, 22, Interview lenght ~ 18min.
Interviewee 6.	Female, 22, Interview lenght ~ 9,5min.
Interviewee 7.	Female, 19, Interview lenght ~ 15,5min.
Interviewee 8.	Female, 19, Interview lenght ~ 12min.
Interviewee 9.	Female, 23, Interview lenght ~ 8,5min.
Interviewee 10.	Female, 18, Interview lenght ~ 8,5min.

Table 1. Interview Details

3.3 Qualitative Sampling

Purposive sampling is a way of deliberately choosing people, cases, or materials that are important or relevant to the research (Flick, 2006). Since this study focused on selecting individuals for interviews, purposive sampling was used for this purpose. This method was chosen to ensure that all participants met the specific criteria related to the research questions. The study aimed to find suitable participants who could share their experiences with influencer marketing and its impact on their purchasing decisions. Participants were required to belong to Generation Z, be Finnish residents, and have prior experience with purchasing decisions influenced by micro-influencers.

Participants were recruited for interviews either in person or through social media. In both cases, they were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and checked to see if they fit the criteria. A total of 10 participants were included in the study. This sample size was sufficient to reach data saturation, where additional interviews no longer produced new themes or insights. The sample was also evenly split by gender, with half of the respondents being male and half female. Participants were also chosen to reflect different interests, especially in the kinds of products or services they had bought based on influencer recommendations.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Ensuring validity and reliability is essential for maintaining the credibility and rigor of qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2016). In this study, validity was enhanced through strategies that improved the accuracy and authenticity of the findings, while reliability focused on ensuring consistency in the research process.

Validity was strengthened by comparing the interview data with existing literature on micro-influencer marketing. This approach ensured that the insights gained from participants were situated within a broader theoretical and empirical framework. Since the study targeted Finnish participants and interviews were conducted with Finnish respondents, the interviews were held in Finnish. This approach reduced the risk of language barriers and ensured that

respondents could genuinely and accurately express their views. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and the recordings were transcribed accurately. This process ensured that the transcripts faithfully reflected the insights shared during the interviews, minimizing errors in data interpretation.

Reliability was ensured by standardizing the interview process. All interviews were conducted using the same interview guide, which guaranteed consistency across participants. Additionally, the interviews were audio recorded to ensure that responses were captured accurately and could be analysed reliably. This approach minimized the risk of recall and interpretation errors during data analysis.

4 Findings

In this section, the empirical findings from the semi-structured interviews are presented and compared to insights from previous literature. The findings are used to address the sub-research questions by identifying key attributes of micro-influencers, their influence on Generation Z's purchase decisions, and effective collaboration strategies. Finally, these insights are synthesized to answer the main research question, providing a comprehensive understanding of how brands can utilize micro-influencers to grow sales among Generation Z in Finland.

4.1 Main Findings from the Interview

Based on the answers from the interviews, key themes emerged that help in understanding the phenomenon being studied. The responses also revealed differences between the participants, which can be explained in various ways. Next, these similarities and differences were examined in more detail.

4.1.1 Recurring Themes

The most important themes that came up were the focus on authenticity and trust, the overall brand image, and the importance of its values to consumers. Participants also pointed out critical views about how too much commercialism can hurt influencers' credibility, making successful marketing collaboration more difficult.

The importance of authenticity and trust was strongly repeated in the responses. Participants emphasized that influencers who honestly share their own experiences and personally use the products they recommend were seen as much more trustworthy and convincing. This trust directly affected how much their recommendations influenced purchase decisions. Social media platforms, especially Instagram and YouTube, were viewed as key channels for this, as their visual nature brought products closer to the consumer's everyday life. At the

same time, using these platforms strengthened consumers' connection with the influencers' content and supported their decision-making.

The importance of brand values and communication was highlighted in many interviews. Consumers felt that brands whose values reflected their own were more appealing, and influencer collaborations were seen as most successful when there was a clear value-based connection between the brand and the influencer. This alignment strengthened trust in the brand and its products, especially when the values were shown in influencer content through concrete examples or stories that evoked emotions, such as inspiration or relatability. Appealing to emotions was a key factor, as many participants mentioned that excitement and connection with the influencer’s content were crucial for their purchase decisions.

At the same time, critical perspectives were also raised in the interviews, especially regarding the balance between commercialism and authenticity. While the commercial aspect of influencer marketing was accepted as part of modern marketing, excessive commercialism or overly obvious product promotion weakened the influencer’s credibility. This could make consumers more skeptical of the influencer’s recommendations and lead them to avoid making purchase decisions. Overall, the ratio of commercial collaborations to an influencer's regular content greatly influenced how authentic and trustworthy consumers perceived the collaboration to be.

4.1.2 Key Differences

The interviews revealed several exceptions that differed from other participants' preferences and brought different perspectives on the effects of influencer marketing. While most respondents found micro-influencers more trustworthy and authentic, a few preferred more well-known and larger influencers, such as famous actors or athletes. This contrasts with the common belief that smaller influencers are seen as more personal and closer to the community.

Additionally, some respondents felt that influencers had little role in their purchase decisions. According to them, they would have purchased the product regardless of who

marketed it because the content itself was so well-made and interesting. In these cases, the success of influencer marketing seemed to depend more on the quality of the content and the interest it generated rather than the influencer's personality or follower count.

These exceptions show that opinions are not always aligned, even when certain ideas about influencer marketing are widely accepted. This highlights how individual views can influence the reception of marketing strategies.

Category	Details
Recurring Themes	- **Authenticity and Trust:** Influencers who genuinely share personal experiences are more trustworthy and impactful on purchase decisions. Social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube strengthen these connections. - **Brand Values:** Influencer collaborations succeed when brand values align with consumers values, especially when emotional stories are used. - **Commercialism Concerns:** Excessive product promotion or over-commercialization harms influencer credibility and reduces purchase intentions. Balance in content is essential for authenticity.
Key Differences	- **Preference for Larger Influencers:** While many valued micro-influencers, some preferred well known influencers like celebrities or athletes. - **Content Quality Over Influencer Role:** Some participants prioritized the quality of content over the influencer's role, stating they would purchase the product regardless of the marketer if the content was engaging. - **Divergent Views:** These differences highlight the individuality of consumer opinions and their impact on the effectiveness of marketing strategies.

Table 2. Main Findings from Interviews

5 Discussion

5.1 Comparison to Previous Research

The findings of this study show both similarities and differences compared to earlier research. Comparing the results helps to understand how they relate to previous studies and what new insights they might provide.

5.1.1 Findings That Support Previous Literature

Several findings from this study align with earlier research, particularly regarding the role of micro-influencers. Conde and Casais (2023) highlight the influence of micro-influencers through their close and trustworthy interactions, which help build consumer trust. This was also evident in the interviews, where respondents emphasized the importance of authenticity in influencing their purchasing decisions.

Additionally, this study supports Lim et al. (2017) findings that the effectiveness of influencer marketing depends on the credibility of sponsored messages. Interviewees highlighted that commercial partnerships are acceptable when they align with the influencer's values and content. This reinforces the idea that the compatibility of values between influencers and brands is essential, even in local markets.

Munschin's (2021) study partly supports the findings from this research's interviews. Both emphasize that factors related to the content of ads, such as humor and the influencer's trustworthiness, play a key role in the effectiveness of ads. However, the interviewees particularly focused on the importance of humor and the influencer's trustworthiness. Many mentioned that humorous elements make ads memorable and entertaining. Also, the perceived trustworthiness of the influence increased their interest in the advertised product or service.

5.1.2 Differences to Previous Literature

The research findings mostly align with previous studies, but there are also some differences and new perspectives. The main difference is how Gen Z consumers perceive the length of ads. Munsch's (2021) study showed that short, visually appealing ads lasting less than 30 seconds keep the viewer's interest and influence purchase decisions. However, in this study, the participants did not specifically mention that ads should be short, even though previous studies have emphasized the importance of short ads for this target group.

This may suggest that consumers value the content and authenticity of ads more than their length. Therefore, while previous studies found similarities, this study also identified differences that may relate to the individual preferences and habits of Gen Z consumers. This indicates that consumer preferences regarding ad length may vary, and the popularity of short ads may not be as strong as previously thought.

Although the study by Masuda et al. (2022) found that influencers played a significant role in purchase decisions, the interviews showed that some respondents felt their role was quite small. These respondents said they would have bought the product even if it had been promoted by someone else because the collaboration video was so well-made and engaging. This suggests that the quality of the content and its ability to generate interest and trust may be more important factors than the influencer’s personality or number of followers.

These observations highlight that in influencer marketing, the focus is not always solely on the influencer's personality or number of followers, but rather on how influencers and brands succeed in creating authentic and engaging content that resonates with the target audience.

Category	Details
Findings That Support Previous Literature	- **Role of Micro-Influencers:** Build trust through authenticity (Conde & Casais, 2023). - **Credibility of Sponsored Messages:** Alignment with influencer values enhances credibility (Lim et al., 2017). - **Humor and Trustworthiness:** Memorable ads rely on humor and trustworthiness (Munschin, 2021).
Differences to Previous Literature	- **Ad Length Importance:** Gen Z did not emphasize short ads (<30 seconds), contrasting with Munsch's (2021) findings. - **Content Quality Over Influencer Profile:** High-quality content outweighed personality or follower count (Masuda et al., 2022).

Table 3. Comparison to Previous Research

6 Conclusions

This section examines how the study's findings answer the research questions, meet the research objectives, and lastly, provide conclusions from the thesis. First, the sub-research questions will be discussed, and based on their answers, the main research question will also be addressed.

6.1 Addressing the Research Questions

Sub-research question 1: What attributes of micro-influencers appeal to Finnish Generation Z consumers?

Based on the interviews, Finnish Generation Z consumers are particularly drawn to micro-influencers' authenticity, relatability, and ability to showcase different aspects of life. Several respondents mentioned that they value influencers who share ordinary everyday moments and are willing to show their flaws as well. This makes the influencer seem more human and approachable, rather than too distant.

The age and gender of the influencer were also seen as factors that made them more relatable. Respondents often felt a stronger connection to influencers who were the same age or gender as them. Some also mentioned that if the influencer's values were similar to their own, it made them feel more positive about the influencer.

However, the most important factor was the influencer's ability to show their life honestly, including both the good and the bad moments. This kind of content was seen as more relatable because it felt real and natural. This authenticity built trust and made the influencer seem closer, which helped influence the purchase decisions.

Sub-research question 2: How do micro-influencer partnerships influence Generation Z's purchase decisions in Finland?

Micro-influencer partnerships significantly influence Generation Z's purchase decisions in Finland, particularly in areas related to brand perception, trust-building, and purchasing decisions. The interviews revealed that Generation Z values authenticity and honesty in influencer marketing. If the collaboration between a micro-influencer and a brand is seen as genuine and aligned with the influencer's personal values, it can strengthen the brand's credibility and increase consumer trust. Interviewees mentioned that they are more likely to view a brand positively if the influencer promoting it shares the same values and lifestyle.

On the other hand, if a brand uses influencers who do not share the same values as the brand or target audience, it can damage the brand's reputation and reduce the likelihood of purchase decisions. Generation Z finds it important that the influencers a brand collaborates with are credible and genuinely connected to the brand. This strengthens the brand's perception and makes consumers view it as trustworthy.

Overall, influencer marketing was seen as a positive element in building a brand's image and emphasizing its relevance. A brand that works with micro-influencers is perceived as modern and up to date, which positively influences Generation Z's purchase decisions. Consumers feel that the brand is "on the same wavelength" as the influencer, which increases their willingness to make purchases from that brand.

Sub-research question 3: What strategies can brands implement to maximize the effectiveness of micro-influencers in Finland?

Brands can maximize the effectiveness of micro-influencers in Finland by focusing on strategies that emphasize authenticity, long-term relationships, and engaging content creation. Interviewees stressed that micro-influencers should use the products or services they promote themselves. This boosts consumer trust, as it suggests that the influencer believes in the product's effectiveness and is not just promoting it for financial gain.

Moreover, consumers particularly valued long-term partnerships. When a brand repeatedly collaborates with the same micro-influencers, the partnership is perceived as more credible and authentic. This continuity helps build consumer trust and creates the impression that the influencer genuinely supports the products they promote. While short-term campaigns can yield quick results, long-term collaborations are crucial for establishing credibility and fostering long-term commitment.

It is important to note that excessive visibility through multiple influencers can raise doubts among consumers. Many interviewees felt that this could signal that the brand is focusing on mass marketing rather than the quality of the product or service. Therefore, it is crucial for brands to carefully select which micro-influencers they collaborate with, favoring influencers with a genuinely engaged audience. The most effective influencers in the micro category were seen to be those with more than 10,000 but fewer than 100,000 followers.

Social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok emerged as the most popular ones (Statista research department, 2024b). Therefore, brands should particularly focus on utilizing these platforms. Additionally, discount codes proved to be an effective way to increase purchasing intent. They not only lower the purchase threshold but also provide brands with a clear way to track the success of the collaboration and assess whether continuing the partnership is worthwhile.

Finally, many interviewees emphasized that the choice of influencer is one of the most critical decisions for a brand. The effectiveness of micro-influencers largely depends on how well their content and values align with the brand's goals. Allowing influencers the freedom to create content in their own style, including for advertising, enables more natural and personalized communication, which resonates particularly well with Generation Z.

Main research question: How can brands utilize micro-influencers to grow their sales among Generation Z consumers in Finland?

Since all sub-research questions have now been answered, we can now give a clearer answer to the main research question. Based on the study, brands can use micro-influencers to

increase their sales among Generation Z in Finland by focusing on the following key factors: authenticity, content and collaboration strategies. Now, let's look at these factors in more detail.

As previously mentioned, the use of influencer marketing was generally seen as positive, as it was perceived to communicate the brand's modernity. However, one key finding was that an excessive number of influencer collaborations can negatively impact consumers' purchasing decisions. When a product or service is promoted by a large number of influencers, the campaign is easily perceived as too commercial and inauthentic.

Choosing the right influencers is very important. If an influencer feels too distant or fake, people are less likely to buy the product. Overall, the most important qualities of an influencer are being real and relatable. Generation Z values influencers whose values, personality, and content match their own. The quality of the influencer's content also matters a lot. Campaigns that seem too focused on selling or don't show the influencer's personal style are less appealing to Generation Z. Influencers should have more freedom to create ads because this leads to more natural and personal content that connects better with consumers.

The content of the ads is also very important. Simply showing the product is often not enough, as Generation Z values entertaining and storytelling elements, such as humor or an interesting narrative. At the same time, they expect the ad to provide enough factual information about the product, making it easier and quicker to make a purchase decision. In some cases, a visually high-quality ad alone was enough to influence the purchase decision, highlighting the importance of diverse content creation.

Brands should also focus on building long-term partnerships with micro-influencers. These relationships help strengthen trust among consumers and increase the brand's credibility. The authenticity of influencer marketing can be enhanced by ensuring that influencers actually use the products or services they promote. This helps consumers believe in the quality of the products or services, which is especially important for Generation Z.

6.2 Conclusion

Based on the analysis and collected data, it can be summarized that micro-influencers play a significant role when brands aim to engage customers and influence their purchasing decisions. Micro-influencers provide companies with the opportunity to reach highly targeted audiences, especially among younger groups like Generation Z. This generation particularly values influencers authenticity and personality, qualities that micro-influencers can convey more effectively than macro- and mega-influencers who reach a broader audience. A key feature of Generation Z is also their strong connection to digital platforms and social media, which makes micro-influencers especially effective at reaching them.

The study revealed that the alignment of values between micro-influencers and brands, as well as the influencers' ability to create authentic connections with their followers, are key factors in successful influencer marketing. By focusing on these aspects, brands can build trust, increase visibility, and ultimately drive purchasing decisions. When a brand successfully chooses the right micro-influencers, they can achieve greater engagement and loyalty by considering the needs and values of the target audience. Additionally, the local presence of micro-influencers allows for deeper connections with the target groups, which is especially important in smaller geographic markets like Finland. Regarding the Finnish market, it does not differ significantly from other global trends, but it is important to note that all the participants in the study were Finnish, making the research particularly focused on the Finnish market.

In conclusion, micro-influencers provide brands with an effective tool for engaging local customers and increasing sales, as long as the collaboration is carefully planned. This requires businesses to understand the needs and values of their target audience and select influencers who can authentically represent the brand. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of micro-influencers and offer practical recommendations for brands looking to successfully leverage this approach in the Finnish market.

6.3 Future Research Opportunities and Limitations

The small sample size and short interview times in this study reduce the variety of perspectives and make it harder to apply the findings to a larger population. Also, since the study focuses only on Finnish Generation Z consumers, the results may not be relevant to other regions or groups. These limitations suggest many chances for future research to expand and improve the study.

Future research could benefit from having a larger sample size to include a more varied group of participants and conducting longer, more detailed interviews to gain deeper insights into their views. Combining quantitative methods, like surveys or experiments, with qualitative approaches could help make the results more general and statistically reliable. Expanding the research to include other regions or cultural settings beyond Finland could give a broader understanding of how micro-influencers affect different populations.

By addressing these areas, future research could offer a deeper understanding of micro-influencer marketing's potential, providing brands with practical strategies to maximize their impact.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Demographics

Demographics		Participants
Age:	18-20	3
	21-23	7
Gender:	Male	5
	Female	5
	Other/Don’t want to answer	0
Estimated Monthly Income	0-1000€	6
	1001-2000€	1
	2001-3000€	3

Appendix 2. Interview Questions

1. Can you share an example of an influencer making you buy something? What convinced you?
2. What makes you trust an influencer's advice?
3. How does it change your view of a brand when an influencer promotes it?
4. What type of influencer feels the most relatable to you? Why?
5. How are micro-influencers (1000 – 100 000) recommendations different from bigger influencers (+100 000)?
6. What kind of content from micro-influencers feels most real to you and on what platform? (stories, tutorials, reviews, plain ads) Why?
7. Does seeing a product from different influencers make you more interested? How?
8. What could brands do to make micro-influencer promotions more engaging?
9. What was the main reason you turned your interest into a purchase decision?