



## **The impact of influencer marketing on consumer purchasing decisions**

Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT

Bachelor's Programme in Business Administration, Bachelor's thesis

International Marketing

2025

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Examiner: Postdoctoral Researcher, Titta Pitman

## ABSTRACT

Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT

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Business Administration

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Examiner: Postdoctoral Researcher, Titta Pitman

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This bachelor's thesis investigates how influencer marketing influences consumer purchasing decisions through the application of the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) model. The aim of the study is to explore how influencers affect consumer behavior from initial brand awareness to purchase action, with particular focus on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook.

The research was conducted using a qualitative method, collecting data through an openended questionnaire. Ten Finnish participants who actively engage with influencer content on social media were selected through purposeful sampling. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the findings were interpreted through the lens of the AIDA model.

The results identified four key themes that influence purchasing behavior which were perceived authenticity and trust, influencer characteristics, platform and content style preferences, and conversion triggers supported by community validation. The study revealed that influencers with smaller followings were perceived as more relatable and trustworthy than celebrity influencers. Authenticity, transparency, and emotional storytelling emerged as the most influential factors in shaping consumer attitudes and driving decisions.

The study concludes that influencer marketing is most effective when it fosters emotional connections and trust through personalized and platform-specific strategies. The findings offer practical implications for marketers, suggesting that campaigns built on genuine influencer-consumer relationships are more successful in leading followers through the AIDA process to conversion.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Lappeenrannan-Lahden teknillinen yliopisto LUT

LUT-kauppakorkeakoulu

Liiketalouden koulutusohjelma

Elias Kantonen

## **Vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin vaikutus kuluttajien ostopäätöksiin**

Kandidaatintutkielma

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37 sivua, 4 kuvaa, 4 taulukkoa ja 1 liite

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Tässä kandidaatintutkielmassa tutkitaan, kuinka vaikuttajamarkkinointi vaikuttaa kuluttajien ostopäätöksiin AIDA-mallin (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) avulla. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, miten vaikuttajat ohjaavat kuluttajien käyttäytymistä tietoisuudesta ostopäätökseen erityisesti sosiaalisen median alustoilla, kuten TikTokissa, Instagramissa, YouTubessa ja Facebookissa.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena avoimella kyselylomakkeella. Kohdennetun otannan avulla valittiin kymmenen suomalaista osallistujaa, jotka seuraavat aktiivisesti vaikuttajia sosiaalisessa mediassa. Aineisto analysoitiin temaattisen analyysin keinoin, ja tulokset tulkittiin AIDA-mallin kautta.

Tuloksista nousi esiin neljä keskeistä teemaa, jotka vaikuttavat kuluttajien ostopäätöksiin: koettu aitous ja luottamus, vaikuttajien ominaisuudet, alusta- ja sisältötyylin mieltymykset sekä yhteisön validointiin perustuvat konversiotriggerit. Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että pienemmän seuraajamäärän omaavat vaikuttajat koettiin samaistuttavammiksi ja luotettavammiksi kuin julkisuuden henkilöt. Aitous, läpinäkyvyys ja tunteisiin vetoava tarinankerronta nousivat merkittäviksi tekijöiksi kuluttajien asenteiden ja päätösten muovaajina.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että vaikuttajamarkkinointi on tehokkainta silloin, kun se rakentaa tunnesidettä ja luottamusta yksilöllisten ja alustakohtaisten strategioiden avulla. Tulokset tarjoavat käytännön näkökulmia markkinoijille ja viittaavat siihen, että aidot vaikuttajakuluttajasuhteet johtavat todennäköisemmin AIDA-mallin mukaiseen ostopolkuun ja konversioon.

## DECLARATION OF AI USAGE

I, Elias Kantonen declare that I have used AI, specifically ChatGPT by OpenAI, during the proofreading part of this thesis titled **”The impact of influencer marketing on consumer purchasing decisions”**.

I confirm that I have used ChatGPT solely for proofreading purposes. No AI tools were involved in creating research content, conducting data analysis, or contributing to any essential elements of the research process. Any AI-assisted changes were limited to proofreading and were thoroughly reviewed and revised by me to maintain accuracy and consistency with the research goals.

This statement is provided in full transparency to acknowledge the limited use of AI in preparing this thesis.

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# 1 Introduction

Influencer marketing has become a dominant strategy in digital marketing, transforming how brands interact with their consumers. The growth of social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube has changed the way consumers seek information, compare products, and make purchasing decisions. Influencers, who have substantial followings on these platforms, are not only promoting products but also setting trends, shaping opinions, and influencing consumer purchasing decisions, all while building trust with their audiences. (Freberg et al. 2011)

The interactive nature of social media platforms increases the effectiveness of influencers by allowing consumers to directly engage with influencers, ask questions, and share experiences, thus strengthening the authenticity of marketing (De Veirman et al. 2017). However, one of the major challenges that brands face is measuring the Return on Investment (ROI) of influencer marketing. Even though outcomes like brand awareness, customer interaction, and higher sales are commonly linked to influencer marketing, these results are not always measurable or easily connectable to specific influencer activities. This can make it challenging for brands to completely assess the effectiveness of their campaigns. To battle with this problem many companies are testing sentiment tracking, AI-based technologies, and custom links to measure the return of investments better, but these methods are still developing and require more improvements (Bell, Olukemi & Brooklyn 2024).

Social media has significantly shaped word of mouth marketing, particularly by influencing consumer purchasing decisions. It has been shown that a large number of consumers trust influencer endorsements over traditional advertising methods, perceiving them as more genuine and relatable (Lou & Yuan 2019). Increasing reliance on influencers brings out the need for further exploration into how influencers affect purchasing decisions throughout the consumer decision making process.

Influencer marketing continues to experience rapid growth, with the industry projected to reach a market size over 30 billion in 2025, reflecting a remarkable annual growth rate of over 35%. This growth is fueled by higher investments in influencer led campaigns, AI-driven

optimization tools, and the growth of social commerce, making influencer marketing a major player in digital advertising. (Influencer Marketing Hub 2025)

This study aims to explore how influencer marketing influences consumer purchasing decisions, focusing on how influencers shape consumer attitudes, behaviors, and decision making. The study will examine how different social media platforms impact consumer purchasing decisions and identify which influencer traits are seen as the most important.

### 1.1 Research objectives and questions

The primary focus of this research is to look into how social media influencers impact consumer purchasing decisions, focusing on the decision-making process from initial awareness to final action.

The main research question is:

*How does influencer marketing on social media platforms (such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube) influence consumer purchasing decisions?*

Sub-questions will examine specific aspects of this question:

- 1. How does the perceived relationship or connection between influencers and their followers affect consumer purchasing decisions?*
- 2. What characteristics of influencers have the most significant impact on purchasing decisions?*

These sub-questions aim to provide more details into platform-specific effects, how influencers influence consumer purchasing decisions, and the traits that make influencers most persuasive in driving consumer purchases.

## 1.2 Previous research

In recent years, influencer marketing has gained considerable focus, with a variety of studies exploring its extensive use across multiple platforms and industries, as well as how it can be used effectively. The reason for that is that brands are more aware of its influence on shaping consumer purchasing decisions. Research by De Veirman et al. (2017) emphasizes that the perceived credibility and relatability of influencers are crucial factors in their ability to affect consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions. Influencers are increasingly seen as trusted figures who can drive brand awareness, often outperforming traditional advertising (Freberg et al. 2011).

Despite significant research from the brand's perspective, there is a gap in studies that explore how influencer marketing affects consumers at each stage of their decision-making process. Lou & Yuan (2019) found that younger consumers like millennials and younger are more engaged with influencer content and tend to trust influencer recommendations more than other age groups, suggesting that influencer marketing is particularly effective among younger demographics.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing varies across social media platforms due to their unique features and user engagement patterns. Previous studies have shown that Instagram's visual-centric format is particularly effective for promoting lifestyle products, using imagery and aesthetics, while TikTok's short-form, viral video style promotes spontaneous purchasing decisions, capitalizing on its dynamic content. YouTube's long-form content drives engagement and brand recall, while Instagram's visual approach facilitates quick consumer interactions. Facebook, despite lower engagement, remains valuable due to its broad reach and diverse user base. (Lou, Taylor & Zhou 2023)

It has been studied that an influencer's authenticity, expertise, and consistency are essential to building trust with their followers. Influencers who maintain strong, authentic relationships with their audience are more likely to influence purchasing decisions, especially when their values align with their followers' interests (Lou & Yuan 2019). Interestingly, smaller influencers, or nano-influencers, have shown to generate stronger consumer engagement due to their ability to form more intimate connections with their audiences, which drives higher purchase intentions (Beichert et al. 2024).

### 1.3 Theoretical framework

This study will build on previous research by integrating key theories related to consumer decision making and influencer marketing. The theoretical framework will use the AIDA Model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) to understand how influencer marketing impacts consumer decisions at different stages of the purchase journey (Wong et al. 2024). Figure 1 below illustrates this theoretical framework, showing how the AIDA model is applied to analyze the influence of social media marketing on consumer behavior.



Figure 1. Theoretical framework

The AIDA model includes several stages in the consumer decision making process: Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. At the attention stage, influencers capture consumer attention with engaging visuals and product showcases (Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin c2015). In the interest stage, influencers spark interest by sharing product reviews and personal experiences. In the desire stage, influencers create an emotional connection by demonstrating how products align with the consumer's lifestyle or aspirations. For example, influencers often use storytelling to share personal experiences with a product or lifestyle aspirations to build desire by helping consumers see the product as essential to their life goals (Baghel 2023). Finally, in the action stage, influencers prompt immediate purchasing decisions through calls to action, such as discount codes or links to product pages (Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin 2015).

#### 1.4 Research methodology

To explore how influencer marketing influences consumer purchasing decisions, this study will be conducted with qualitative research method. An open-ended survey will be distributed to social media users who follow influencers, assessing their attitudes toward influencer recommendations, the perceived credibility of influencers, and ultimately how these factors influence their purchasing decisions.

#### 1.5 Delimitations of the research

This research will focus exclusively on influencer marketing through social media platforms, excluding influencers in traditional media channels such as television and print. The study will target social media users in Finland who actively engage with influencers, ensuring that the research accurately reflects consumer purchasing decisions in relation to influencer content. However, it would be beneficial to consider a more global perspective, especially given how influencer marketing strategies vary significantly across regions. For example, platforms like WeChat in China or LINE in Asia have their own unique cultural dynamics and influencer practices that differ from those in Western markets.

#### 1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organized into six interconnected chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive exploration of how influencer marketing affects consumer purchasing decisions.

The first chapter lays the groundwork by introducing the research topic and outlining the central aims of the study. It presents the background and motivation for examining influencer marketing, outlines the research objectives and questions, and defines the study's scope through a discussion of its delimitations. Additionally, it briefly introduces the theoretical framework, and the qualitative approach adopted in the study.

The second chapter delves into the theoretical foundation, focusing on the AIDA model, which serves as the guiding analytical framework for this research. This chapter also reviews

relevant academic literature on influencer marketing, consumer behavior, and platform-specific user engagement, providing the conceptual basis for interpreting empirical data.

The third chapter outlines the research methodology, explaining the rationale for using a qualitative approach and an open-ended questionnaire as the primary data collection method. It details the sample selection process, data gathering procedures, and the use of thematic analysis to identify patterns within the responses. The chapter also explains how the AIDA model informed both the design of the questionnaire and the structure of the data analysis.

The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings based on insights from ten Finnish social media users who actively engage with influencer content. The findings are organized into four core themes: perceived authenticity and trust, influencer characteristics, platform and content preferences, and conversion triggers influenced by social proof and community engagement and are discussed in relation to the stages of the AIDA model.

The fifth chapter discusses the findings in light of the research questions and existing literature. It addresses both sub-questions and the main research question, analyzing how emotional connection, influencer traits, and platform dynamics shape consumer decisionmaking. This discussion bridges the empirical data with the theoretical framework, offering a nuanced interpretation of the results.

Finally, the sixth chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing the key insights derived from the study and reflecting on their implications for marketing professionals. It also acknowledges the study's limitations and proposes directions for future research, particularly regarding emerging trends such as AI-generated influencers and the evolving expectations of consumers in digital environments.

## 2 Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundation for the research, which is built around the AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action). The AIDA model offers a comprehensive understanding of how consumers respond to marketing messages, specifically within the context of influencer marketing. By integrating the AIDA model with consumer purchasing behavior, this research provides a strong foundation for analyzing how influencer marketing shapes consumer decisions in the digital era. This chapter reviews key literature, positioning the current research in line with contemporary academic perspectives on influencer marketing and consumer behavior.

### 2.1 Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is a modern digital way of communication. Influencer marketing channels are mostly social media platforms where influencers post interesting content on their accounts daily to build a large following. The parties involved in influencer marketing are the influencer itself and the company. An influencer receives free promotional products and possibly money from the company when the company asks influencers to support and advertise and share their opinion on their products on social media. (Bakker 2018)

In a commercial sense, influencer marketing is a form of advertising. The influencer is a big part of the customer's purchase decision process. When an influencer publishes an advertisement that has been paid for, it must be stated in the post so that the audience can recognize the paid and voluntary recommendations from each other. (Bakker 2018)

Influencer marketing has become one of the most influencing forces in modern digital marketing, using the influence of social media personalities to shape consumer behaviors and attitudes. The rise of social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube has significantly changed the way brands communicate with their audience. Kithinji (2023) highlights how influencer marketing is particularly effective in engaging digital consumers and influencing purchasing decisions, particularly in the Kenyan market. This form of

marketing involves individuals who have built a significant following and can impact their audience's opinions through authentic content and endorsements (Shona & Chuubi 2024).

The influence of social media celebrities is particularly noteworthy. Zhang (2022) demonstrates that human images used in digital marketing significantly influence purchase intention, as consumers are more likely to engage with content when they see familiar or relatable figures promoting products. Influencers cultivate trust by presenting themselves as credible and authentic, which is central to their success in driving consumer actions (Johansen & Guldvik 2017).

In the context of influencer marketing, the distinction between paid and earned content is significant. Studies have shown that influencer credibility and parasocial relationships influence consumer purchase intentions. It was found that when the followers feel they are like the influencer they are following, it strengthens one-sided emotional connections, while physical attractiveness shows mixed results. The study suggests that the authenticity of influencer endorsements, whether paid or earned, plays a key role in shaping consumer trust and purchase decisions, with earned content often seen as more authentic and trustworthy. (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) This authenticity, combined with influencers' personal storytelling, helps forge strong emotional connections that drive consumer behavior (Baghel 2023).

However, influencer marketing is not without its limitations. While much of the research focuses on its benefits, issues such as influencer fatigue, oversaturation of sponsored content, and growing consumer skepticism about the authenticity of influencer endorsements must also be acknowledged. Ethical concerns, such as undisclosed sponsorships or influencers promoting products that don't align with their values, can negatively affect consumer trust and behavior.

## 2.2 The AIDA model

The AIDA model was originally developed by E. St. Elmo Lewis in 1898, and it remains a fundamental and widely used framework for understanding the consumer decision-making process. It divides the process of buying into four consecutive stages: attention, interest, desire, and action, each reflecting a psychological phase that the consumers usually go through when they come across marketing content. (Aryal 2005)

Initially created to support traditional sales processes, the AIDA model has since been adapted across various marketing and communication contexts, including advertising, branding, digital marketing, and more recently, influencer marketing. It continues to offer a valuable structure for analyzing how external stimuli, such as promotional content or influencer recommendations, can move consumers from awareness to action. (Petit et al. 2011)

The AIDA model illustrates how individuals react to marketing efforts and how those responses change as they move through the journey of making a decision. Each phase involves a different degree of involvement, requiring marketers to use targeted strategies to guide and steer consumers to the next phase. For instance, marketers must first capture consumers' attention before they can spark the interest of the consumer and then proceed to nurture it into desire and eventually it leads to action. The model's step-by-step framework is especially valuable not only in consumer marketing but also in fields like intellectual property (IP) strategy, where building awareness and encouraging behavior change also unfolds in similarly staged manner. (Petit et al. 2011)

When applied to influencer marketing, AIDA proves particularly relevant. Social media platforms naturally support each phase of the model, enabling influencers to guide followers from initial exposure to a product all the way to the point of purchase. Through visually compelling posts, personal storytelling, and interactive content, influencers are able to move their audience through the AIDA stages in a seamless and engaging way. The model's successful adaptation in other domains, such as IP awareness in small and medium-sized enterprises, highlights its flexibility and ongoing relevance in analyzing behavior-driven processes. (Petit et al. 2011)

### 2.2.1 Attention

The first phase of the AIDA model Attention is essential in influencer marketing, as it marks the consumer's first point of contact with a brand or product. In today's saturated digital spaces, gaining consumer attention requires more than just visibility, it demands creativity and strategic presentation. Influencers excel at this by producing content that is visually dynamic, emotionally engaging, and platform optimized. According to Kithinji (2023), tools

like Reels and Stories on Instagram or short-form videos on TikTok help influencers stand out in a crowded feed. Zhang (2022) further emphasizes that consumers are especially drawn to influencers who appear authentic and relatable.

This process reflects broader principles in digital communication, where catching attention often depends on emotionally charged content, bold imagery, and personalized messaging. Ghirvu (2013) highlights how interactive and entertainment-oriented content can be structured to pull viewers into a branded experience from the very beginning. Visual elements and storytelling techniques are key for these formats, because they capture the viewers' attention and raise awareness of the brand or product. In the context of influencer marketing this occurs when influencers post seamlessly blends into the user's social media feed, drawing interest while attaining a commercial purpose.

### 2.2.2 Interest

After capturing attention, the next step is to nurture Interest. This stage involves deepening the consumer's engagement by providing them with relevant and appealing content. Influencers often achieve this by seamlessly integrating products into their routines or personal stories, allowing audiences to understand how the product functions in real life (Sokolova & Kefi 2020). Johansen and Guldvik (2017) point out that authenticity during this stage is crucial, as consumers seek trustworthy sources before considering a product further.

Interest is also reinforced when influencers deliver informative content reviews, comparisons, or how-to guides that adds practical value. Mensah and Amenuvor (2022) argue that this kind of educational storytelling fosters cognitive engagement and strengthens brand associations. Ghirvu (2013) reinforces this idea by suggesting that persuasive content works best when it provides both information and entertainment in a way that feels natural within the user's experience. Instead of coming across as obvious advertising, the product details become part of a compelling and enjoyable story that keeps the audience engaged and interested.

### 2.2.3 Desire

Desire represents the stage where consumers develop a psychological need for the product. According to Baghel (2023) and Prader (2021), influencers are highly effective in creating desire through emotional storytelling and personal connections. The parasocial relationships one sided emotional bonds that followers form with influencers play a significant role in this process (Leite & Baptista 2021). For instance, micro-influencers and influencers that have strong connections with their followers tend to generate stronger desire in their followers because of the more intimate, genuine connections they build (Shona & Chuubi 2024).

The enthusiasm influencers express for a product further drives consumer desire. (Liu & Zheng 2024) highlights that when influencers display passion and authenticity, it enhances the perceived sincerity of their endorsements, making it more likely that followers will desire the product.

### 2.2.4 Action

The last stage of the AIDA model is Action, where the consumer takes steps to purchase the product. Influencers help convert desire into action by providing clear calls to action, such as links, discount codes, or direct recommendations (Gross & von Wangenheim 2022). According to Ojagh et al. (2023), the action stage is heavily influenced by the trust consumers have in the influencer. When an influencer is seen as authentic and relatable, consumers are more inclined to act on their recommendations.

The concept of social proof plays a key role in motivating consumers to take action, because consumers are often influenced by seeing others engaging with a product. Leite and Baptista, 2021 note that seeing an influencer's followers using or talking about a product can trigger a sense of social validation, making followers more likely to make a purchase. The functionality of social media platforms, such as shopping tags on Instagram, simplify the purchasing process, making the transition from desire to action easier (Song et al. 2021).

It is also crucial to note that the journey from desire to action may not always follow a linear path, as consumers often revisit stages or delay their purchases. Additionally, platform

algorithms and digital features, such as Instagram's algorithm that focuses on certain types of content or integrated shopping tools, can influence how consumers engage with content and make purchasing decisions.

### 3 Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how influencer marketing influences consumers' purchasing behavior on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate when the goal is to explore how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences, especially in complex and evolving digital environments. As Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2022) point out, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of interpretation and aims to uncover meanings from participants own viewpoints, making it well-suited for studies that seek to understand human behavior in context. Additionally, the inductive nature of this methodology supports the discovery of new insights, as it allows patterns and interpretations to emerge directly from the data rather than imposing predefined assumptions. This studies approach allowed a rich examination of how individuals engage with influencer content and how these interactions affect their attitudes and purchasing decisions.

The theoretical foundation of the study was based on the AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action), which helped structure the research design and served as a tool for interpreting consumer responses. The AIDA model outlines the typical stages of a marketing driven decision-making process and allowed the researcher to explore how influencers capture attention, sustain interest, create desire, and ultimately influence actions such as purchases. By applying this framework, the study aimed to identify the ways in which influencer marketing strategies guide consumers through these psychological stages.

#### 3.1 Open-ended questionnaire

The data for this research was collected through an open-ended online questionnaire, a method that is commonly used in qualitative studies to gather rich and detailed accounts of participants' experiences. This approach gave participants the opportunity to describe their thoughts freely, encouraging reflective and elaborative responses that revealed their underlying motivations, emotional reactions, and perceptions related to influencer content. The questionnaire was carefully designed to cover key aspects of the AIDA model while also

exploring themes relevant to influencer marketing, including elements such as trust, emotional connection, content preferences, platform behavior, and purchase motivations.

The study involved ten Finnish participants, selected through purposeful sampling to ensure they were active users of social media and regularly engaged with influencer content. The sample included individuals of different ages and genders to capture a diverse range of viewpoints. Each participant was informed about the purpose of the research and the use of the data, and their anonymity was guaranteed. This assurance of confidentiality enabled more candid and honest responses, which in turn increased the depth and quality of the data.

To provide context for the participants' backgrounds, a demographic table 1 was included, summarizing the age and gender of the individuals who took part in the study. The participants were between 19 and 42 years old, representing a diverse group of young to middleaged adults who actively use social media. The sample consisted of four women and six men, providing a mix of viewpoints in terms of gender and stages of life. This diversity aimed to capture a wider variety of experiences and viewpoints regarding influencer marketing engagement.

Table 1. Participant demographics

<b>Participant</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Age</b>	19	30	24	26	26	34	21	28	29	42
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male

The questionnaire was distributed online and filled out remotely, offering an easy and accessible way to gather information. Even though the questions were organized thematically to ensure clarity and focus, the format remained flexible enough to allow the expression of new thoughts and insights to emerge. Participants shared their experiences with influencer marketing in relation to key psychological and behavioral aspects, such as how credible they find influencers, how emotionally connected they feel to them, what kind

of content they prefer, how they behave on different platforms, and how influencer content compares to traditional advertising in shaping their buying decisions.

These thematic areas offered a broad yet focused foundation for analyzing the social and emotional factors that influence consumer behavior in the context of influencer marketing. The results of this questionnaire are summarized and categorized in table 2, which outlines the four central themes and their related sub-themes and participant quotes.

### 3.2 Thematic analysis

The data was examined through thematic analysis, a qualitative approach that helps interpret, uncover, and make sense of recurring patterns and themes in the data. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to find out shared meanings and underlying concepts in participants' narratives. It is especially well-suited for studies aiming to understand how people make sense of their experiences and assign meaning to them. (Braun & Clarke 2006)

The analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher became familiar with the data by reading through the responses multiple times while making analytical notes. This initial immersion helped in identifying potential ideas and areas of interest. In the next phase, the data was systematically coded to highlight significant segments that related to the research questions. These codes represented recurring expressions, reflections, or opinions found across multiple responses. Once coding was complete, the codes were examined more closely to identify broader patterns and recurring meanings that could be grouped together into potential themes.

In the following phase, the themes were carefully examined and adjusted to make sure that they clearly reflected the central meaning of the data, while maintaining clarity and avoiding repetition. Each theme was then clearly defined and named in a way that reflected its core message and relevance to the research objectives. In the final phase, these themes were organized into a coherent narrative and presented in the findings chapter, supported by direct quotes from participants to preserve the authenticity of their voices.

Rather than strictly analyzing the data according to the questionnaire's structure, the themes were allowed to emerge organically based on participants' responses. This approach was selected to avoid artificially separating overlapping experiences and to better reflect the way

consumers interact with influencer content in real life, where emotional responses, trust, platform behavior, and purchase motivations are often interlinked.

As a result of the analysis, four central themes were identified which are perceived authenticity and trust, influencer characteristics, platform and content style preferences, and conversion triggers supported by community validation. These themes are presented in table 2 along with representative sub-themes and illustrative quotes. The table serves to visually summarize the key patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives and supports the interpretation of the findings in alignment with the AIDA framework. In the following chapter, the findings related to each of these themes are explored in detail and interpreted through the lens of the AIDA model and relevant academic literature.

Table 2. Four central themes of the thematic analysis

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	CODE EXAMPLES
Perceived authenticity and trust	Transparency and honesty	“Transparency increases trust”, “Authenticity fosters credibility”.
	Personal use and experience	“Product use enhances trust”, “Alignment with lifestyle builds trust”.
	Consistency in messaging	“Authentic promotion is effective”, “Long-term exposure strengthens trust”.
	Educational or professional background	“Credentials influence credibility”, “Evidence-based content increases trust”.
Influencer characteristics	Relatability and personality	“Relatable influencers build trust”, “Humor maintains engagement”.

	Micro- vs macro-influencers	“Micro-influencers feel more authentic”, “Celebrities can seem inauthentic”.
	Subject matter expertise	“Relevant expertise increases credibility”, “Expertise boosts trust in advice”.
	Community engagement	“Interaction signals care”, “Engagement enhances credibility”.
Platform and content style preferences	Platform behavior and preferences	“TikTok feels authentic”, “Instagram makes recommendations accessible”, “YouTube offers in-depth reviews”.
	Content type and tone	“Personal stories increase appeal”, “Transformations draw attention”, “Humor and emotion boost engagement”.
	Visual and narrative style	“Real-life demos enhance credibility”, “Overly polished posts reduce trust”.
Conversion triggers and community validation	Promo codes and time-limited offers	“Discounts boost purchase intent”, “Urgency increases conversion”.
	Call to action (CTA)	“Clear CTAs support action”, “Direct links ease conversion”.
	Social proof and follower feedback	“Peer feedback builds trust”, “Comments validate effectiveness”.
	Long-term and real-time use	“Ongoing use signals authenticity”, “Live use aids product visualization”.

## 4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical study on how influencer marketing impacts consumer purchasing decisions on social media platforms. The findings are organized in a logical and cohesive structure and analyzed in the context of previous research and the theoretical framework discussed in previous chapters. Every section presents important insights drawn from participant responses and thematic analysis, analyzing how influencer characteristics, trust, content style, and platform preferences drive purchasing behavior.

### 4.1 Perceived authenticity and trust

A central theme across participant responses was the importance of authenticity and trust in shaping their attitudes toward influencer recommendations. Participants consistently emphasized that influencers must appear genuine and honest to be considered credible sources. Influencers who openly disclosed partnerships, admitted product flaws, and visibly used the products in their day-to-day lives were seen more positively. Authenticity played a particularly important role, as it created the sense that the influencer genuinely supported the product rather than promoting it solely for financial reasons. These results aligned with the work of Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who indicate that an influencers credibility is usually based on perceived authenticity through trustworthiness, expertise, and value alignment significantly enhances the persuasive power of endorsements.

*"If they're transparent about both pros and cons, I trust their advice." - Participant 4*

*"If the influencer is honest about both the pros and cons of a product, I trust them more." - Participant 5*

*"I trust influencers who are open about their flaws and don't pretend everything is perfect." - Participant 3*

Participants also noted that trust develops over time. Long-term exposure to consistent messaging increases the likelihood of believing and acting on an influencer's

recommendation. When influencers give realistic assessments and are transparent about sponsorships, this increases the perceived credibility of their recommendations.

*"I'm more likely to believe them when they show that they've used the product for a long time." - Participant 9*

*"Trust comes when the influencer seems relatable and genuinely enthusiastic about the product." - Participant 6*

#### 4.2 Influencer characteristics

Participants identified both positive and negative influencer characteristics that shaped their attitudes and purchasing decisions. Positive traits, such as authenticity, honesty, relatability, and emotional connection, were repeatedly emphasized. Influencers who appeared sincere and consistent in their messaging were more likely to be trusted. Participants valued influencers who integrated personal experiences, humor, and storytelling into their content, which helped create a sense of intimacy and approachability. Micro-influencers, in particular, were seen as more relatable and trustworthy than celebrities with massive followings due to their smaller audiences and perceived sincerity.

*"When they're relatable, it feels like I could be friends with them." - Participant 5*

*"If they're honest that it's an ad, I still trust them just don't try to hide it." - Participant 1*

*"If they seem authentic and really use the product, I'm much more likely to believe them."*

-

#### *Participant 2*

Influencers who demonstrated real product usage, disclosed sponsorships, and engaged with their followers through comments or live sessions were especially appreciated. These behaviors signaled that the influencer genuinely cared about their audience and believed in the product.

*"They feel more like a real person when they respond to comments." - Participant 9*

These commonly appreciated traits are summarized visually in figure 2, which illustrates the most frequently mentioned positive characteristics of influencers according to participant responses. The figure supports the qualitative insights by highlighting the key factors that enhance trust, relatability, and the overall persuasiveness of influencer content.

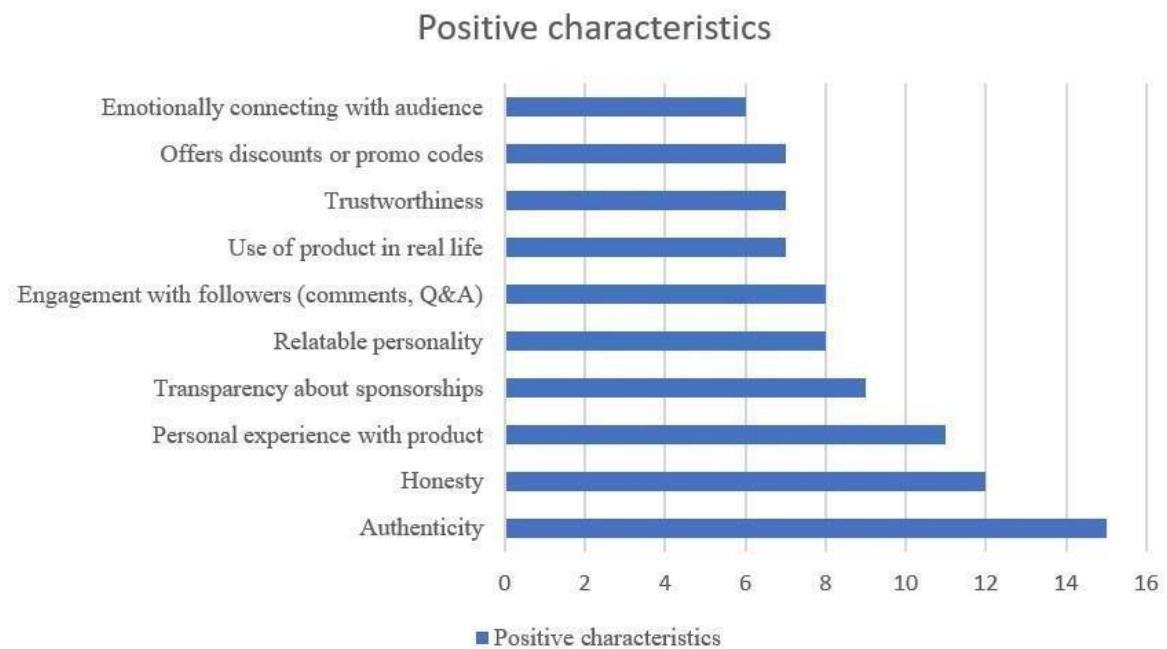


Figure 2. Positive characteristics of influencers according to the questionnaire

Nevertheless, participants also expressed some negative traits that make the influencer undesirable. Overly polished or scripted content was often perceived as fake or commercialized. Influencers who promoted products without actually using them, failed to disclose paid partnerships, or lacked engagement with followers were seen as less credible. Frequent promotion of unrelated products or sudden shifts in content style raised concerns about authenticity and consistency.

*"I'd rather hear a few negatives than just hype it feels more believable." - Participant 7*

*"Overly scripted content makes me feel like they're just doing it for money." - Participant 10*

*"When their content suddenly changes, I question their sincerity." - Participant 3*

These recurring criticisms are visually summarized in figure 3, which presents the most frequently mentioned negative characteristics of influencers based on participant responses. The figure supports the thematic analysis by drawing attention to traits that decrease

perceived authenticity, weaken trust, and interfere with the persuasive impact of influencer content.

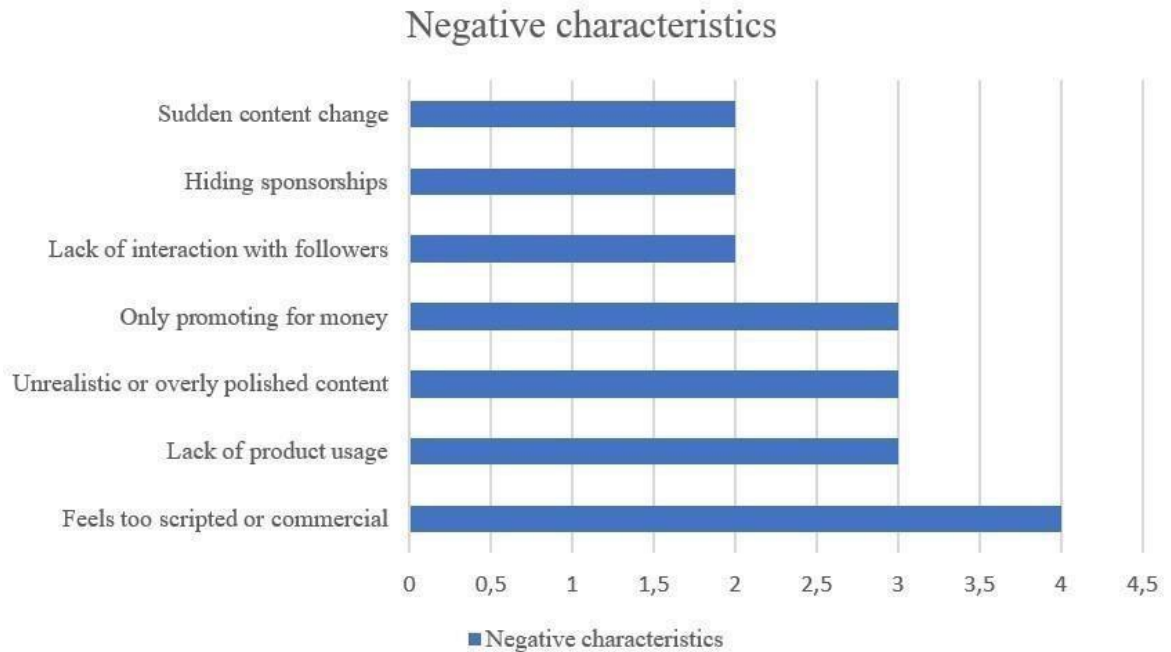


Figure 3. Negative characteristics of influencers according to the questionnaire

#### 4.3 Platform and content style preferences

Participants revealed that different social media platforms influenced their experiences and trust in influencer marketing in distinct ways. Each platform offered unique strengths that affected how content was received and how purchase decisions were formed. Figure 4 illustrates the most frequently used social media platforms among participants, providing context for how and where influencer interactions most commonly occurred. This visual overview complements the analysis by showing which platforms were most central to participants interactions with influencers, helping to explain differences in how authenticity, trust, and content impact were perceived across platforms.

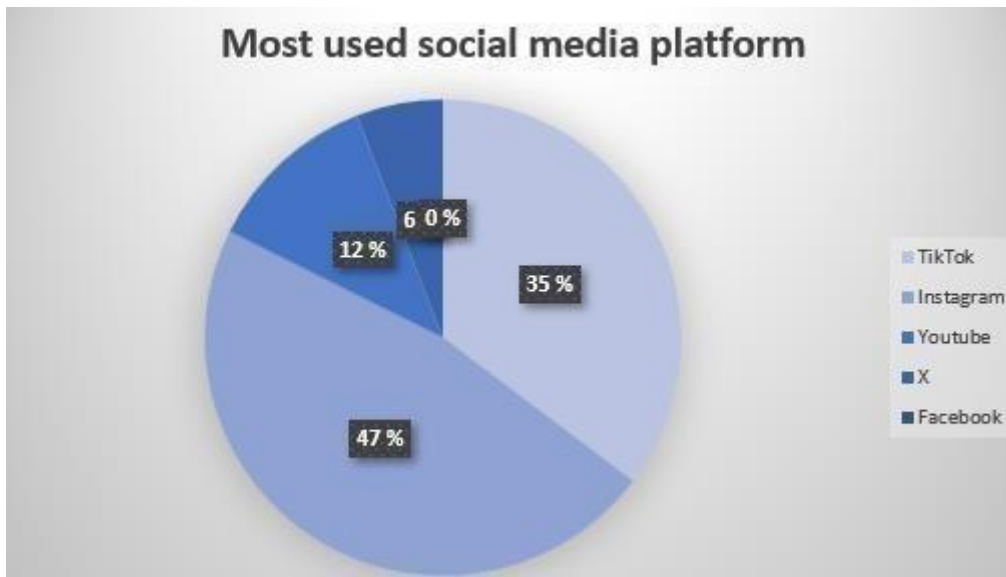


Figure 4. Most used social media platforms according to the questionnaire

Instagram was commended for its polished and clear visual content and user-friendly navigation. Features such as stories and reels were noted as effective tools for quickly sharing product recommendations in a visually engaging format. TikTok, on the other hand, was associated with more spontaneous and authentic content. Its informal tone, short videos, and viral trends made it feel more personal and trustworthy. Participants defined TikTok content more emotionally impactful and relatable, which often led to impulsive buying decisions.

"Instagram stories and reels make it easy to follow what influencers are doing." - Participant

3

"TikTok feels more authentic, like I'm seeing the real side of someone's life." - Participant

6

YouTube stood out for its ability to provide in-depth reviews, detailed tutorials, and longer narratives. This platform was commonly used when participants were researching products they were more invested in. Its capacity to deliver thoughtful, comprehensive content made it ideal for building trust in high-involvement purchasing decisions.

In contrast, Facebook was largely absent from participant responses, indicating a diminishing role in influencer engagement among the demographic studied.

Content style was equally important across platforms. Participants showed a clear preference for content that was relatable, emotionally engaging and grounded in daily life.

Behindthescenes footage, real-life use of products, and storytelling were effective in capturing attention and sustaining interest. Conversely, content that felt overly promotional, staged, or focused purely on aesthetics was met with skepticism.

"I'm more likely to watch content that feels personal or emotional not just product features."

- Participant 8

"Authentic behind-the-scenes content catches my eye." - Participant 10

Table 3 summarizes the key characteristics of each platform as described by participants, including their typical content formats, their impact on purchasing behavior, and their marketing strengths. This structured comparison helps clarify how different platforms serve distinct roles in the influencer marketing process and shows the specific ways in which content delivery influences trust and buying decisions.

Table 3. Social media platforms characteristics

Platform	Content format	Impact on purchasing decisions	Strengths in marketing
Instagram	Visual	Quick purchasing decisions	Aesthetics, highlighting product images
TikTok	Short video	Spontaneous impulse purchases	Entertainment, viral content
YouTube	Long video	High brand memory and trust	In-depth product introduction
Facebook	Text + image	Less commitment	Wide user base, good coverage

#### 4.4 Conversion triggers and community validation

Beyond emotional connection and platform preferences, participants identified several key triggers that influenced their decision to act on an influencer's recommendation. These triggers included both practical and psychological motivators that facilitated the final step in the purchasing process.

Promo codes and discounts emerged as particularly persuasive. Participants expressed that receiving exclusive deals through influencers gave them an added incentive to make a purchase. This promotional tactic was seen as mutually beneficial, and it provided value to the consumer while reinforcing the influencer's credibility.

*"Getting a discount through someone I follow feels like a bonus." - Participant 4*

Clear calls to action such as "link in bio" or embedded purchase links were also noted for their importance in streamlining the purchase journey. When influencers provided an easy transition from content to commerce, participants were more likely to complete the transaction, because it was more convenient.

*"If the influencer includes a link or promo code, I'm more likely to buy right away." - Participant 5*

Social proof played a crucial role. Participants reported that they often read comments on influencer posts to assess peer reactions before making a decision. Seeing other followers engage positively or endorse a product reassured them of the product's value. Additionally, when multiple influencers endorsed the same product, it amplified trust and created a sense of urgency.

*"It's easier to believe in someone who actually interacts with their followers." - Participant 7*

*"Seeing several influencers recommend the same thing makes it seem more trustworthy." - Participant 6*

Real-time use and demonstrations helped participants visualize how a product would fit into their own routines, bridging the gap between interest and action. This type of content, when executed authentically, was especially effective in triggering purchases.

*"When I see someone use the product in their routine, it's easier to imagine myself using it."*

- Participant 9

Together, these findings demonstrate how emotional resonance, ease of purchase, and community validation work together to move consumers through the decision-making process. Influencer marketing that incorporates these elements effectively can significantly increase consumer conversion rates.

Table 4 gives an overview of the four main themes from the study, showing how each one connects to the stages of the AIDA model and the types of consumer responses they caused. It helps explain how different parts of influencer marketing affect people at each step of the buying process, from noticing a product to making a purchase.

Table 4. Findings Summary

Theme	Stage (AIDA)	Consumer responses
Perceived authenticity and trust	Interest, desire	Affective, cognitive
Influencer characteristics	Attention, interest, desire	Affective, social
Platform and content style preferences	Attention, interest	Sensory, affective
Conversion triggers and community validation	Desire, action	Behavioral, social

## 5 Discussion

This chapter integrates the empirical findings of this study with the theoretical framework built around the AIDA model. The purpose is to examine how influencer marketing on social media platforms influences consumer purchasing decisions. The discussion is structured around the research questions, starting with the two sub-questions. These are answered using insights from the open-ended questionnaire and the literature reviewed, followed by addressing the main research question with the support of the previous analyses.

### 5.1 Sub-research question 1

How does the perceived relationship or connection between influencers and their followers affect consumer purchasing decisions?

The perceived relationship between influencers and their followers emerged as a central element influencing consumer purchasing behavior. Thematic analysis revealed that emotional connection, often described as a parasocial relationship, strongly shaped how followers interpreted influencer content. Influencers who engaged actively with their audience by responding to comments, hosting Q&A sessions, or sharing personal stories were seen as more trustworthy and authentic. These findings support the idea that Interest and Desire stages in the AIDA model are deepened when emotional closeness is present. (Leite & Baptista 2021)

Participants frequently described influencers they follow as “relatable” or “like a friend,” indicating that trust is emotionally grounded and builds gradually through consistent interaction. When this connection was lacking, such as when influencers ignored follower questions or suddenly changed their content style participants reported reduced interest or trust, which ultimately weakened purchase intention. These findings are consistent with recent research showing that when influencers share personal experiences, it enhances their credibility and strengthens the parasocial relationships, which makes their endorsements feel more genuine and like direct advertising (Chung & Cho 2017).

## 5.2 Sub-research question 2

What characteristics of influencers have the most significant impact on purchasing decisions?

The most influential characteristics identified in this study include authenticity, relatability, transparency, and expertise. Participants valued influencers who used the products themselves, provided honest reviews, and disclosed sponsorships. These qualities strengthened the Interest and Desire stages by making the content feel more trustworthy and relevant to everyday life.

Influencers with smaller followings were repeatedly described as more impactful than those with large audiences. Their smaller audience sizes fostered a stronger sense of closeness and relatability, which increased the credibility of their recommendations. This supports findings by the Beichert et al. (2024) which show that nano-influencers generate higher engagement and deliver significantly better return on investment compared to influencers with larger followings.

Conversely, negative characteristics such as scripted content, lack of product usage, overly polished posts, or hidden sponsorships were linked to reduced trust. These traits signaled commercial intent and diminished the perceived authenticity of the influencer, aligning them more closely with traditional advertising. These findings are in line with Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who emphasized the role of credibility and perceived similarity in fostering trust and influencing purchase intentions in influencer marketing, particularly among younger audiences.

The importance of storytelling, humor, and product fit with influencer lifestyle also emerged as key attributes that sustain engagement and influence behavior throughout the AIDA model journey.

## 5.3 Main research question

How does influencer marketing on social media platforms (such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube) influence consumer purchasing decisions?

This study shows that influencer marketing can influence consumer purchasing decisions by guiding them through the AIDA stages from initial awareness to final conversion using personal, emotionally resonant content and platform-specific strategies.

Influencers capture Attention by creating visually appealing or relatable content, particularly on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which participants noted as their most used channels. Interest is built when influencers integrate products naturally into their lives and share valuable insights. Desire emerges through storytelling, emotional connection, and alignment between the influencer's lifestyle and the product. Finally, Action is triggered by practical elements like promo codes, call-to-action links, and visible social proof such as follower comments and reviews.

TikTok and Instagram were seen as the most effective platforms for capturing attention and creating a sense of immediacy and connection. YouTube was noted for its depth and in-depth reviews, which supported decision-making. Facebook was rarely mentioned, suggesting its decreasing relevance among the demographic studied.

In line with the AIDA model, the findings demonstrate that influencer marketing is most effective when the influencer is seen as authentic, relatable, and consistent. Influencers who build long-term trust through transparency and ongoing engagement can move followers from passive viewers to active buyers. On the other hand, inauthentic content, lack of interaction, or excessive promotion can disrupt the AIDA process and hinder conversion.

These insights reaffirm the power of influencer marketing as a peer-driven, emotion-based form of promotion that surpasses traditional advertising in perceived relevance and trustworthiness.

## 6 Conclusion

This study set out to explore how influencer marketing affects consumer purchasing decisions using the AIDA model and qualitative data collected through an open-ended questionnaire. Through in-depth thematic analysis, the research uncovered how perceived authenticity, emotional connection, influencer traits, platform dynamics, and community interaction play vital roles in guiding consumers from awareness to action.

The findings emphasize the importance of authentic, engaging, and value-driven content that resonates with the consumer's identity and lifestyle. Participants consistently valued transparency, emotional storytelling, and real-life product use, which helped to build trust and interest key stages in the AIDA model. Micro-influencers were found to be more effective than celebrity influencers in most cases due to their relatability and perceived sincerity.

Moreover, the strategic use of platform features such as promo codes, direct links, and interactive content helped facilitate the transition from desire to action.

By applying the AIDA framework, the study demonstrated that effective influencer marketing is not merely about visibility, but about building a sense of trust and connection that supports the entire decision-making journey. Influencers who align their content with their personal values and maintain consistency in messaging were the most successful in converting followers into consumers.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how influencer marketing functions as a social and emotional process in today's digital age. It also offers practical insights for marketers, suggesting that the most impactful influencer campaigns are those that foster emotional resonance, community trust, and ease of access to products.

### 6.1 Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was based on a small sample of ten Finnish participants, and as such, the

findings should not be generalized to broader populations. Second, the questionnaire was conducted in English, which is not the native language of the participants. This may have affected the depth and expressiveness of their responses. In future research, the use of participants' native language could enable more detailed and authentic data collection.

Further research could address these limitations by using larger and more demographically diverse samples that include participants from different cultural, linguistic, and age groups. A comparative cross-cultural study, for instance, could reveal how influencer marketing is interpreted differently across societies. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data could provide both depth and breadth, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Other possible avenues for future research include examining the long-term effects of influencer marketing on brand loyalty and exploring how AI-generated influencers or automated influencer campaigns are perceived in terms of authenticity and trust. As influencer marketing continues to evolve, especially with the integration of emerging technologies, these questions will become increasingly relevant for both academics and practitioners.

Despite its limitations, this study provides a meaningful contribution to the field by illustrating how influencers can influence purchasing behavior by forming emotional and credible connections with their followers. It offers practical implications for brands looking to maximize their return on investment in social commerce by collaborating with influencers who are seen as trustworthy, relatable, and aligned with the values of their target audience.

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## Attachments

Attachment 1. Structure of the open-ended questionnaire

The impact of influencer marketing on consumer purchasing decisions

What makes you trust an influencer's recommendation when deciding to buy a product?

What makes you more likely to buy a product that an influencer recommends?

Which social media platform do you use most to follow influencers?

How does the influencer's connection with their followers affect your purchasing decision?

What qualities of an influencer make you trust their product recommendations?

Do you prefer influencers who share personal experiences or those who focus on the product's features? Why?

Does the size of an influencer's following (celebrity vs. micro-influencer) affect your decision to trust them?

What type of influencer content grabs your attention the most?

Can you remember a time when an influencer caught your attention? What made you stop and pay attention?

How do you usually discover new influencers or content that make you want to buy something?

What types of posts or topics influencers make that you want to keep following them?

When do you feel the most desire to buy a product after seeing an influencer's post?

Does it make a difference to you if the influencer personally uses or endorses the product?

Do you think your emotional connection with an influencer plays a role in your desire to buy the products they recommend?

How do discounts, special offers, or limited time deals from influencers impact your decision to buy something?

Do you think influencers should include a clear call to action ("Buy Now" or "Link in Bio") in their posts?

Overall, how would you describe the impact of influencer marketing on your purchasing decisions compared to regular marketing styles?

What could influencers do differently to increase the chances of you buying the products they promote?

Any other thoughts or experiences on how influencer marketing has influenced your purchasing decisions?