

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Brand Perception and Customer Engagement

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Abstract: *This paper explores the evolving role of social media influencers in shaping brand perception and driving consumer engagement. Through a comprehensive literature review and a quantitative survey conducted among 100 social media users, the study investigates the psychological mechanisms that underpin influencer effectiveness, such as authenticity, social validation, and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). The findings highlight the shift from celebrity endorsements to everyday content creators, emphasizing the growing importance of relatability and trust in digital marketing. The research also examines the professionalization of influencer-brand collaborations, the strategic segmentation of influencers by audience size, and the increasing reliance on data-driven approaches in campaign management.*

In addition to behavioral outcomes, the study addresses how influencers facilitate emotional connections between consumers and brands, functioning as cultural intermediaries who translate brand values into accessible narratives. Particular attention is given to the rise of micro- and nano-influencers, who, despite their smaller followings, often yield higher engagement rates due to perceived authenticity and community belonging. The survey results confirm that influencer marketing positively influences purchase intention, particularly among younger audiences, while also identifying challenges related to content saturation, ethical concerns, and transparency. Moreover, the paper reflects on the potential risks of over-commercialization and trust erosion when influencer messaging becomes inconsistent or misaligned with audience expectations.

Ultimately, the study underlines the need for value alignment and long-term partnerships to maintain consumer trust and achieve sustainable impact in influencer marketing.

Keywords: influencer marketing, brand perception, consumer engagement, authenticity, FOMO, social media, brand-influencer alignment.

Introduction

In today's digitally driven landscape, the relationship between brands and consumers is increasingly mediated by social media. As the effectiveness of traditional marketing channels continues to decline, brands are turning to social media influencers—individuals with loyal online followings who have the capacity to shape public opinion, spark trends, and directly influence purchasing behaviour. This shift marks a significant evolution in marketing strategy, where peer-driven recommendations often hold more weight than conventional advertising efforts.

Social media influencers now serve as key intermediaries between brands and their audiences. Through personalised content, narrative-driven engagement, and a cultivated sense of authenticity, influencers contribute not only to heightened brand awareness but also to the shaping of brand perception. Their role extends far beyond simple product endorsement; influencers frequently embody the values, aesthetics, and culture of the brands they represent, thereby becoming instrumental in defining brand identity in the eyes of consumers.

This thesis is organized into three main chapters, each addressing a distinct aspect of the relationship between social media influencers, brand marketing, and consumer behaviour within the context of the digital economy. Chapter One offers a historical perspective on the emergence and evolution of social media influencers, charting their progression from amateur content creators to influential digital figures. It also explores the broader shift from traditional advertising to influencer-led marketing, and the ways in which influencers contribute to brand image and identity. Chapter Two investigates how brands strategically engage influencers in marketing campaigns, focusing on alignment in tone, values, and audience relevance. It further examines how the success of such collaborations is measured using data-driven performance indicators such as engagement rates, reach, and consumer sentiment. Chapter Three presents the findings of a primary research study conducted through an online survey. This chapter explores how consumers respond to influencer-brand collaborations, with a focus on emotional and psychological influences—such as FOMO and social validation—as well as growing expectations around ethical transparency and content authenticity.

Overall, this thesis aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of social media influencers in contemporary marketing. It seeks to uncover the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer responses and provide insights into how brands can build effective, credible partnerships in an increasingly skeptical and media-saturated environment.

Literature review

Understanding social media influencers and their impact on brand perception

The evolution of social media influencers

The rise of social media has transformed the concept of influence in marketing, shifting it from traditional celebrity endorsements to everyday content creators. Platforms like YouTube and Instagram enabled individuals to build large followings by sharing relatable, personal content, often within niche communities (Abidin, 2016; Hou, 2019). Unlike celebrities, these creators gained credibility through authenticity, interaction, and consistency—traits highly valued by modern consumers (Audrezet et al., 2020).

This shift has given rise to micro- and nano-influencers who, despite smaller audiences, often generate higher engagement and trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Their grassroots appeal and personal branding have challenged the effectiveness of top-down advertising, making influencer marketing a more targeted and cost-effective strategy (Freberg et al., 2011).

Simultaneously, consumers have become more reliant on peer recommendations and user-generated content rather than traditional ads. Influencers act as trusted intermediaries, offering product guidance through approachable and authentic narratives. Their impact is further amplified by digital markers of social proof, such as likes, shares, and comments (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

Social media influencers as a marketing tool

Social media influencers have emerged as a strategic asset in digital marketing, leveraging their credibility, relatability, and niche expertise to shape consumer behavior. Defined by their ability to impact followers' opinions and purchase decisions, influencers are categorized by audience size into mega, macro, micro, and nano tiers. Each category offers unique advantages: mega-influencers (1M+ followers) provide extensive reach, macro-influencers (100K–1M) offer a balance of scale and engagement, micro-influencers (10K–100K) are valued for authenticity and

niche appeal, and nano-influencers (<10K) excel at grassroots engagement through close-knit communities (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Abidin, 2021).

Influencers collaborate with brands through several strategic formats. Sponsored content—posts created in exchange for compensation or gifts—is widely used but must be clearly disclosed to maintain transparency (Abidin, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Affiliate marketing relies on commission-based promotion via referral links or discount codes, offering brands measurable ROI and incentivizing influencers to drive conversions (Duffy, 2020). Brand ambassadorships, meanwhile, involve long-term partnerships that integrate influencers into campaigns, events, or product development, fostering stronger brand alignment and credibility (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017).

A central challenge in influencer marketing lies in balancing authenticity with commercialization. Consumers—especially younger audiences—are increasingly skeptical of overly promotional or misaligned content. Authenticity is built through consistency, value alignment, and personal storytelling, often leading to parasocial relationships that enhance trust (Audrezet et al., 2020; Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Conversely, saturation with sponsored posts or inconsistent messaging may erode credibility and reduce campaign effectiveness (Evans et al., 2017).

To maintain trust, successful influencers blend organic and sponsored content, disclose partnerships transparently, and prioritize long-term brand collaborations. For brands, aligning with influencers who genuinely reflect their values and voice is essential. As influencer marketing matures, authenticity remains a cornerstone of sustainable engagement and consumer loyalty (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Brand image and consumer perception in influencer marketing

Influencers play a central role in shaping how consumers perceive brands, acting not just as promotional tools but as symbolic extensions of brand identity. When an influencer's values, tone, and style align with a brand's image, their endorsements can effectively transfer those attributes to the brand in the minds of consumers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). This process, known as brand identity transfer, is especially powerful when executed by micro- or niche influencers, who are perceived as more authentic and relatable. Their endorsements often feel more genuine, fostering trust and increasing purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020). In contrast, poorly matched collaborations may appear insincere and damage both brand and influencer credibility (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019).

Beyond the influencer-brand relationship itself, user-generated content (UGC) and community engagement further strengthen brand perception. UGC—such as testimonials, social media posts, and reviews—provides peer-driven perspectives that enhance trust and authenticity (Berthon et al., 2012). Influencers amplify this effect by engaging followers in two-way communication, encouraging interaction, and even inspiring them to create and share content related to the brand. This participatory culture turns consumers into co-creators of the brand narrative, reinforcing emotional connections and a sense of belonging (Pöyry et al., 2019; Marwick, 2015). Brands that leverage UGC in influencer campaigns benefit from increased credibility, engagement, and conversion (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012).

A key mechanism driving this impact is social proof—a psychological principle where people look to the behavior of others to guide their own choices, especially in uncertain situations (Cialdini, 2007). Influencers function as social validators, and visible engagement metrics like

likes, comments, and shares serve as indicators of popularity and trust (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Influencer content that mimics peer behavior, such as product demonstrations or unboxings, provides heuristic shortcuts for consumers overwhelmed by choices. Micro- influencers, in particular, are effective in delivering social proof due to their authenticity and close connection with their audience (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Together, these elements—brand identity alignment, UGC, community engagement, and social proof—illustrate how influencer marketing shapes consumer perception and builds trust. When strategically aligned, influencers act not only as brand messengers but also as facilitators of consumer-brand relationships, playing a key role in driving engagement and loyalty in the digital age.

Investigating the role of influencers in brand marketing campaigns

The evolution of influencer marketing strategies

Influencer marketing has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from informal brand mentions to highly strategic, data-driven campaigns. In its early stages, collaborations were often spontaneous and based on personal relationships, with limited tracking or strategic planning (Freberg et al., 2011). These one-off partnerships prioritized short-term exposure and lacked clear performance metrics.

Today, influencer marketing is guided by advanced analytics and strategic alignment. Brands use data such as engagement rates, click-throughs, and audience demographics to evaluate influencer effectiveness and ensure content relevance (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Platforms and technologies now support real-time campaign management and improve targeting precision, making influencer marketing more professional and measurable (Vrontis et al., 2021).

In parallel, brands have shifted from one-time collaborations to long-term partnerships. Sustained influencer relationships foster trust, consistency, and more authentic content integration (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Repeated endorsements help build brand familiarity and deeper engagement, benefiting both the influencer and the brand through stability, co-creation, and stronger audience connections (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Glucksman, 2017). As audiences become more discerning, continuity has become essential for credibility and long- term campaign success (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

A particularly innovative development is the emergence of AI-generated influencers – virtual personas like Lil Miquela or Imma who exist solely online but collaborate with major brands (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). These digital ambassadors offer full brand control, consistency, and freedom from reputational risk or logistical issues (Gartner, 2020). However, they also raise concerns about authenticity and emotional connection, as audiences may struggle to relate to non- human figures (Shao et al., 2022). Despite these limitations, AI influencers are gaining traction among digital natives and are poised to reshape the future of influencer marketing—particularly in industries where aesthetics and innovation are central.

Overall, influencer marketing has evolved into a sophisticated, multichannel discipline—blending human connection, data analytics, and emerging technologies to optimize brand engagement in an increasingly competitive digital landscape.

Analysis of brand personality and values in influencer partnerships

While follower count was once the dominant selection metric, brands now prioritize engagement rates, audience demographics, and content relevance. Engagement indicators—such as likes, comments, and shares—offer a more accurate view of influence, particularly among micro- and nano-influencers who often foster higher trust and loyalty (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Demographic alignment ensures content reaches the right target audience, while consistency in content style and brand fit strengthens credibility (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez- Sánchez, 2018; Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). Influencer selection is now a blend of data analysis and qualitative judgment.

Furthermore, an influencer's tone, personal values, and niche are central to brand alignment. The tone—whether aspirational, humorous, or conversational—must suit the campaign's objectives and audience expectations (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). Shared values between the brand and influencer enhance credibility and emotional connection, while mismatched values can damage reputations (Audrezet et al., 2020). Additionally, influencers with niche expertise—such as in fashion, fitness, or tech—bring credibility and targeted engagement to partnerships, increasing message relevance (Casaló et al., 2018; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020).

Last but not least, campaign success is assessed using a mix of ROI, engagement data, and consumer sentiment analysis. ROI focuses on tangible outcomes like sales or leads relative to investment, often tracked via promo codes or affiliate links (Linqia, 2020). Engagement metrics provide insight into how well audiences respond to influencer content (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Meanwhile, sentiment analysis evaluates the emotional tone of audience reactions, helping brands understand perception and identify reputational risks (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Together, these tools offer a comprehensive view of campaign effectiveness, guiding brands toward more strategic influencer partnerships.

Consumer perception and response to influencer promotions

Sponsored content is central to influencer marketing, but its effectiveness depends on how well it aligns with the influencer's voice and values. When collaborations are clearly disclosed and consistent with the influencer's established niche, audiences tend to view the content as credible and authentic (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017; Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). In contrast, overly commercial or mismatched promotions—especially when repeated across multiple brands—can erode trust and reduce engagement (Evans et al., 2017). Content that incorporates storytelling or personal experience tends to feel more genuine and reinforces relatability (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Moreover, influencer campaigns often leverage psychological triggers like Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and social validation to influence consumer decisions. FOMO is activated through exclusive offers or aspirational content, creating urgency and a desire for inclusion (Przybylski et al., 2013; Hodgkinson, 2019). Social validation, reflected in likes, comments, and shares, signals popularity and drives conformity, especially when the influencer is seen as relatable (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). These effects are magnified by algorithmic visibility on social platforms, increasing emotional engagement and behavioral response (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

As influencer content becomes more common, audiences are developing fatigue and skepticism, particularly when exposed to repetitive or inauthentic promotional messaging (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Woods, 2016). Inadequate disclosure of paid partnerships undermines trust, prompting regulatory responses that remain unevenly enforced (Boerman et

al., 2017). Ethical concerns also arise regarding the promotion of unsustainable lifestyles, unrealistic standards, and questionable products. Influencers' portrayals of idealized lives can negatively affect followers' wellbeing and self-image (Marwick, 2015). These issues highlight the growing need for brands and influencers to adopt more mindful, transparent, and ethically grounded approaches to preserve consumer trust and foster meaningful engagement.

Methodology

This study investigates consumer responses to influencer-brand collaborations on social media, with a particular focus on psychological drivers, trust, and brand perception. The core objectives are to assess how users perceive influencer partnerships in terms of authenticity and credibility, to explore psychological triggers such as FOMO and social validation, to examine the influence of an influencer's tone and values on brand perception, and to understand which demographic groups are most responsive to influencer marketing.

To address these aims, the study proposes four hypotheses. First, that influencer-brand collaborations perceived as authentic are more likely to positively impact consumer interest and purchase intention. Second, that consumers are significantly influenced by psychological mechanisms like FOMO and social proof when engaging with influencer content. Third, that strong alignment between an influencer's tone and values with those of the brand improves overall brand perception. And finally, that younger consumers—particularly those belonging to Gen Z and Millennial cohorts—are more susceptible to influencer-brand partnerships than older demographics.

A quantitative research approach was employed, using a structured online survey to collect both numerical and categorical data. This method was chosen for its ability to reveal patterns, test hypotheses, and provide generalizable insights across a diverse population of social media users. The survey captured data on psychological attitudes, trust levels, engagement behavior, and platform usage, allowing for structured comparison across demographic and behavioral segments.

Data for this study was collected through a structured online survey created using Google Forms. The platform was selected for its accessibility, ease of use, and ability to reach a broad and diverse audience efficiently. The survey aimed to quantify consumer attitudes and behaviors toward influencer-brand collaborations and included 20 questions exploring various aspects of engagement, perception, and psychological triggers.

A variety of question formats were used to capture both general patterns and nuanced insights. Multiple-choice questions gathered information on platform usage and interaction frequency, while checkbox questions allowed respondents to indicate multiple motivations for following influencers. Likert scale items assessed attitudes toward influencer trustworthiness, content authenticity, and brand impact.

The survey was distributed via WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, targeting active social media users. A snowball sampling method was applied, with initial respondents encouraged to share the survey within their networks. This approach expanded reach and supported a more diverse set of responses. A total of 100 responses were collected over the course of one week.

To maintain ethical standards, the survey was anonymous, with no personal identifiers collected. Its concise structure—designed to be completed in under five minutes—encouraged full participation while ensuring data quality and integrity.

Results and discussions

This study aimed to explore the influence of social media influencers on consumer purchasing patterns, focusing on how their endorsements shape interest and buying behavior. The analysis centered on survey findings related to engagement frequency, reasons for following influencers, and purchasing actions prompted by promotional content. Insights from the visual data reveal that many respondents engage frequently with influencer content and are motivated to follow influencers for product discovery and lifestyle inspiration. A substantial number of participants confirmed they had purchased products promoted by influencers, as illustrated in Figure 1,

I have discovered a brand or product through an influencer that I later purchased.
100 responses

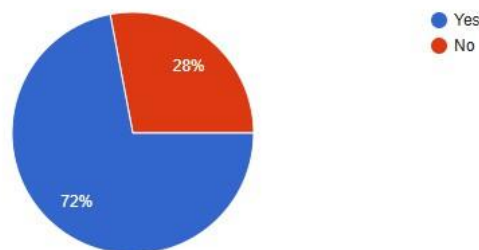


Figure 1. Product discovery and purchase through influencers

Source: Authors' own research results/contribution

highlighting the effectiveness of such endorsements. Emotional triggers like social proof and FOMO also played a significant role, as respondents showed high levels of agreement with statements reflecting their susceptibility to peer engagement and fear of being left out. Figure 2 provides a clear depiction of the role FOMO plays in driving engagement and purchase intent, further emphasizing how exclusivity and perceived popularity influence decision-making.

Have you ever felt the need to try or buy a product because you saw an influencer promoting it and didn't want to miss out? (FOMO)
100 responses

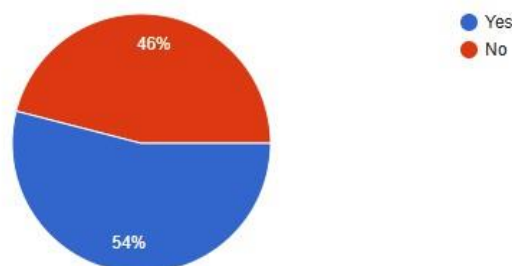


Figure 2. Respondents experiencing FOMO from influencer promotions

Source: Authors' own research results/contribution

Additional data revealed that factors such as increased product visibility, high engagement, and emotionally resonant content were among the most persuasive drivers of consumer behavior. Collectively, these patterns underscore the persuasive power of influencer marketing in driving purchase decisions through emotional connection, peer validation, and digital visibility.

In parallel, the research also examined consumer perceptions of authenticity and trust in influencer endorsements. Survey responses indicated that influencers are generally regarded as more credible than traditional advertisements, especially when their content aligns with their personal lifestyle and brand partnerships are perceived as authentic. Consumers reported being more likely to make purchases based on influencer recommendations when there is a clear match between the influencer's image and the brand's values.

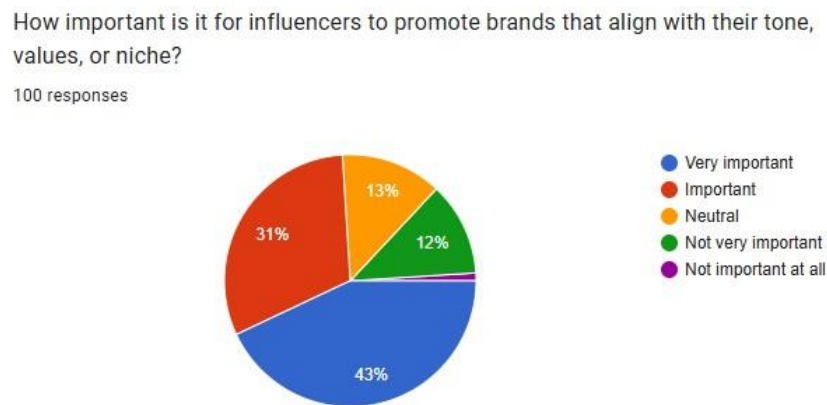


Figure 3. Importance of brand-influencer value alignment

Source: Authors' own research results/contribution

As shown in Figure 3, consumers exhibit higher levels of trust when influencer-brand alignment is strong and consistent, demonstrating the critical role of value congruence in shaping brand credibility. However, data also revealed that excessive or inconsistent promotions can weaken credibility and erode trust. These insights point to the importance of coherent messaging, transparency, and long-term authenticity in sustaining trust between influencers and their audiences.

The findings presented across the analyzed data strongly support the research objectives and hypotheses established at the outset of the study. The results confirm that influencer-brand collaborations significantly impact consumer behavior, particularly in terms of purchase intent, emotional engagement, and brand perception. Authenticity, trust, and value alignment emerged as key factors in shaping consumer responses, while psychological mechanisms such as FOMO and social validation were shown to amplify the persuasive power of influencer content. Furthermore, the data highlighted that younger demographics are more responsive to influencer promotions, aligning with expectations about generational engagement trends. Taken together, these outcomes validate all four hypotheses and demonstrate that the study's objectives were successfully met through comprehensive quantitative analysis.

Conclusion

The transformation of marketing in the digital age has redefined how brands engage with consumers, placing social media influencers at the centre of this evolution. These individuals have become powerful mediators between brands and audiences, shaping perceptions not only through product promotion but also through the cultivation of trust, authenticity, and emotional connection. Their influence reflects a larger shift in consumer behaviour—one that favours relatability, peer validation, and alignment of values over traditional advertising.

Findings from the primary research confirmed that influencer marketing holds significant weight in shaping consumer decisions. A majority of respondents acknowledged discovering products through influencer content, with emotional triggers such as social proof and fear of missing out (FOMO) contributing to increased interest and purchase intent. Respondents also indicated a strong preference for influencer-brand collaborations that feel consistent and value-driven, reinforcing the importance of perceived authenticity and coherence. However, the data also revealed rising levels of content fatigue and skepticism, particularly when influencer promotions lack transparency or appear overly commercialized.

These insights highlight the dual nature of influencer marketing: its power to engage and persuade, and its vulnerability to diminished impact when trust is compromised. The balance between visibility and credibility has become a critical factor in maintaining long-term audience engagement. Brands must therefore prioritize alignment, consistency, and ethical transparency in their partnerships, recognizing that the modern consumer is not only influenced by what is promoted, but by how—and by whom—it is communicated.

In conclusion, the integration of influencer marketing into brand strategies is not simply a trend, but a structural shift in the way consumer relationships are built and sustained. As audiences become more discerning, the long-term success of influencer-brand collaborations will depend on their ability to maintain relevance, foster genuine connections, and uphold the standards of trust demanded by today's digital consumer.

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