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# Instagram Influencers for Online Purchase Inclination

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Instagram influencer marketing is an essential social media mass communication strategy for promoting products, engaging consumers, and mounting purchase inclinations in contemporary business. However, there is a lack of in-depth studies on the role of Instagram influencers, although modern consumers' perceptions are highly motivated by them. Therefore, the study investigates the role of Instagram influencers on consumers' online purchase inclination. The research reflects a constructivist research paradigm and a qualitative research strategy to investigate the issue following the two-step flow theory of media communication. The data were collected by interviewing an influencer manager and an online consumer of the case company. In addition, the research employs thematic analysis to evaluate the collected data.

The findings reveal that influencer credibility and authenticity are essential in shaping consumer purchasing behavior by enhancing trust in genuine and experienced endorsements. Frequent influencer interactions with meaningful recommendations are also necessary to build a loyal community. Influencer content marketing includes a short video in a story and reels that obtain consumers' attention and actions. Theoretically, the two-step flow theory of media communication should incorporate trustworthiness as a dominant component of mass communication.

The study suggests that companies should focus on selective collaboration, quality content, and transparency to maintain influencer credibility and effectiveness for purchase inclination when they imply an Instagram influencer marketing strategy.

<sup>1</sup> Keywords: Instagram influencer, influencer marketing, consumer perception, online engagement, influencer credibility

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS ABSTRACT .....	2
Pictures, Figures, and Tables .....	5
1 INTRODUCTION .....	6
1.1 Background.....	6
1.2 Research Gaps.....	9
1.3 Research Questions and Objectives.....	10
1.4 Scope of the Study .....	11
1.5 Key Concepts .....	12
1.6 Structure of the Study.....	12
2 INFLUENCER MARKETING: THEORETICAL VIEWPOINT .....	14
2.1 Two-Step Flow Theory of Media Communication .....	14
2.2 The Role of Influencers.....	15
2.3 Rise of Influencer Marketing .....	16
2.4 Overview of Instagram .....	17
2.5 Instagram Influencer Marketing.....	22
2.6 Consumers' Inclination to Make Online Purchases .....	23
2.7 Factors Influencing the Online Purchase Inclination .....	25
2.7.1 Influencers' Credibility .....	25
2.8 Influencers' Credibility Dimensions and Purchase Intention .....	26
2.8.1 Attractiveness.....	26
2.8.2 Trustworthiness .....	27
2.8.3 Expertise .....	27
2.9 Theoretical Framework .....	28
3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	29
3.1 Research Philosophy, Approach, and Strategy .....	29
3.2 Empirical Data Collection and Analysis Techniques.....	30
3.3 Research Validity, Reliability, and Ethics .....	31
4 THE CASE STUDY OF COMPANY AB .....	32
4.1 Background of the Company, Product, and Services .....	32
4.2 Influencer Marketing for Digital Growth.....	32

5	THE RESULTS AND FINDINGS.....	33
5.1	Credibility and Trustworthiness of Influencers .....	33
5.2	Engagement and Interaction with Followers.....	35
5.3	Content-Type and Presentation.....	36
5.4	Influencer-Consumer Relationship Dynamics .....	38
5.5	Impact on Brand Loyalty and Purchase Intent.....	40
6	DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS.....	42
6.1	Influence on Consumer Decision Making .....	42
6.2	Key Factors Influencing Consumer Behavior .....	42
6.3	Frequency of Interactions.....	44
7	SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS .....	45
7.1	Summary of the Study.....	45
7.2	Managerial and Theoretical Implications .....	45
7.3	Policy Implications.....	47
7.4	Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.....	49
	BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	50
	APPENDICES .....	62

## **Pictures, Figures, and Tables**

Figure 1. Structure of the Study.....	13
Figure 2. Two-step Flow of Media Communication (Fei et al., 2022).....	15
Figure 3. Role of Instagram in Marketing (Akter, 2023). ....	20
Figure 4. Conceptual Model.....	28

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter provides an outline of the thesis. It first describes the background of the research and indicates the research gaps. The research aims, questions, and objectives are developed based on these gaps. The study scope is presented in the following sections. The key concepts and study structure are explained in the final section.

## 1.1 Background

Instagram, a social media application centered on photo and video sharing, is under the ownership of Facebook, which recently rebranded to Meta, signaling a shift towards the meta-verse (Haenlein et al., 2020). By December 2021, Instagram achieved a significant milestone, boasting a user base of 2 billion active users worldwide (Robertson, 2018). Notably, individuals aged 25 to 34 constituted the largest demographic group of Instagram users globally, closely followed by those aged 18 to 24. Regarding gender distribution, men comprised 51.6 percent of the platform's user base on a global scale (Statista, 2024). With the rise of social media, certain users actively generate online content, assuming the role of an influencer (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Their shared posts (Yilmaz et al., 2020), enriched with reviews, emotions, and personal experiences (Nandagiri & Philip, 2018), get a word of recognition in selling products, brands, and potential audiences. Hence, these individuals are called digital influencers (Susarla et al., 2016).

The ascent of influencers has given rise to influencer marketing, which is now an essential component of marketing communication strategies for spanning brands and various product categories (Aramburu & Pescador, 2019). Businesses seek to expand their customer base and foster enduring consumer relationships (Aramburu & Pescador, 2019). Consumers are more inclined to trust and embrace influencers' perspectives due to their voluntary decision to follow them (Gomes et al., 2022). This trend is driven by the growth of influencers on social media platforms, which offers companies new opportunities to engage with their audiences more authentically and meaningfully (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). It is becoming increasingly important for marketing experts and researchers to understand the determinants of success in influencer marketing. These decisions involve many factors, including relevant factors such as reliability, intelligence, and quality of content (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Among the numerous social networking sites (SNS) accessible today, Instagram is witnessing a consistent rise in its active user base, particularly within the fashion industry (Fakhreddin & Foroudi., 2022). Moreover, Instagram stands out as the preferred platform for influencers due to its ability to foster a sense of immediacy and create communities (Park & Kaye, 2017). This trend is expected to persist in the foreseeable future. Additionally, research indicates that Instagram boasts a higher engagement rate than other social networking sites (SNS) (Latif., 2021), with influencers experiencing an even more significant engagement percentage.

In contrast to other social networking sites (SNS), Instagram allows brands to share visually appealing, creative, and captivating content such as photos, videos, stories, and live broadcasts. Its exclusive focus on visuals allows brands to showcase their products attractively (Lyfe Marketing, 2018). Consumers exhibit different behaviors and reactions on Instagram than other SNSs, as they are more likely to follow brands, visit their websites, and make purchases after viewing brands' posts. Additionally, the engagement rate on Instagram is higher, indicating a more active and responsive user base (Latif et al., 2021). Furthermore, most studies have focused on areas such as the content posted on Instagram (Highfield & Leaver, 2015), the motivations behind using Instagram (Järvinen et al., 2016), the factors influencing consumer interaction with a brand's official Instagram account (Casaló et al., 2020). The rise of the Internet and its associated technologies has amplified the influence of influencers as key opinion leaders (Fakhreddin & Foroudi., 2022), leading to a surge in research within this domain.

Numerous studies have delved into the realm of online influencers (Zhao et al., 2018), especially in text-based platforms like virtual communities (Liao et al., 2024), blogs, and social networking sites (SNS) such as Twitter (Park, 2014). However, research focusing on opinion leadership within visually oriented SNS platforms like Instagram (Evans et al., 2017) is relatively scarce despite its status as influencers' most utilized platform (92%). This preference stems from Instagram's superior creative tools, visual allure, and widespread popularity. Furthermore, influencer marketing on Instagram has emerged as a highly effective advertising channel, with advertisers investing \$1.07 billion in 2017. This figure is expected to rise substantially to \$1.60 billion in 2018 and \$2.38 billion in 2019 (Casaló et al., 2020).

Firstly, regarding the factors leading to opinion leadership on Instagram, research has indicated that the number of followers significantly impacts a user's popularity, sometimes elevating them to the status of opinion leaders (De Veirman et al., 2017). Regarding its outcomes, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) suggest that Instagram celebrities influence the purchasing decisions of young female users, with non-traditional celebrity profiles being perceived as more influential due to their perceived credibility. Furthermore, it has been observed that when influencers disclose that they are being compensated for posting brand-related content, their followers recognize it as advertising, potentially impacting their attitude and willingness to share such content negatively (Evans et al., 2017). This could be attributed to the diminished credibility of the influencer. Nonetheless, a more comprehensive understanding of the factors leading to opinion leadership and its consequences on Instagram remains necessary.

Digital influencers have gathered significant recognition for their influence, mainly due to their large follower base. Their presence is omnipresent across various domains, such as fashion (Kusumasondjaja & Tjiptono, 2019), travel (Song et al., 2017), and food (Casaló, 2020). However, they have particularly captured immense attention within the food industry. Within the sector, the opinions of influencers carry weight (Wiedmann et al., 2010) as their food-related posts serve as sources of inspiration for consumers and wield considerable influence over their purchasing decisions (Susarla et al., 2016) or shopping behavior. Furthermore, it is evident that food enthusiasts assist influencers in disseminating content and propagating food trends within their networks and beyond (Goldsmith et al., 2012), leveraging the power of social media platforms (Lipsman et al., 2012). Foody influencers position themselves on networks like Instagram by posting healthy recipes, tips, habits, and images promoting reliable food standards and good consumers (Gil-Quintana et al., 2021). Food-related products often prompt consumers to engage with visually oriented-platforms like Instagram (Mull & Lee, 2014). In 2018, Instagram reported a substantial milestone with 1 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018).

Analysis of food influencers' posts has shown that they follow trending foods and promote food products or products labeled as specific forms of nutrient absorption already found in healthy foods (Gil-Quintana et al., 2021). Moreover, some posts contain self-promotion, criticism without scientific evidence, and promotion of products of unclear origin (Gil-Quintana et al., 2021). The percentage of young people (13-24 years old) in the current audience (24%).



According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 39% of people over the age of 18 (39% of men and 40% of women) are overweight (Ahmed & Konje, 2023). A gender comparison of Spanish Real-Fooders viewers shows that, on average, less than 18% of viewers are male. These numbers show how to generate ideas to reach the target audience (Gil-Quintana et al., 2021).

## **1.2 Research Gaps**

The literature on social media influencers (SMIs) and their impact on followers remains underdeveloped within marketing and advertising research. Specifically, there is a notable absence of studies exploring the relationship dynamics between SMIs and their followers, along with the factors contributing to their persuasive influence (Taillon et al., 2020). The existing literature lacks a thorough comprehension of consumer decision-making processes concerning the choice of food and restaurant. Despite numerous studies identifying and analyzing factors and consumer profiles influencing decision-making, there remains a necessity for more in-depth research elucidating the cognitive and psychological processes underlying consumer decisions (Kurdi et al., 2022). Additionally, a significant gap exists in research about the attitude-behavior gap concerning sustainable consumption. Apparent gaps exist in understanding the source factors of Instagram influencers and the anticipated outcomes of their interactions with followers.

This presents a significant opportunity for further research to delve into the complexities of SMI marketing and its implications for consumer behavior and brand promotion strategies. In this context, utilizing Instagram as a platform to showcase products appears to be a reasonable strategy (Ahmed, 2017; Streimikiene et al., 2021). What sets Instagram apart from other social networking sites is its ability to allow brands to present content visually appealingly through features like image-sharing, photos, videos, and stories (Lyfe Marketing, 2018). Instagram influencer posts typically consist of images and videos accompanied by textual descriptions. Previous research has predominantly focused on textual platforms such as blogs, Twitter (Park & Kaye, 2017), and other online communities about influencers (Zhao et al., 2018). Despite its popularity due to its visually pleasing aesthetic, which may significantly influence users' purchasing decisions, studies on visual social networking platforms like Instagram (Abed, 2018; Li & Du, 2011) remain limited. Nevertheless, there is a need for further exploration into the effects of digital influencers on consumers' decision-making processes.

This research tries to address the gap in understanding the influence of digital influencers on consumers' decision-making processes. Specifically, the study focused on Instagram food bloggers, considering that influencer marketing is heavily utilized in the food industry (Garland & Reed, 2018). In today's era of widespread internet access, social media influencers have emerged as dynamic third-party endorsers (Freberg et al., 2011). Typically, social media influencers maintain engagement with their followers by consistently sharing up-to-date information (Lee et al., 2022). Influencer marketing tries to boast thousands of followers on social media profiles to serve as brand ambassadors. Since Instagram's expansion has continued, a predominant user demographic has comprised young people; the research aims to investigate influencers' characteristics and how these traits influence consumers' inclination to make online purchases. It necessitates analyzing Instagram influencers through their dimension's trustworthiness, expertise, credibility, and consumer online purchase inclination. Schivinski and Dąbrowski (2013) also researched that brand loyalty and purchase intent are significantly interrelated. Besides, Instagram influencers get extensive public reach to engage more and more consumers in food selections, creating higher customer loyalty and increased profitability (Fiorentino, 2019).

### **1.3 Research Questions and Objectives**

Finding or identifying social influencers can be very useful because these influencers can play a significant role in the success of entertainment media and positive, political, and economic causes. The key to identifying influencers is finding ways to evaluate their communication potential by discovering the essential characteristics of influencer content. The growth of Instagram influencers in digital marketing has raised questions about their impact on consumers' online shopping inclinations. Although influencers are widely used as marketing tools, little is known about their characteristics and whether it is necessary to study them. Consider influencers' characteristics, such as trustworthiness, expertise, and credibility, influencing consumers' decisions and online shopping opportunities. Therefore, there is a need to investigate where Instagram influencers influence consumers' decisions, mainly online purchases, including factors such as influencers' characteristics like trustworthiness, expertise, and credibility in recommendations.

The above knowledge leads to seeking solutions to the following Research Question: What is the role of digital influencers on consumers' online purchaser inclination? The main research question is further segmented into objectives for systematic action, such as identifying the Instagram influencer marketing strategy traits and understanding the frequency of influencer interaction with the audience in consumers' purchasing decisions. The study followed the guided principles of the two-step flow theory of media communication to answer the main question theoretically. Empirically, the study collected data by interviewing a manager from the case company and a consumer of an online purchasing group to understand the role of influencers in shaping consumer purchase inclination.

#### **1.4 Scope of the Study**

The scope of this research encompasses understanding the role of digital influencers, particularly on Instagram, on the consumer's decision-making process regarding online purchases. The primary aim is to explore the role of influencers affecting consumer behavior, identify the main factors that contribute to their influence, and examine how the frequency of influencer interactions on Instagram affects consumers' inclination toward online purchases. The study employed a qualitative research strategy using an inductive approach. The study gathered data by utilizing interviews with open-ended questionnaires. For this purpose, the sample usually consists of a case company, explicitly targeting influencers within Pakistan relating to skin care products. The study has utilized thematic analysis to analyze the data. Furthermore, the study's findings examine aspects such as the influence of digital influencers on consumer decision-making, the factors contributing to influencer credibility, the impact of the frequency of interactions between influencers and their audience, and the impact on brand loyalty and shaping consumer purchase intent. It does not cover non-digital forms of influence or industries outside of skincare and excludes qualitative data and methodologies.

## 1.5 Key Concepts

Table 1 below explains the fundamental concepts of Instagram influencers and influencer marketing.

Table 1. Key Concepts.

Terms	Explanation
Instagram influencers	Instagram influencers are individuals with a recognized level of credibility and a dedicated audience. They can influence others through their perceived trustworthiness and genuine authenticity (Hermawan, 2020).
Influencer marketing	One type of social media marketing is influencer marketing, characterized by influencer endorsements and product placements. These influencers are recognized for their expertise or significant social influence within their respective domains (Saima & Khan, 2020).

## 1.6 Structure of the Study

Chapter One introduces the study, outlining its background, significance, and objectives. It provides an overview of the research questions and the rationale behind the study, setting the stage for the detailed examination of digital influencers' role in consumers' decision-making processes regarding online purchases. Chapter Two is about the literature review following the theory. It reviews prior research on digital influencers, consumer behavior, and online purchasing. In addition, Chapter Three details the methodology employed in the research. It describes the research design, approach, and data collection and analysis methods. The chapter explains the rationale for choosing a qualitative research strategy. Chapter Four is the description of the case company. Chapter Five is about the empirical findings based on research objectives. Chapter Six discusses the empirical findings and previous research findings. It interprets the results, explaining their significance. Moreover, Chapter Seven is related to the as shown in Figure 1. It discusses the theoretical and practical implications, offering insights for academics, marketers, and businesses. It also outlines the study's limitations and suggests avenues for future research.

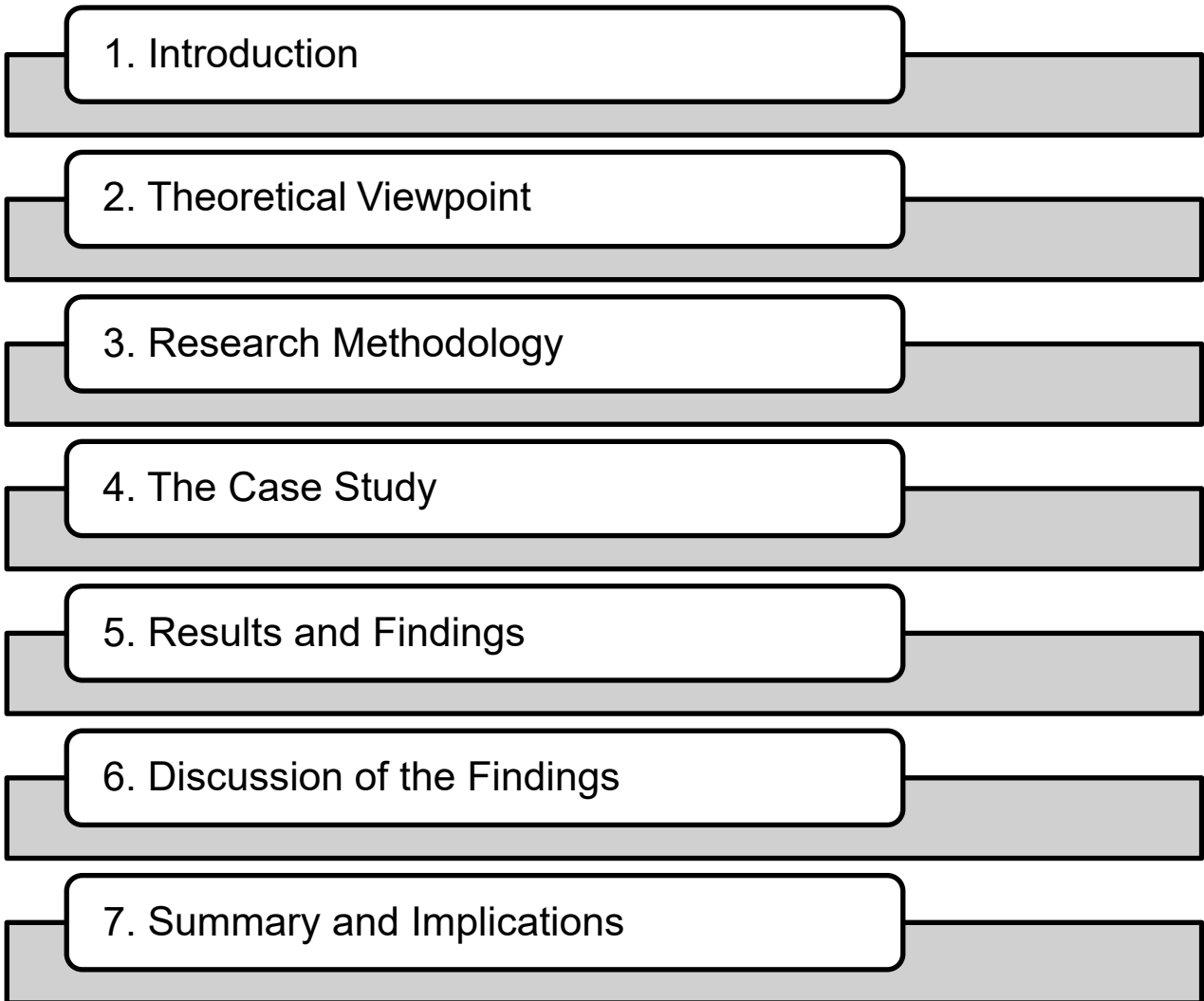


Figure 1. Structure of the Study.

## **2 INFLUENCER MARKETING: THEORETICAL VIEWPOINT**

The chapter explains the theoretical underpinnings and the existing literature review about the research topic. It intends to develop an understanding and comprehension of relevant and impactful concepts and terms concerning influencers, consumers, and their online behaviors.

### **2.1 Two-Step Flow Theory of Media Communication**

The research carries the two-step communication theory as its theoretical framework. This model extends the two-step media communication theory that Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet formulated in the 1940s. Successful influencers typically have an extended reach network or a concentrated connection network (Stansberry, 2015). They express their views to followers or subscribers, who spread these ideas to other audiences. Adopting this principle concerning social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter permits content owners to distribute their creations in no time. Numerous theoretical and empirical research works have employed the two-step communication theory in traditional media (Brosius & Weimann, 1996) and social media research (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2024). Correspondingly, the research applies the two-step communication theory as its theoretical base to investigate the role of digital influencers on consumers' decision-making activities. On the other hand, the multi-step flow pattern considers a complicated process and movement of information among different intermediaries, from mass media to online opinion leaders, e.g., digital influencers, and finally to the ultimate audience ((Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2024)).

The theory is particularly suitable for current research as it defines influencers or opinion leaders as intermediaries between mass media and the public, as shown in Figure 2. Influencers interpret, filter, and then communicate information to their followers. These roles are crucial in the modern digital landscape, where influencers have become key figures in shaping consumers' behavior and opinions. In addition, influencers' extensive networks and high levels of engagement with their followers enhance the ability to spread information. Therefore, the theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors behind shaping consumer perceptions.

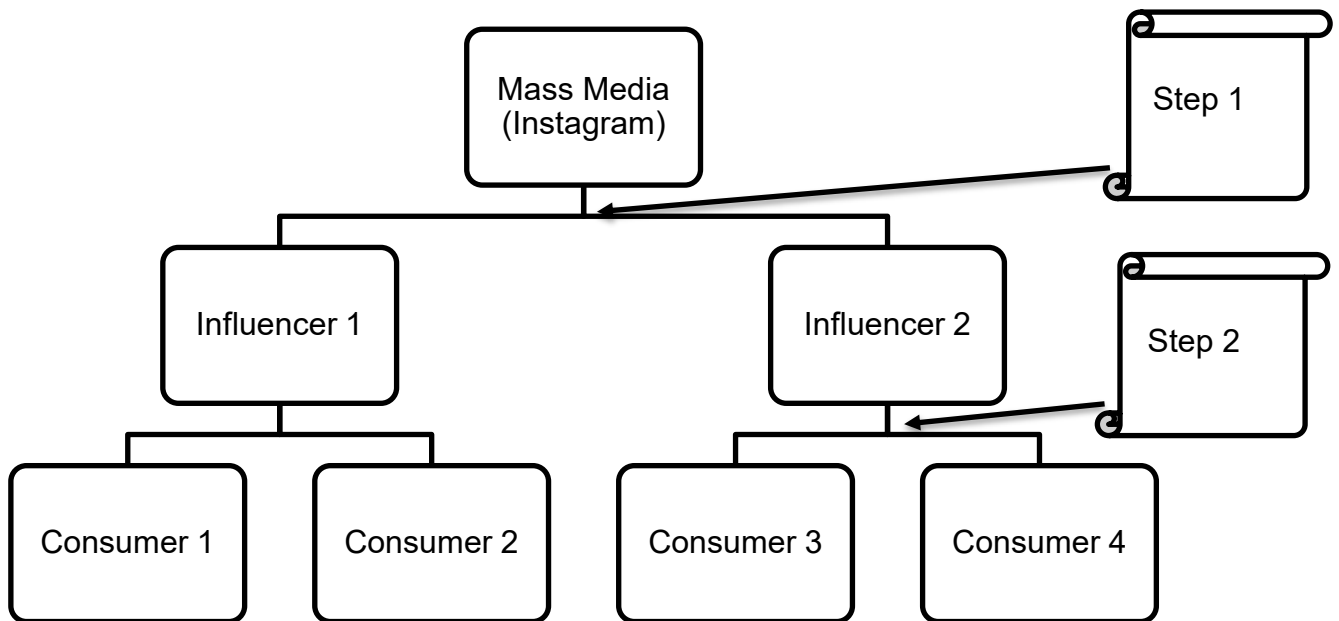


Figure 2. Two-step Flow of Media Communication (Fei et al., 2022).

## 2.2 The Role of Influencers

In today's word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing landscape, influencers are crucial in rapidly expanding their influence (Scoble & Israel, 2006). These influencers occupy a unique position within the virtual community, disseminating information through many social media platforms, including social networks and blogs. They share personal stories, images, and opinions on a wide range of topics, including services and products, illustrating the significant phenomenon of influencing (Alsulaiman et al., 2015; Alhidari et al., 2015). Unlike traditional celebrities with a broad following, influencers often create advertorials on social media or blogs and may receive compensation for promoting products or services.

Bloggers have a dedicated audience interested in specific discussion topics, with 77% of internet users regularly reading blogs (McGrail & Behizadeh, 2017). Consequently, marketers have recognized the value of bloggers as endorsers, considering them potentially more credible than celebrities (Mendoza, 2010). As a result, brands are increasingly turning to influencers for authentic marketing efforts, leveraging their ability to create a sense of relatability with consumers (Yesiloglu, 2020). This shift highlights the importance of brands carefully selecting influencers who genuinely resonate with their target audience, as these influencers may differ significantly from traditional celebrities and paid endorsements.

## 2.3 Rise of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has emerged as a groundbreaking strategy, particularly for marketers, significantly elevating brand visibility, awareness, and customer engagement to unprecedented levels (Leung et al., 2022). Delving into the historical context of influencer marketing reveals a consistent theme: the indispensable role of influential individuals in promoting brands and driving customer behavior. This trend predates the advent of social media. Even without digital platforms, people were influenced by print ads, television commercials, and radio endorsements when making purchasing decisions. This evolution is highlighted in a recent article by Aspire (2023), which outlines the transformative journey of influencer marketing. The initial phase, referred to as "pioneers," dates back to the 18th century. An illustrative example is Josiah Wedgwood, a British potter whose cream-colored artwork garnered royal approval from Queen Charlotte in 1765, earning him the prestigious title of "Her Majesty's Potter." Leveraging this endorsement, Wedgwood cleverly branded his creations as "Queensware," capitalizing on associating with the influential queen to propel his business to tremendous success (Mohanty et al., 2022).

The Internet has revolutionized traditional business practices and consumer relationships, altering how companies interact with customers and facilitate transactions. Due to the rise in e-commerce, online shopping has garnered immense popularity and is widely accepted as a primary purchasing method (Bourlakis et al., 2008). As a result, social media has emerged as a vital channel for international marketing communication, emphasizing scholars, practitioners, and organizations to concentrate on the effectiveness of advertising and its impact (Khamis et al., 2016).

In this landscape, influencer marketing has gained significant attention as a highly impactful practice, defined as marketing activities aimed at identifying and cultivating relationships with individuals who can influence potential buyers (Zhou et al., 2019). Influencer marketing has emerged as a prominent and impactful strategy in today's market. A study by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) (2018) posited that approximately 75% of consumers engaged with influencer marketing, with about 36% considering it the most effective (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). Previously, brands had to approach celebrities who were relevant to their industry for advertising purposes.



However, with advancements and the rise of influencers, companies now collaborate with influencers to showcase their products on blog pages or Instagram profiles. These influencers share their opinions and influence their followers to engage with these brands (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). With the rise of social media platforms, as discussed by Szakal (2022), people now rely on online reviews and authentic feedback when making purchasing decisions, whether online or offline. This reliance underscores the need for individuals who can offer ongoing transparency and consistency in their reviews (Szakal, 2022). This has led to the emergence of a new profession known as influencers, whose role is to provide reliability and trustworthiness in people's lives. Despite being relatively new, influencer marketing has become the preferred choice for brands and influencers to promote products and services.

Lou and Yuan (2019) describe influencer marketing as a collaborative effort between marketers and brands to engage specific influencers and utilize their content to advertise across various social media platforms. This application tool can serve as a substitute for marketing strategies that are more time-consuming and costly (Granberg, 2019). The primary attraction for brands, companies, ordinary individuals, and the influencer community towards this social media platform is the vast range of opportunities and options on Instagram. Users can select the type of content they wish to see, create, and share. Additionally, Instagram's advertising strategy is considered one of the most potent marketing tools compared to other strategies (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

## **2.4 Overview of Instagram**

The social networking app Instagram endeavors to share images and videos. Graduate students at Stanford University, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, designed it, and it was launched on October 6, 2010 (Frier, 2021). Instagram quickly gained 25,000 users on its launch day, setting a remarkable record. Within a week, the app had been downloaded 100,000 times, and by the end of the year, it had amassed nearly a million users (Musonera, 2018). The development of Instagram took approximately eight weeks for the software engineers, starting from a prototype of a web app called Burbn. After securing funding from investors, Instagram incorporated several advanced features while maintaining a minimalist approach, such as photo uploads with filters, commenting, and liking.

Initially, Instagram was exclusively available on the Apple mobile operating system, but it expanded to Android devices in 2012, broadening its user base significantly. The surge in Instagram's popularity can be attributed to the launch of the iPhone 4 in June 2010, which featured an enhanced version of the iOS camera. This improvement contributed to the widespread use of Instagram for sharing photos and videos (Ghosh, 2023). In 2012, Facebook acquired Instagram for \$1 billion in a combination of cash and stock, marking a significant milestone in Instagram's journey (Akter, 2023). Despite incorporating new features over time, such as long and short video clips, Instagram has maintained its primary focus on photo and video sharing as preferred by its owners. Users on Instagram can choose to make their profiles public or private, providing flexibility based on their preferences. The platform also includes features like followers, which facilitate the connection between content creators and their audience, allowing users to showcase their lifestyles and various content to their followers.

Adherents connect individuals who wish to showcase their lifestyles or content with those who follow them to view their posts. Users can set their profiles as public or private, depending entirely on their preferences (Akter, 2023). However, Instagram offers a variety of features for creating content, sharing, and communicating. Users can post photos and videos if they adhere to Instagram Community Guidelines. The images and videos a user posts are their IG feed (Instagram feed), which is visible to their followers. Users can upload media with up to 1080 pixels, following advanced resolution guidelines.

In addition to traditional video uploads on Instagram feeds, there is a noteworthy feature called Instagram Reels. This feature has garnered immense popularity within the Instagram community, elevating Instagram usage to new heights of success. Reels allow users to create and share videos by recording and combining multiple video clips. Users can also add existing audio, voiceovers, and effects and utilize new creative tools. Reels can range from 15 seconds to a maximum of 90 seconds (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). Reels from profiles can be posted by both private and personal accounts, making it the most efficient way to reach a broad audience and expand the reach of an Instagram account significantly. Another widely used feature on Instagram is Instagram Stories, along with Instagram Stories Highlights. Instagram Stories allows users to post photos or videos for 24 hours, providing a way to maintain ongoing communication and transparency with followers.

After 24 hours, the content disappears unless added to Instagram Stories Highlights, which are permanently displayed on a user's account feed. Initially considered a niche endeavor, influencer marketing has grown into a significant industry in the digital era. The global investment and market size for influencer marketing surged to US\$148 million in 2019, and projections indicate that this figure will surpass US\$373 million by 2027 (Ozuem & Willis, 2022). This advancement in Instagram features allows users to preserve their Stories for longer and make them accessible to their audience. Subsequently, Instagram offers a live broadcast feature, live video, allowing users to share real-time content and engage with their audience directly.

During live sessions, users can invite viewers to join, read, and respond to comments instantly, fostering immediate communication. Additionally, Instagram provides the option of Direct Messages (DMs), enabling users to connect and communicate privately. Recent enhancements in this feature have significantly improved communication capabilities. Users can now make audio and video calls, send voice messages, share photos or videos for one-time viewing, and maintain a record of texts in the DM section. Other functionalities such as stickers, blocking, reporting, chat themes, mute, shared media, and restrictions can be customized according to user preferences. Instagram also incorporates the hashtag feature, allowing users to discover similar content from different profiles, regions, or categories through hashtag usage.

According to Sprout Social (2023), approximately 4.89 billion people worldwide are actively using social media platforms, spending an average of 151 minutes daily, marking the highest engagement level to date. This includes platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, and Snapchat. Instagram has over 2 billion users as of 2022, making it the market leader in social selling from a business standpoint and offering a remarkable ROI (Return on Investment) of around 33% for selling products or services. Regarding user demographics, individuals aged 18–34 represent the most extensive user base on Instagram, accounting for approximately 61.2% of regular users on the platform. Moreover, Instagram's engagement rates are four times higher than Facebook's. Reels has introduced the latest feature on Instagram, a revolutionary change on the platform, leading users to spend 30% of their time on Instagram. Marketers and brands leverage this strategic shift for sponsored content through influencers (Sprout Social, 2023).

Furthermore, 81% of social media users utilize Instagram to research products or services within the commercial sectors (Ambrose, 2023). In addition, by sharing excellent images or videos and interacting with other users, marketers can reach their intended niche market through comments and likes on posts. However, this approach has evolved beyond just seeking potential customers at the initial stage. It maintains correspondence with existing customers or followers, preserves brand images, and provides concurrent information to Instagram followers. The business model of Instagram is to have comments, likes, sharing, and digital word-of-mouth from existing consumers and convert them into adherents. The followers of these followers are considered the secondary intended audience. Additionally, the purpose and function of Instagram marketing differ depending on scenarios, leading to differences in measurement metrics that focus on specific objectives, as shown in Figure 3.

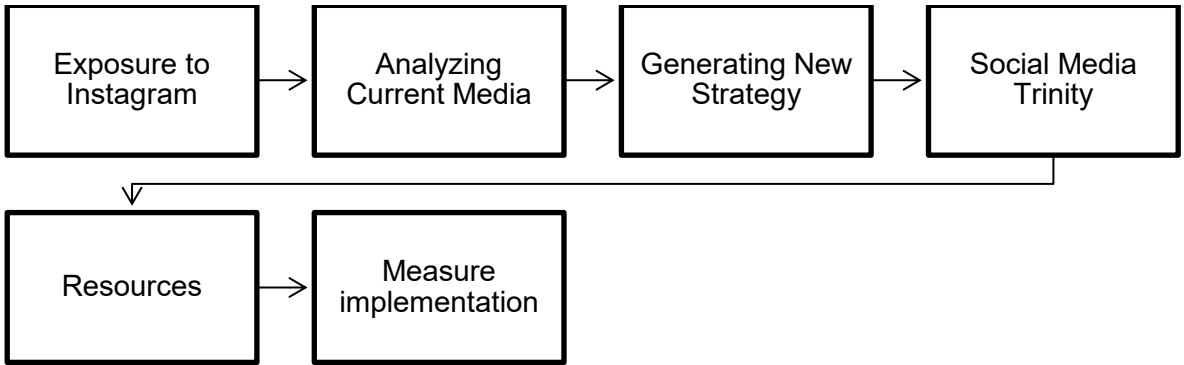


Figure 3. Role of Instagram in Marketing (Akter, 2023).

Therefore, examples of measurement metrics include the total amount of comments, likes, and follows that are utilized to increase and develop brand awareness (McCann & Barlow, 2015). Delving deeper into the usage of the Instagram app and its capabilities for advancing marketing strategies, one can see that two different kinds of Instagram profiles are available for a wide variety of users. First, the personal account whose characteristics have previously been discussed is the default choice for application users. However, with approximately 25 million business profiles as of its inception in 2016, the Instagram business profile is a more sophisticated version of the Instagram profile category. Specifically, brands, celebrities, and influencers favor this newer profile type to enhance clarity in measuring customer engagement statistics (Varvara, 2019). Additionally, several advanced features significantly benefit marketers, brands, and influencers on Instagram.

One of these features is Instagram Insights, an analytics tool specifically designed to provide detailed information for business profiles on the platform. Instagram Insights offers a wide range of features tailored to each profile's specific needs, which can be customized accordingly. Competition, Content, and Audience are the three sections that make up this feature-based division. The activity focuses explicitly on determining the business account's reach, whether users see the material the account creates, and the actions they take when interacting with the profile. It provides detailed information about user interaction patterns by providing weekly statistics broken down by different business days. The content category shows all messages created by the account throughout the week, including posts, Instagram stories, and regular posts. This section provides an overview of account content strategies and performance metrics so that strategic adjustments and optimizations can be made based on written requirements.

Finally, Visitor Demographics provide information on the most critical regions for profile followers, age demographics, gender distribution, and peak employment times. This information helps understand audience composition and preferences to develop content creation and marketing strategies. It also helps identify the cities and countries with the most participation. Another essential part of Instagram is its advertising tool, which offers brands, influencers, or casual users a creative way to turn posts into posts. The primary purpose of this support tool is to have two main drives. First, its purpose is to increase business awareness and prevalence. The latter is designed to drive viewers to share a profile, access a profile, follow a profile, or purchase the gateway product from the link.

The promotion feature enables users to push their posts by advancing their profiles automatically to access their required audiences through age, gender, locale, and interests. Generally, a higher budget results in broader exposure to audiences, contributing to the success of the promotional campaign. In addition to promotional content, Instagram has introduced a more advanced tool called Instagram Ads. This feature allows professional accounts to create customized advertisements and boost feed posts, reels, and stories. The aim is to attract potential customers through precise targeting and actionable insights, offering a more sophisticated approach to advertising on the platform. The collaboration feature on Instagram is a recent addition that allows users to partner up collaboratively, aiming to enhance creativity, connections, and overall business growth. This collaboration involves co-authoring posts, including single or multiple photos, videos, or reels.

These co-authored posts are then displayed on both profiles' feeds, making them accessible to a broader audience across the platform. Furthermore, Instagram provides the option to include contact information, facilitating a more streamlined networking process by offering detailed information preferred by the account owner. This information, such as phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses, is not mandatory but acts as a bridge between companies, brands, and influencers on the platform.

## **2.5 Instagram Influencer Marketing**

The strategic approach that has gained prominence in the industry is Instagram influencer marketing, which has proven highly effective in connecting with potential customers and nurturing them (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). A thesis study on "Influencer Marketing as a Marketing Tool" notes that typical consumers frequently ask for advice from influencers, perceived as neutral authorities, rather than directly from the brand before purchasing (Akter, 2023). This highlights influencers' significant influence and role in building their recognition. Instagram influencers have categorized themselves based on different aspects and have focused on specific market segments and products, positioning themselves as experts.

In addition, a study found that 90% of customers trust recommendations from individuals within their network, with online platforms accounting for 81% of these referrals (Akter, 2023). As outlined below, the classification of influencers on Instagram is primarily determined by the number of followers an account user has. However, beyond the sheer number of followers, influencers are also classified based on several other criteria that determine their level of influence. Morte (2017) noted that the motivation to influence others could stem from professional roles or personal interests. This categorization includes influencers such as opinion leaders, experts, celebrities, trendsetters, and more. Additionally, the primary source of influence and engagement with their audience significantly impacts an influencer's effectiveness and reach (Morteo, 2017). The rapid expansion of content on the Weibo platform has caused online celebrities to compete for the attention and influence of their peers (Trusov et al., 2009). These influential people, often called opinion leaders, can influence members of their communities by spreading the word. Research focusing on the diffusion of knowledge is particularly interested in understanding how influential people interact and exert influence within their networks.

In recent years, these influencers have become online opinion leaders in the form of bloggers and video bloggers (Sethi et al., 2024) and have gained the power to create personalities and mold others on social media platforms. Throughout the meaning-changing process, these influencers increase interest and influence consumers' attitudes toward products, brands, and purchasing decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Existing literature shows social media on various e-commerce platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, investigating the impact of media content on other important sites. This research highlights the significant role of digital influencers in fields such as food, education, and healthcare (McNeill & Briggs, 2014). In virtual communities, stakeholders significantly impact consumers' pre-purchase and post-purchase behavior (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Creative leaders can influence their peers to accomplish essential tasks (Smith, 2020) and broadcast them to a broader audience (Goldsmith et al., 2012). These influencers are well-versed in understanding their followers' preferences, allowing them to deliver content to their target audience by better understanding what consumers think, thus turning them into fans (Teng et al., 2020). This often leads to more sharing on the network, increasing the reach and impact of the content.

Rapid and widespread dissemination of content plays a vital role in accessing new information on the network and increasing user participation. Additionally, these features help companies identify new customers and meet changing customer needs (Aldhaferi & Bach, 2013). Despite the popularity of digital influencers, few studies have focused on investigating their impact on consumer decisions. Additionally, there is no research on accessing influencer content (Chahal, 2016).

## **2.6 Consumers' Inclination to Make Online Purchases**

Purchasing Inclination (PI) holds significant importance within marketing literature, primarily due to its close association with consumer buying behavior (Goyal et al., 2018). Scholars have shown keen interest in studying PI because of its predictive power regarding future outcomes (Bishop & Barber, 2014). Ajzen and Madden (1986) emphasize that inclination is a crucial indicator of intentions, reflecting the extent to which individuals are willing to engage in a particular behavior and their efforts to carry out that behavior. Aligning with Ajzen's perspective, Jian et al. (2023) highlight that the lack of intention to make purchases online poses a significant challenge in the advancement of e-commerce.

The purchasing process begins when a consumer begins exploring products, which can ultimately result in acquiring a specific item (Bishop & Barber, 2014). Purchasing intention refers to the likelihood of a customer buying a particular product or service (Bishop & Barber, 2014). It also signifies the inclination towards planning to purchase goods or services (Goyal et al., 2018). Additionally, purchase inclination is a component of consumer cognitive behavior, indicating how an individual intends to purchase a specific brand or product (Hosseini & Norouzi, 2017). Purchase inclination reflects that consumers utilize their experiences, preferences, and the wider community to obtain data, weigh options, and make purchase decisions (Chi et al., 2011). The intention to purchase online indicates a customer's level of preparedness to conduct transactions online (Meskaran et al., 2013). Research has demonstrated that consumers' purchasing inclination significantly influences their buying decisions. Companies recognize the importance of purchasing intention as it correlates with boosting product and service sales to maximize profits (Hosseini & Norouzi, 2017).

Furthermore, marketing professionals regularly assess and utilize purchase intentions to forecast market share or sales figures for new and current goods and services. Managers can benefit from the purchasing intention data in marketing decisions related to market segmentation and promotional strategies (Goyal et al., 2018). Previous online experiences are precursors to online purchase intentions (Meskaran et al., 2013). Weisberg et al. (2011) conducted a study revealing that prior purchases forecast intentions to make future purchases, with trust and social presence acting as partial mediators. Additionally, Hsu and Tsou (2011) found that customer engagement with online blogs significantly amplifies the impact of past experiences on purchase intentions. Moreover, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) plays a pivotal role in influencing consumer purchasing decisions positively or negatively (Sa'ait et al., 2016). Mikalef et al. (2013) highlighted the interconnectedness of product browsing and word-of-mouth intentions, thereby increasing the likelihood of completing a purchase. The consumer's willingness to disclose personal information online plays a pivotal role in shaping purchase decisions, with privacy considerations being identified as a factor influencing online purchase intentions (Belanger et al., 2002; Tariq & Eddaoudi, 2009). Furthermore, endorsers and their expertise, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness are additional influential factors. A person who endorses a product or brand and aligns well with these criteria is more likely to positively influence purchase intent, while the opposite is also true (Fred, 2015).



## **2.7 Factors Influencing the Online Purchase Inclination**

In addition to influencers' characteristics like trustworthiness, expertise, and credibility, other factors influence purchasing intent and the inclination to shop online.

### **2.7.1 Influencers' Credibility**

There is no denying that credibility has always been crucial to marketing (Dwivedi et al., 2018). From a conceptual standpoint, credibility refers to how credible the information is and those who provide it. On the other hand, credible parties enhance their performance with their trustworthiness on Instagram (Dwivedi et al., 2018). Conversely, credibility appears to be a subjective concept (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Because the receivers' hearts and minds make this determination, it is impossible to determine whether a particular piece of information is universally accepted as credible (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Over the past few decades, only those fortunate enough to have sound legal standing and sufficient financial resources have been able to create content and information for large audiences in traditional media spaces (AlFarraj et al., 2021). These days, technological advancements remove such obstacles. According to Duong (2020), anyone can use the internet and social media to broadcast messages to a large public audience; authority or high costs and risks are not necessary to accomplish the goal or deliver the message. Influencer marketing is a mutually beneficial collaboration between social media influencers and brands or companies. This partnership aims to provide value to customers while benefiting both parties involved. Typically, influencers promote the products or services of brands on their social media channels and receive compensation in the form of a flat rate per post or a percentage of sales generated through their promotions, often facilitated by purchase gateways or promo codes. This arrangement leads to increased sales and brand engagement. The payment to influencers varies based on the specific terms agreed upon in the deal and the performance metrics of their posts. It can range from three to six figures, with celebrities often commanding higher rates (McKinsey & Company, 2023). According to Alvarez-Monzoncillo (2023), effective endorsement outcomes are achieved when there is a strong alignment between the idealized self-image of the customer and the image that a social media influencer project.

## **2.8 Influencers' Credibility Dimensions and Purchase Intention**

The research community has been interested in the legitimacy of influencers and how they affect purchase inclination, which has resulted in the publication of multiple research papers and academic attention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). An investigation into the mediating function of attitude in the relationship between UK customers' readiness to purchase service brands and perceived credibility, for example, was conducted by Hughes et al. (2014). Based on their research, they concluded that sponsored blogging affects online behavior, including brand favoritism.

It was discovered that this influence varied according to the attributes of the bloggers, the message of their blogs, the kind of social media network, and the goal of the promotional effort. It was concluded that the effectiveness of a sponsored post on a blog depends on the blogger's expertise, with more knowledgeable bloggers being more effective at increasing awareness than encouraging actual trials. They also highlighted that the effectiveness of campaign incentives is significantly influenced by the type of platform used (Hughes et al., 2014). This underscores the importance of considering various factors, including influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, content relevance, and platform type, in designing effective influencer marketing campaigns.

### **2.8.1 Attractiveness**

Erdogan (1999) proposed that attractiveness encompasses positive associations with an individual, including physical appeal, personality traits, and athletic abilities. This suggests that lovely influencers likely influence their followers' purchase intentions (Guo et al., 2021). Additionally, attractiveness is seen as a crucial factor in effectively delivering messages, as indicated by Wang and Scheinbaum (2018). However, some scholars argue that while attractiveness positively impacts evaluations, its direct influence on purchasing intentions remains unclear. For instance, Wang and Scheinbaum (2018) noted that advertisers often prefer physically attractive influencers for their campaigns due to their ability to shape customer attitudes toward brands. Moreover, research by Lou and Yuan (2019) highlights that influencers' attractiveness affects trust in content and boosts brand awareness.

### **2.8.2 Trustworthiness**

The definition of trustworthiness is the endorser's honesty, integrity, and dependability exhibited, according to Van der Waldt et al. (2009). Ohanian (1990) defines it as the level of trust customers have in influencers' intention to communicate the claims, they find most credible. Instagram users evaluate influencers' credibility when they believe they are trustworthy, dependable, honest, or sound (Ceyhan et al., 2018). Research has indicated that the degree of trust and loyalty between consumers and influencers has a beneficial impact on sales, the image of the brand, and the sustainability of relationships. Wang and Scheinbaum (2018) found that the most essential factor studied in the beauty sector is trustworthiness, especially when it comes to social media influencers. They also found that attractiveness is critical in influencing consumer attitudes and connecting relevant endorsers with trustworthy brands. De Brito Silva et al. (2022) also explored how engagement generated from product or service advertisements by digital influencers on platforms like Instagram influences product endorsements.

### **2.8.3 Expertise**

Expertise characterizes the endorser's knowledge and abilities to market the product (Van der Waldt et al., p. 104). Information from experts in a field is generally considered more reliable than that from non-experts. Essentially, having an influencer with solid expertise in clearly marked advertising should have less impact on trustworthiness than non-experts or celebrities from the same era (Guo et al., 2018). According to Daneshvary and Schwer (2000), expertise is a crucial characteristic of influencer success, recognition, and credibility as a trustworthy source of knowledge for their audience.

An influencer should have expertise only if their followers believe they are skillful, proficient, and knowledgeable (Schouten et al., 2021). Additionally, expertise influences the perceived credibility of influencers and shapes customers' purchasing behavior and intentions (Schouten et al., 2021). Endorsers with higher expertise and perceived as experts are more persuasive and can increase engagement with the brand (Erdogan, 1999). Therefore, the expertise of Instagram influencers could significantly impact customer inclination levels and, subsequently, their purchase intentions.

## 2.9 Theoretical Framework

From the above literature, the study proposed that the three primary dimensions of Influencer credibility—attraction, trustworthiness, and expertise—play pivotal roles in forecasting online customers' purchase inclinations.

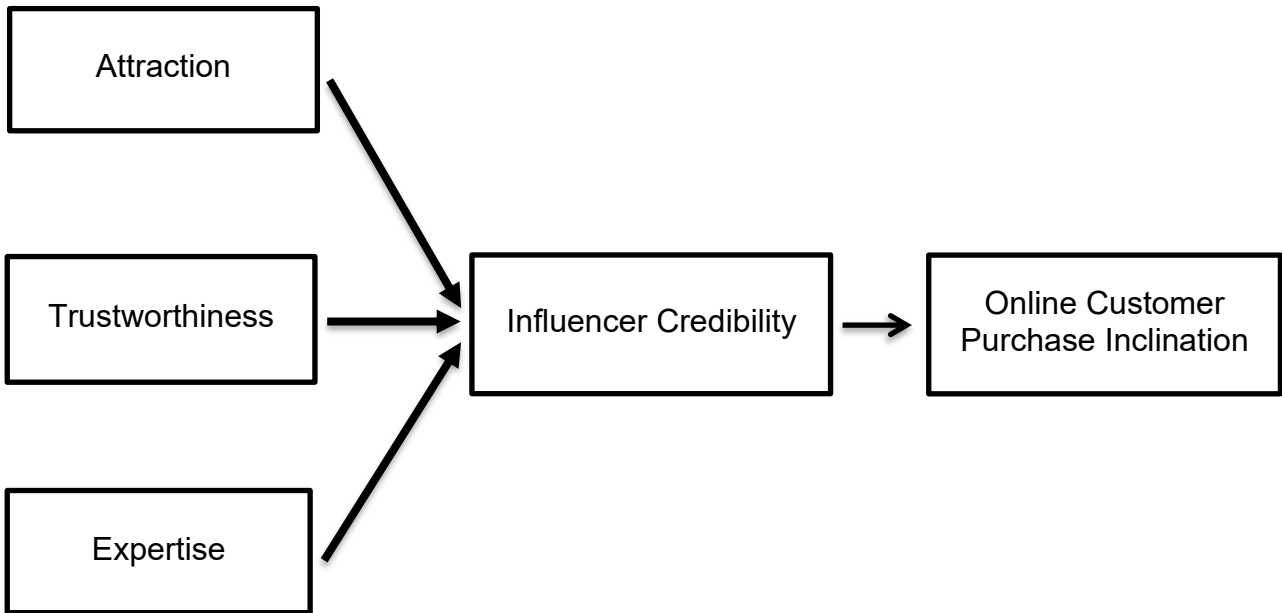


Figure 4. Conceptual Model.

### **3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter elaborates on the research methodology. First, it explains the research philosophy, approach, and strategy. Then, it describes the empirical data collection and analysis. Finally, it focuses on research validity, reliability, and ethics.

#### **3.1 Research Philosophy, Approach, and Strategy**

The research applied subjectivism and interpretivism according to ontology and epistemology research philosophy. It emphasizes the exploration of complex social phenomena associated with influencer marketing and consumer behavior. Interpretivism emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals' subjective meanings and interpretations of their experiences and the social world around them. The approach allowed the researcher to gain in-depth insights into the perspectives and experiences of Instagram influencers and their followers. This approach ensures that the research is rigorous, reliable, and capable of producing generalizable and actionable insights.

Moreover, Guest et al. (2013) indicate that this inductive research approach has the advantage of collecting rich, detailed data that can reveal underlying motives and contextual factors influencing consumer behavior, thus providing valid and reliable conclusions. Therefore, the method was significant because it could look at consumer experiences with influencers. The inductive research approach benefited this study since it helped the researcher develop fresh perspectives on issues and themes from the collected data. By analyzing interview data, the researcher could recognize patterns, themes, or relationships that emerged naturally from participants' responses (Evans et al., 2011). This flexibility proved convenient when delving into a relatively less studied area, such as the specific impacts of Instagram influencers on consumer decision-making. Consequently, the research employed the qualitative research strategy in the research methodology, which is suitable for untangling multi-dimensional phenomena and understanding participants' attitudes, beliefs, and actions. According to Tracy (2019), the qualitative research strategy was the most appropriate method used in this investigation because it helps to understand the perceptions and attitudes of participants.

### **3.2 Empirical Data Collection and Analysis Techniques**

The study employed interviews as the data collection method with two participants, using open-ended questions conducted online. This form of data collection aided in conducting the current study. Open-ended questions enable participants to express their thoughts and experiences in detail, providing rich, qualitative data that can reveal complex insights into their behaviors and attitudes (Rosenthal, 2016). Moreover, online interviewing was very convenient for both the researcher and the respondents since it made interview scheduling and passage easier without being influenced by geographical locations. Also, volunteer sampling, which consists of self-selection and snowball sampling techniques, has successfully identified consumers who are genuinely interested in or involved with such a subject area (Rahman, 2023). This is even more crucial in the social media context because it makes it possible to get potential candidates from different platforms and, therefore, not need to see them physically.

The research utilized the thematic analysis approach to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that recognizes, examines, and reports data patterns (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). It offered a structured approach by which the researcher could handle qualitative data, ensuring thorough and systematic analysis. In addition, it is a flexible method that can be applied to a wide range of qualitative data, helping the researcher discover more profound insights and connections among data. Key issues or influences that may not seem obvious were also identified (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In addition, through this process, the main themes associated with the role of Instagram influencers on consumers' purchasing decisions were systematically addressed and interpreted, thus giving a clear understanding of the findings.

### **3.3 Research Validity, Reliability, and Ethics**

The data collection process from participants in the sample was conducted ethically and with their full consent. The researchers adhered to confidentiality and anonymity while maintaining an objective position for the credibility of collected data (Bishop, 2009). It followed best practices and data protection regulations to keep collected data safe. The researcher ensured that all information was kept securely, with limited access given only to the investigator and authorized staff members. The participants were treated respectfully and sensitively during interviews (Robinson, 2014).

The questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to express their views without feeling forced or coerced. The researcher was neutral and unprejudiced, allowing any experience to be shared within a safe space. Furthermore, participants were notified of their right to withdraw from the research anytime they felt like without facing any negative consequences.

## **4 THE CASE STUDY OF COMPANY AB**

This chapter describes the case company's background, product and services, and marketing positioning in Pakistan. Finally, it illustrates the importance of influencer marketing for brand awareness and loyalty.

### **4.1 Background of the Company, Product, and Services**

The case company AB is one of the leading skincare brands in Pakistan. Starting in 2016, AB takes pride in 100% natural parabens, GMOs, and toxins-free products. The business idea of AB is to ensure that customers are aware of the natural performance of the products. AB has a product line of over 50 products targeting all age groups. It has a separate line for kids' products. This kids' range is an ultra-gentle, paraben-free, and phthalate-free line of products that helps protect a child's delicate skin. AB's products focus on solving skin problems ranging from pigmentation and acne to aging.

### **4.2 Influencer Marketing for Digital Growth**

This brand mainly works online, with a gross revenue of over Rs. 500 million annually. This study decided to collaborate with AB company since their digital marketing strategies heavily depend on influencers. There are multiple ways in which they are utilizing this approach. In the product launch phase, they create a campaign solely including influencers to create a pre-launch release product hype. After launch, influencer marketing consists of showing the problems the product is solving and the benefits users will get from the product. Hence, every step of their digital marketing takes advantage of the massive following of these influencers, especially their credibility and trust factor, to create more brand awareness and, ultimately, revenue.



## 5 THE RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter provides the analysis based on the data collected. To better understand the role of influencers on consumer inclination toward online purchases, the findings discussed the themes of influencer credibility and trustworthiness, engagement, interaction, content type and presentation, influencer-consumer relation dynamics, and impact on brand loyalty and purchase intent. The respondents' quotes indicated H1, the information provided by the case company's manager, and H2, the consumer who used to purchase online.

### 5.1 Credibility and Trustworthiness of Influencers

The theme explores how influencers' perceived credibility and trustworthiness impact consumer purchasing decisions. It examines the factors that contribute to an influencer's credibility, such as authenticity, transparency, and the quality of their endorsements. For example, how followers perceive the sincerity and expertise of influencers and how this perception affects their willingness to follow purchase recommendations. As one of the respondents highlighted.

We look at the attractiveness part, but that is not very concerning in terms of the brand and the values we offer to our customers. However, we mostly look at engagement on their post and the quality of their content. (H1)

The above statement highlights the importance of substance over superficial qualities. The interviewee emphasizes that an influencer's credibility is tied to the quality and engagement of their content rather than their physical appearance. This suggests that the perceived effort and authenticity influence followers in an influencer's posts, affecting their trust and willingness to act on recommendations. Another response, like the context, highlighted that.

Trustworthiness is very crucial... If an influencer is promoting, let us say, five brands per month, their audience knows that, okay, they are not promoting every product that has been launched; they are just promoting the best ones. (H2)

The above statement highlights that trustworthiness is vital to an influencer's credibility. Promoting too many products can dilute an influencer's trustworthiness, whereas being selective and genuine in endorsements enhances their credibility.

Followers are likelier to trust and follow purchase recommendations from influencers they perceive as authentic and selective in their brand partnerships. In other responses, it is highlighted that.

If an influencer promotes ten products per day, the audience will not follow them. The significant impact is only generated by credible influencers who promote products based on their trust and what they consider is good for their audience.  
(H2)

The above statement highlights a crucial element of influencer marketing as the interchange between marketing and authenticity. Another factor is seen in the statement: too much advertising can destroy an influencer's reputation because their desire to profit from their followers becomes quite apparent. When an influencer makes endorsements over a short period, it might be perceived as not being sincere or genuine by his or her followers. The phrase 'strongest effect' in the quote refers to the real power that genuine influencers possess over their followers. This is matched with influencers who carefully select products they want to promote so that what they recommend aligns with their brand and values. Through selectivity, influencers prove that it is not about building wealth but promoting products they believe in that can benefit their audience. Such behavior develops trust between the influencer and their followers; this also helps them keep such trust intact.

Meanwhile, trust is critical for good influencer marketing. People are more inclined to follow advice they view as reliable by influencers. This indicates that the influencer's endorsement is credible only if they continually advertise things that align with their audience's preferences and requirements. Consequently, this faith translates into increased chances of followers purchasing goods based on the recommendations by the influencer. This demonstrates a deeper level of commitment towards the well-being and happiness of their audience. Subsequently, it can be argued that followers value such authenticity and will remain loyal to influencers who demonstrate that they care about what they promote. It is concluded that an Instagram influencer's credibility and trustworthiness play a significant role in followers' purchase decision-making process. Authenticity, selective endorsement, and content quality have fostered this trust relationship. Influencers considered sincere and responsible in customer interactions may influence the inclination to buy.

## 5.2 Engagement and Interaction with Followers

The second theme is engagement and interaction with followers, which explores influencers' engagement with their audience. This includes responding to comments, replying to direct messages, and maintaining a personal connection with them. One participant responded to the question about engagement and interaction.

When influencers take the time to reply to comments or direct messages, it makes followers feel valued and heard. This kind of interaction builds a strong bond and trust. (H2)

This statement shows how important it is for influencers to interact directly with their followers. Influencers engage with their audience by responding to comments and messages to personalize the experience, making followers feel appreciated and acknowledged. This personal touch fosters a sense of community and loyalty. As followers feel more connected and valued, their trust in the influencer grows, making them more likely to consider and act on the influencer's product recommendations. It has been observed that the perceived accessibility and responsiveness of the influencer contributes significantly to the followers' trust and loyalty, thereby enhancing the influencer's persuasive power. Again, another participant put it this way.

I follow influencers who actively engage with their audience because it feels like a two-way conversation rather than just them broadcasting content. It makes their recommendations feel more genuine. (H1)

The above statement underpins the communication transition from one-sided to interactive. Fans admire influencers who have a conversation rather than just posting content. This interactive approach makes recommendations sound more genuine and less like they are doing paid promotion. A two-way conversation brings out the human touch, which followers can identify with at the most personal level possible. The relatability raises the perceived authenticity of an influencer, which compels followers to believe in their endorsements and thus purchase what they recommend. Also, it has been stated that.

Influencers who take the time to know their followers' preferences and respond accordingly can make a huge difference. It shows they genuinely care about what their audience thinks. (H2)

The statement mentioned above highlights a more progressive level of interaction whereby influencers surpass mere general communication to discern their followers' specific preferences and interests. Additionally, tailoring their responses and content according to what followers like or dislike shows that these influencers are concerned about them. This individualized way of dealing with people has increased trust between followers and influencers because they feel their opinions and desires are valued. When followers realize that their needs are identified and met, they trust the recommendation from the influencer and have confidence in purchasing decisions.

Therefore, analysis of the theme indicated that active participation and meaningful interaction are essential for building trust between influencers and followers. Responding to comments and direct messages and creating content purposely aimed at specific audiences makes people feel connected as a community. Thus, this personal outlook enhances an influencer's authenticity when recommending brands or products, making such advice trusted by many individuals. Therefore, when followers feel cherished and acknowledged by the influencer, they are highly likely to respond positively towards product endorsements, leading to increased purchase decisions. The study points out that influencers who emphasize real engagement get endorsed more often than others, better influencing their followers' purchasing behaviors.

### **5.3 Content-Type and Presentation**

The theme studies how various content formats (e.g., stories, reels, live sessions) impact consumer buying decisions. It investigates the efficacy and attractiveness of different forms of content in driving engagement and conversions. For example, the effectiveness of video content, such as reels and stories, when it comes to getting attention and inciting purchases compared to static images or text posts. This was witnessed by a respondent who stated that.

I find reels and stories more engaging because they are short and dynamic. They capture my attention quickly, and I'm more likely to watch them through and act on what is being recommended. (H1)

The above statement underlines the significance of reels and stories as excellent tools for attracting viewers' attention. Reels and stories are usually short but visually attractive, making them more likely to be watched till the end. Therefore, influencers can send their messages instantly through this medium.

The statement revealed that high engagement rates associated with reels and stories may result in a higher conversion rate. One interviewee commented that people are more likely to respond to the recommendations made through these formats because they are compelling and concise.

Live sessions are great because they allow for real-time interaction. When an influencer goes live, it feels more authentic and spontaneous, and I trust their recommendations more in that format. (H2)

It has been highlighted from the above quote that through the live sessions, influencers can easily interact with their followers in real-time with more attraction. Impulsive communication makes them appear more expert than any other form of interaction between people online. Followers ask questions during live sessions, and immediate responses are received, giving them a sense of transparency and trust. Such sessions can significantly shape consumer behavior, given followers' trust in recommendations made during real-time interactions because of the immediacy and genuine concern experienced. In addition, it has been highlighted that.

I prefer watching detailed product reviews in video format. Seeing the product in use and hearing an influencer's detailed opinion helps me make more informed purchase decisions. (H1)

This statement establishes the importance of detailed product reviews in video form. Videos that extensively review and demonstrate goods will enable enthusiasts to witness how the item operates alongside its characteristics and benefits. This holistic approach gives followers first-hand information about what is available on the product to make better purchase decisions. While static images or text need to rely on words alone to persuade potential buyers to purchase, videos empower customers' minds using visual and auditory senses, providing them with a more profound sense of fulfillment, thereby increasing purchase intent.

In general, the analysis of this theme shows that the kind and presentation of content incredibly impact consumer behaviors. Reels and stories as short-form videos have significant advantages in capturing attention and driving engagement because they are dynamic and to the point. Live sessions make it possible for real-time interaction to be more authentic and trustworthy, leading to better conversion rates.

Detailed product video reviews give ample information and facilitate followers' informed purchase decisions. Viewers' involvement with Such content formats is effective in authenticity and engagement, thus influencing their buying behaviors.

#### **5.4 Influencer-Consumer Relationship Dynamics**

This theme explores the relationship dynamics between influencers and their followers, focusing on how influencers' connections and perceived authenticity contribute to their persuasive power. This is like the importance of relatability and authenticity in an influencer and their followers, which leads to a faithful audience that is more inclined to respond to a given suggestion. The researcher got a view from.

I follow influencers who share their real-life experiences and struggles. It makes them more relatable and human. When they recommend a product, I feel it comes from a friend rather than a salesperson. (H1)

The above statement points out the relevance of being relatable and authentic in the influencer-consumer relationship. By sharing personal stories and real-life experiences, influencers become more trustworthy to their followers. When an influencer is seen as a friend who shares honest opinions rather than a salesperson with unknown motives, their recommendations carry more weight. This perceived authenticity and personal connection enhance influencers' powers of persuasion, leading to a greater likelihood of follower compliance with recommended behaviors.

The influencers I trust the most stay true to their values and are consistent in their messaging. Their credibility makes me believe in their recommendations. (H1)

This quotation underscores the need for influencers to build trust between them and consumers by being consistent and accurate. This builds trust as people who always stick to their principles or follow a clear message become believable compared to others who jump from one thing to another. As a result, this uniformity helps reassure followers that the influencer's recommendations come from an authentic standpoint rather than opportunistic endorsements. The important dynamic here is based on credibility; followers tend to trust and follow their recommendations when they believe that an influencer's endorsements are authentic and in line with their values. Hence, this trust is essential for long-term loyalty to be sustained and the influencer's persuasive power to remain unchanged.

When an influencer I follow posts regularly and engages frequently with their audience, it keeps them on top of my mind. I am more likely to consider their recommendations because I know them better. (H2)

The above statement argues the importance of regular interaction between influencers and followers. Regular posts and frequent engagement keep the influencer in mind and relevant to the audience. Thus, this continuous presence helps establish a stronger bond, making people feel closer to those who post stories about their lives online or share opinions with followers. It is, therefore, evident from this statement that due to frequent interactions that develop into familiarity, there are chances that these followers would trust such recommendations the influencers give. This consistent visibility reinforces the influencer's credibility, raising the likelihood of followers considering and buying recommended products. In addition, there was also another response regarding this issue.

Influencers who take the time to interact with their audience daily seem more genuine and invested. Their frequent engagement makes me trust their opinions more, and I am more likely to buy the products they endorse. (H1)

This statement emphasizes the perceived authenticity and investment of influencers who engage daily with their audience. Regular engagement with followers suggests that the influencer is deeply interested in their community and appreciates their participation. This everyday exchange of messages enhances the perceived authenticity of the influencer because it reflects some form of dedication and openness. Followers are also more inclined to buy from influencers who are seen to be genuinely invested in them and are honest in their dealings. This belief leads to increased sales for products endorsed by influencers, indicating that the frequency of interactions significantly affects consumer purchase decisions by fostering a more robust, genuine connection. Overall, the analysis provided the research with the view that personal connections, perceived authenticity, and frequent interactions are crucial in the influencer-consumer relationship. Influencers can be made more accessible and trustworthy when they are open about personal stories or experiences that connect with others. The trust is further reinforced by consistent values across all messaging, whereby audiences perceive an influencer as trustworthy and dependable.

These traits encourage brand loyalty as those who follow them will most likely adhere to their suggestions if they think these influencers understand them well enough. The more frequent the interactions, the more robust and accurate the relationship between influencers and their followers affects consumers' buying decisions. These dynamics are based on the influencer's ability to influence consumers properly.

## **5.5 Impact on Brand Loyalty and Purchase Intent**

This theme examines how influencers build brand loyalty and influence their followers' purchase intent. It also considers the long-term effects of influencer endorsements on consumer behavior and brand perception. Situations where influencers have managed to encourage repetitive purchases of goods or services in a brand through continuous genuine endorsements. One respondent mentioned the below.

I started buying from a skincare brand because an influencer I follow recommended it. Over time, as she continued to use and endorse the products, I became loyal to the brand, too. I trust her judgment, so I keep going back to the brand. (H2)

This quote illustrates the powerful role influencers play in fostering brand loyalty. She established credibility with the audience by using and promoting these skincare cosmetics. In such a long-term relationship, subsequent sales indicated that consistent and genuine endorsements could make someone buying once a repeat customer. Followers' trust in the influencer's judgment affected their future buying behavior, suggesting that continued and authentic promotions might have significant implications for influencers' brand loyalty and customer retention.

When an influencer I trust discusses a new product or brand, I am likelier to try it out. I often stick with it if I like it because I associate the positive experience with the influencer's recommendation. (H2)

The above statement revealed how influencers drive initial purchase intent and subsequently influence long-term consumer behavior. His trust highly influences the decision of a follower to try a new product in the influencer. The positive link between the influencer's recommendation and the follower's satisfaction with the product can result in its continued usage and brand loyalty.



Considering the theme analysis, it can be noted that influencers significantly affect brand loyalty and purchase intention. Consistent and authentic endorsements by influencers can change followers into loyal customers who purchase a particular brand repeatedly. In their opinion, the influencer's trust is significant for a potential customer's choice to try out a product initially and to create long-term loyalty. Brand experiences that are positively related to endorsed products and continued endorsement enhance the link between the endorsed brands and recommendations made by an influencer, increasing interest and making repeated purchases. In essence, influencers thus are significant contributors to consumer behavior and brand perception over time.

## **6 DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

The research findings explore how Instagram influencers impact consumers' decision-making when purchasing online. The study was guided by two main sub-questions: identifying the key factors attributed to influencers that affect consumer behavior and examining how the frequency of influencer interactions influences purchasing decisions. The discussion addresses achieving research objectives through a literature review and qualitative interviews.

### **6.1 Influence on Consumer Decision Making**

Firstly, while seeking the research question about the influence of influencers on the inclination to make online purchases. The findings align with the theoretical framework based on the two-step flow theory, which posits that influencers act as intermediaries between mass media and the ultimate audience, significantly shaping consumer behavior. This theory extends Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1995) two-step flow model by illustrating how influencers receive information from the media and interpret and transmit it to their followers, who influence their networks. The study also highlighted through the analysis that influencers are pivotal in online shoppers' decision-making. This is consistent with existing literature that highlights the growing influence of digital figures in the marketing landscape (Scoble & Israel, 2006). Influencers leverage their perceived expertise, relatability, and personal connection with followers to influence purchase decisions. They create a trusted source of information that is often considered more credible than traditional advertising. This aligns with the findings of Lee et al. (2022), who noted that influencers are dynamic third-party endorsers capable of engaging audiences and shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. Therefore, based on the analysis and findings, the research has achieved the study's primary objective.

### **6.2 Key Factors Influencing Consumer Behavior**

The research provided findings into the specific attributes of influencers that resonate with consumers. Key factors identified include credibility, attraction, trust, and engagement quality. This supports prior research that suggests that consumers are more likely to be influenced by individuals they perceive as trustworthy and relatable (Alsulaiman et al., 2015; Alhidari et al., 2015).

Moreover, credibility is a quality that contains many dimensions, such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). This would suggest that influencers who only choose products selectively that they support and give truthful, expert opinions are more credible. In addition, Hovland et al. (1953) also hold that the source's credibility is significant in persuasion. As per the findings, authenticity implies being honest and open. Overall, influencers talking about their experiences make people think they are genuine and influential. It is also in line with the work of Audrezet et al. (2018) that authenticity in influencer marketing leads to more robust consumer connections and increased trust.

Equally, there is importance in the expertise of engagement. Influential influencers maintain regular interactions with their followers regarding posts where they respond to their followers' comments, thereby providing another avenue for two-way communication. Engagement builds community feel and trust among the audience members, especially on social media platforms like Instagram. It has been analyzed that if an influencer promotes too many products, the audience does not follow them. On top of that, only credible influencers generate real impact who promote products out of genuine concern rather than selling what they think is suitable for their audience. This enforces the need for selective endorsement and maintaining credibility to influence consumer choices effectively. Furthermore, those influencers who involve themselves actively with their audience on a substantive basis are considered to care more about their followership, thereby enhancing trustworthiness and loyalty towards them. This is supported by findings from De Veirman et al. (2017), who noted that the perceived authenticity and quality of interactions between influencers and followers significantly impact consumer attitudes and behaviors.

Thus, the study verified that essential matters such as credibility, authenticity, and expertise in engagement are vital in shaping customers' habits, therefore successfully achieving the first sub-question of the study. Influencers who appear genuine and trustworthy, maintain high levels of genuineness, and interact normally with their viewers are better at persuading consumers to buy products. These findings add to a broader comprehension of influencer marketing dynamics impacting consumer behavior while supporting theoretical underpinnings and existing literature.

### 6.3 Frequency of Interactions

The study explored how the frequency of interactions between influencers and their followers affects consumer purchasing decisions. The report revealed that frequent and meaningful interaction, for example, replying to comments or direct messages, facilitates a strong personal connection, leading to more trust and loyalty. This finding confirms the view of other scholars that continuous interaction helps influencers become more persuasive and increases their engagement levels and conversion rates. It has been noticed that when influencers respond to comments or direct messages, it feels more intimate and reliable. This would make me more inclined to treat their suggestions seriously.” The reason is that such behavior supports the idea of regular and genuine communication necessary for building a loyal following in terms of purchasing power. Thus, this research has successfully addressed the second sub-questions posed by the study.

After careful discussion based on the analysis and the relevant literature, it has been observed that the research has successfully achieved its objectives by elucidating the critical factors that make influencer marketing effective and highlighting the importance of interaction frequency. The study’s outcomes highlighted the importance of credibility, authenticity, and expertise in influencing consumer behavior while enhancing brand loyalty. The results from the research offer deeper insights into influencers-consumer relationship dynamics, thereby allowing marketers to use influencers more effectively. The research confirms that Instagram influencers who are authentic and engaging have a significant impact on consumers’ choices concerning brands and loyalty, which corresponds well with the theoretical foundations of the reviewed literature.

## **7 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

The chapter summarizes the key findings from the study and discusses the managerial, theoretical, and policy implications. The research aimed to investigate the influence of Instagram influencers on consumers' inclination to make online purchases, highlighting the critical attributes that contribute to influencers' persuasive power and shaping behaviors. The chapter offers practical strategies for organizations to adopt and optimize influencer marketing efforts.

### **7.1 Summary of the Study**

This study investigated the influence of Instagram influencers on consumers' inclination to make online purchases. By employing a combination of literature review and qualitative interviews, the research sought to uncover the key factors contributing to influencers' persuasive power and how their interaction frequency affects consumer purchasing decisions. It was found that Instagram influencers significantly contribute to shaping consumer behavior. The study highlighted key attributes like credibility, authenticity, quality, and engagement expertise, which are essential in influencing trust among consumers and their inclination toward purchasing. Influencers, who are viewed as trustworthy, sincere, and captivating, have more of an effect on positively making their followers' purchasing decisions. Moreover, multiple interactions that mean a lot between influencers and their fans have shown an increase in trust and following of these leaders, which results in more buying intent and loyalty. The research also aligned with the two-step flow theory, which shows how influencers work as intermediaries between mass media information and their audiences, thus affecting purchase behavior. The findings of this investigation provided empirical evidence for the importance of influencers in modern marketing strategies.

### **7.2 Managerial and Theoretical Implications**

The study holds several managerial implications for organizations utilizing influencer marketing to drive customer engagement and online purchases. Brands should prioritize collaboration with influencers who align with their values and target audience, as this can enhance brand trust and drive customer engagement more effectively.

Managers should encourage influencers to engage meaningfully with their audience through regular interactions, such as responding to comments and personalizing communication. Such involvement creates a community feeling and trust, which is necessary for driving purchase intention. As per Munnukka et al. (2019), interactive communication between influencers and their followers enhances perceived relationship quality, resulting in higher trust and loyalty. Therefore, they argued, "Interactive communication between influencers and their followers enhances perceived relationship quality, leading to higher trust and loyalty." Building meaningful relationships leads to engaged customers who become loyal purchasers and, hence, more likely to follow what the influencer recommends or suggests, thus improving upon marketing's effectiveness.

In addition, brands can enhance the authenticity and effectiveness of influencer endorsements by providing training and support. It is essential to help influencers understand the brand better so that they can promote products sincerely that fit well with the essence of the brand. This will make endorsements more convincing and retain the authenticity of the person promoting it. According to Kapitan et al. (2022), training programs for influencers could improve their promotional skills, allowing them to know more about the brand and, as a result, have more effective marketing efforts. Educating influencers can create lasting relationships between brands and influencers who continuously provide authentic and consistent content.

The study also contributed to the theoretical understanding by enhancing the understanding of influencer marketing and validating the two-step flow theory. It demonstrated that influencers act as intermediaries who significantly shape consumer behavior by interpreting and transmitting information from mass media to their followers. The study also provided insights into the relationship dynamics between consumers, influencers, and brands, which can help refine theoretical frameworks to explain these complex interactions better. Overall, the implications of this study offer both practical strategies for organizations and theoretical advancements in the field of influencer marketing.

### **7.3 Policy Implications**

The insights from this study have numerous implications for organizational and government policies. Practical strategies for capitalizing on the power of social media influencers can be created to market and engage consumers.

#### **Organizational Policy**

Organizations should adopt a strategic approach when selecting influencers, ensuring they align with the brand's values and target audience. Collaborating with influencers who have similar values and share a genuine connection with their followers can significantly improve brand trustworthiness and consumer engagement. Brand fit, as perceived by the influencer, plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). This correlation helps facilitate a coherent storyline for the brand while ensuring that endorsements look real enough for customers, leading to positive responses. Rather than inundating followers with numerous promotions, brands should prioritize creating high-quality, authentic content that resonates with the audience. The trustworthiness of an influencer can be diluted with too much advertising, thereby making followers question the endorsements. According to Lee et al. (2022), the frequency and authenticity of posts are essential in keeping up with the faithfulness of followers. By concentrating on quality more than quantity, brands can assist influencers in maintaining their credibility and effectiveness. Genuine content that reflects the experiences and opinions of the influencer can lead to higher rates of engagement as well as a stronger bond with subscribers.

#### **Government Policy**

Governments should consider implementing regulations that ensure transparency in influencer marketing. Transparency guidelines on paid advertising disclosure ensure trust is maintained, thus protecting consumers from misleading endorsements. In the US, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has set requirements that demand influencers to make all their partnerships with brands transparent, which pertinently segregates genuine suggestions from paid promotions (Carter, 2016). With these rules, clients get the correct information, hence no deception through hidden commercial propaganda. Governments can, therefore, enforce such regulations to ensure integrity in influencer marketing while building consumer confidence.

Policies aimed at protecting consumers from false advertising and ensuring that influencers provide accurate information about products can enhance the overall credibility of influencer marketing. These measures protect consumers from misleading advertisements and guarantee that what they get is genuine and reliable. Not only does this kind of regulation shield buyers, but it also ensures a fair game in which honesty matters. When consumer rights are reinforced, more reliability in audience marketing occurs and, hence, better outputs. Government agencies can run educational campaigns to inform the public about how to evaluate influencer endorsements critically. Such campaigns may enable consumers to make informed choices while reducing the impact of misleading marketing practices. For example, public education programs that teach consumers how to recognize disclosure statements and evaluate the trustworthiness of content can reduce risks from influencer marketing (Evans et al., 2017). Governments can increase digital literacy among citizens by educating them on authentic endorsements versus paid promotions. This measure will lower consumer deception and foster transparent market environments.

Policies encouraging collaboration between influencers and small businesses can help boost local economies. Influencers can be provided incentives when they promote local brands to increase the visibility and growth of small businesses. An example is where tax breaks or subsidies are given to influencers who choose to incorporate in their content materials the operations of small enterprises for them (influencers) to encourage local development (Carter, 2016). Such measures will create a relationship where influencers benefit from fresh content and small firms obtain much-needed publicity. In this way, communities can gain economic growth through such collaborations, enabling businesses with little resources to survive in a competitive market.



## 7.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The research has several limitations despite its contributions to understanding the influence of Instagram influencers on online purchase decisions. The research limitations include a small sample of participants. This small sample size limits the generalizability of the results. A more extensive and more diverse sample would provide a broader understanding of the phenomena and enhance the reliability of the findings. In addition, the study relied heavily on the qualitative research method. The analysis depends heavily on the interpretation of the researcher, which could introduce bias. Additionally, qualitative findings cannot be easily quantified or statistically tested. Moreover, the research was focused on Instagram influencers. While Instagram is a significant platform, the findings may not apply to influencers on other platforms like YouTube, TikTok, or Twitter. Different platforms have unique features and user interactions that might influence consumer behavior differently. Furthermore, cultural differences can significantly impact how consumers perceive and interact with influencers.

Future research should include a more diverse cultural sample to understand these nuances better. Future research should aim to include a large and diverse sample of participants. This approach will help understand influencer impact variations across different age groups, cultures, and regions. In addition, future studies could employ a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys. This would allow for the statistical validation of findings and the ability to generalize results to a larger population. Quantitative data can provide measurable evidence of influencer impact and facilitate comparisons across different variables. Moreover, this research is limited to Instagram influencers only; expanding research to include influencers on various social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how platform-specific features and user interactions influence consumer behavior.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1. Interview Questionnaire**

## **Appendix 1. Interview Questionnaire**

### **Demographics Questions**

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your occupation?
4. How many hours per day do you spend on social media platforms?

### **Instagram Use and Engagement**

5. How frequently do you use Instagram? (e.g., daily, weekly)
6. What type of content do you mostly engage with on Instagram? (e.g., fashion, food, technology)
7. How many influencers do you follow on Instagram?
8. Do you frequently come across influencer posts and advertisements on my social media feeds?

### **Influencer Characteristics and Content**

9. What qualities do you look for when deciding to follow an influencer? (e.g., attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness)
10. What type of posts by influencers do you find most engaging? (e.g., stories, videos, photos, live sessions)
11. How important is an influencer's authenticity in your decision to follow them?

### **Influence on Purchasing Decisions**

12. Influencer's content has played a significant role in making products more visible and accessible.
13. Have you ever made a purchase based on an Instagram influencer's recommendation? If yes, please elaborate.
14. What specific factors of an influencer (e.g., credibility, frequency of posts, personal connection) most influence your purchase decisions?

15. How does the type of content (e.g., reviews, unboxing, tutorials) shared by influencers impact your likelihood of making a purchase?
16. The information provided through influencers significantly impacts my likelihood of considering a purchase.
17. How does the frequency of an influencer's interaction with their audience (e.g., responding to comments and direct messages) affect your purchasing decisions?

### **Brand Loyalty and Purchase Intent**

18. Do influencers play a role in building your loyalty towards a brand? Can you provide an example?
19. How significantly do influencers affect your intent to purchase new products?
20. To what extent do you trust the recommendations made by influencers? What contributes to this trust?
21. What recommendations would you give to brands leveraging Instagram influencers for marketing?