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Understanding the Influence of Follower Count on Purchase Behavior and Consumer Perception
in Influencer Marketing

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
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Abstract

In recent years, influencer marketing has emerged as a popular strategy for brands to connect with consumers on social media. This study examines the impact of influencer follower count on consumer purchase behavior and perception of influencers in the context of influencer marketing. A qualitative research approach was employed, surveying 60 participants familiar with the concept. The findings suggest a relationship between influencer follower count and consumer perceptions of influencer attractiveness indicating that influencers with larger followings are more likely to be deemed attractive to social media users. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on influencer marketing and provides valuable insights for marketers seeking to optimize their influencer marketing strategies for maximum impact.

Introduction

Marketing strategies are subjective to different markets and are ever changing due to technological and societal advances. Because of this, brand marketing is a developing topic and has many factors involved. The audiences companies market towards are based on various factors such as demographics, culture, political environment, social norms, and most importantly, technologically. Within the past decade, and along with the continuous advancement of technology and social media, influencer marketing has become increasingly popular throughout social media platforms (Kim., et al 2021). By utilizing social media, brands collaborate with social media influencers that have a significant influence on their audiences in order to promote their products or services.

The magnitude and impact that social media has on society nowadays is incomparable to many other marketing strategies. To elaborate, according to the article “15 Reasons Why...,” discussing social media’s impact on small businesses, “Marketing through social media is one of the most versatile and cost-effective strategies that small businesses can use to reach their target audience and boost sales over time. That’s why 97% of marketers are using social media to reach their audiences.” This statistic allows marketers to utilize social media in a manner that is not only cost-effective but also reaches consumers from all over the world by means of internet and online networking. This research delves into the intricate dynamics of influencer marketing within the lifestyle realm, focusing on its impact on consumer behavior. Specifically, the study seeks to unravel the relationship between an influencer's follower count and the perceived credibility and trustworthiness they command. By exploring this correlation, the research aims to shed light on how influencer marketing strategies can be optimized to resonate more effectively with consumers, ultimately influencing their purchasing decisions in the beauty and lifestyle sectors. This thesis explores the nuanced relationship between an influencer's follower count and its subsequent effect on consumer perception, specifically focusing on the consumer's attitude towards products endorsed by influencers and the perceived expertise of the influencer.

Background

Consumers have always been influenced by others and are a critical part of consumer behavior. Celebrity endorsements was the first form of influencer marketing and dates back to the 1930s (Suciu 2020). Brands and companies would promote famous personalities alongside their products in order to leverage consumer trust. This would be publicized via radio and newspapers. In later years, with the advancement of technology, television became an outlet for these endorsements. As social media began to gain popularity in the early 2000’s, influencer

marketing began to be what it is today. Moving away from celebrity endorsements, influencers have created not only a name, but profession for themselves by using their followings on social media to promote products via brand sponsorships. In recent years, this marketing strategy has been brought about as a vital strategy in the beauty and lifestyle industry as it is revolutionizing traditional marketing techniques. Social media positively impacts businesses both financially and perceptively. It is important to recognize what platforms are most commonly used and responded to by these companies in order to gauge consumer interest. In 2022, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Youtube, Twitter, Tiktok, and Snapchat were the most used social media platforms in gaining consumers: “With an active user count of close to 2.9 billion, Facebook is the most popular social network worldwide” (Dencheva 2023). Therefore, the market leader also remains the most important social media platform among marketers on the business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) spectrums. However, as the social media landscape is quickly evolving and new players are fighting for attention from audiences and marketers alike, Facebook is facing increasing competition. With this information in mind, marketers are using this information to branch away from these common platforms and utilize ones on the rise in order to gauge consumer interest from other demographics. An example of this is the popular social media platform Pinterest which is an image-based social media network that allows users to explore various interests via virtual bulletins otherwise known as “pinning.” This platform has seen a great deal of attention from younger age groups as a large demographic of them have been reported to be, 61.9% specifically, aged 18 to 34 as of 2022 (Oberlo.com). Justifying Pinterest’s popularity and success as a credible marketing tool, MDG Solutions, a renowned marketing agency, reported to have also found that “a full 25% of respondents have made a purchase after discovering a product on Pinterest. This supports online statistics that show how

Pinterest's unique visitors have almost tripled over the last year to reach nearly 20 million." That said, using these facts allow marketers to utilize various platforms such as Pinterest, Snapchat, and Tiktok in order to interact and market towards different demographics and age groups.

Expanding on the critical role social media plays in marketing, it's evident that captivating younger demographics—namely teens, young adults, and millennials—has become a strategic focus for marketers. These groups represent not only the next generation of substantial consumers and buying power but also the future workforce. Recognizing this, marketers aim to capture customer interest early, nurturing the potential for lifelong loyalty. This strategy is effectively executed through partnerships with social media personalities who boast significant followings across diverse interest groups. These individuals, widely recognized as "influencers," have emerged as pivotal figures in modern marketing paradigms, particularly within realms such as Instagram and TikTok.

The influencer phenomenon has burgeoned into a standalone industry and career path, thanks to the exponential growth of social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest. A compelling illustration of their influence comes from a 2022 study by Find Your Influence, which found that "70% of teens trust influencers more than traditional celebrities." This trust stems from a perceived relatability and authenticity; influencers often forge more personal connections with their audience compared to the distant admiration fans may feel for celebrities. Remarkably, "Four in 10 Millennials say that their favorite influencer understands them better than their friends," (Find Your Influence 2022). This deep sense of understanding and trust between influencers and their audience creates an invaluable opportunity for brands. When influencers genuinely resonate with and convey a brand's message, it can have a more profound impact than traditional, scripted advertising methods. Therefore, by engaging young

consumers through the authentic voices of influencers, brands can lay the foundation for enduring relationships. This approach not only capitalizes on the current sway of social media but also ensures adaptability to evolving marketing landscapes. As social media continues to shape consumer behaviors and preferences, leveraging influencers allows companies to stay at the forefront of these changes, ensuring sustained engagement and relevance among younger generations.

Once the significance of social media in marketing and the most effective platforms have been identified, it is crucial to understand the precise reasons behind the effectiveness of social media influencing in marketing. As previously mentioned, social media influencing is a burgeoning job market that connects entrepreneurs with brands through collaborations, offering incentives in exchange for access to potential customers. So why exactly are influencers so impactful specifically on social media platforms such as Instagram? Five main concepts come to mind and will be further discussed throughout the progression of this research. These five concepts are trust, awareness, social proof, emotional connection, and engagement (Hollebeek., et al 2022). These attributes are what influencers use to connect with an audience and ultimately create a sales transaction. Therefore, beauty brands and various companies idealize these concepts and allow influencers to use them to their benefit in order to obtain customer interest and direct consumer behavior.

Social Media Influencers Concepts and Effects

The impact of influencer marketing on consumer purchase behavior in the beauty industry can be significant. In a 2022 study done by Jönköping International Business School, an empirical analysis focusing on influencer marketing on Pakistan's fashions industry was done and delves into the "impact of social media influencer's credibility dimensions." Basing my research measurements similarly to this one allowed me to follow a straightforward research strategy. Below are the four attributes of influencer marketing discussed in this study and how they drive consumer behavior:

1. **Trust and Credibility:** Influencers are often seen as trustworthy and credible sources of information. Their followers view them as experts in the field and trust their recommendations. When an influencer recommends a product, it can have a significant impact on their followers' decision to purchase that product.
2. **Awareness:** Influencer marketing can also increase consumer awareness of a brand or product. When an influencer promotes a product on their social media channels, their followers are likely to become aware of it, which can increase its visibility and reach.
3. **Social Proof:** Social proof is the phenomenon where people are more likely to do something if they see others doing it. When influencers promote a product, it can provide social proof to their followers, who are more likely to purchase the product as a result.
4. **Emotional Connection:** Influencers often share personal stories and experiences with their followers, which can create an emotional connection between the influencer and their audience. This emotional connection can translate into a desire to purchase the products that the influencer recommends.

5. Engagement: Influencer marketing can also increase consumer engagement with a brand.

When an influencer promotes a product, their followers may engage with the brand on social media, which can lead to increased brand loyalty and repeat purchases.

Overall, influencer marketing can have a significant impact on consumer purchase behavior in the beauty industry. It can increase brand awareness, trust, and credibility, provide social proof, create emotional connections, and increase engagement (Adebayo., et al 2023). According to Fredberg, brands and their brand imaging must be cognizant of the recognition and success the social media influencer provides them with. This relation allows the brand the opportunity to first handedly see the value of the posts to their target audience.

Literature Review

Influencer marketing has become a dominant force in the realm of social media as it has been a driver in transforming the purchase decisions and behaviors of consumers according to the 2022 study titled “The Effect of Influencer Marketing on the Buying Behavior of Young Consumers.” In this study, it was observed that “customers tend to buy products seen used by an influencer during the purchase decision phase. This illustrates that influencers influence followers daily, without necessarily promoting anything specificAs it has become a prominent strategy within the beauty industry, influencer marketing allows for a direct connection between influencers and their followers, therefore, forever changing the manner in which consumers engage with brands” (Gelati., et al 2022). This literature review aims to analyze and synthesize the key findings from scholarly literature, holistic analysis, and industry statistics in order to

understand the fundamentals of influencer marketing strategies and their effectiveness on purchase behavior in the beauty sector.

Influencer marketing hones in on the B2C (business to consumer) marketing tactic by leveraging individuals with a credible social media following in order to endorse products or services to that audience. More specifically, in the beauty industry, influencers are often made up of makeup artists, lifestyle bloggers, content creators, or internet personalities that possess a high level of credibility, fame, or expertise in the art of recommending products and influencing audiences. A study by Tafesse and Wood (2021) highlights that trust is a foundational aspect of influencer marketing as consumers perceive influencers as trustworthy sources of information due to their authenticity. In support of this argument, a study done by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that “Instagram users tend to trust influencers with more modest numbers of followers than those with larger follower bases.” To elaborate, influencers have become their own niche type of public figures as they do not hold the same responsibility as mainstream celebrities or hollywood stars, but rather their own domain in the world of e-commerce that allows them to expand their reach within that specific niche realm.

In context to influencer following, the persuasive power influencer marketing greatly drives consumer purchase behavior in the beauty industry. Research done on the basis of marketing tactics has shown that influencer marketing is more likely to attain more attention from consumers compared to company created advertisements and campaigns (Pereira et al., 2014).

Influencer marketing's significant impact on individuals who identify as female aged 18-25 stems from a combination of demographic and psychographic factors. This demographic is often at a stage in life where they are actively seeking out new products, experiences, and

lifestyle choices, making them highly receptive to influencer recommendations and endorsements (Singer., et al 2023). Moreover, individuals in this age group are more likely to view influencers as relatable role models, aspiring to emulate their lifestyles and choices (Veirman., et al 2019). Influencers, in turn, cater to this demographic by creating content that resonates with their interests, aspirations, and values, effectively establishing a sense of trust and credibility with their audience.

Furthermore, the rise of social media as a dominant communication platform has significantly contributed to the influence of influencers on this demographic. Female-identifying individuals aged 18-25 are among the most active users of social media platforms, where influencers play a central role in shaping trends, opinions, and purchasing decisions (Gelati., et al 2022).. The visual and interactive nature of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube makes them ideal for influencer marketing, allowing influencers to showcase products and lifestyles in a compelling and engaging manner. Given the influence and receptivity of this demographic to influencer marketing, targeting them in my survey allows for a focused examination of how follower count impacts their perceptions and purchase behavior. By understanding the specific dynamics at play within this demographic, my research aims to provide actionable insights for marketers looking to leverage influencer partnerships effectively and enhance their overall marketing strategies.

Hypotheses

The realm of digital marketing has witnessed a paradigmatic shift with the ascendancy of social media influencers. These individuals, armed with significant followings on various platforms, wield a considerable impact on consumer behavior and perception. Central to the influence exerted by these social media juggernauts is their follower count—a metric often associated with their credibility, reach, and persuasive power (Adebayo., et al). The hypotheses formulated to guide this investigation are as follows:

	Hypotheses
H1	Consumers' attitude toward the product will be more positive when an influencer has more followers when compared to an influencer with fewer followers.
H2	Purchase intention of the product will be more positive when an influencer has more followers when compared to an influencer with fewer followers.
H3	Perceived expertise of the influencer will be greater when an influencer has more followers when compared to an influencer with fewer followers.
H4	Perceived attractiveness of the influencer will be greater when an influencer has more followers when compared to an influencer with fewer followers.
H5	Perceived trustworthiness of the influencer will be greater when an influencer has more followers when compared to an influencer with fewer followers.

It is posited that consumers' attitudes towards a product will be significantly more positive when the product is endorsed by an influencer with a higher follower count as opposed to an influencer with a fewer number of followers. This hypothesis stems from the assumption that a high follower count not only amplifies the perceived popularity of the influencer but also engenders a bandwagon effect, leading consumers to view the endorsed products more favorably due to the inferred validation from the large follower base (Ducros., et al 2023). This hypothesis is supported by Abraham et al. (2022), who found that influencers with a larger following are perceived as more trustworthy and knowledgeable, which positively influences consumers' attitudes towards endorsed products. Additionally, Singh Kamaldeep (2021) discusses how consumers tend to mimic the behaviors of popular influencers, further supporting the notion that higher follower counts lead to more positive consumer attitudes.

Moreover, the psychological concept of social proof, as discussed by Lee and Watkins (2016), suggests that individuals are more likely to conform to the actions of others, especially when those others are perceived as popular or influential. Therefore, it is expected that consumers will be more inclined to adopt a positive attitude towards a product endorsed by an influencer with a higher follower count, as they perceive the product to be validated by a larger audience, thus increasing its desirability and perceived value. This hypothesis is also consistent with the findings of Freberg et al. (2010), who highlight the importance of perceived popularity in shaping consumer attitudes towards influencers and their endorsements."

The perceived expertise of an influencer is hypothesized to be greater when the influencer has a more substantial follower count compared to an influencer with fewer followers. The underlying rationale for this hypothesis is anchored in the heuristic principle of social proof,

where individuals attribute higher expertise and credibility to persons with a larger audience. The follower count, in this context, serves as a heuristic cue for consumers, influencing their perception of the influencer's knowledge, skills, and authority in their niche or industry. By examining the proposed hypotheses, this research aims to offer actionable insights for marketers seeking to leverage influencer partnerships more effectively and to contribute to the theoretical foundation of digital marketing strategies in the social media era.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This research employs a qualitative methodology through an online experiment to explore the influence of an influencer's follower count on consumer perception, particularly focusing on the perceived expertise of the influencer and consumers' attitudes towards endorsed products. The study's participant pool comprises female-identifying individuals aged between 18 and 25 years. This demographic is chosen based on their active engagement with social media and their potential as a significant consumer base for influencer-endorsed products. Ensuring ethical considerations, only individuals above the age of 18 were invited to participate in this study, with no one under this age being considered eligible. Targeting female participants aged 18-25 was a strategic decision based on several factors. First, this demographic represents a key target market for many lifestyle brands, which often utilize influencer marketing to reach this audience segment. Second, research suggests that younger consumers, particularly those in the 18-25 age range, are more likely to be active users of social media platforms and to engage with influencer content. By focusing on this demographic, the study aimed to capture insights that are relevant and actionable for brands seeking to effectively leverage influencer marketing to engage

with and influence this demographic. Additionally, narrowing the focus to female participants allowed for a more specific and targeted analysis of the impact of follower count on purchase behavior (Gulbrandsen). Therefore, this demographic aids in providing valuable insights for brands looking to tailor their influencer marketing strategies to resonate with female consumers in this age group.

Procedure

The study is operationalized through an online survey distributed via Qualtrics, a robust platform for executing academic and market research surveys. Participants were recruited through Prolific, a renowned research panel management company, which facilitated access to a targeted participant pool that meets the study's demographic criteria. The first 60 female-identifying individuals in the specified age range who opted to participate were granted access to complete the survey. Participants engaged with the survey were presented with one of two experimental manipulations, each differing only in the depicted influencer's follower count. This binary manipulation ensures the isolation of the follower count variable, allowing for a focused examination of its impact on the participant's perception. Each participant was randomly assigned one scenario, ensuring an equitable distribution of exposures to each condition.

Upon completion of the survey, participants were assigned a unique code to claim their compensation, valued at \$1.00, from Prolific. This code also served as a measure to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of responses, as it was permanently disassociated from the survey data and deleted following compensation disbursement. The provision for participants to exit the study at any point was made explicit, underscoring the voluntary nature of participation.

Data Collection Instrument

The survey instrument, developed for this study, comprises scenarios and picture manipulations designed to simulate real-life engagements with influencer content. The critical variable manipulated in these instruments is the number of followers, presented within the scenarios/pictures to reflect either a high or low follower count condition. Subsequent questions focused on gauging participants' attitudes towards the product endorsed in the scenario and their perception of the influencer's expertise. This instrument is pivotal in operationalizing the constructs under investigation and is detailed in the included survey instrument documentation.

Recruitment Materials

Recruitment for the study was facilitated through Prolific, where a recruitment message was posted, detailing the study's purpose, the estimated completion time (approximately 5 minutes), the compensation offer, and eligibility criteria. Interested participants were directed to the Qualtrics survey link through this recruitment message.

Ethical Considerations

This study was designed with stringent adherence to ethical guidelines, ensuring participant confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. All participant data was handled with utmost confidentiality, and measures were put in place to ensure that compensation codes were securely managed and separated from survey responses to maintain anonymity.

In summary, the methodology employed in this research is designed to provide a rigorous and ethical investigation into the effects of influencer follower counts on consumer perceptions. By leveraging a controlled experimental design and ensuring ethical treatment of participants,

this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of influencer marketing and its psychological impacts on young consumers. Overall, this mode of research creates the opportunity to properly test set variables in a practical, yet understandable manner.

Results

Trustworthiness Perception

To assess the participants' perception of the influencer's trustworthiness, multiple statements were presented, including "I feel this influencer is honest," "I consider this influencer trustworthy," "I feel this influencer is reliable," and "I consider this influencer sincere." These scaling questions were directly inspired by the 2023 study titled "The Role of Influencer-Follower Congruence in the Relationship Between Influencer Marketing and Purchase Behavior" by Dominyka Venciute et al. Participants were asked to rate these statements on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The analysis of these statements revealed high levels of agreement among participants, with an average score of 4.2 for "I feel this influencer is honest," "I consider this influencer trustworthy," "I feel this influencer is reliable," and for "I consider this influencer sincere." These results indicate that participants generally perceived the influencer as honest, trustworthy, reliable, and sincere, suggesting a positive perception of the influencer's character and credibility.

Attractiveness Perception

Participants' perception of the influencer's attractiveness was assessed through statements such as "I consider this influencer very attractive," "I consider this influencer very stylish," "I think this influencer is beautiful," and "I think this influencer is sexy." (Venciute., et al 2023).

Similar to the trustworthiness assessment, participants were asked to rate these statements on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The analysis revealed that participants rated the influencer highly in terms of attractiveness, with an average score of 4.85 for "I consider this influencer very attractive," "I consider this influencer very stylish," "I think this influencer is beautiful," and "I think this influencer is sexy." These results indicate that participants found the influencer to be attractive, stylish, beautiful, and sexy, suggesting a positive perception of the influencer's physical appearance and fashion sense.

Expertise Perception

Participants' perception of the influencer's experience and expertise was assessed through statements such as "I feel this influencer knows a lot about the products she promotes in social media posts," "I feel this influencer is competent to make assertions about the products she promotes," and "I consider this influencer an expert on the products she promotes" (Venciute., et al 2023). Participants rated these statements on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The analysis showed that participants perceived the influencer to be knowledgeable and experienced in the products she promotes, with an average score of 3.80 for "I feel this influencer knows a lot about the products she promotes," "I feel this influencer is competent to make assertions about the products she promotes," and "I consider this influencer an expert on the products she promotes."

Purchase Behavior Intention

Participants' intention to purchase the product promoted by the influencer was assessed through the statement "I am likely to buy this product after seeing this influencer's post," "After seeing the post by this influencer, I want to buy this product," and "After seeing the post by the influencer, I want to buy this product" (Dominyka Venciute et al). Participants were asked to rate this statement on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The analysis revealed that participants expressed a high intention to purchase the product promoted by the influencer, with an average score of 4.19.

Attitude Towards the Product

The questions in this section were adapted from the 2023 study titled "The Role of Influencer-Follower Congruence in the Relationship Between Influencer Marketing and Purchase Behavior" by Dominyka Venciute et al. Participants were asked to indicate their attitude towards the product featured in the influencer's post using three statements. The first statement, "I am likely to buy this product after seeing this influencer's post," aimed to gauge the participants' intention to purchase the product based on the influencer's recommendation. The second statement, "After seeing the post by this influencer, I might buy this product," was included to capture a more tentative inclination towards purchasing the product. The third statement, "After seeing the post by this influencer, I want to buy this product," was designed to assess the participants' desire or eagerness to make a purchase. Participants were asked to respond to each statement on a 1-7 Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

The analysis revealed that participants expressed a positive attitude towards the product promoted by the influencer, with an average score of 4.98.

Congruence Perception

Participants' perception of congruence between themselves and the influencer was assessed through statements such as "This influencer reflects my personal lifestyle," "This influencer and my personality fit very well," "I can identify myself with this influencer," and "If this influencer had a brand, I would like to buy its products." (Dominyka Venciute et al). Participants rated these statements on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The analysis revealed that participants perceived a high level of congruence between themselves and the influencer, with average scores of 3.77 for "This influencer reflects my personal lifestyle," "This influencer and my personality fit very well," "I can identify myself with this influencer," and "I would like to take this influencer for dinner." These results suggest that participants perceived a high level of similarity between themselves and the influencer.

Demographic Statistics

The study sample comprised female-identifying individuals aged between 18 and 25, with an average age of 22.92 years. The youngest participant was 19 years old, and the oldest was 25, ensuring that the study's focus remained on a demographic that is highly engaged with social media platforms and influencer marketing.

Social Media Engagement

Participants were queried about their daily social media usage across various platforms, including Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, and Pinterest.

The distribution of responses was as follows:

- Non-Social Media Users: One participant reported not using any social media platforms.
- 0-1 Hours Daily: Six participants indicated spending 0-1 hours on social media daily. This group likely includes individuals who use social media sparingly or for specific purposes.
- 2-3 Hours Daily: The largest group comprised 21 participants who reported spending 2-3 hours on social media daily. This indicates a substantial portion of the sample engaging with social media for a moderate amount of time daily.
- 4-5 Hours Daily: Seventeen participants reported spending 4-5 hours on social media daily, indicating a significant time investment in consuming social media content.
- 5+ Hours Daily: Fifteen participants reported spending over 5 hours on social media daily, highlighting a subgroup that is highly engaged with social media platforms, potentially using them for entertainment, information, and social interaction.

The distribution of social media usage among the participants underscores the pervasive role of social media in their daily lives. With the majority of participants spending at least 2-3 hours daily on social media and a substantial portion exceeding 5 hours, it is evident that social media platforms serve as integral channels for information consumption, social interaction, and entertainment among this demographic.

These usage patterns have implications for influencer marketing strategies, as they suggest that the target demographic is highly active on social media and likely exposed to influencer content regularly. Understanding these engagement patterns can help marketers tailor their influencer collaborations to effectively reach and engage with their target audience, leveraging the influence of social media personalities to drive consumer behavior and perceptions.

Hypothesis Testing

The core investigation of this study centered on the impact of an influencer's follower count on consumer product and influence evaluations. Based on the responses to the experimental manipulations, statistical analysis revealed significant findings regarding the perceived attractiveness of influencer. In this study, an independent sample t-test was used to compare the means of two independent groups: one group exposed to influencers with low follower counts and another group exposed to influencers with high follower counts. This test was chosen because it allows for the examination of whether there is a significant difference between these two groups in terms of their perceptions of attractiveness and trustworthiness. The t-test is appropriate in this context as it helps determine if any observed differences between the groups are statistically significant or simply due to random chance. By using an independent sample t-test, the study could assess whether the perceived attractiveness and trustworthiness of influencers were influenced by their follower counts. The results of this test provide valuable insights into the role of follower count in shaping consumer perceptions and help inform influencer marketing strategies.

Figure 1

Table 1*Variable Results*

Variable	<i>p-one tail</i>	<i>t- test</i>
Attitude Towards Product	0.233	-0.734
Attractiveness Perception	0.027	-1.965
Congruence Perception	0.359	0.364
Expertise Perception	0.494	0.15
Purchase Intention	0.451	0.123
Trustworthiness Perception	0.173	0.949

This study examined the impact of influencer follower count on perceptions of attractiveness and trustworthiness. Contrary to conventional assumptions, the analysis revealed that follower count did not significantly influence these perceptions. For attitude towards the product, the comparison between low (mean = 4.86) and high (mean = 5.09) follower counts yielded a non-significant result ($t = -0.734$, $p = 0.233$). Similarly, for trustworthiness, the comparison between low (mean = 4.35) and high (mean = 4.04) follower counts also resulted in a non-significant finding ($t = 0.949$, $p = 0.173$). These outcomes challenge the notion that a larger follower count directly translates to greater attractiveness or trustworthiness in the eyes of consumers. Consequently, brands should consider other factors beyond follower count when selecting influencers to ensure their campaigns resonate effectively with their target audience.

To test H1, an independent sample t-test was performed to compare low and high follower count on consumer attitude toward the product. The analysis involved comparing low (mean = 4.86) and high (mean = 5.09) follower counts in terms of perceived attractiveness. An independent samples t-test yielded a result ($t = -0.734$, $p = 0.233$) that fails to support H1. This outcome suggests that the attitudes towards the product, as perceived by consumers, is not significantly influenced by the size of their follower base, indicating other factors may play a more pivotal role in shaping these perceptions

To evaluate H2, which posits that the purchase intention for a product will be more positive when an influencer has a higher follower count compared to one with fewer followers, an independent sample t-test was conducted. The results indicated no significant difference in purchase intentions between influencers with low (mean = 4.22) and high (mean = 4.16) follower counts ($t = 0.123$, $p = 0.451$). Consequently, H2 was not supported, suggesting that an influencer's follower count does not significantly impact consumers' intentions to purchase a product. This outcome challenges the assumption that a larger follower base automatically enhances an influencer's effectiveness in driving purchase behaviors.

In the case of H3, which hypothesized that the perceived expertise of an influencer would be higher among influencers with a greater number of followers, an analysis was conducted comparing influencers with low (mean = 3.81) and high (mean = 3.80) perceived expertise levels. The findings, based on an independent sample t-test ($t = 0.15$, $p = 0.494$), do not support H3. This indicates that there is no significant difference in perceived expertise based on the number of followers, suggesting that follower count alone is not a reliable indicator of an influencer's expertise from the perspective of the consumer.

Regarding H4, which anticipated that influencers with more followers would be perceived as more attractive than those with fewer followers, the analysis shows significant difference between low (mean = 4.67) and high (mean = 5.03) follower count on attitude toward the product ($t = -1.97$, $p = 0.027$), therefore H4 is supported. The data underscores that a larger follower count significantly enhances the perceived attractiveness of an influencer, aligning with the hypothesis that follower count plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions in the context of influencer marketing.

Finally, for H5, which suggested that influencers with a higher follower count would be perceived as more trustworthy than those with fewer followers, the data analysis compared low (mean = 4.35) and high (mean = 4.04) follower counts in terms of perceived trustworthiness. An independent samples t-test ($t = 0.949$, $p = 0.173$) indicated that H5 was not supported. This finding implies that there is no significant difference in perceived trustworthiness based on an influencer's follower count, challenging the notion that a larger audience automatically translates to higher credibility in the eyes of consumers.

In summary, the analysis of the hypotheses regarding the impact of influencer follower count on consumer perceptions indicates nuanced findings. While the data supports the hypothesis that a larger follower count enhances the perceived attractiveness of an influencer, it does not significantly influence attitude towards the product, perceived expertise, purchase intention, or trustworthiness. These results suggest that while follower count may play a role in shaping certain aspects of consumer perception, other factors likely play a more substantial role in influencing consumer behavior in the context of influencer marketing. These findings provide valuable insights into the complexities of consumer perceptions and behaviors in the digital age.

They also contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of influencer credibility and the psychological impact of social proof in the digital marketing landscape.

The finding that influencer follower count does not significantly relate to variables such as attitude towards the product, perceived expertise, purchase intention, and trustworthiness presents an intriguing opportunity for marketing managers. Rather than solely focusing on influencers with the largest follower counts, brands can diversify their influencer marketing strategies by considering other factors that may have a more direct impact on consumer perceptions and behaviors.

One approach is for marketing managers to prioritize influencers based on their content quality, relevance to the brand, and engagement levels with their audience. This shift in focus can lead to more authentic and meaningful partnerships, as influencers who resonate deeply with their audience are likely to have a stronger influence on consumer behavior regardless of their follower count. By collaborating with influencers who align closely with their brand values and target audience, marketers can create more impactful and genuine brand messages that resonate with consumers on a deeper level. Additionally, marketing managers can use the research findings to refine their influencer selection criteria and develop more targeted campaigns. Instead of solely relying on follower count as a measure of an influencer's effectiveness, brands can look at other metrics such as engagement rates, audience demographics, and the influencer's ability to drive specific actions (e.g., website visits, purchases). By taking a more holistic approach to influencer selection, marketers can maximize the impact of their influencer marketing efforts and build stronger connections with their target audience.

Analysis & Reflection

The findings of this study shed light on the nuanced relationship between influencer follower count and consumer perceptions. Contrary to conventional wisdom, which often assumes that a higher follower count translates to greater influence and credibility, this research reveals that follower count does not significantly impact variables such as perceived expertise, purchase intention, and trustworthiness. This finding challenges traditional notions of influencer marketing effectiveness and suggests that brands should consider a more nuanced approach to influencer selection. One of the key implications of these findings is the importance of focusing on quality over quantity when it comes to influencer partnerships. While influencers with large follower counts may offer broad reach, they may not always be the most effective at driving specific consumer actions or perceptions. Brands should instead prioritize influencers who demonstrate a strong connection with their audience, as evidenced by high engagement rates and relevant, authentic content.

Another important implication is the need for brands to diversify their influencer marketing strategies. Relying solely on influencers with large follower counts may limit the effectiveness of campaigns and overlook opportunities to connect with niche or highly engaged audiences. By considering a broader range of influencers based on factors such as content quality and audience relevance, brands can create more targeted and impactful campaigns.

Overall, this study highlights the complexity of influencer marketing and the importance of considering multiple factors when selecting influencers. While follower count may still play a role in influencer selection, it is not the sole determinant of effectiveness. By taking a more nuanced approach to influencer partnerships, brands can maximize the impact of their influencer marketing efforts and build stronger connections with consumers.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, comprising only 60 participants. While efforts were made to ensure the sample was diverse and representative of the target population, the findings may not be generalizable to larger populations. Additionally, the study only tested two specific follower counts (12,000 and 112,000) within the influencer marketing context of the lifestyle industry. This limited scope may restrict the applicability of the findings to other follower count ranges or industries.

In context with the given attributes, the study's reliance on self-reported data for measuring consumer purchase behavior and perceptions of influencer credibility may introduce response biases. Participants' responses may be influenced by social desirability or recall biases, impacting the validity of the results. Moreover, the study only includes two graphics to illustrate the data, which may limit the depth of analysis and visual representation of the findings. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample size, testing a wider range of follower counts, and utilizing more varied data visualization methods to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research could explore several avenues to further enhance our understanding of the influence of follower count on purchase behavior in influencer marketing. Firstly, conducting similar studies with larger sample sizes, diverse participant pool, and a broader range of follower counts could provide a more comprehensive

understanding of how different follower count levels impact consumer behavior. Additionally, future research could investigate the role of other factors, such as influencer credibility, content relevance, and engagement metrics, in influencing consumer purchase behavior. Understanding how these factors interact with follower count could provide valuable insights into designing more effective influencer marketing strategies. That said, longitudinal studies could be conducted to examine how consumer perceptions and behaviors evolve over time in response to influencer marketing campaigns. This could provide valuable insights into the long-term effectiveness of influencer marketing and the sustainability of its impact on consumer behavior.

As the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in influencer marketing becomes more prevalent, understanding its implications for the industry's future is crucial. Future research in regards to influencer marketing could delve into areas that further investigate AI's role in influencer marketing. Research targets include, but are not limited to, investigating the effectiveness and consumer perception of AI-generated content compared to human-created content, studying the prevalence of fake influencers, addressing ethical concerns surrounding AI in influencer marketing, and examining potential regulations and guidelines for AI use in influencer marketing. By addressing these research areas, scholars and practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of how AI is shaping the future of influencer marketing and develop strategies to leverage its benefits while mitigating its challenges.

Overall, continued research in these areas are essential for marketers to stay abreast of changing trends and consumer behaviors in the dynamic landscape of digital marketing. Continued research could explore the effectiveness of different types of influencer marketing strategies, such as micro-influencer campaigns or co-creation campaigns, in engaging consumers

and AI generated content. By addressing these research gaps, future studies can contribute to advancing our knowledge of influencer marketing effectiveness and informing best practices for marketers in the digital age. Moreover, future research could delve into the impact of influencer authenticity and trustworthiness on consumer perceptions and purchase decisions. Exploring these factors could provide valuable insights into how marketers can build more meaningful and impactful influencer campaigns.

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Influencer Thesis Study Survey

Start of Block: Informed Consent

Q1 UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA
PROTOCOL TITLE: Influencer marketing (IRB#: 24-025)

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Why We Are Conducting the Research? The purpose of this research is to better understand influencer marketing.

Who Can Participate? You must be at least 18 years of age and female identifying to participated in this study.
Approximately 60 people will be involved in this study.

What Will You Be Asked to Do During the Research? You will be asked to answer questions about influencers.

Time Required: We estimate it will take 5 minutes for you to complete the study.

Risks and Benefits: There are no foreseeable risks to you if you choose to participate in this study. The direct benefit to you is that you earn \$1.00 from Prolific. The information gained from this research may benefit others in the future.

Compensation or Incentives: You will earn \$1.00 from Prolific.

How Will My Information Be Protected? The information provided by you will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Only the researcher for this study will know your identity. You will submit your responses to the study via secure transmission through this study website. Your Prolific ID will be removed from your survey responses and after removal, your responses to the survey may be used for future research studies or distributed without additional informed consent.

What If I Decide Not to Participate? Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You will not be penalized if you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. If you decide not to participate or withdraw after the study has started, any information already collected from you will be discarded.

What if I Have Questions? If you have questions about the research study or any of the information above, you can contact Dr. Stephanie Gillison (Stephanie-Gillison@utc.edu, 423-425-4164). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you may contact Dr. Susan Davidson, Chair of the UTC Institutional Review Board at (423) 425-1387.

This research protocol has been approved by the UTC Institutional Review Board. Additional contact information is available at www.utc.edu/irb.

Agreement: I have considered all of the above information and have had an opportunity to ask questions about anything that is not clear to me. I am at least 18 years of age, and I choose to participate in this study.

Continuing to the study will be considered your consent to participate in this study.

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Prolific Instructions

Q2 Please enter your Prolific ID below:

End of Block: Prolific Instructions

Start of Block: Scenarios

Q28 Timing

First Click (1)

Last Click (2)

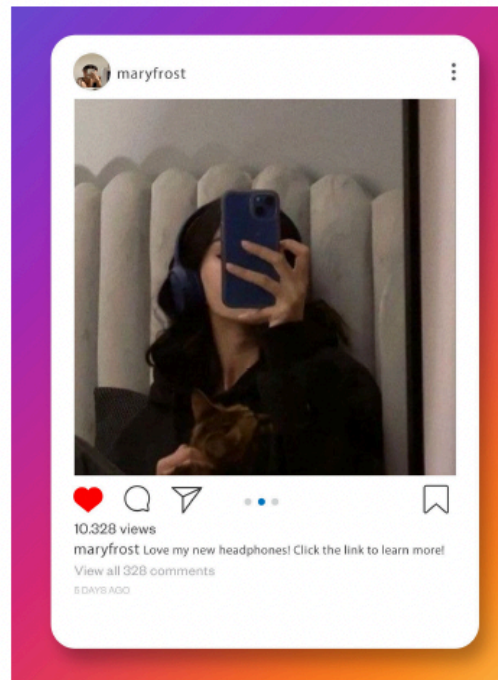
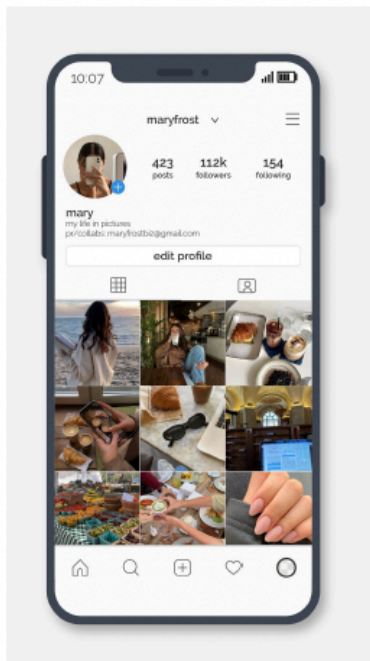
Page Submit (3)

Click Count (4)

Q22 Please take a moment to read the scenario below and take a look at the picture that follows. As you are reading, imagine the scenario happening to you in real life.

You have been following the below influencer for a bit of time. This is a well-known influencer who has 112,000 followers.

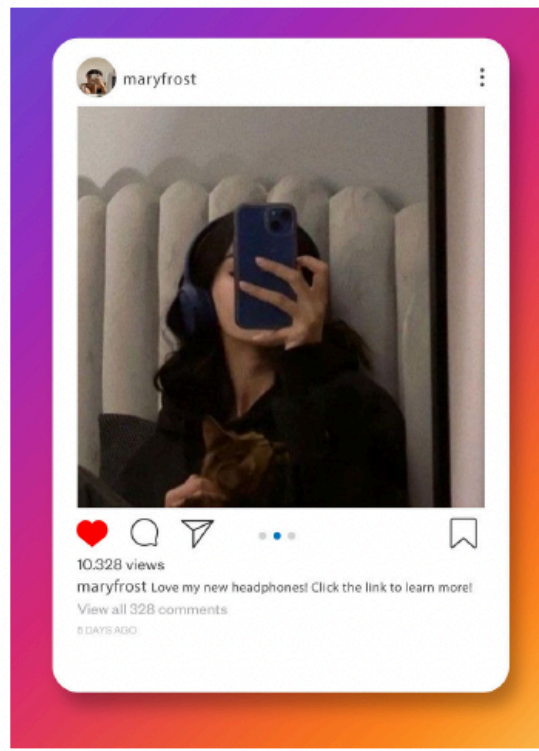
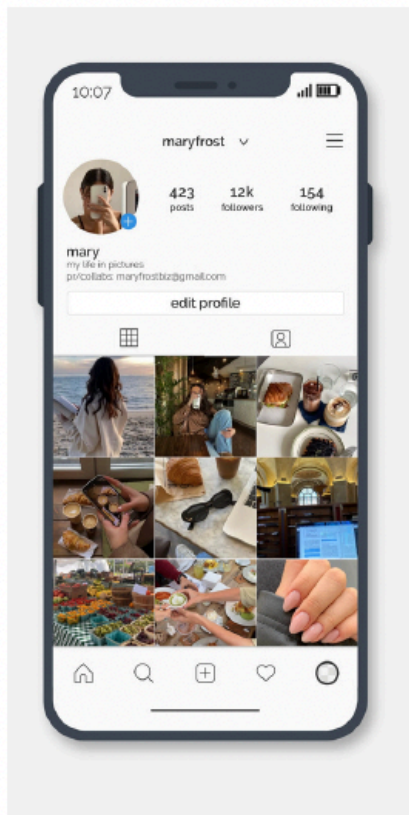
Recently you have been on the lookout for a new pair of headphones. One day you are scrolling through your socials and you come across a post from this influencer endorsing a pair of headphones that fit all your product requirements and budget.



Q23 Please take a moment to read the scenario below and take a look at the picture that follows. As you are reading, imagine the scenario happening to you in real life.

You have been following the below influencer for a bit of time. This is lesser-known influencer who has 12,000 followers.

Recently you have been on the lookout for a new pair of headphones. One day you are scrolling through your socials and you come across a post from this influencer endorsing a pair of headphones that fit all your product requirements and budget.



End of Block: Scenarios

Start of Block: Product Outcomes

Q15 Based on the scenario and picture you saw on the previous page, please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
------------------------------	---------------------	------------------------------	---------------------------------------	---------------------------	------------------	---------------------------

After seeing the post by this influencer, I might buy this product (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After seeing the post by this influencer, I want to buy this product (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Product Outcomes

Start of Block: Block 2

Trustworthiness Based on the scenario and picture you saw, please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.

As a reminder, the scenario and picture are provided at the bottom of this page.

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
------------------------------	---------------------	------------------------------	---------------------------------------	---------------------------	------------------	---------------------------

I feel this influencer is competent to make assertions about the products they promote in social media posts (2)



I consider this influencer an expert on the products they promote (3)



I consider this influencer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about the products they promote (4)



Display This Question:

If Please take a moment to read the scenario below and take a look at the picture that follows.

As y... Displayed

Q26 You have been following the below influencer for a bit of time. This is a well-known influencer who has 112,000 followers.

Recently you have been on the lookout for a new pair of headphones. One day you are scrolling through your socials and you come across a post from this influencer endorsing a pair of headphones that fit all your product requirements and budget.

Display This Question:

If Please take a moment to read the scenario below and take a look at the picture that follows.

As y... Displayed

Q27 You have been following the below influencer for a bit of time. This is lesser-known influencer who has 12,000 followers.

Recently you have been on the lookout for a new pair of headphones. One day you are scrolling through your socials and you come across a post from this influencer endorsing a pair of headphones that fit all your product requirements and budget.

End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: Congruence

Personal Relevance Based on the scenario and picture you saw, please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
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This influencer reflects my personal lifestyle (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This influencer and my personality fit very well (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can identify myself with this influencer (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If this influencer had a brand, I would like to buy its products (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Congruence

Start of Block: Followers Evaluation

Q18 Based on the scenario you read and picture your saw, please answer the following questions. As a reminder, the scenario and picture are provided at the bottom of this page.

	Very low (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	Very high (10)
The influencer's number of followers is: (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q19

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
The influencer has a lot of followers (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer is popular (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q24 How many followers did this influencer have?

- 12,000 (1)
- 112,000 (2)
- 12,000,000 (3)

Display This Question:

If Please take a moment to read the scenario below and take a look at the picture that follows.

As y... Displayed

Q29 You have been following the below influencer for a bit of time. This is a well-known influencer who has 112,000 followers.

Recently you have been on the lookout for a new pair of headphones. One day you are scrolling through your socials and you come across a post from this influencer endorsing a pair of headphones that fit all your product requirements and budget.

Display This Question:

If Please take a moment to read the scenario below and take a look at the picture that follows.

As y... Displayed

Q30 You have been following the below influencer for a bit of time. This is lesser-known influencer who has 12,000 followers.

Recently you have been on the lookout for a new pair of headphones. One day you are scrolling through your socials and you come across a post from this influencer endorsing a pair of headphones that fit all your product requirements and budget.

End of Block: Followers Evaluation

Start of Block: Social Media Usage & Demographics

Q21 In an average week, about how many hours a day do you spend on social media (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X (Twitter), Youtube, Facebook, Pinterest, etc.)?

- I do not have any social media (1)
- 0-1 hours (2)
- 2-3 hours (3)
- 4-5 hours (4)
- 5+ hours (5)

Q22 What is your age?

Q31 Please let us know of any issues or problems you had while completing this study:

End of Block: Social Media Usage & Demographics

Start of Block: Block 6

Q20 Thank you for completing this survey. To receive compensation, please enter this code in Prolific: C1FHQI11

End of Block: Block 6

