




Article

Exploring Influencing Marketing—Consumer Insights and Creators' Perspectives

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Abstract: Internet users consistently lean towards influencers who actively participate in their respective areas of interest, providing thorough information and genuine product reviews. These practices have the potential to positively influence the decision-making process related to purchasing. This study delves into the realm of influencer marketing, examining it from the viewpoints of both consumers and specialists. The study is based on the qualitative research, employing both individual in-depth interviews and a focus group. More precisely, the investigation included a series of six individual interviews with influencers from Romania and a focus group comprising eight participants to grasp their perceptions of influencer marketing campaigns. The findings underscore the importance of transparency and authenticity for content creators. Influencers tailor their content based on the platform they use, revealing an existing correlation among them, all while underscoring the significance of transparency and striving to maintain close connections with their followers. This study not only offers a fresh perspective on understanding consumers' views regarding the activities of content creators in the online domain but also sheds light on influencers' perspectives concerning collaborations, content creation, and their relationships within their community. Theoretical implications encompass the identification of novel behavioral traits among Romanian consumers regarding influencer marketing actions and contributes to a clearer understanding of the term influencer marketing.

Keywords: influencer marketing; content creators' perspective; influencer marketing campaigns; social media platforms; sustainability



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1. Introduction

Influencer marketing has also gained momentum due to changes in consumer behavior. Traditional advertising and direct marketing actions are increasingly viewed with skepticism from customers. According to Leung, Gu and Palmatier, under these circumstances, online influencers are a very efficiency solution for young audiences, the content created by influencers being an authentic one, integrated into their daily lives, suggesting a naturalness in the statements made in the online environment [1]. Influencer marketing is viewed as a digital advertising tactic, which relies on popular social media users who have built a significant and engaged follower base by frequently posting texts, images and/or videos, to promote products and brands [2].

Understanding attitudes from both specialists and consumers is of paramount importance to gain a better understanding of the viewer's perception and the strategy underpinning an influencer marketing campaign. This study, encompassing two distinct perspectives, allows for the future analysis of the effectiveness and impact of influencer marketing in the context of sustainability.

By examining the results of studies conducted on the same concept but from opposing perspectives, correlations can be drawn, leading to a better comprehension of these concepts.

Most importantly, these findings can prove highly valuable in the business environment as they can inform digital marketing strategies based on the needs and perceptions of consumers, while also taking into account the opinions of influencers.

The present research primarily examines consumer perception regarding the activities of online content creators. These findings contribute to understanding consumer behavior in relation to digital marketing actions and, more importantly, serve as a foundation for developing marketing strategies that align with customer expectations and needs. Specifically, the results obtained from the analysis of the focus group assist in identifying the key elements that a marketing strategy should incorporate to influence the purchasing decision of a product. Determining the most used social media platform by the subjects of the study allows for the identification of the social media network where digital marketing campaigns can reach a significant number of users.

Moreover, identifying the aspects that instill credibility in subjects during an influencer marketing campaign can be leveraged in promotional activities. A relatively recent and widely debated trend in Romania pertains to the mandatory disclosure of paid partnerships by influencers. Therefore, acquiring detailed insights into consumer behavior concerning influencer activities on social media facilitates their effective utilization through the development of efficient digital marketing strategies.

In the business milieu, an insightful comprehension of market dynamics and the collaborative conduct of stakeholders proves pivotal in devising efficacious digital marketing strategies. The current study elucidates the strategic advantage derived from discerning influencers' perspectives pertaining to content creation methodologies, collaboration norms, brand expectations within partnerships, and their prospective outlook. These nuanced insights empower managerial endeavors, facilitating more adept communication with influencers, thereby optimizing the orchestration of promotional initiatives.

This current research stands out from other articles by consolidating two distinct perspectives on the same subject within a unified paper. In particular, the study delves into both consumer opinions and expert attitudes concerning influencer marketing initiatives in Romania. Several previously published studies have centered on influencers to discern the following: the significance of congruence among influencers, products, and consumers [3,4]; the repercussions linked to the number of followers influencers attract [2,5]; the application of hashtags [6,7]; diverse metrics assessing their activities [5,8,9]; the phenomenon of meaning transfer [10,11]; the effects of partnerships with social media influencers [12–14].

A gap in current research lies in the limited integration of qualitative interviews with influencers alongside comprehensive consumer behavior research. While there are studies that focus solely on consumer perspectives or influencer experiences, there is often a lack of research that combines these two aspects to provide a holistic understanding of the influencer marketing ecosystem.

The purpose of the article is to explore the decision-making processes of influencers when creating content and collaborating with brands, and assess the subsequent impact on consumer behavior.

For this purpose, the authors of the article aim to conduct two qualitative research: a series of individual interviews with content creators in Romania and a focus group that includes consumers. The following statements were formulated as research questions: (1) Is there an association between the platforms on which influencers activate and the type of content created? (2) How does the obligation to mention paid partnerships affect the work of content creators? (3) What are the main way influencers manage to keep in touch with their followers? (4) What is the degree of knowledge of the term influencer marketing? (5) Is it possible for the target audience to purchase products based on consumer recommendations? (6) Does the indication of paid partnerships by content creators influence consumer perception?

The article is structured into six sections, starting with a short introduction, then a literature section, followed by Section 3 which includes the methodology of the two types of qualitative research carried out. Further, Section 4 contains the results of the individual

interviews and the focus group, certain aspects being highlighted in Section 5. The study concludes with a series of conclusions and future proposals (Section 6).

2. Literature Review

This review is divided into two sub-sections, which cover both consumer behavior on social networks and the effects of social influence on that behavior. The first sub-section aims to present readers with various typologies of user behavior and how they have evolved over time. In the second sub-section, researchers delve into the benefits of social networks, factors influencing the product purchase decision-making process, and how potential buyers' behavior can be influenced through social media platforms.

2.1. Consumer Behaviour on Social Media Platforms

The study and deepening of the concept of influencer marketing are essential because this field is becoming increasingly recognized. Consumers spend a significant amount of time online and frequently encounter these marketing techniques. Moreover, compared to celebrity endorsements, influencers have the advantage of creating content from their environment, utilizing social platforms to distribute campaigns, and thereby reducing the intensive use of certain resources. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a need to study the impact that influencer marketing can have on sustainable development and sustainability [15].

Influencer marketing has the advantage of a significant power to change behavior [16]. Adopting a more sustainable behavior, promoting eco-friendly products, and simply informing about this current concept are all possible through influencer marketing techniques. For example, travel agencies that conduct influencer marketing campaigns highlighting their commitment to sustainability are more likely to attract a larger number of tourists [17].

Social media platforms serve as channels that enable users to share various types of personal information, including images, text and videos [18]. Understanding the consumption behavior and patterns of younger generations is of great interest to various industries. Armed with this knowledge, businesses can tailor their communication, promotion strategies, and product/service campaigns accordingly [19].

People satisfy their need for belonging through the online environment; they choose to share ideas, feelings, be socially connected and enjoy different experiences with other people they resonate with. Social networks perform several functions, the most important of which are to influence the attitude, perception, and final behavior of consumers [20].

When users create an account on social media platforms, they provide a lot of personal data, including demographic information, geographical coordinates, and details about their interests or lifestyle habits. Companies employing digital marketing strategies can collect similar information when users access websites or interact with multimedia elements [21]. Utilizing these data, companies have the opportunity to create digital segmentation strategies, based on a more accurate segmentation of the target audience, strategies that will have a real success on consumer behavior in the digital age [22].

A topic of great interest is the factors that influence the decision-making process of users in the online environment. They can be identified with the help of information collected from the online environment associated with the behavioral patterns of netizens. More specifically, you can study the reviews offered by certain people in the online environment, along with their personal opinions and experiences, or even by analyzing the connection between people who have accounts on social media platforms [23]. In this digital era, users of social media platforms are increasingly eager to be visible, involved in numerous activities, but they especially want to gather a large community around them. Followers' decisions are often influenced by the reviews, comments, and opinions of other people active in the online environment [24].

Consumer behaviours may differ according to several characteristics. First, nowadays, a common classification made is according to generations. Thus, according to Rudolph

et al., seven generations are distinguished: the oldest generation, the silent generation, baby boomers, generation X, millennials, generation Z, and generation Alpha [25].

A differentiation of individuals' consumption behavior can be observed depending on the generation to which they belong. For example, Generation X spend more time researching a product, prefer high-quality products, and purchase from physical stores. They do not keep up with technology, preferring the computer or a notebook. Instead, millennials tend to use smartphones for both information and purchase. They prefer online channels that make sense to them and practice content marketing [26].

Social networks have also had a major impact on the consumption behavior of generation Z, who often use their mobile phone to inform themselves before making a purchase, and if they make the purchase decision, most of the time, they will pay by making an online transaction [27].

Impulse purchases are based on numerous stimuli. Among them, studies have highlighted the following: promotional advertisements [28], photos or videos displayed on a brand's Instagram account [29], but also recommendations from friends and opinion leaders or so-called influencers [30].

In 2018, Instagram improved the facilities it offered, giving merchants the ability to tag products in photos/videos posted directly to ease the buying process. Thus, the shopping service on the Instagram platform was another stimulus that determines impulsive buying [31]. This social network brings many benefits to commerce pages, especially due to the visual elements that can be posted because they represent an essential role in promoting products [32]. Moreover, the pleasure those users feel while using Instagram influences consumer behavior, especially decision making, because customers no longer evaluate the entire decision process [33].

One of the most noticeable shifts in customer behavior is the transition to online purchases. Simultaneously, social networks play a very important role in influencing purchasing decisions. The impact of social influence depends on the relationships established between people, social networks, individual characteristics, and others. The power of influence on social networks is seen as the basis for creating communities of users whose main purpose is to exchange information, opinions, and feelings [34].

Statistics from the Digital Marketing Institute-Part of the BPP education group showed that 49% of consumers depend on recommendations made by social media influencers. Moreover, 40% of those mentioned above also made purchases of products after seeing them on Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. According to the same article, 82% of people make purchase decisions based on the recommendations and opinions they find on social platforms, more specifically, the opinions of friends, family, and even influencers [35].

Research conducted by Bogнар, Puljic, and Kadezabek (2019) attests to the fact that influencers' posts have a positive effect on consumers; thus, the latter effectively search for products recommended on social media by content creators, but, importantly, leave comments and reviews and recommend them to friends and family. Therefore, the information transmitted by influencers in the online environment will spread very quickly, reaching a very large audience. Overall, 87% of the subjects who participated in the research conducted by the three authors said that influencers' opinion helps them make the purchasing decision when they have to choose between several similar products from competing brands. It can be concluded that the purchasing decision-making process as well as people's consumption behavior is influenced to a large extent by influencer marketing actions [36].

When it comes to influencer marketing campaigns, companies should pay more attention when choosing collaborations with content creators because consumer trust in influencer posts plays a very important role in the success of the campaign, but especially in consumer behavior and the buying decision-making process [37].

Another study looking at the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior is conducted by Bogнар together with Puljic and Kadezabek. Their study revealed that 87% of participants indicated a preference for products endorsed by influencers when considering

alternatives from competitors. This underscores the substantial influence of influencer marketing on consumer behavior and purchase choices. Furthermore, the followers of content creators on social networks not only periodically purchase products endorsed by these influencers but also actively seek them out. Importantly, they engage in discussions about and recommend these products to their friends and family [36].

In the use of influencer marketing techniques, an essential role is played by influencers, who can have a great impact on the purchasing decisions of members of their community. Content creators share both information about products they have personally purchased and product recommendations from brands they partner with. Their followers tend to mimic the behavior and style of influencers; they will purchase the same products or use promo codes for different brands. Because they identify a lot with the influencers they follow online, people aspire to look like them, considering them an ideal, and some of them even resort to plastic surgery [38].

Consumer behavior can be defined as “those actions directly involved in obtaining, consuming, and disposing of products and services, including the decision processes that precede and follow these actions” [39].

Various consumption models exist that vary in their complexity. Among the simplest are the economic model (which is based on the principle of maximizing utility, whereby consumers seek to maximize gains by spending a minimal amount), the psychological model (which is founded on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, emphasizing that consumers are driven by their essential needs), the Pavlovian learning model (which posits the existence of behavior resulting from stages of learning, practice, and experience), and the sociological model (where consumer behavior is influenced by social norms or individuals within society) [40].

Consumer behavior can be significantly influenced by social media, particularly due to the perceived risk of a purchase, which may be substantially reduced through the valuable information identified online [41]. Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has facilitated the transition to influencer marketing, as companies have recognized the positive impact of the transparency provided by social media users’ reviews on consumers’ decision-making processes [42]. Furthermore, according to Nash (2019), “there is evidence that online reviews are considered a more powerful tool than expert reviews” [41]. The quality and quantity of online reviews are also crucial. The presence of informative and persuasive online reviews significantly influences consumer behavior on social media [43]. “Social networks are perceived as a more reliable source of information compared to corporate communications and advertisements” [40].

According to Wibowo et al. (2021), marketing activities conducted on social media are much more appealing to users compared to traditional marketing techniques. Among the advantages of social media platforms as marketing tools are the consumers’ ability to personalize the sought information, a more entertaining and interactive user experience, and the ability for customers to obtain real-time and rapid information [44].

However, it is crucial to note that social media can influence consumer behavior at various stages of the purchase decision-making process [45].

The majority of marketing agents are cognizant of the fact that influencers represent a solution for building and sustaining authentic relationships with consumers [46].

2.2. Effects of Social Influence on Consumer Behaviour

The term ‘social influence’ refers to the mechanism by which individuals modify their behavior by motivating or inspiring others. Social influence can be exerted based on various factors, including synchronization between individuals, the nature of their relationship, physical distance, specific characteristics of the parties involved, but also the chosen network. The impact of social media is steadily growing, leading to a rise in the number of consumers who share information within communities with similar interests [47].

The purchase decision is influenced by both emotional and rational factors. Therefore, social supports as well as impulsive desires are factors that come from the digital environment and can influence the purchase of a good. Currently, digital platforms are included in the category of places where potential consumers seek information, but more importantly, they follow recommendations provided by other consumers, especially when it comes to purchasing goods for the first time [48].

Incorporating social networks into marketing efforts can consistently enhance brand loyalty among consumers. Many businesses have already recognized the essential role of social media platforms in their marketing strategies, especially for engaging with potential customers [18].

The swift integration of social networks into various aspects of life has led to the pervasive generation, dissemination, and consumption of online content by all social media users [49]. As a result, new communication dynamics tailored for social media platforms have emerged [50].

Users intend to establish relationships with those they perceive opinion leaders, the latter become effective. Therefore, utilizing social platforms increases the effectiveness of the message conveyed by influencers, increasing the likelihood that followers will react to the information received. Importantly, followers identify with content creators [51]. Moreover, constant interaction with influencers, whether through private messages, comments, or even offline meetings, fosters a much more personal connection between followers and content creators [52].

Social networks are a highly trusted source of information for potential customers, so social media platforms can be used both to sell goods and to outline the portrait of the target market of the product. The decision-making process of consumers is greatly affected by the information circulating on social networks; thus, there are two possibilities: either the product becomes a very successful one, or, in the case of negative reviews, the brand image may suffer. Ntobaki, Tlapana, and Matli (2022) believe that marketers and company managers should include social media in promotional, advertising, and marketing campaigns because through this strategy they can establish solid, lasting relationships with manufacturers and also gain a significant advantage over competitors [53].

Social networks allow both communicating and answering various questions, sharing information, and product evaluations—even consumers can be content creators [54]. These features led people to trust the opinions of other users, which positively influenced purchasing decisions [55]. Another study attests to the fact that transmitting information through the old “word of mouth” method, but in the online environment, more precisely on Instagram, influences the decision-making process of consumers’ purchase. The research highlights that users of the Instagram platform follow reviews on this network to gain more truthful information before making the decision to buy a product [56].

Influencer marketing represents a solution for both increasing awareness of sustainability and bringing about behavioral changes among social media users. The authors of the article titled “Sustainability influencers: between marketers and educators” argue that content creators can have two roles in the field of sustainability: one educational and one promotional. Influencers’ content can be both organic and sponsored, serving three functions: informing, educating, and entertaining for certain consumers [57]. Existing studies have largely focused on marketing, communication, and environmental sciences separately, neglecting the synergies between marketing and sustainability [58].

As revealed by the research conducted by Aragoncillo and Orús (2018), the shipping and return costs of a product, along with the convenience and easily accessible nature offered by the internet, contribute to impulsive purchases. Impulsive buying is also a result of sensory stimuli, as well as images and video clips encountered on social media. Facebook and Instagram have the highest penetration rate in this regard, with both platforms being increasingly utilized for making purchases [59].

Consumer purchasing experiences have been significantly enhanced due to the advantages provided by the digital environment. Customers actively engage with actions

undertaken on brand social media pages, leading to increased consumer satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and commitment to the brand [60].

Through the use of social platforms, brands succeed in eliciting emotions from consumers, thereby generating emotional engagement towards the brand [61]. Furthermore, brand actions on social media pages foster users' behavioral commitment. Specifically, consumers willingly choose to become involved, investing effort, energy, and time in various brand-related activities. For instance, they provide feedback, leave comments, likes, or even share information about the brand with other potential consumers in need of transparent opinions (eWOM) [62].

Another shift in consumer behavior has been identified by analyzing their interaction with discount coupons. Consumer involvement has been observed in the sharing of coupons aimed at generating benefits for social media platform users. The higher the value of the coupon, the more actively it is shared online by users [63].

A significant impact on individuals' cognitive states is exerted by live streaming stimuli, influencing consumer behavior regarding online purchases and prompting instant decision making [64]. Due to this phenomenon, numerous companies form partnerships with celebrities to promote products or brands, aiming to increase consumers' purchase intentions [65].

3. Materials and Methods

Certainly, until now, a lot of research has been conducted on the work of content creators on social networks, on influencer marketing, as well as on consumer attitudes. However, given the current situation and technological progress, academic interest and industry needs determine a constant need for research in this area. Among the topics to be researched are characteristics of influencers, general factors associated with effectiveness, ethical aspects including the use of disclosure and segmentation in the use of influences, characteristics of different forms of social media, as well as the issue of micro vs. macro influencers [66].

3.1. Methodology of Qualitative In-Depth Interview Marketing Research

During the in-depth interviews researchers intended to identify the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of Romanian experts in the field of influence marketing. For this purpose, the objectives of in-depth interviews are as follows:

(O1) To establish the current state of influencers' activity and how they manage the content created on various social media platforms;

(O2) To identify the factors that influence the relationship between content creators and their followers and the feedback received by influencers regarding the disclosure of paid partnerships;

(O3) To discover influencers' future outlook and the changes they would like to see in the online environment.

The selected method for the first qualitative marketing research is the semi-directive (semi-structured) in-depth interview among experts. It provides for questioning specialized persons with outstanding experience in the field of research, who are qualified and competent to answer various questions [67]. This design of the research was based on semi-structured direct communication techniques, more precisely semi-directive in-depth interviews were conducted and applied to specialists in the field of influence marketing. The population consists of all content creators in Romania. In this case, the exact size of the target audience is unknown, but 45 content creators from Romania were contacted. Of these, in the end, a sample of six content creators was created.

The personal interviews took place between April and May 2023. Each interview last from 30 min up to 1 h. At its core, the interviewer followed the topics previously set out in the interview guide found in Appendix A.

The discussion was audiotaped and then transcribed, and the most important information was centralized within the content matrix. Following the application of the interview guide, six answers resulted.

3.2. Qualitative Research Methodology Specific to the Focus Group

The second qualitative research was conducted, this time it is a focus group, which is a representative method for group qualitative techniques, aiming to obtain primary information based on discussions that take place in a relatively homogeneous group of people [68].

During the focus group, consumers' attitudes towards social media platforms will be tracked, as well as their opinions on online content created by influencers. The objectives of second study were as follows:

(O1) To identify the sources that subjects use to inform themselves and make purchasing decisions;

(O2) To determine subjects' attitudes toward social networks and online influencer activities;

(O3) To establish subjects' attitudes towards the posts made by the influencer in partnership with other brands, as well as public mention of this aspect.

3.3. Organization of the Focus Group

The population subjected to the research consists of consumers of social networks, more precisely citizens over 18 years old, from Brasov County, who know the term "influencer" and who follow content creators in the online environment.

The research was conducted on 19 April 2023, between 19⁰⁰ and 20³⁰, in Brasov County, the discussion being mediated by a moderator, based on an interview guide presented in Appendix B.

During the focus group, discussions were launched, questions were adhered to, and projective techniques were used, such as a sentence completion test and story continuation test.

The discussion was recorded with video and audio, then transcribed, and the most important information was centralized and analyzed.

In the following, the information obtained during the focus group will be synthesized, as well as the overall conclusions on the qualitative study, the latter being transposed into abstract conclusions, with the researcher keeping an impartial position.

4. Results

This section consists of two sub-sections describing the results of the focus group and those of the individual interviews.

4.1. Results of Qualitative In-Depth Interview Marketing Research

The sample consists of six Romanian content creators, aged between 24 and 39 years. They are engaged in various content creation fields such as entertainment/parody, cooking, and lifestyle. The latter domain was mentioned by four out of the six sample members, specifying that they create multiple types of content within this category. One of them has been producing content for nine years, two for over a decade, while the remaining three have been active in this field for 4, 5, and 6 years, respectively. Those who have been active for 9, 10, and 11 years in this domain reveal that they initiated their journey by establishing a blog where they wrote articles about their personal experiences (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the in-depth interview sample.

Topic	Subject 1	Subject 2	Subject 3	Subject 4	Subject 5	Subject 6
1. The year of starting the online activity	2018	2019	2015	2020 (In the pandemic)	2013	2014
2. The platforms on which they are currently active	Instagram TikTok YouTube	Instagram TikTok Facebook Educational	Instagram Facebook TikTok	TikTok Instagram	TikTok Instagram Facebook	Instagram Facebook TikTok
3. Type of content	Entertainment Parody	Lifestyle Beauty Travel	Cooking Lifestyle	Make-up	Lifestyle Beauty Travel	Lifestyle
4. Age	25	25	39	24	26	24
5. Gender	Masculine	Feminine	Feminine	Feminine	Feminine	Feminine
6. Number of followers	TikTok: 48.3k Instagram: 89.4k Facebook: 1.2k	TikTok: 74k Instagram: 22.4k Facebook: 1.5k	TikTok: 153.5k Instagram: 139k Facebook: 147k	TikTok: 752.8k Instagram: 116k Facebook: 1.4k	TikTok: 1.1M Instagram: 411k Facebook: 5.5k	TikTok: 55.9k Instagram: 104k Facebook: 281k

To begin with, the moderator wanted to find out more details about the current state of activity of content creators, as well as their journey so far. Each of the 6 subjects started their activity in a different year, not having an identical path. For example, one of the subjects managed to gather 750k followers on TikTok in less than 3 years, while all the others started their activity several years ago. Two of the six participants started their activity on the Facebook platform 9 and 11 years ago, respectively. One subject had a more complex beginning, being active on all existing platforms in 2013. Being very young at the time, he considered everything to be a game. The first person debuted creating photo content on the Instagram platform in 2018.

Success is defined differently by each of the six participants in this study. Thus, the first subject believes that when various public figures began to repost his pictures, he began to be successful. The second believes that reaching the 10k followers mark on Instagram gave him the title of content creator. Another point of view is presented by respondent number three, who started his activity in 2012 and believes that success appeared gradually, over time. Other opinions were making money, contacting a marketing agency, and collecting a huge number of likes and shares.

To get to know them better, the moderator wanted to find out what is the field in which each influencer works and on which social media platforms. Thus, the first respondent creates parody content while the second started by approaching educational content, but in the meantime, they refocused on content that is categorized in the influencer industry as “lifestyle”, addressing themes from everyday life, but also aspects of travel and beauty. Similarly, two more subjects work in the field of “lifestyle”, currently not wanting to limit themselves to only one branch. A respondent started his activity by posting culinary content and this is how he is recognized today, but sometimes he also posts information about organization, gardening, and fashion, aspects that can be classified as “lifestyle”, but these are not as successful. The fourth respondent posts more artistic content, make-up, and various transformations achieved through makeup. Their main content format is video, but photos are still used mainly on Instagram and Facebook.

All participants are present on Instagram and TikTok, four of them also work on Facebook, and two of the six also use YouTube to a small extent.

To better understand if influencers create their content first or if the social media platform on which they operate is more important to them, the moderator asked the following question: “Was the platform chosen first or did the type of content influence the choice of platform?”

For two respondents, the content created is the most important, but one of them knew from the beginning that he wanted to post on Instagram. One of the participants initially chose the platform (Instagram) because it offered him much more freedom of expression, but also possibilities to create more types of content. He later chose to move to YouTube precisely because it hurts to create another type of content (longer videos), so

with the passage of time there are changes in the behavior of content creators; sometimes the platform can be more important, and then the type of content that attracts various platforms prevails. Another point of view is that of the respondent for whom the passion for cooking prevails, choosing to create different content depending on the platforms, as did the sixth participant. Another situation was represented by the fact that one of the respondents started his activity in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the TikTok platform was heavily used, thus choosing to post on it even more because he wanted to create video content.

The reach a post has can vary depending on several factors. The moderator wanted to identify whether exposing the personal lives of content creators impacts followers to a greater extent. All participants in the research believe that more personal posts automatically attract a higher engagement rate.

All the specialists chosen for this study believe that platforms influence the success of collaborations. Their explanations were as follows: both the content and the platforms on which they are posted matter a lot because they demonstrate the capabilities of each influencer, as well as their work; Instagram is considered the most profitable platform, where most conversions are made. On the other hand, TikTok has influenced collaborations over time, gaining momentum some time after its launch.

In the relationship with partner companies, communication is essential. All six subjects say they have a very good relationship with partner companies; there is always discussion about the brief they receive, there is understanding from both sides, and, most importantly, every time, middle ground is found. Some subjects, for collaboration, create different content for each platform, while others share the same content on multiple platforms.

Two of the subjects had most of their collaborations on Instagram; one of them also supports the possibility of sharing collaborations on Facebook and TikTok, not collaborating exclusively on TikTok, and the second creates different content for each platform for 90% of collaborators. However, some companies want the same content on Instagram and TikTok. Some campaigns also share them on Facebook, but do not create specific content. At the opposite end, another respondent has the most collaborations on TikTok and sometimes shares the content on Instagram, but in his case, brands focus on TikTok.

Additionally, in the direction of collaborations made by content creators, researchers intended to identify potential problems that may arise. Only in the case of one person was identified a less pleasant incident, namely an inappropriate attitude on the part of the representative of a brand when the influencer expressed his inconsistency with the product to be promoted. Starting from this issue, the moderator asked for the opinion of specialists on the need for a concordance between the promoted product/partner brand and influencer. 100% of respondents said that such a correlation is necessary between the promoted product and the field in which they operate in the online environment. Five of them said they turned down brands whose products they were not comfortable with or did not resonate with. One of the five has strong principles, is vegan, does not consume juices, and is celiac; thus, the possibilities for collaborations are much narrower because many products, especially food, are automatically excluded. Two of the six respondents consider it very important that they can make their own mark on the campaign. One of them translates any collaboration through makeup, and the second focuses on funny content and parodies. For three content creators, it is essential to use the product or test it beforehand.

The existence of an association between social media platforms and certain types of content is a topic of interest for this study. Five out of the six participants associated Instagram primarily with photos, three of them also mentioned video content, two of them also reels, and one of the six associated the platform only with artistic videos and stories. In the case of TikTok, all participants associated it with videos, with one subject providing additional explanations, such as practical videos, challenges, and funny and short clips. Regarding Facebook, is concerned, there is minimal attention to this platform, one participant views it as a news channel where pictures prevail, while another mentioned "It

doesn't pay too much attention to Facebook content, it can be any content". The remaining four participants did not associate Facebook with any type of content, indicating a low level of interest in this social network.

Over time, technological progress has brought numerous changes among social media platforms as well. The aim was to identify how the passage of time has influenced the activity of influencers in Romania. Half of the study participants say they have also turned their activity to the TikTok platform due to its popularization. Two of the content creators have benefited from the success of the TikTok platform; they already have activity on this channel, its evolution bringing them much greater benefits over time. Only one person believes that the passage of time has influenced the type of content they create because it has developed and changed in their life. A similar answer was given by the third participant, who mentions that his personal evolution led him to offer certain content because in some situations he did not have access to the creation of other types of content.

A common aspect of all participants in this study is that none of them established their target audience from the beginning. Everyone created content out of pleasure and passion, and then the community grew with time. Currently, everyone's audience differs by age, but also by platform. One of the subjects knew from the beginning that he would not address minors or the elderly, initially having content intended for students. On the other hand, one of the subjects confesses that on the TikTok platform, the highest engagement rate is produced by children under eighteen.

There are many ways to determine the success of a post or campaign, and influencers define success differently, each paying attention to specific metrics. Five of the six participants consider the metrics provided by social media. Only one respondent does not follow statistics; for him, success is represented by the reposting of photos created by him by public celebrities. However, he still monitors the number of likes, comments, and private messages. Four out of six people mentioned engagement rate as something they pay attention to when assessing the success of a post. All subjects highlighted the number of likes, comments, shares, and private messages as very useful to identify whether a post or campaign was well-received and successful.

Creating a social media community is relatively easier than maintaining it long-term. Influencers perform numerous actions to maintain connection with their followers. Two of the subjects claim to pay close attention to private messages and always try to respond to messages, one of them mentioning that they often have frank discussions in private. Constant posting helps maintain a long-term relationship with the community (it is mentioned by two subjects), interact with followers, either through the tools offered by the platforms, or by asking for the opinion of followers or even by involving them in the creative process in different ways (four mentions). Two specialists said that naturalness and authenticity are very important in maintaining a close connection with the community.

Because recently, the need to mention the partnerships made by influencers was implemented, the moderator brought up this subject being topical, but also important in the future. Five of the participants in the individual interviews think it is very useful and fair to followers to mention paid partnerships. There are two possibilities, either through the Instagram banner that says, "Paid Partnership" or through the hash tag "#ad". One of the subjects chooses to use the hash tag (when not restricted by the collaborator) because they believe that the banner negatively influences the engagement rate. Only one participant chooses not to indicate paid partnerships at this time. In this regard, none of the content creators surveyed received negative reactions from followers about the paid partnerships they displayed publicly. One of the influencers even mentioned that people in his community have always had a good reaction and trust his posts.

Given the existence of several social media platforms, it was desired to identify the most preferred one by content creators. Five of the participants chose TikTok because it offers many creative possibilities; being a much more diverse content, there is freedom of expression, and the content is easier to make. One of the subjects chose TikTok from a rational point of view and because it presents great potential in the future. Only one

participant chose Instagram because the community they have on this platform is much more united, even if statistically it has the lowest figures. At the opposite end, if they had to choose a platform on which they would not activate as a content creator, they chose the following: YouTube (two people) because it is hard to grow your community and because it is not found with it; Facebook (three people) because the communities on this network are not their target audience, being older than their target market. One of the respondents mentioned other platforms besides YouTube and Facebook, citing the same reason as mentioned by the other two. Snapchat was recalled by an influencer who believes that this is an app and has lost visibility, has become a platform that is exclusively for friends (small communities), and is not useful for content creators.

Every field has its pros and cons, and in the context of influence marketing, participants in the interviews were asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of this type of activity. The positive aspects mentioned include the ability to convey different moods to followers, easy connection with the community, brand exclusivity when serving as an ambassador, flexibility in organizing one's time, the option to create content in advance, interaction with individuals who share similar passions and work in various fields, providing opportunities to learn. Participants also highlighted the chance to meet people with high positions from different countries, gaining valuable lessons from their experiences and developing creativity and imagination. Overcoming the fear of public speaking was also mentioned. The monetary benefit was an advantage mentioned by four out of the six respondents.

On the other hand, influencers have also identified the disadvantages of influencer marketing, these being as follows: overuse (three responses; the need to always be online; the underdevelopment of this market in Romania; lack of privacy (two responses); it can be an expensive activity; lack of credibility and reluctance of some (two responses), especially when a brand collaborates with several creators for the same product; the exclusivity that brands demand, so they cannot accept other collaborations of competitors and cannot talk about other products that they may enjoy.

Looking to the future, the authors wanted to identify the perspective influencers have on expanding to another platform. Two of the subjects stated that working on several distinct platforms is quite demanding, and one of them would only enter another platform if they could add the same content they create for Instagram and TikTok. Four of the six choose to turn their attention to TikTok because two of them are relatively at the beginning and the other two want to improve and consider it the app of the moment. A single content creator would like to invest more time and energy in YouTube because he likes this platform a lot, but it requires a lot of time, the whole creation process being longer.

In terms of the evolution of influencer marketing, content creators have different opinions. Two of them believe that less pleasant aspects may arise when individuals quickly become content creators without going through certain stages. Three of the respondents see influencer marketing as a promising field currently on the rise. One subject sees it as an area where authenticity will prevail, while another believes that it will take many years to fully overshadow traditional marketing.

Drawing a parallel between traditional and influencer marketing, the latter is considered by all respondents to be the most effective and is certainly one for the future. It is also effective since it allows choosing the target audience with much greater accuracy, and the generations that come later will be increasingly digitized, which will make traditional marketing actions no longer so useful and successful.

Considering that a significant portion of their time is spent in the online environment, there was a desire to identify the aspects that content creators would change in the online world. Two subjects believe that the attitudes and actions of some content creators should be more carefully considered because they can create an unpleasant image overall, including all influencers. One of them mentioned the need to differentiate between those who put more effort into their campaigns and those who are more superficial. Another aspect that should be changed is the online negativity; two respondents mentioned this. One of

them would like to make the online environment a better place, and the other believes that malicious people should consider if they would say the hurtful words they write in comments directly to the creator in person. One unique mention came from subject number six, who would change the algorithm on Facebook and Instagram based on which posts appear on the platforms' feed. They believe that some posts do not reach the audience even if they follow the creator who posted the picture/video. Changes are needed in this regard, with the ideal situation being for posts to appear chronologically and prioritize those posted by people in the following list. A single respondent would not change anything in the online environment, has learned to accept the fact that there will always be pros and cons, and claims that this is ok.

The six interviews concluded with the question "What is the secret of success in influencer marketing?". The most common answer (four responses) was "consistency". Respondents believe that it is essential to post as often as possible, even daily, and creating quality content. Another aspect mentioned by four of the six participants was "naturalness" and "authenticity". Subjects believe that adding your personal touch is crucial, while also maintaining one's identity in everyday life to prevent potential mental health issues. Two participants stressed the significance of doing what you love, creating content for pleasure and with passion, which they consider fundamental for success not only in influencer marketing but in any field.

In conclusion, at the end of the individual interviews conducted within the qualitative research, all the objectives pursued by the qualitative research conducted at the level of content creators in Romania were achieved. The findings also confirm that respondents consider it important to integrate promotional actions into their daily routine to create an honest relationship with their followers. According to the results obtained from the interviews, there are several aspects to change in the online environment regarding the activity of content creators. Some things are related to people in communities, but also to users of social networks, and others are interdependent on the human source, for example the algorithm of platforms that sometimes disfavor content creators.

The findings indicate that influencers adeptly tailor their content based on both the platform of posting and contractual agreements to facilitate diverse collaborations. Interview subjects adapt to market demands, particularly in complying with the obligation to disclose paid partnerships and avoiding negative incidents with followers, thereby strengthening their connection with the audience. This relationship is grounded, firstly, in sincerity and transparency. Secondly, effective communication with followers is crucial, encompassing private messages and various tools provided by social media platforms, offering influencers opportunities to engage with the community.

4.2. Results of Qualitative Research Specific to the Focus Group

The discussion during the focus group began by introducing the participants in the order appointed by the moderator and asking them to say a few words about themselves, about their hobbies or about the activities they carry out for pleasure. Therefore, all eight subjects participated in the discussion, of which seven were women and one was a man, aged between 24 and 33 years. All eight members of the sample met the selection criteria: they are all familiar with the term "influencer," use social media platforms, and follow at least one influencer online. Five of them have a monthly net income exceeding RON 4000, while three of them receive a monthly income ranging between RON 3501 and 4000 (Table 2).

The analysis of the information obtained from the focus group was carried out by carefully transcribing everything that each topic reported, then the most important and relevant aspects for analysis were identified. After establishing these topics, all interviews are reviewed, notes are taken along the way and the opinions of each interview topic are analyzed.

Table 2. Characteristics of focus group sample.

Topic	Subject 1	Subject 2	Subject 3	Subject 4	Subject 5	Subject 6	Subject 7	Subject 8
1. Age	26	26	24	25	28	25	32	33
2. Occupation	Personal trainer	employee	employee	employee	Self employed	employee	employee	employee
3. Last school graduated	high school	Bachelor	Bachelor	Master	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor
4. Net monthly income	Over 4000 RON	Over 4000 RON	Over 4000 RON	Over 4000 RON	Over 4000 RON	Over 4000 RON	Over 4000 RON	3501–4000 RON
5. Gender	Feminine	Feminine	Masculine	Feminine	Feminine	Feminine	Feminine	Feminine

An initial topic of discussion initiated by the moderator pertained to the ways in which participants gather information about their own hobbies. Seven of the eight subjects choose to search for information on the Internet by accessing the Google search engine, and most of the time they even follow specialized sites. One of the respondents prefers to search for information on YouTube because there he obtains numerous details, and can see the product from several angles; sometimes, various situations are even presented through which the product is tested, so they can also see feedback/reviews from people who have tested that object. Two of the respondents who use various sites mentioned that sometimes they also access social media platforms because in their follower list they have people who practice the same hobbies, or have even pages dedicated specifically to certain passions, where they find diverse and very detailed information exactly in line with their field of interest.

For the purpose of determining the factors that influence respondents to make the decision to purchase a product, they were asked what the most important elements are they consider when they want to buy a product. It has been observed that respondents place great emphasis on the experiences of others, whether it is the opinions of those close to them or online reviews. For two of the subjects who gave this answer, it is not enough to have a good review, it also pays close attention to the number of reviews. The price was mentioned by three of the eight participants, and four other opinions pointed to the need for high credibility. More precisely, the brand needs to be known/serious, but also the site to be credible and provide all the necessary information. One of them also added that, for him, the warranty term and the return term are very important because he has had unpleasant experiences in the past. If the company is serious, has a consistent turnover, the return term is according to the norms, and the warranty is offered according to the type of product, the subject trusts that brand and makes the purchase decision. Another respondent considers that it is essential for the company that markets the product in question to be present online, and he is always attentive to what the company transmits, more precisely the values they have and the marketing actions they practice. All participants seek this information primarily online. Even if the products are to be purchased from physical stores, they prefer to look for price information, reviews, and various conditions (warranty, return) in the online environment because it is very handy and fast.

To initiate the discussion on the topic of interest, the moderator focused on social media platforms, specifically addressing the reasons why participants use these networks. The most frequently mentioned purpose is information, seven out of eight respondents prefer to use social media for various information, whether related to a specific niche or any field, including staying updated on global news, even beyond Romania. Half of the responses emphasized the need for socialization, which is fulfilled through the accounts the accounts participants maintain on various social platforms. Here, they share their feelings, experiences, and thoughts with others. The role of inspiration and motivation of these networks was also mentioned. At the same time, social media also satisfies the need for entertainment; thus, four of the eight subjects choose these squares for relaxation and entertainment.

Next, the moderator aimed to identify the most used social media platforms by the participants. All subjects have accounts on Instagram, seven of them also use Facebook,

and six of them were registered on TikTok. YouTube is used by three respondents, and Snapchat and Twitter were mentioned only once by two distinct subjects. So, according to respondents, it can be concluded that Instagram is the most used platform by five of them, TikTok prevails for two of them, and for one person the most used network is Facebook. The latter topic mentions that this platform offers him many advantages; because communication is much easier, it can be carried out through Messenger. Here, he finds many groups of people who share the same passions with him; he can become informed, but he can also ask for opinions about various products and, in particular, there is the "Marketplace" part that allows him to buy various products, but also to trade. Thus, a single platform satisfies his many needs.

Following the recruitment questionnaire phase of this study, it was known that all respondents are aware of the term "influencer" and that they follow such people in the online environment, but the aim was to identify the attitude of the subjects towards them. Therefore, content creators are especially appreciated when they are honest, transparent, when they provide clear, detailed and, above all, informed information. Respondents do not tolerate creators who talk about topics such as tobacco, alcohol, gambling or even supplements that are not tested by knowledgeable people. Three of the subjects have a very good opinion of the activity that influencers carry out online because the latter spend a lot of time to become informed, often test products on their own skin, and then share the information obtained in detail with followers voluntarily. They admit that sometimes they would not know about various products if it were not for these creators providing all the details online. Half of the participants in the discussion said that they mainly follow content creators who provide reviews and do not carry out promotional actions. The remaining four respondents agreed with these statements, admitting that they also choose influencers who offer information from their own experiences or even test live various products. One of the subjects is not bothered by the promotion actions in the online environment, if they are carried out in a very creative way, with the influencers making a visible effort to obtain that campaign.

In the continuation of the discussion, participants were asked how they decide which influencers to follow online. Five of the eight have influencers in their watchlist who always offer reviews for the products used, who know the field in which they operate very well, and especially those who obtain very precise information before posting any information. For one of these subjects, it is fundamental to be able to obtain information about the particularities of a product, all technical aspects, and especially details about products that have been tested beforehand. Therefore, transparency and naturalness are characteristics that respondents appreciate and look for in the people they decide to consider as benchmarks. While for three subjects, transmitting information from their field of interest is a factor that determines them to choose certain content creators, for one of the eight the usefulness of the information transmitted is more important, as well as the degree of creativity of the posts, being open to receive information from any field if it is useful.

When it comes to the type of content preferred by subjects, videos are the top choice with five mentions, followed by instastories (two mentions) and reels (two mentions). Only one person appreciates text posts; more precisely, the information that is transmitted is much more important, not necessarily the form in which it is found. More specifically, they prefer posts that present in a very explicit way the steps of creating various decorations, simple recipes, organization tricks, and posts like "tips and tricks". Another participant also favors this type of content but opts for videos. The most watched content is mainly that in everyone's field of interest, inspirational content, and that which motivates participants. In the discussion, one participant mentioned a preference for videos with text (subtitles) as it allows for viewing under any circumstances, even without sound.

Given the existence of a concordance between the influencer and the content he creates in the online environment, everyone present at the focus group considers it crucial to have a strong correlation. One of the respondents states that the lack of a link between the field in which the content creator works and the promoted products gives the impression

of posts made only for financial interest; thus, the influencer does not carry out serious documentation, and the information transmitted may be false or untested. In discussion, there is a parallel between influencers who promote products they do not test and about which they do not know detailed information and the actions of traditional marketing (TV commercials).

The debate continues and the topic of paid partnerships that content creators make on social networks is brought up. It can be seen that three participants mention that they prefer personal opinions and reviews offered by influencers, and if they are integrated into a sponsored post, they are not bothered at all, but if they are missing, subjects ignore the post and are indifferent, practically the message does not reach them. Another opinion is surprising that paid promotion of various products does not influence credibility if they are part of the influencer's area. Sponsored posts that appear on social media have been brought up even if those people are not on users' watchlists. These types of posts are disturbing and disliked by respondents. One person confessed that if it is not made public that a post is a paid partnership, it conveys the feeling that the post would be more honest and authentic. The key takeaway from this discussion is that none of the participants lost trust in a content creator or gave up purchasing a product just because the post was made for paid collaboration if the product was in their area of activity. Two subjects said they mean to find extra information when an influencer they love posts a product in the form of a paid partnership, even if it is part of their niche.

To find out if study participants were buying products on impulse, the moderator asked them if they had purchased a product only because it had been recommended online by a content creator. Four of the subjects admitted to buying products recommended by influencers even though they did not need to, especially clothes and cosmetics, two of them pointed out. However, the factors that pushed them to purchase are the recommended products were part of the influencer's domain, detailed information was presented, as well as the benefits of the product and one of the four was also boosted by the fact that the influencer offered a discount code for that product. Three of the respondents did not purchase products on impulse, but one of them admits that they do not hesitate to seek opinions and reviews on social networks before deciding. Another opinion is that of the subject who purchased products recommended by influencers, but not on impulse, being goods that he was going to purchase anyway.

Subsequently, the moderator applied the test of continuing the story to see how they would act as influencers, aiming to identify how they would prefer an influencer to handle a certain situation. According to the story, influencer X, who has an Instagram account, has adapted to the new requirements regarding the marking of posts that are paid partnerships. Following this action, the influencer faced a wave of negative opinions, namely that his followers no longer trust his advice and opinions. Opinions were divided: four of the respondents believe that in this case the content creator should ignore the created situation because there will always be negative opinions and malicious people, and by indicating sponsored posts the influencer did nothing wrong, but on the contrary showed transparency and sincerity. One of the four mentioned that he would not take any action because he would not feel guilty, especially since he would only post tested products that he believes in. He claims that he prefers to overlook certain topics because any attempt to explain the situation will trigger another wave of discussion. Any less pleasant experience will help content creators learn how to act and what to avoid in the future.

On the other hand, four other opinions stand out, but opposite to those stated above. The subjects believe that transparency is the best solution. One of them would explain to followers what a paid partnership means and provide information about his opinion on the brand he had that collaboration with. Like this point of view, another respondent believes that a small explanation of how influencer marketing works would be useful but would later choose to block accounts that leave malicious comments. Respondents propose providing clarification in instastory posts.

During the focus group, researchers planned to find out the respondents' point of view regarding the comparison between the actions of traditional marketing and those of influencer marketing. The debates revealed that everyone involved in the conversation prefers the actions of influencer marketing. They motivated the choice as follows: influencer marketing actions are on the internet and reach them much faster because they often use their phone and spend much of their time online, which is more appropriate for their age. Two other opinions surprisingly revealed that influencer marketing is perceived as much more credible, original, and creative. Moreover, these actions present the personal experiences of content creators and seem much more real. Two of the respondents say that traditional marketing techniques do not reach them, often do not even notice them, especially if it is street banners or even TV commercials, because during the time when the latter are broadcast, they choose to turn their attention to the phone. One of the subjects would choose influencer marketing, but still appreciates posts like Facebook Ads, InstaAds, or even TikTok Ads more.

For all participants in the study, the most credible posts in the online environment are those that provide information about the product, more precisely, reviews and personal opinions.

The advantages and disadvantages felt by the subjects are presented in the table below (Table 3).

Table 3. Benefits and disadvantages of influencer marketing from a consumer perspective.

Advantages of Influencer Marketing	Disadvantages of Influencer Marketing
Sincerity	Promotion of products opposite the niche
Visibility	date
High credibility	Lack of sincerity
The speed with which the promoted products can be purchased	Negative influence on consumers through manipulation
Quick access to information	Lack of credibility
Information and detailed description of products	
Getting honest opinions	
Save time and money	

Following what the subjects said, there are several advantages of influencer marketing, from their point of view.

Most participants in the discussion prefer to follow influencers because they gain information, and learn new things both from their field of interest and from other areas.

Regarding the feelings felt by respondents, three of them felt sincerity from influencers because they are transparent with them and thus gain trust; conversely, two people associated them with falsehoods and interest in money. However, three other subjects were indifferent, because they felt that there was no impact on them, as they were able to filter the information encountered in the online environment.

After analyzing the discussion during the focus group, it can be concluded that half of the participants make impulse purchases because they saw certain posts by influencers, even if they did not need that product in that moment. On the other hand, the remaining four subjects are not inclined to buy a product they do not need just because it was promoted or recommended by a content creator on social media.

All objectives of group research have been achieved.

5. Discussion

The results of this study bring an addition in this field, more precisely to studies in the scientific literature. For a better understanding of the overall image on the study performed, the authors illustrated Figure 1.

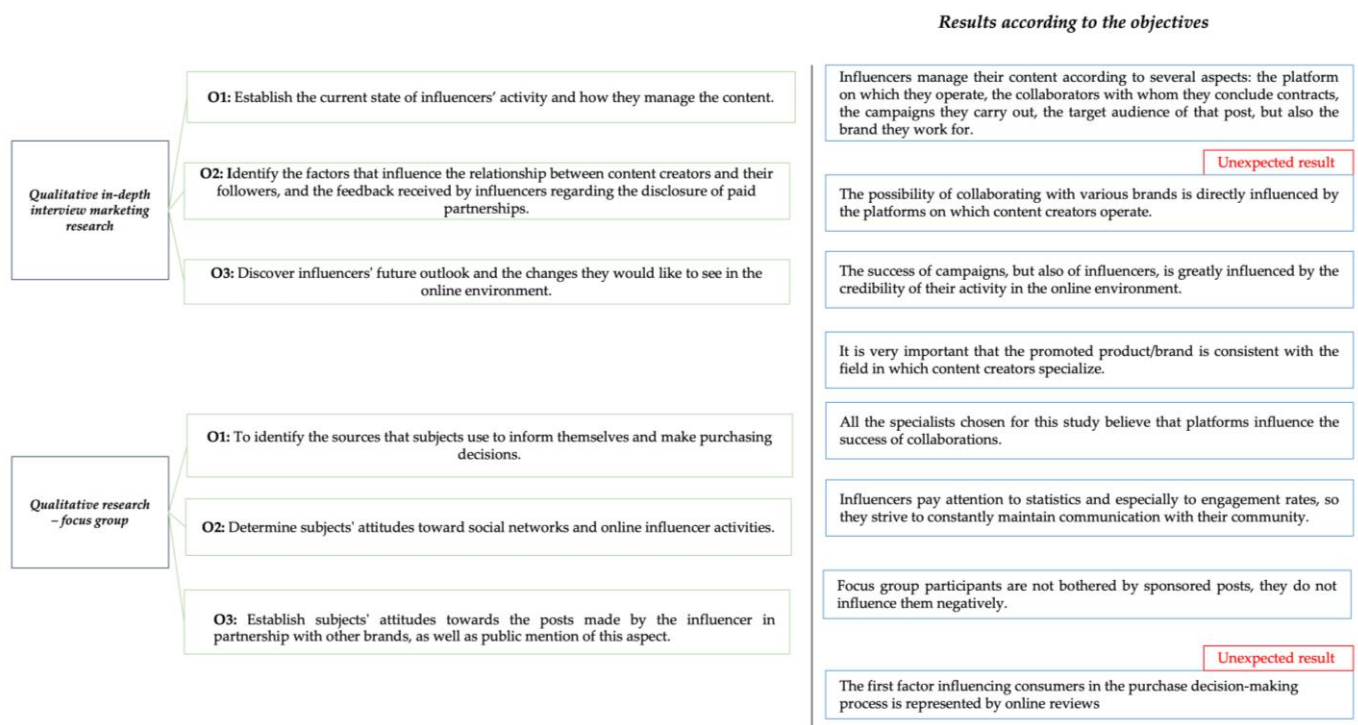


Figure 1. The overall structure of the study according to objectives.

First, the information resulting from individual interviews highlights the fact that influencers manage their content according to several aspects: the platform on which they operate, the collaborators with whom they conclude contracts, the campaigns they carry out, the target audience of that post, but also the brand they work for. Many of them are active on at least two platforms and mention that their target audience is different. The possibility of collaborating with various brands is directly influenced by the platforms on which content creators operate because, as mentioned earlier, the target audience is different. The more influencers are active on several social media platforms, and automatically have more types of followers, the more the possibility of being able to promote more product typologies from different fields increases. However, the success of campaigns, but also of influencers, is greatly influenced by the credibility of their activity in the online environment. Thus, according to the information resulting from individual interviews, it is very important that the promoted product/brand is consistent with the field in which content creators specialize.

Influencers pay attention to statistics and especially to engagement rates; thus, they strive to constantly maintain communication with their community. Whether it's daily posts, Q&A sessions or private message discussions, communication is key, as is transparency, naturalness, and sincerity.

As influencer marketing has grown significantly, numerous companies are now turning their attention to content creators. Consequently, many content creators acknowledge having numerous collaborations and paid partnerships that they do not wish to conceal. For some, it is even a source of pride, and can later attract a larger number of partnerships. While there are other opinions, and some creators would prefer not to post paid collaborations publicly, today's legal environment is working to compel them to be publicly affirmed,

Surely, the TikTok platform seems to be the platform of the future, on which more and more content creators are starting to integrate.

On the other hand, from a consumer perspective, it can be stated that most study participants use social media platforms for information and entertainment. For them, it is very important for influencers to share honest reviews with multiple details. They have

a very big impact on the procurement decision-making process. Sometimes subjects buy products recommended by content creators, even if they did not plan on a purchase.

Focus group participants are not bothered by sponsored posts, they do not influence them negatively, stating that they appreciate sincerity very much, and the concordance between the brand/product promoted through sponsorship and the activity/field of activity of the content creator is the most important aspect.

After analyzing this research, the eight subjects expressed a preference for following influencers in the online environment who create content within their favored domain. Often, hobbies, occupation, or even personal status can influence the appreciation of content creators in the online environment. For instance, when one of the subjects became a parent, he started seeking information about children, parenting, or baby products, expanding his list to include other influential figures on social media platforms. Most of the time, spontaneous events in a person's life can influence their activity, preferences, or even simple searches in the online environment.

6. Conclusions

The findings of the focus group analysis align with those from previous studies [56,65,69,70], which assert that positive online customer reviews influence the decision-making process of individuals in purchasing. This study presents the perceived advantages and disadvantages of influencer marketing actions by consumers, including high credibility, as also noted in the work of Ge and Gretzel (2018) [71], rapid access to information [72], and time and cost savings (mentioned in the article by Leparoux, Minier, Anand [73]).

Within this focus group, the following drawbacks of this technique were identified: promotion of products incongruent with the content creator's domain, as mentioned by Luo and Yuan (2019) [37]; lack of sincerity and authenticity, confirming findings by Mathew (2018) [74] and Sundermann and Raabe (2019) [75]; and low credibility [76], which may arise from mismatches between the brand and the influencer with whom a partnership is formed [77].

This research underscores the importance of understanding social media consumers' opinions regarding their perception of influencer marketing actions. Specifically, identifying the advantages of these activities is crucial for their development, while knowledge of the disadvantages is essential for improvement or, if necessary, avoidance. Additionally, understanding content creators' opinions is vital. According to the analysis conducted in this paper, it is noteworthy that influencers participating in the research choose to partner only with brands they appreciate and whose products they genuinely use, aligning with studies by Piskorski, Brooks (2017) [78], Veirman et al. (2017) [5], Lin et al. (2018) [79], and Leparoux, Minier, Anand (2019) [73]. They integrate aspects of their personality into promotional campaigns, akin to the findings of Hass and Laverie (2020) [80]. Similarly, subjects in this study admitted a preference for the term 'content creators' over 'influencers' [80].

This article amalgamates two distinct vantage points: firstly, a consumer perspective derived from a focus group, and secondly, the viewpoint of specialists—namely, content creators who bear direct responsibility for the content disseminated across diverse social media platforms. Evidently, it underscores the imperative nature of scrutinizing the activities of influencers while simultaneously delving into the perceptions of consumers. This inquiry extends to the assessment of marketing campaigns and sponsored posts, as these topics remain highly relevant and, assuredly, will continue to be of paramount importance in the future.

Considering the results obtained from the two qualitative research, in addition to the information detailed in Sections 4 and 5, the authors formulated two proposals: one for the managerial environment, and one directed at theoretical implications.

The managerial implications are useful for marketers to know how to manage collaborations with influencers, how they see the concordance between their field of activity and products/brands, what is their association between the type of content created and

the platform on which they post, as well as their attitude towards publicly indicating paid partnerships and sponsorships.

The passage of time, coupled with the evolution of technology, has exerted a notable influence on the activities of content creators. These shifts, as elucidated by influencers themselves during individual interviews, reflect an evolving landscape. Over time, the Facebook platform has somewhat receded from the spotlight, with influencers opting to allocate diminished attention to this network. Instead, their concerted efforts have gravitated towards the present-day platform du jour, TikTok.

The insights gleaned from in-depth interviews underscore that influencers now regard their Facebook pages as but one among several platforms, primarily serving as conduits for the redistribution of content originally generated on Instagram or TikTok. Notably, content creators who initiated their endeavors more recently, particularly from the years 2019 to 2020, often forego the creation of dedicated Facebook pages for their professional activities, preferring to maintain private, personal accounts. This multifaceted approach serves a dual purpose: it facilitates the anticipation of consumer behaviors, and affords a deeper understanding of prevailing opinions and attitudes. This repository of information assumes paramount importance as a foundational element for the formulation of effective influencer marketing strategies. Furthermore, in the refinement of such strategies, insights derived from the analysis of consumer behavior serve as indispensable guideposts. As such, specialists engaged in influencer marketing must exercise judiciousness to ensure that every marketing campaign exudes authenticity, striving for maximal transparency. Equally pivotal is the selection of products or brands that align seamlessly with the influencer's niche. The more comprehensively these considerations encompass the perspectives of both consumers and content creators, the greater the efficacy of influencer marketing campaigns.

Theoretical implications encompass the identification of novel behavioral traits among Romanian consumers regarding influencer marketing actions, enabling the delineation of 'portraits' that can be utilized in formulating marketing strategies. Furthermore, the presentation of domain experts' perceptions contributes to a clearer understanding of the term influencer marketing. The latter is elucidated both through the lens of consumer individuals' perceptions and from the perspective of content creators actively engaged in influencer marketing activities.

The academic implications are delineated through the contribution of results to the development of case studies and practical examples that can be employed within the academic milieu to garner a more profound understanding of the characteristics of influencer marketing. These instances encompass the perspectives of both consumers and professionals, elucidating explicitly how the success or failure of influencer marketing campaigns can be influenced by the degree of knowledge of the opinions of these two parties. The information proves valuable to the academic environment as it shapes not only future marketing professionals but also prospective entrepreneurs who can glean insights into current practices in digital marketing.

Furthermore, by comprehending the drawbacks of influencer marketing from the consumers' standpoint, research endeavors can be fostered to contribute to the enhancement of regulations in this domain, safeguarding consumers against unethical practices within the realm of digital marketing.

A first limit is represented by the specificity of the research, because the obtained results cannot be extrapolated to the entire population due to lack of representativeness. Another weak point was determined by the difficulty of contacting influencers because they receive numerous messages and visibility is reduced. The number of followers that the interviewed influencers have may represent a minus in this research because the communities on the platforms differ a lot and, in addition, there is a possibility that mega influencers will approach other strategies on the Instagram network, for example, the influencer with the most followers having 1 million people in his community on TikTok.

In the case of a focus group, there is a possibility that some answers given by participants may be influenced by the opinions of other subjects. On the other hand, there is also

a risk that the researcher will misinterpret some answers given by group members. The age of the participants may be a limitation of the research because they are between 24 and 33 years old; thus, people over 33 years old were not included in the research, which may influence the results.

Given the information above, future studies could analyze several elements of influencer marketing campaigns that can influence consumer buying behavior or analyze the requirements and expectations that content creators have regarding various collaborations.

Moreover, quantitative research can be conducted to probe potential consumers of influencer marketing campaigns to find out what their opinions are on these types of campaigns.

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Appendix A

Interview guide for in-depth individual interviews

General theme: Influencer marketing—about social media platforms and online content

- A. The current state of influencers' activity as well as their journey so far.
 1. How did you start your activity in the online environment? Did you intend from the beginning of your activity to become a known/popular/influential person?
 2. When did you "know" you became an influencer? When did you receive this status?
 3. What platforms do you operate on? What made you choose the mentioned platform?
 4. Was the platform chosen first, or did the type of content influence the choice of platform?
 5. What type of content do you post on social media?
- B. Types of content posted by influencers on different social media platforms
 6. Do you think your personal life has a bigger impact on your followers?
 7. Does the platform influence collaboration capacity/number of collaborations?
 8. Can the success of an influencer be influenced by the platform on which they operate? What about the success of a campaign?
 9. Do companies that want to collaborate with you impose a certain type of content (video, text, photo)?
 10. What do you do if a certain type of content is imposed on you by your collaborator/partner?
 11. How do you determine the type of content you're going to post? Do you create different content depending on the platforms you are present on?
 12. From your point of view, can there be an association between certain platforms and types of content? (e.g., Facebook = pictures, Tik Tok = video, etc.)?
 13. Is there a connection between the promoted product and the chosen platform?

14. Does your social media platform influence your activity or the content you create?
 15. What would be the steps you take to create an influencer marketing campaign?
 16. How have changes in social media platforms influenced your work over the years?
- C. Social media consumer behavior
17. Do you think that an influencer first chooses his target audience and based on it will create a certain type of content or vice versa?
 18. How did you set/choose your target audience?
 19. How do you identify the most appropriate content? Do you only count metrics on platforms?
 20. How do you connect with your followers? How do you know what content they prefer?
 21. How did you build and manage to maintain a solid and lasting relationship with your followers?
 22. Do you consider important the existence of a concordance between the influencer-brand and the promoted product? Why?
 23. Do you consider the possibility of “fake” accounts that can negatively influence statistics?
- D. Obligation to indicate sponsored posts
24. Have you faced the “problem” of paid partnerships? (lack of credibility, “re-volt” of pursuers).
 25. How did your followers react?
 26. Your activity Has social media suffered with this change?
 27. Have you faced followers who have lost confidence?
 28. What kind of problems do you face when collaborating with different brands for campaigns?
- E. Conclusion phase
29. If you had to operate on one platform, what would it be? Why?
 30. What platform would you never want to create content on? Why?
 31. What do you consider to be the positive aspects of influencer marketing? What about the negative ones?
 32. Do you intend to expand your influencer marketing activity on other platforms? Can you elaborate please?
 33. How do you think influencer marketing will evolve?
 34. What would you change online?
 35. What is the secret of success?

Appendix B

Focus group guide

Preamble (5 min)

Hello,

I would like to begin by thanking you for agreeing to be present at this discussion today. The topic we will debate today is a topical one, namely: online marketing activities carried out in collaboration with content creators (influencers).

In order for our discussion to be as effective as possible, we will establish a series of rules:

1. There are no right or wrong answers.
2. Your views are very important and I would appreciate if you would give me honest and complex answers to the questions that will follow.
3. Please respect the opinions of other participants in the discussion, regardless of their content.

4. The participation of each of you is required. to the discussion.

I would like to inform you that our discussion today will be audio-videotaped, this being necessary for the processing process of the collected data. The recordings will be used strictly for research purposes and will be deleted later. Your identity will be protected and responses will be anonymous.

With your permission, I propose that we start discussions.

Are there any questions or concerns?

Introduction—heating (10 min)

- Moderator self-presentation
- Presentation of the first name by each participant and enumeration of 3 words that best characterize them.
 1. Subjects' attitude regarding the information mode (5 min)
 - What hobbies do you have?
 - When you want to learn more about your hobbies, what sources of information do you prefer?
 - But when it comes to the decision to purchase a product, how do you become informed?
 - What are the factors that influence your purchase decision?
 2. Subjects' opinion on social networks (15 min)
 - What role do you think social media platforms have nowadays?
 - What social media platforms do you have accounts on?
 - What platform do you use most often?
 - What do you use each platform for? (information, entertainment, advertising, etc.)
 - Do you use social media platforms to develop more opinions about a product?
 - Did you purchase products just because they were promoted by a certain influencer, even if you did not necessarily need them at the time?
 3. Subjects' opinion on online content (20 min)
 - What is your point of view regarding influencers and their activity in the online environment?
 - What types of content do you prefer to see in your feed? Why?
 - What are the factors that determine you to follow an influencer?
 - Do you think there is a connection between the influencer and the platform on which he operates? Develop.
 - How do you see the concordance between the influencer and the promoted brand/product?
 - Have you dealt with sponsored posts? How do you feel?
 - Have you noticed a change in the activity of influencers you follow regarding the mention of paid partnerships? What do you think about this aspect?
 - Does mentioning paid partnerships influence the credibility of the post?
 - Have you given up considering a review of an influencer you follow just because it was a paid partnership?
 4. Sentence completion test (10 min)

Please complete the following sentences:

 - The most credible posts in the online environment are.....
 - The main advantages of influencer marketing are.....
 - The main disadvantages of influencer marketing are.....
 - I love following influencers because.....
 - Paid partnerships convey my feeling/feelings of.....
 - The content that appeals to me most is the ones that.....
 5. Story continuation test (15 min)
 - Influencer X, who has an account on Instagram, has adapted to the new requirements regarding the marking of posts that are paid partnerships. Following this action, the

influencer faced a wave of negative opinions, his followers no longer trusting his advice and opinions.

- What would you do instead of the influencer to remedy the situation?
- Wrapping Up (15 min)
- If we were to discuss traditional advertising and influencer marketing, which would you prefer? Why?
- Which of the two techniques do you encounter more often?
- Which do you think has a stronger effect on your behaviour if we refer to the buying process?
- If there are other interventions, if anyone else has something to add?
- The moderator thanks the participants and declares the meeting closed.

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