The Effects of Digital Influencers in Purchase Intentions

A detailed look at how Social Media impacts Consumer Decisions.

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Abstract

Social media has changed the way people communicate, advertise, and purchase goods. Consequently, companies had to adapt their marketing strategies to be present on social media and in the new sales channel created, mostly known as e-commerce. One of these strategies is investing and sponsoring digital influencers to promote products or services, with the objective of developing a closer relationship with users and engaging more with their target audience in the social media environment.

However, what is the real impact of digital influencers on online consumer purchase? Today, are social media channels and digital influencers relevant in the online shopping process? This research will investigate the sales effects of adopting a digital influencer marketing strategy on the user online shopping experience. The research method will be qualitative, following the methodology of interpretivism and collecting data through in-depth interviews using semi-structured telephone interviews with five active social media users. The main objective is to understand the consumer online shopping behaviour and if the digital influencer marketing strategy is relevant for companies to grow their sales.

The conclusions of the research advise that digital influencers can have an important impact on consumer purchase intentions and that this marketing strategy applied adequately with the correct audience can influence the company's sales. In addition, these effects of increased sales are directly related to the relationship of trust between the digital influencer and the audience that consumes the content produced in the social media environment. Since social media and technology is constantly changing, the need to keep investigating the research theme is essential to investigate new techniques.

Keywords: social media, consumers, online shopping, digital Influencers, marketing strategies, technology, sales.

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1.Introduction

This work will investigate the impact of using digital influencers as a communication marketing strategy in the online shopping purchase process and if this marketing strategy is essential for the consumer industry in today's world. Digital influencers are a type of leader that can be considered an expert in a specific area, with an extensive online network, significant influence over customers, and they are primarily present on social media (Öztürk, 2020). The research will understand some actions that lead digital influencers to influence online purchases on the Instagram social network. The research will analyse social media in general. However, Instagram was the focus since it is the one more popular worldwide. Companies often use social media platforms to choose digital influencers to advocate for their brand (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). When a company decides to use digital influencer sponsorship with a marketing strategy, the digital influencer usually becomes a brand ambassador. A brand ambassador helps the company increase brand awareness and drive sales (Andersson and Ekman, 2009). Some of the big brands worldwide, such as Coca-Cola, Mars, Zara, etc., have digital influencers promoting their products or services on social media in the form of recommendations to their audience.

After the internet was created, it allowed people to connect from everywhere and to be able to shop from anywhere around the world. Companies recognized the importance of the internet and quickly made sure to be part of it. Bringing to the current scenario, in which the whole world is passing through the Covid-19 pandemic, the internet became even more critical to the population because it helps people to connect without being in the same physical space.

In the internet world, communication and content is the key for brands. A brand example that performs both exceptionally well is Amazon. They have a strong culture of studying the metrics, especially related to retail, to offer the best service to the customers, and they often use influencers to speak about their services (Chaffey, 2021). It is essential to understand the mechanisms that lead digital influencers to purchase products through the social network Instagram in today's world.

The partnerships between social media and digital influencers have also raised issues about advertising and whether the digital influencer is recommending

because the product or service is good or only because they were paid to do it. The users are conscious that one of the ways digital influencers make profits is through sponsorship content. However, they demand more transparency from the digital influencer to show their audience what content is sponsored by a brand when they recommend a product or service. As a result, the term "paid partnership" or "sponsored content. This term is used by digital influencers when they are recommending a sponsored product or service in the platform in order to make their audience aware of the fact that they were paid to produce that specific content. Following the research narrative, the next chapter will cover different topics related to the research essay such as marketing strategies before the internet, social media born, the connection between social media e advertising, the impact in sales of companies using social media, digital influencers strategies and their impact effective in increasing the sales. The objective after analysing the information is to provide a gap in the literature that needs to be investigated by the researcher.

The study conducted qualitative research based on interpretivism and collected data from five people who actively use social media and interact with digital influencers. This conditional from the participants was essential to investigate their relationship since one individual who does not use social media could not bring insights to the research topic. Through the in-depth interviews it was possible to build material for the study interpretation. Using the qualitative research method, it was possible to analyze and have valuable findings and write the conclusion.

The author expects to present further information on the digital influencer marketing strategy and provide valuable data for companies that can adapt this strategy to increase their sales. The next chapter will critically examine past literature that contains relevant information for this research.

2.Literature Review

1. Introduction

The study intends to review for a more extensive understanding of the view from previous research from different authors related to the dissertation theme. The study will examine social media platform, focusing on Instagram, and the impact on purchase intentions. In addition to this study, it will be analysed the social media

influencers and influencer marketing connection on increasing sales from companies.

2. Marketing

2.1 What is Marketing?

To increase sales, companies quickly recognized that Marketing is an essential piece of the business since understanding customer needs will make them buy and consume more products or services (Strydom, 1999). Marketing is often compared to sales, but it is essential to differentiate the terms. Marketing is focus on being more long-term and product-oriented, and sales as short-term and customer relationship-oriented (Homburg and Jensen, 2007). In summary, both areas walk together but are not the same. In a specific definition, marketing is the role of communicating the product or service to customers as they walk towards a buying decision process (Court, Elzinga, Mulder and Vetvik, 2009).

More recent research says that the marketing function is developing and performing pricing, promotion, ideas, products, and services to achieve the customer desire and business goals (Bakare, 2011). Before introducing marketing into a business, marketing strategies need to be created. A marketing strategy is a method applied to reach a specific marketing-related audience, and it usually focuses on growing the company's profits (Hudson, 2021). There are diverse examples of marketing tactics that can be applied differently for companies depending on their goal. These strategies are often called "marketing mix", which stands for different strategies that work together to affect and increase the company revenue (Strydom, 1999). The marketing mix is classified under four parts: Product, Price, Place, Promotion (Abrams, 2000). Companies need to be aware that a successful marketing mix strategy is usually applied as per marketing requirements and with changing external circumstances (Singh, 2012).

When the companies have a clear understanding of the target market and customer needs for the audience they wish to achieve, marketers will influence the consumer's purchase decision journey. To have this influence, they will develop and implement customer-focused marketing strategies based on relationship building, knowledge management, and information sharing (Ferrell and Hartline, 2008).

1.2 Marketing strategies before the Internet

During the Industrial Revolution in the 1920s, the marketing importance has reduced since most companies focused on large scale production, not marketing (Strydom, 1999).

According to Strydom (1999), by that time, companies were not focusing on being "customer-centric", as the companies wanted to produce as many products and services as possible. According to Aldo (2015), in today's world, the opposite holds true. The automation age was followed by the relationship age (Cundari,2015), and companies were forced to adopt customer-centric marketing strategies. According to Aldo, the power of technologies enabled consumers to change how they behave since they can now go online and get the price, availability and buy.

In the '90s, the most common media tools were radio, television, and newspapers (Strydom, 1999). Figure one, created by Armano (2009), illustrates the evolution of marketing communication before and after the internet. The figure explains how marketing has shifted from mass communication not focusing only on one niche, including journal and radio promotion (Aghaei et al. 2012), to an interactive, focused on the end-user and proactive marketing environment. Still analysing the figure, it is possible to see how the direction changed after the birth of social media, focusing on the target market and production of content.

Figure 1 – Evolution of Marketing Communications (2009)

Social Media Achieves Marketing Objectives

Figure 1.4

The Evolution of Marketing Communications

Source: Based on David Armano (May 21, 2009), Social Engagement Spectrum, http://darmano.typepad.com/logic_emotion/2009/05/social-engagement-spectrum.html, accessed November 8, 2011.

Broadcast Print Radio Outdoor

Tradigital Marketing
- Mass and Targeted Online Media
- Push Orientation
- Outbound Messaging with interactivity enabled
- Attention gained via interruption
- Personalization and relevance

Networks Communities Blogs Microblogs

Traditional Marketing
- Mass Media
- Push Orientation
- Outbound Messaging
- Attention gained via orientation

Social Media Marketing
- Niche Online Media
- Attraction Orientation (pull)
- Content attracts inbound traffic
- Attention gained via interactivity
- Dialogue
- Participation
- Sharing

Banners Microsites E-mail Search

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2. Social Media and Advertising

2.1 What is social media?

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) mentioned that social media gathers internet-based programs created to produce and transfer content and data between users. The study of Fuchs et al. (2013) defines social media as giving "online social networking, online community structure and support, collaborative data production and sharing, and user-generated content creation, distribution and consumption". In addition, to these definitions, Li, Larimo and Leonidou (2020) explain the objective of social media has continuously developed from a single marketing tool, and it has turned very important for companies to use social media to reach competitive advantage and better sales performance along with competitors.

Social Media products can be Blogs, videos, ratings (Tuten, 2008). A blog is used in social media as a "post". A blog post is a unique web page on a website that has a blog format (Forsey, 2020). A video in the social media environment can be used to promote a product or service (Conley, 2020). The ratings are consumers' comments and opinions about different services or products in a social media channel (Ray, Bala and Jain, 2020).

How people interact with each other starts becoming different after social media was created and became popular. Walters (2016) affirms that these social interactions changes made the advertising industry develop new marketing strategies to reach customers. Companies found social media a great place to advertise with less monetary investment and the possibility to engage with many potential customers (Tuten and Solomon, 2014).

The products from social media are created for a specific audience, and this content creation is made to have the consumers interacting. This interaction between the person creating the content and consuming it is called customer engagement (Behnam, Hollebeek, Clark and Farabi, 2021). Customer engagement creates an good relation between companies and customer and makes the them to trust the company and continue to rely on buy rather than make transactions with the competitors. The seller and the customer meet the purposes of the seller and customer collaborating in creating value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

To focus on social media customer engagement, companies needed to understand the marketing mix and technology tools better and assist customers. The potential of social media to promote products and brands was quickly realized by companies, with several early attempts producing promising results (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The internet and social media showed to be more critical after Covid-19 (Wong et al., 2020). According to Anja Feldmann (2021), the datasets from Internet Service Providers, primarily in Europe, present a view on the changes in Internet consumption due to pandemic and the lockdown that made hundreds of millions of citizens stay and work from home. Her study analyses reveal that the increase of Internet usage was up 15-20 % within a couple of weeks, increasing over multiple months of people still in the lockdown.

2.2 How social media can be used in Advertising?

Social networks have become a great marketing and sales tool since people have access to the internet on their phones. The research, "The State of Small Business Report," conducted by Network Solutions, LLC and the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, says that 75% of the companies have a business page on a social networking site (Neti, 2011). The purpose of social media in brand marketing projects is to create a solid connection among consumers and companies and present a natural move for the company to its clients (Drennan, 2010).

Today, companies understand the importance of being present on the internet, and this can be recognized with the increase in searching for digital marketing professionals to help them develop digital marketing techniques (Tesseras, 2021). Digital marketing is described as performing marketing goals using digital technologies (Chaffey et al., 2021).

To apply these techniques, social media is often used as the primary tool. Like the traditional marketing known by people, the strategies are very similar but applied in a different environment, the internet (Figueiredo et al., 2013). The tools to apply this type of technique might vary, but e-commerce tools such as "Instagram shopping" are often used. Instagram Shopping is a tool in which the Instagram profile can post the pictures and tag the links to the product (Instagram, 2021). This Instagram tool

utilises real-time and pre-made content to produce an interactive, visual shopping experience (Instagram, 2021).

2.3 Instagram and Advertising

The social media platform Instagram is very popular with one billion active monthly users in 2019 (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Instagram became very popular in the last ten years, and most users are under 50 years old (Bakshi, Shamma, & Gilber, 2014). Instagram initial function was to be a photo album, where the users could upload their photos and share them with their 'friends' (Bakshi, Shamma, & Gilber, 2014). According to emarketer (2021), Instagram has 1.074 billion active users. Instagram gained 73.5 million users compared to 2020 (eMarketer, 2021). Still, according to the emarketer study, this incredible growth is due to the pandemic, which made many people sign up for the platform to connect with other people.

Instagram is a social networking platform, however with the born of the e-commerce tool, Instagram shopping, it became the perfect place for advertising (Bakshi, Shamma, & Gilber, 2014). In 2018, 71% of the companies in the US were using Instagram to promote their products (René and René, 2021). According to Muqaddam (2019), companies can perform two successful advertising strategies on Instagram. These tactics are sponsor brand posts and influencer posts (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019).

2.4 The Digital Advertising impact on Sales/Firm Performance/Purchase Intentions

In the past decades, internet progress and social media presence have played a crucial role in helping business achievements (Kim, Li, & Brymer, 2016). The industry has quickly identified that digital marketing advertising in the social media environment brings good results to companies since it is used strategically, and this new marketing tool has been added to the selling strategy to grow the business (William, 2017). Recent studies show that 85% of companies adopt social media to implement their marketing campaigns, and the global penetration rate is 70% (Statista, 2019).

The increase of sales can be measured with the engagement metrics to establish the company goals and evaluate the performance of organisations after creating and

adding to the social network the marketing strategy (Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013). According to Taylor and Francis (2012), social media needs to be an essential part of the business, as it enables salespeople to contact customers and build an environment where "encourage customers to interact, engage, and establish relationships with them".

With these interactions, companies expect users to start having purchase intentions with their products or services. Purchase intention means a consumer's tendency to feel confident about buying a product or service (Balakrishnan, 2014). The more confident this customer is, the higher the chance to purchase the product or service. Often the consumer will search before consuming a product or service to make sure it will suit their needs (Rahim, 2016). In a previous study conducted by Massoud Moslehpou (2020), social media marketing, brand and trust were identified to influence purchase intention directly. According to his study findings, companies need to focus on creating content in social media that can stimulate and attract consumer interest in their products.

3. Digital Influencers

3.1 The Born of the "Digital Influencer" term

Influencer marketing is defined as "a method of recognising individuals who influence a specific target audience" (Sudha and Sheena 2017). According to Solomon (2013), the goods industry chooses influencers separating into four different modes to promote a product or services, product endorsement, and acting strategies. Salomon mentioned these four criteria divided by:

- Number of people watching the digital influence,
- Engagement with users,
- Level of expertise in the subject they speak on their social media,
- Social popularity.

The digital influencers usually speak about various topics, such as Healthy Lifestyle, Food, Travelling and Fashion (Taylor and Francis, 2012). The influencer goals are to differentiate themselves from different influencers and create unique content for their followers (Duffy, 2017). Consumer's behaviour studies disclosed a preference in

digital influencers reviews on products since they can associate with the influencer and enjoy collecting the digital influencer opinion based on their previous experience with that good (Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

Figure two below illustrates how a Digital Influencer promotes a product or Service on social media. In the figure, Louise Thompson is promoting a hair vitamin. 53 people commented, and 9.800 added likes. Social media presents a tool for metrics of engagement (e.g., "likes," comments, and followers), which also helps the digital influencer to measure the impact of the advertising (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Likes and comments are unique engagement numbers based on user interaction with another profile (Chen,2021). Followers are the number of people that watch the other user content (Chen,2021). Social media metrics are essential since they can demonstrate through numbers how that marketing campaign or advertising performed and the overall impact on a business.

Figure 2 - 'New influencer marketing guidelines encourage brands and talent to be 'upfront and clear' (2021)

According to the evoke magazine, Hairburst is the UK's best-selling online hair supplement, selling a bottle a minute. On the Hairbust website, it is possible to see

different digital influencers recommending the product, this is part of the digital marketing strategy of brand endorsement. According to a case study conducted by Seller Interactive (2020), orders increased after Hairbust started hiring digital influencers to recommend their product online to their users. The statistics provided in the case study says that the number of total sales increased an average of 13K.

Figure 3 - Hairbust case study (2020)
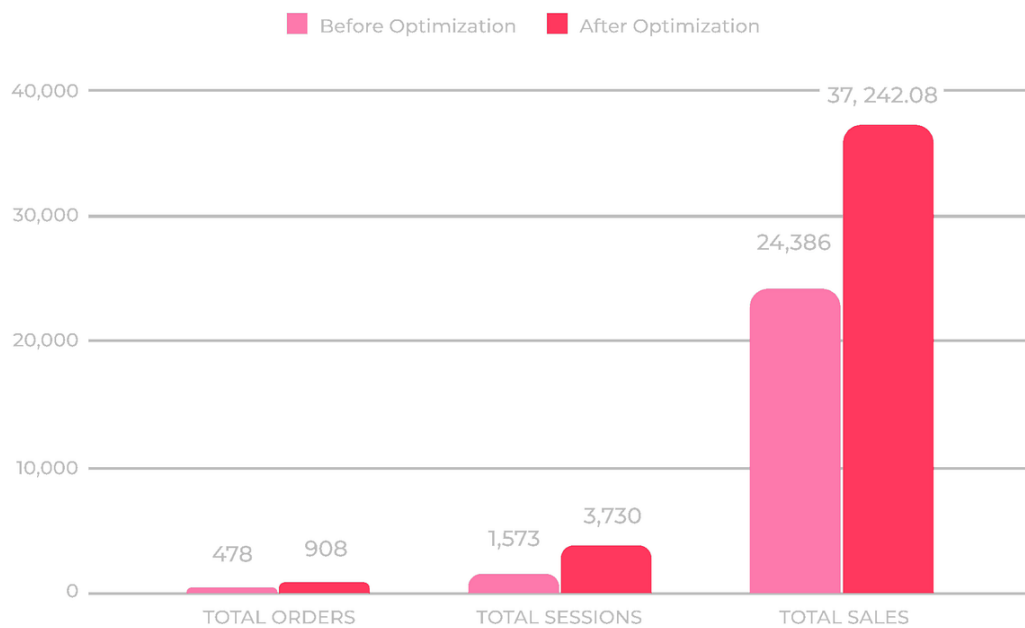
3.2 How can companies track Digital Influencers performance (Impressions)?
Digital Influencers Social Profiles are measured by different metrics depending on the advertising goal (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Companies can measure the digital influencer performance per quantity of followers, engagement, impressions, or all options (De Veirman, 2017). Impressions are the number of times a content on social media is viewed (Yuki,2016). To measure this performance, it needs to use the social media algorithm. Algorithms are computer programs representing a sequence of actions that include working on data to provide any result (Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot, 2014). Bucher (2012) comments on the algorithm thought structure to explain that social media make assumptions of the relevancy of posts, which can be inaccurate.

The high number of followers count traditionally measured the performance of digital influencers. However, today it is possible to realise that a high number does not promise a reasonable engagement rate (Lalwani and Shavitt, 2013) and (Lalwani and Forcum, 2016). According to the study of influence.co (2018), the digital influencer will be a measure of different metrics. The figure below illustrates two digital influencers' performance and the price for a post a company needs to pay to have the content sponsored by the influencer on their page.

Figure 4 - Differentiating between the two Digital Influencers (Influence. co, 2018)

Influencer	Followers' Count	Avg Likes Per Post	Avg Comments Per Post	Price
@shetourist	35.3K	2,500	2,500	$185
@reubenkang	75.7K	3,500	20	$258

In Warc, a case study was conducted by Tom Curtis (2020) to analyse the metrics of a digital campaign from Fanta campaign called "Twisted Carnival". During Halloween, Fanta created a digital campaign focusing on the UK market, using a social media channel called Snapchat. The campaign consisted in hiring digital influencers to use Fanta Halloween content on their social media profile. According to the study, 10m people interacted with the content from Fanta, and as a result, the sales increased by 19% year on year, selling one-million more-unit cases (equivalent to 16.5m cans) in 2018 than in 2017 (Warc, 2020). The case study from Fanta is an example of how digital influencers, through content creation, can directly impact and increase sales.

3.3. Brands using Digital Influencer marketing

One of the companies that are very active in posting on social media is Boohoo. As a reflection of being present and interacting with their social media users, their sales were up 45% in the quarter to the end of May 2020 during the first months of the pandemic (Gilliland, 2021).

Boohoo's social media strategy has constantly been consistent and focused on the users. The company uses digital influencers to promote their clothes by focusing on

young people as a target market. The main social media channel used by the company is Instagram, where it now has 6.6m followers (Gilliland, 2021). In 2018, Boohoo spent £80m on influencer marketing (Gilliland, 2021). Influencer marketing means a brand working with a digital influencer to promote one of its products or services (Geyser, 2021).

Another company very active in social media is GoPro. GoPro, Inc. is a pioneer in the action camera market. The company GoPro Inc. was founded by Nick Woodman in 2003. The company created action cameras that could capture images and videos of people's movements, which are very famous for people practising sports (Rahman and Sherman, 2021). GoPro is present in different social media channels, and depending on the type, the company applies different strategies. On Instagram, the company focuses on reinforcing the camera quality and sharing user-generated posts (Salamader, 2021). GoPro also does some partnerships with companies to promote their camera. For example, during the New York Fashion Week, GoPro gave the camera to the supermodel and digital influencer Karlie Kloss to live stream behind the scenes and post on social media (Warc, 2015).

GoPro is present in different social media channels, and depending on the type, the company applies different strategies. On Instagram, the company focuses on reinforcing the camera quality and sharing user-generated posts (Salamader, 2021).

4. Effects of the Pandemic in Online Shopping

The circumstances after the COVID-19 impacted people's lives and how society had to adapt to online shopping quickly. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has contaminated more than 2.8 million people (World Health Organization, 2020). Companies start adapting their business model to stimulate customers to buy online (Arpana, 2020). Online shopping allows unique flexibility in time, location, and product type (A. J. Rohm and V. Swaminathan,2004). Furthermore, the pandemic forced the companies to go online, and many businesses have made such changes successfully in a short period. A survey conducted by UNCTAD and Netcomm Suisse eCommerce Association, in collaboration with the Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br) and Inveon, illustrates that online shopping has grown by 6 to 10 percentage marks across most product categories from 2019 to 2020.

Figure 5 - % of active online shoppers (2021)

% of active online shoppers conducting at least one online purchase every 2 months.

Cosmetics & Personal care	+6
Digital entertainment	+1
Agro Food and Beverages	+0
Fashion and accessories	+2
Pharmaceutical/ Health	+9
Media & books (both digital and physical)	+4
ICT/electronic goods	+10
Home furniture & household products	+7
Education and online courses	+8
Tools, gardening & do-it-yourself	+9
Tourism/Travel, e.g. hotel bookings, flight tickets, etc.	+0

0%   25%   50%   75%

■ Since the outbreak of COVID-19   ■ 2019

5. Digital Marketing Strategies and Digital Influencers

5.1 Use of digital influencers to promote products and services

Influencer marketing can be defined as "a process of identifying and activating individuals who influence a specific target audience or medium to be part of a brand's campaign towards increased reach, sales, or engagement"(Sudha, M; Sheena, K., 2017). Brands commonly use digital influencers to promote their products and services. According to Wiedmann, Hennigs and Langner article (2010), they selected three kinds of social influencers in fashion: the first one is the "fashion super spreaders " that does not have much connection with the fashion world, the "narrative fashion expert" which are the ones that have some idea about fashion and also love shopping, and the "helpful friend", that are the ones more conscious about how the fashion industry works and try to alert their followers about the fast-fashion industry and other polemic topics. Since the fashion industry is constantly changing, the fashion industry needs to create advertising through content to promote new products.

According to Sedeke (2013), fashion trends are constantly changing with new products and trends happening and new designers looking forward to becoming famous around the world at any moment. The fashion industry is always trying to connect with the consumers since this is very important for their sales. A digital

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influencer strategy enables brands to find and advertise directly to their target audience (Council, 2021). One of the most common digital influencer strategies is called "world-of-month". The strategy is based on the digital influencer giving opinions about specific products or services that they like and sharing their knowledge, advice, and insights (Warc, 2021).

In the Council article in Forbes (2021), consumers are frequently suspicious of brands and their marketing strategy, and building trust is crucial. Influences on digital influencers enable brands to advertise through a niche community awareness engage with and trust daily (Council, 2021).

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of other past research conducted in the literature review section, it is possible to conclude that social media transformed the way consumers and companies interact and buy. In addition to this transformation, companies quickly became aware of social media power to influence purchase intentions and moved their marketing strategies from traditional mass media to the digital environment focusing on social engagement. The use of digital influencers became popular once brands realised that the consumers were seeking opinions from other online users before purchasing a product or service. The digital influencers appeared to suggest their knowledge about products and services online. A general review of the most relevant past research papers about the consumer industry, digital influencers and online consumer behaviour has been created. Researchers agree that there are not many pieces of research about the impact of digital influencers in the consumer industry. After analysing and building more knowledge about the topic during the literature review, possible gaps were identified, such as how brands create digital influencers strategies and increase sales. After analysing the study of the digital influencer effects in purchase intentions from Warc (2021), the desire came to investigate further the impact of digital influencers in sales and how companies can utilise this strategy to grow their business.

I)Analyse the best social media channels to apply digital influencer marketing strategies.

ii)What makes a user follow a specific digital influencer - a deep analysis of user behaviour and the relationship of trust between digital influencers and their audience.

iii) To identify what stimulate a user to buy a product or service in the social media environment.

By combining the information obtained through the literature review of the digital influencer endorsement and product recommendations resulting in purchase intentions, this research aims to contribute to more reliable digital marketing strategies to help companies to be more assertive once they decide to work with digital influencers in social media. In addition to it, to benefit the consumers to have a better experience with digital marketing strategies more aligned with their expectations.

3. Aims and Objectives

3.1 Research Question

The study intends to investigate the effects of digital influencer marketing strategies on purchase intentions in the social media environment. These strategies are usually related to product or service endorsement or recommendation. To conduct this investigation, the study will analyse social media channels, mainly focusing on Instagram. This research will discuss the impact of social media advertising on the customer buying journey. In addition, this research intends to describe the impact of digital influencer advertising and the results in company's sales figures. This dissertation aims to present a comprehensive understanding of digital influencers impact on customer decisions. This research will discuss the below question:

1. *"Is the consumer being influenced by the digital influencers they follow in Social Media before purchasing a product or service?"*

To answer this question, the study also look for exploring the following objectives:

(I)Is the sales of companies increasing after applying digital influencer marketing strategies?

The Literature Review analysed the business cases from Boohoo, Gopro and Fanta that increased their sales after applying digital influencer marketing strategy. This objective examines what makes companies stand out in the social media environment and the relation between digital influencers strategies.

(ii) To examine what actions in social media makes the company drive their online sales.

Companies are more and more often present in social media. This objective seeks to understand the complexity of what motivates the companies to choose the digital influencer to create marketing content and the results presented to the brands.

This research will be subjective and centred on each user who uses social media and understand how impacted this person is before purchasing a product. The research aims to understand how the effect is on social media and digital influencers strategies. This case study research will investigate and examine a group of 5 consumers active in social media to understand their purchasing behaviours. As well as obtaining knowledge in the digital influencer practices and the social media platform's impact on these individuals. The following chapter explains the methods used framed around these objectives

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The research methodology method describes a look through the study that follows the data collection (Collis and Hussey, 2003). The Research methodology is a fundamental and significant piece of a research study. This chapter will describe the methods applied to accomplish this research. It will summarise the study intentions and goals, the chosen methods, and the theoretical section. It will also include the process of sampling decided by the researcher, combining an analysis of the study

limitations, ethical concerns and what data type was used for the examination. The following section will investigate the study gaps and explain the research in conduction in detail.

This chapter will include the philosophy, research approach, strategy, interview structure, data collection procedure, data analysis and research ethics, which will help the researcher investigate the study question. The research to be examined is related to the relationship between customer purchase intentions and digital influencers in the social media ambience.

This research investigation will follow a particular methodological study to obtain the maximum level of accuracy from the candidate's responses. Moreover, qualitative research will be conducted through in-depth interviews with five participants to assist the researcher to understand the impact of digital influencers on purchase intentions. To summarise, this chapter will evaluate and discuss the research method to conduct this thesis. It will justify the in-depth research choice and the importance of this method for the theme of this study. This chapter also writes about how the data was collected from the participants and how it will be analysed.

4.2 Research Philosophy and Design

The research results depend on the philosophical method decided, and it can be different for each theme of study intended to investigate. It also can differ depending on the approach applied for the analysis and the method selected to collect and analyse data. Following this process is necessary to create a reliable piece of work since a precise research method for a particular project is crucial to a successful and accurate result.

In-depth interviews will be conducted to suit the purpose of the investigation better. Moreover, researchers are encouraged to develop a philosophical attitude to run all the research processes to bypass bias in the studies.

According to Smith and Shaw (2018), the research has three foundation definitions: ontology (reality), epistemology. (knowledge), axiology (values). Ontology sees the world, and it is the subject of nature and the ideas of living in the world (Quinlan, 2011). Epistemology aims to represent accurate knowledge concentrating on different ideas to understand better the importance of human lives (Mejías, 2018). The word 'axiology' begins from two Greek roots, Axios and logos. Axios has the

definition of 'worth' or 'value' and logos the definition of 'logic' or 'theory.' Together, it translates to 'a theory of value.' (Biedenbach and Jacobsson, 2016)

This research aims to understand the impact of the digital influencer on purchase intentions in the social media context; the epistemology method was chosen since the researcher is doing in-depth interviews, and this style is qualitative, and it requires an interpretative approach. This method is more suited to epistemology than "how is it possible for us to gain knowledge of the world" (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997).

4.3 Research Approach - Qualitative and Quantitative Research

4.3.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a valuable method correlated with an "interpretative philosophy" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), obtaining oral information, usually using in-depth interviews or in a focus group (Hair et al., 2010).

Qualitative research is commonly used to explain human behaviour and recognise personal opinions and decisions after conducting interviews and analysing the data. It is also designed to realise a cultural representation, lifestyle, type of trends and customer decision. Additionally, another benefit of in-depth interviews is having better data collection about the subject, since when speaking about the theme, people also demonstrate feelings and motivations related to that subject (Hair et al., 2010).

The in-depth interviews are the best method for the research as it will be possible to analyse user purchase intentions within social media closely. As the covid-10 pandemic has hit the world, in-depth interviews will not be conducted in a physical environment. The researcher chose to run the interviews over a phone call to better suit the participant's schedule and avoid physical contact since covid-19 restrictions are still in place in Ireland.

4.3.2 Quantitative Research

According to Neuman (2006), quantitative research intends to express a data result based on a numeric expression. Hence a quantitative methodology accommodates research when the needs of collecting numbers are necessary, and the answer is obvious, not leaving room for interpretation. This type of research aims to analyse large data sets and validate the research objectives and questions.

Sometimes, a multi-method is utilized when the research combines quantitative and qualitative research to reach the best results. However, the research is focusing on a single method of qualitative research and data gathering using the in-depth interviews approach.

4.3.3 Inductive Approach

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) discussed two distinct research approaches, deductive and inductive, and both means to address an argument or research problem. The inductive approach, also recognised as inductive logic, begins with the inferences and methods are introduced towards the point of the research process as a decision of the observations (Goddard, W. & Melville, S.,2004). The inductive approach includes working using past participant experiences, conducting the complete data analysis and results. This type of research is very suitable for qualitative research because it enables a solid perception of human reactions to be determining events.

Since this study is related to the participant's past experiences in the social media platform and its impact on purchase intentions, the interviews will direct the researcher into a pattern to analyse the data and validate. The results will determine if the digital influencers impact the customer buying journey on the customer buying journey social media platforms. It is very relevant to profoundly investigate the participant's practices and preferences in the Social Media environment. In the inductive analysis, "although the findings are influenced by the evaluation objectives or questions outlined by the researcher, the findings arise directly from the analysis of the raw data, not from *a priori* expectations or models" (Thomas, 2006).

4.3.4 Deductive Approach

According to Wilson, J. (2010), A deductive approach is related to "developing a hypothesis (or hypotheses) based on existing theory, and then designing a research strategy to test the hypothesis". In simple words, the deductive approach is based on hypothesis and deductions from the object studied.

This type of research can have many advantages, such as measuring concepts, generalising the study, and reading causal connections within concepts and variables (Dudovskiy, 2018). While quantitative researchers usually choose a deductive research method and qualitative researchers frequently advise an inductive method, both areas of researchers apply deductive and inductive processes in their research practice (Hyde, 2000).

4.4 Research Strategy

The research strategy section is the one that explains the researcher methods to collect the data for the study (Saunders et al., 2016). This section of the research is critical since it draws on how the research will be conducted and what methods will be used. For this study, qualitative research is the one that will be presented. The research strategy is a method applied to carry marketing study plans.

Qualitative research is a valuable system connected with an "interpretative philosophy" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This type of research intends to understand better human preferences and behaviour and how different cultures, lifestyles, and fashion trends can lead customers to purchase decisions or behaviours. This type of research usually requires only a tiny sample. In this research, the sample will be five participants.

The main goal of the research is to understand if digital influencers directly influence individuals before making a purchase. The in-depth interviews are going to be focusing mainly on generic questions "How", "What", and "Why" style. The goal of asking this type of open question is to leave the participant comfortable to speak about their preferences and habits without any pre-set question and to avoid any biased response.

4.5 Advantages and disadvantages of in-depth interviews

When choosing in-depth interviews for a qualitative study, the researcher believes that participants with individual experiences with the subject under investigation are essential information references. During in-depth interviews, communication is the data collected (Patton, 1990). The discussions are going to be held by the researcher with five individuals over the phone. The researcher chose this method to benefit the participant with open questions and get a great sense of consumer behaviour and preferences related to purchasing intentions and digital influencers. Additionally, this method gives the researcher an excellent knowledge of the participant's points of view and extra knowledge associated with personal feelings and consumer preferences.

However, there are some disadvantages to selecting this type of research. Since the nature of the study is to interpret the participant's behaviour, the fact that the interviews will be placed over the phone can make the researcher lose the personal 1:1 interaction that could add more insights to the study conclusion. Depending on the research subject, it will always tend to choose a method instead of another. In a more realistic representation, in-depth interviews are less standardized than other data collection practices since interview variants and interactive forces exist between interviewers and interviewees (Goodman, 2001).

4.6 Limitations of the Research

According to Collis and Hussey (2014), a limitation is a position past a researcher or writer's power, and such circumstances include inability, limiting weakness, lack of capacity. The main research limitation involves the current Covid-19 pandemic, which is not allowing face-to-face interviews. For this reason, the interviews will be conducted via phone call using the speaker's mood and recorded with another phone using the iPhone application called voice memo. This is a limitation since the researcher will lose the 1:1 interaction and sense of intimacy created once you are in a physical space. In addition to the interview place, the sample available is five participants, four females and one male. The researcher lacks a balance of the genres due to the difficulty of finding participants available since all the meetings and classes are in the virtual space, and the college space is not open where some students could also take part in the interviews. If this research were conducted in

another period, the study would have been chosen by the National College of Ireland library. The small sample of five people is also a limitation. However, the researcher could not find more individuals aiming to discuss the study theme over the phone.

4.7 Interview Structure

The participant's sample needs to match the objective group of the study. The interview will be conducted with five people, and the individual selection was based on their personal preferences and lifestyles to have the results relevant to the research. The interview style will be semi-structured since the interviewer has several prepared questions and desires to offer some flexibility as the interviewer will be free to probe and follow up with questions based on the participant's responses. The criteria used to select the participants were active in social media. The individuals needed to use any social network and follow any digital influence. The individuals were first contacted via WhatsApp (online application). The interviewer asked some questions about their availability, social media usage, and relationship with digital influencers. These questions were placed to find individuals that could suit the study purpose. The researcher organised the interview schedule based on the availability of the interviewers. Initially, six people were contacted, but only five actively used social media and interacted with digital influencers.

For this reason, only five were chosen. Following up on the questions asked via WhatsApp, the interviewer sent the consent form over email. In the sample selected by the researcher, the age range was from twenty to thirty years old. This data range sample was chosen to fit the interview purposes better since this age range has contact with social media for more time and can provide deeper insights about the platforms and purchase of products.

To create a better level of debate, the interview question was prepared based on topics that match the literature narrative. The issues mentioned during the interviews were: social media, advertising, digital influencers, trust, and brands behaviour in the social media environment.

During the interviews, the researcher took notes to ensure any additional insights could be detected (Huberman & Miles 2002). This approach permitted the researcher to record the discussion from the researcher's point of view and

guarantee that no preference was conducted through the interview. Therefore, the information should be reliable and accurate.

During the phone call interviews, the researcher used two phones. One to call the participant and another to record the call using the iPhone application called "voice memo". This application records the audio, and it was essential for the transcribing process. Since the researcher's first language is not English, the researcher listened to the interview three times to ensure everything was correctly transcribed. To guarantee the interviews were going to be correctly transcribed, the process of transcribing it happened within 24 hours of the time of the interview. This ensured the interviewer was able to incorporate the participants thoughts and opinions related to the topic.

4.8 Qualitative Data Primary Collection

This study has used a qualitative method, and consequently, both the gathering and analysis of the data found through the interviews were significant. All five in-depth interviews were placed over the phone at a time that accommodated the participants. The interviews were carried over one week in mid-July 2021, and each lasted between thirty minutes to forty minutes. Since the interviewer used a semi-structured interview method, most of the questions were follow up questions for responses. Considering the in-depth interview was placed over the phone, the participants were asked before the interview if they authorised the call to be recorded and utilised for the study analysis. All five participants were aware of the audio recording and that their responses would be used as data for the research.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration is an indispensable part of any research subject. This research section includes the rules and criteria of any research, and the researcher must follow. It is essential to highlight those ethics that were considered during the study. Before the interview started, the interviewer informed all the participants that the interviews were going to be recorded and that a transcript of the responses would be sent to them to review and confirm the accuracy of the transcription. All the participants were notified that the interview information would be utilised for the objective of this MSc of Marketing dissertation and that if they want, they could

choose to be anonymous. All the five participants have decided to be anonymous, and for this reason, they will be referred to in the next chapter: participant 1, participant 2, participant 3, participant 4 and participant 5. Before the interview, the participants were told and prepared to follow the research process. The researcher also followed the ethical guidelines and practices of research linking to "Human Participants of The National College of Ireland" along with the research process. All points mentioned above will direct to solid and authentic results.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter was composed of the scientific approach description of the thesis and why the in-depth interviews were chosen as a research method. The researcher chose an inductive approach since it is more suitable for qualitative research, including in-depth interviews. This chapter also mentioned the importance of following the correct procedure to ensure the quality of the study and ensure the participants feel comfortable during the interviews. The primary purpose of this chapter was to inform the person who is marking the thesis of all the processes to collect the data and the type of research that will be conducted for this thesis.

5. Analysis, Findings and Discussions

5.1 Introduction

This section objective is to analyse the data collected during the five in-depth interviews. As mentioned in the research methods section, five individuals participated and discussed their opinions with the interviewer. This chapter will describe some of the individual's answers, experiences, thoughts and how it connects with the points mentioned in the study. To summarise, the primary purpose of this chapter is to understand if digital influencers impact customer purchases intentions in social media.

5.2 Demographics

The research was conducted with five research individuals, four female and one male. The age range was from 25 to 30 years old, and it suits perfectly since all participants were active using any social media platform. The table below gives further details from the participants:

Participant	Interview Duration	Sex	Employment Status	Age
Participant 1	30 min	Female	Non-Employed	25
Participant 2	35 min	Female	Full-time employment	25
Participant 3	30 min	Female	Full-time employment	26
Participant 4	40 min	Female	Non-Employed	25
Participant 5	35 min	Male	Full-time employment	30

5.3 Research Objective 1:

To understand what their favourite social media application and how many hours per day each participant is would spend using their favourite social media;

Interview themes emerged: Social Media applications, Mobile applications, Electronic Devices, People feedback, Advertising, User experience.

The first finding in the research is to understand everyone's favourite social media and how many hours per day they would spend using an online application. These five people's average hours spent on social media was around three hours per day and almost 21 hours per week. People spending more time on social media was mentioned and expected in the Literature Review section and reinforces the importance of having companies and brands in the virtual environment using social media to promote their products and services. Companies need to focus on adding

their brand to the social media environment where individuals consume for more than 20 hours per week.

"I love Instagram. It is a social media that can have every type of content inside: sports, fashion, decoration. I also love how simple it is to use on my phone. I can spend hours just watching other people's lives." Participant 1, 25 years old. Female.

Apart from participant 2, all the other four participants stated that Instagram is their favourite social media, how easy to use the application is, and the variety of content they can find in the application. This variety is a plus for Instagram since different types of products can be added to the platform as advertising and influence the purchase intentions in the virtual space. The participants also mentioned that sometimes they spend more time than they should spend using the application because there is so much new content to see.

"Instagram is definitely the best social media; I can spend hours and hours using it. I spend more time checking the stories (a feature from the platform which allows people to record video and photos and post a type of "live" video) from my favourite digital influencers. So easy and pleasant to use. Also, it's not full of Advertising which is great". Participant 4, 25 years old, Female.

According to the participants, the fact that Instagram has a layout that does not display advertising for every post makes them feel that they see less advertising, bringing a positive experience for the person who uses the platform. Even though the application has advertising, the algorithm makes sure it is not reflected every second in the platform.

"To be honest, I prefer Facebook. I know Instagram is nice, but I love the group's spaces on Facebook. I also like the application interface". Participant 2, 25 years old, Female.

5.4 Research Objective 2:

To assess whether the participant felt that was influenced by a Digital Influencer using social media before buying a product or service.

Interview themes emerged: Social Media, Recommendation, Consumer Purchase, Digital Influencer, Trust, Discount Code.

The findings from this research section showed that the participants are most influenced by digital influencers for products related to food and fashion. According to Chatzigeorgiou (2017), social media influencers influence digital users' liability within the number of followers they own, and the character and activities presented on text comments, videos, or tutorials become a significant influence on users' purchasing decisions.

" I recognized that I bought so many clothes after seeing digital influencers stories and advertising on social media. I remember once I saw one of my favourite digital influencers wearing a bikini. I ordered at the same time because she said it was good material. She was right." Participant 1, 25 years old, Female.

" I follow a girl on Instagram that always adds discounts to amazing clothes. When she shows on her Instagram stories a good deal, and I can afford it, I tend to buy it. Since she is recommending it, I trust her". Participant 4, 25 years old, Female.

The two statements above are important because they reinforce the digital influencer's credibility and users' trust. Having someone recommending something on the internet makes other users think it is more reliable. The brands usually choose digital influencers that speak about the content related to that product. According to Dabholkar and Sheng (2012) and Dabijaet al. (2018), users are likewise reliable to believe in other people's recommendations rather than the companies recommending their product.

"Digital influencers influence me to buy food. Sometimes at night, before dinner, I check my social media and see a digital influencer eating something that I like

makes me go to the app and order to eat. It is nice because they have some discount codes from nice restaurants." Participant 5, 30 years old, Male.

Discount codes are also a digital influencer strategy. For example, the company gives a discount code to the digital influencer, which they will share with their users while speaking about that product or service. It is an excellent idea for the companies to track numbers from those digital influencers since if they have people using that specific code, it means it was coming from that specific social media profile. This digital marketing strategy is mainly adopted by the fashion, healthy and food industries.

5.5 Research Objective 3:

To assess whether the credibility of digital influencers when they advertiser products and services in social media.

Interview themes emerged: Trust, Buying, social media, Recommendations.

Credibility is "the extent to which the consumer perceives claims made about the brand in the advertising to be truthful and believable" (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). The trustability of digital influencers is also an essential topic since trusting in their recommendation is the first step that might lead the user to buy a product or service online in the social media environment.

" I usually trust them (digital influencers), but it also depends on the product that is recommended. In general, if it is somebody (digital influencer) I follow for a long time, usually I trust the recommendation and think about buying if I need that". Participant 5, 30 years old, Male.

The statement above shows that the individual thinks about the company reputation and considers the digital influencer recommendation. She also mentions how long she follows that digital influencer.

" I love going to the gym, so for me, if I see any of the girls (digital influencer), I follow them talking about gym clothes, I know it is a good product. I usually trust the product recommendation because I know they want to wear nice and comfortable clothes practising sports". Participant 1, 25 years old, Female.

" In social media, I look for bag recommendations from the digital influencers because they always have discounts, and these bags are very expensive. These recommendations are usually from nice brands, so it is a great opportunity to buy bags with a great price". Participant 3, 26 years old, Female.

" I trust them because they always recommend nice things. I know they get paid for speaking about that product, but I think it is also true. I do not think they would speak about something very bad to get the money. This can destroy the career of a person". Participant 2, 25 years old, Female.

The findings from this research section point out that the participants trust the digital influencer they follow on social media and think the person and product offered are reliable. One of the participants also mentioned that the digital influencer would use the product to make the researcher believe that the digital influencers can only recommend products they will use. The example of the influencer that goes to the gym very often speaks about exercise and then recommends gym clothes makes the user believe that product is good because they will use it. The fact that users usually trust the digital influencers they follow was suggested by Christou (2015), referring to competence, reputation, and expertise to trust users using social media platforms.

5.6 Research Objective 4:

To assess what Brands the participants usually follow or interact with on social media and what makes these brands stand out from others?

Interview themes emerged: social media, Digital Marketing, Sales, Content, Shopping.

Companies have focused their attention on social media applications using digital marketing communication approaches, essentially creating content for Instagram to

produce a "one to one relationship" with users (Barbalova and Rolland, 2018). When the participants were asked to say their favourite brand on Instagram, the five participants mentioned well-known brands, which invest high amounts of money to be present in the social media platforms, especially on Instagram.

" I love to follow Disney on Instagram. They always share the release date of the new movies". Participant 2, 25 years old, Female.

"I like to follow Benefit Cosmetics. They (Benefit Cosmetic) add the digital influencer's content using their product in make-up tutorials. It is nice because I can learn about different make-up styles and see their products. Sometimes they add discounts to the page, and I love that". Participant 1, 25 years old, Female.

"A brand that I like to follow is the clothing ones, like Zara and pull and bear, to check the new products and when they are going to launch the new sales. I love when they give discounts as well". Participant 4, 25 years old, Female.

" I like to follow Columbia. They always add hiking and sports content in different locations, which is nice because I can see nice clothes and discover new places to visit in the future". Participant 5, 30 years old, Male.

From the statements above, it is possible to confirm that content production was mentioned in the literature review that attracts the user. Aligning the company products with content that interests the user is an attractive way to make them follow the brand and, consequently, shop in the future.

5.7 Research Objective 5:

To access whether if the participants are annoyed or dislike the digital influencer advertising products and or if they usually skip this type of content
Interview themes emerged: Digital Influencer, Trust, Paid Content, Consume.

The main objective of this section was to learn if the participants would appreciate advertising content on the social media space, more specific when it comes from a

digital influencer. The main point is to understand if it is worth it for a brand to keep investing or invest in digital influencers to advertise their product or services.

"It depends on the digital influencer. I like the digital influencers that produce content and advertise. Like if they are doing the makeup and then show a nice product. Sometimes digital influencers advertise all the time without saying anything relevant; this type of digital influencer I stop following at the same time". Participant 4, 25 years old. Female.

"I know they (digital influencers) need to be paid, so I do not mind if they advertise. The only thing necessary is always to say this content is advertising, just to make sure people watching know that the content is paid". Participant 2, 25 years old, Female.

"I skip when the content is useless to me. If it is content related to babies or mothers, I don't want to be a mother now, so it does not matter to me. But if it is a makeup product, I always like to watch. I would say I don't like the ads (advertising) if they are not about what I like. Participant 3, 26 years old, Female.

In the individual's opinion, it is essential to highlight a couple of things. First, the participants do not complain about advertising content. However, it is necessary to be related to what those individual likes and consume as a content. Bringing to the company perspective, before choosing the digital influencer to advertise a specific product, it is crucial to understand the audience of that digital influencer. As an example, a beauty brand is looking for a digital influencer to advertise its makeup. It is vital to choose someone who produces organic products and can introduce the product during the content creation. In this way, it will still be advertising for something that makes sense and can be consumed by the digital influencer audience.

"I usually don't skip the content because the girls (digital influencers) I follow only speak about nice things. I think they only advertise what they consume, so it is nice

to see if they like it, and maybe in the future I can buy it". Participant 1, 25 years old. Female.

The connection between trust and the recommendation is significant to the participants. The digital influencer needs to build an audience with trust and produce content about what their users like. The companies need to find their niche to advertise in a place where the trust digital influencer-user exists.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research objective was to understand the effect of digital influencers on purchase intentions in the social media environment. Using in-depth interviews, the researcher found that digital influencers are an excellent opportunity for companies to interact with consumers more naturally. The reason for it, is because the Digital Influencer produces content for a specific niche of users. Therefore, introducing the company's product or service that matches that content will reach users interested in the product. In addition, it was found that digital influencers have a relationship of trust with their "followers". For this reason, they are a trustworthy source of information when the users are looking for product or service recommendations. The social media platform is built in a constant interaction between users between videos, photos, contents, text, etc. This builds a solid ground for product and services recommendations. Over the years, the digital influencers started including their content product recommendations, and the result was to start driving purchase intentions. Over the years, traditional media advertising has been losing space for the social media environment. For this reason, the first objective of the study *was to understand what their favourite social media application and how many hours per day is each participant would spend using their favourite social media;* was to understand what is the favourite social media channel of each participant and understand what can be the best place for companies to advertise. Four out of five participants choose Instagram as their favourite social media. Only one participant chose Facebook. It is essential to highlight that both Instagram and Facebook belong to the same company.

Following up on the discussion, the second objective was to *assess whether the participant felt that he/she was influenced by a Digital Influencer using social media*

before buying a product or service. It was concluded that a digital influencer influenced directly all the participants to consume a product or service after watching their recommendation via social media. The influence of the purchase intentions is related to the credibility that a particular digital influencer has among the audience. It was mentioned during the interviews that the fact that a digital influencer speaks about a specific niche makes the person an expert in that subject. Consequently, when that digital influencer speaks about a particular product, the users trust the recommendation since it comes from an expert. The relation between trust is something that can be compared with brands. Brands usually build brand trust over the years with their consumers. This trust relationship can be compared with the trust built by the digital influencer with the user audience in social media. In a business context, companies that spot digital influencers with a trustworthy relationship with users and speaking about the product niche make fertile ground for advertising the company's product.

For this reason, the thirty objectives of the study were *to assess the credibility of digital influencers when they advertiser products and services on social media.* It was concluded that credibility is one of the keys to success for digital influencers. All the participants mentioned credibility as a direct connection before buying anything the digital influencer recommended. Usually, digital influencers are followed by users who have similar preferences and styles. Based on the in-depth interviews, it is possible to recognise that the users like digital influencers informing and updating them about trends and news related to the field they talk to (fashion, beauty, fitness world). Usually, the digital influencer has prior experience with that specific field, such as professional experience, to make these recommendations. For their user audience, this makes that person an "expert" and, in the longer term, creates an element of trust. Thinking now from a brand perspective, it is essential for the companies before choosing the digital influencer to associate with a particular product, to understand what the audience of digital influencer is, the credibility relation that this person has with the audience, and what type of product the company can advertise with that digital influencer, who has the audience seeking for their product.

The forty objectives were to *assess what Brands the participants usually follow or interact with on social media and what makes these brands stand out from others.*

For the participants of this research, the brands that they interact with more are the ones that produce content they are interested in. It was mentioned that they follow these brands because they collaborate with digital influencers to produce content, which allows the user to find inspiration to use the company's product. The engagement with the user for the brands mentioned during the interviews involves buying traditional marketing, bringing to the user the content they are really interested in, instead of pushing or promoting only the sales. As mentioned in the literature review, content creation stands out from traditional marketing and increases engagement between the audience and the brands.

On the other hand, during the interviews, it was mentioned that what makes users stop following brands is when they produce content only to drive sales and do not bring any value to the audience. The audience disinterest comes from the sense of a company trying to manipulate the shopping intentions of the users. Natural, organic, and updated content, adding to the valuable user information, makes the brand profile in social media stand out.

The final topic of the research *was to assess whether the participants are annoyed or dislike the digital influencer advertising products and or if they usually skip this type of content.* The main objective behind this topic was to understand if the individuals feel annoyed by the advertising content. The result was expected since the participants do not feel enjoyed as they know that the digital influencer needs to get paid, and one of the ways is to be suppressed by brands to advertise their products. The main point is that if the product relates to the audience and looks like a natural recommendation, most likely, the users will even enjoy that sponsored content. Of course, the digital influencers and companies must keep in mind to balance traditional and sponsored content since no user would like only to watch advertisements without content. From the digital influencer perspective, the main challenge is balancing both contents to ensure their audience is not overloaded only with advertising. The challenge of digital influencers is to understand the limit allowed by their audience of advertising content. A consequence of a digital influencer only producing advertising is losing their followers and audience.

Digital influencers in social media can increase company's sales if the correct marketing strategy, such as investing in the right marketing partnership, is applied. An example of a great marketing partnership, a digital influencer who is also a chef,

sponsored by food brands, and promoted the food products. The content creator makes different receipts using the sponsored products and shares on the social media page. As a result, the food products might connect and interest the digital influencer audience. In the long term, the audience will start associating that digital influencer with a specific product. This marketing strategy can be applied to various market sectors, such as beauty, fashion, and education. Having digital influencers sponsored by a brand can allow the brand to create a closer relationship with the audience, making the connection look more organic and not only a push for consuming the product.

On the other hand, brands need to make sure that digital influencers connect with the audience they wish to reach. To do so, different metrics can be analysed, such as if the audience engages with certain products and types of media they like to consume (video, photos, live content) if competitors' brand that previously worked with that digital influencer had the sales increased after the marketing, and so on. It is essential to do this digital influencer historical research to make sure the brand will be associated with a person that better communicates with the desired audience and can positively impact the brand reputation.

7.0 Recommendations for future academic research:

Social Media is a subject that is constantly changing as technology advances. New features, applications, and tools keep being added to develop and facilitate the use of technology by users. This research found a few articles associated with social media, digital influencers, and the relationship between consumer intentions. However, because this topic keeps being updated, other research needs to be analysed since social media marketing strategies are constantly changing. In the future, new research can improve companies approaches to increase and promote sales using digital influencers as a marketing strategy. For this purpose, for future academic research is suggested:

1. Investigate how customers interact with social media and the most common tools that big companies are promoting as a sales channel.

2. The new study can be focusing on only one social media channel, such as Instagram, Facebook or any other that is also important for companies to be aware of.

3. Another study can analyse the customer purchase data from other media channels, such as television and social media, to understand which can boost sales based on a specific audience.

4. Another study can be carried just to analyse companies' performances after applying digital influencer marketing strategies and what other brands can replicate.

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Appendix

Consent form sample:

Template

[Title of project]

Consent to take part in research

- I…………………………………… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

- I understand that participation involves…[*outline briefly in simple terms what participation in your research will involve*].

- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in…[*list all forum in which you plan to use the data from the interview: dissertation, conference presentation, published papers etc.*].