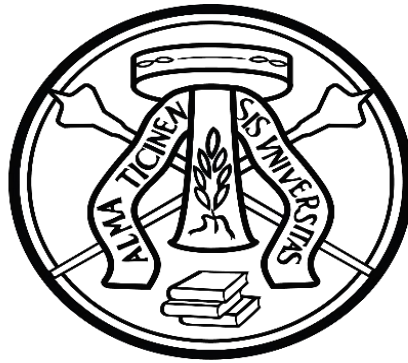




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Size Matters? Micro vs. Macro Influencers and Their Impact on Consumer Behavior

An Empirical Analysis of Authenticity, Trust, and Parasocial Relationships in Social Media

Marketing

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Abstract

This thesis explores the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior, focusing on the differences between micro influencers and macro/mega influencers in terms of authenticity, trust, and purchase intention. As social media has become a dominant part of everyday life, influencers increasingly shape how consumers perceive brands and products. The study examines whether smaller influencers are perceived as more authentic and how this affects consumer trust and decision-making.

The research is based on a quantitative online survey completed by 102 respondents, mainly young social media users. The findings show that micro influencers are generally viewed as more authentic, relatable, and trustworthy than larger influencers. Perceived authenticity was found to positively influence consumer trust, while trust itself increased the likelihood of product interest and purchase intention. At the same time, the results reveal that despite the authenticity advantage of smaller influencers, respondents still tend to follow and engage more frequently with macro and mega influencers because of their greater visibility and reach.

The study also highlights the importance of parasocial relationships, showing that feelings of closeness and relatability can strengthen influencer effectiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that successful influencer marketing depends on balancing authenticity, trust, emotional connection, and audience reach. Micro influencers appear more effective in building trust and engagement, while larger influencers remain valuable for broader exposure and visibility.

Abstract in Italian

Questa tesi analizza l'impatto dell'influencer marketing sul comportamento dei consumatori, concentrandosi sulle differenze tra micro influencer e macro/mega influencer in termini di autenticità, fiducia e intenzione d'acquisto. Con i social media diventati una parte dominante della vita quotidiana, gli influencer influenzano sempre di più il modo in cui i consumatori percepiscono marchi e prodotti. Lo studio esamina se gli influencer di dimensioni minori siano percepiti come più autentici e in che modo ciò influisca sulla fiducia dei consumatori e sui loro processi decisionali.

La ricerca si basa su un questionario quantitativo online compilato da 102 partecipanti, principalmente giovani utenti dei social media. I risultati mostrano che i micro influencer sono generalmente percepiti come più autentici, più vicini e più affidabili rispetto agli influencer più grandi. È emerso che l'autenticità percepita influenza positivamente la fiducia dei consumatori, mentre la fiducia aumenta la probabilità di interesse verso i prodotti e l'intenzione d'acquisto. Allo stesso tempo, i risultati evidenziano che, nonostante il vantaggio di autenticità dei micro influencer, i partecipanti tendono comunque a seguire e interagire più frequentemente con macro e mega influencer grazie alla loro maggiore visibilità e portata.

Lo studio sottolinea inoltre l'importanza delle relazioni parasociali, mostrando come sentimenti di vicinanza e identificazione possano rafforzare l'efficacia degli influencer. Nel complesso, i risultati suggeriscono che il successo dell'influencer marketing dipende dall'equilibrio tra autenticità, fiducia, connessione emotiva e ampiezza del pubblico. I micro influencer sembrano più efficaci nel creare fiducia e coinvolgimento, mentre gli influencer più grandi rimangono importanti per garantire maggiore esposizione e visibilità.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of digital technologies and social media platforms has significantly transformed the way marketing communication works. Traditional one-way communication has gradually been replaced by more interactive, consumer-oriented approaches, where users are not only passive receivers but also active participants in content creation and brand-related discussions. In this changing environment, influencer marketing has become an increasingly important tool, enabling brands to reach consumers through individuals who are often perceived as more authentic and relatable than traditional advertisements.

As influencer marketing has become increasingly important in digital communication, several questions have emerged regarding its effectiveness. One key issue is the difference between influencer types. While macro and mega influencers provide high visibility and reach large audiences, micro influencers are often considered more authentic, more trustworthy, and closer to their followers. This creates a potential trade-off between reach and authenticity, which is highly relevant for both marketers and researchers (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

Based on this, the main research question of this thesis is: What are the differences between the perceived authenticity of micro influencers compared to macro and mega influencers? To what extent does this perceived authenticity influence consumer trust and purchase intention?

The aim of this thesis is to examine how different types of influencers influence consumer perceptions and behavior, with a particular focus on authenticity, trust, and purchase intention. In addition, the research also explores the role of parasocial relationships and how they contribute to the connection between influencers and their followers.

To answer these questions, the thesis applies a quantitative research approach. Primary data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed on social media platforms, using

convenience sampling. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, and mean values, as well as comparative analyses across different influencer types.

The thesis is organized as follows. The first part provides a theoretical overview of marketing and its digital transformation, followed by a discussion of social media and influencer marketing. This is complemented by key theoretical concepts, including social influence theory, authenticity, trust, and psychological mechanisms such as parasocial relationships. The empirical part presents the methodology and survey results, followed by their interpretation. Finally, the thesis concludes with a summary of the main findings and their implications.

1.1. Introduction to Marketing and Its Evolution

In *Principles of Marketing*, Philip Kotler and Gary Armstrong define the purpose of marketing as a tool for engaging customers and managing profitable relationships with them. Marketing aims to meet two objectives: attract new customers by offering top-quality value, and keep and grow existing customers by satisfying their needs (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018).

In the beginning, marketing was only about advertising and selling, but these are just parts of the marketing mix, which is four marketing actions (product, price, place, and promotion) combined that take a product or service to market (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018).

Today, marketing is all about satisfying consumer needs. It is a process in which companies interact with customers, build strong relationships, and deliver customer value in return for customer value. First, companies analyze the market and identify customer needs and wants. Then, develop a marketing strategy focused on delivering customer value. After, they implement a coordinated marketing program that provides superior value to customers. Finally,

companies interact with customers, build profitable relationships, and ensure high customer satisfaction (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018).

As marketing shifted from a product-centered approach to building relationships and fostering customer engagement, digital technologies significantly changed how these interactions occur.

1.2. Digital Transformation of Marketing

Media platforms provide companies with opportunities to reach and engage their target audiences, functioning as channels that connect brands with consumers. In the era of traditional media, communication was dominated by one-way mass media, in which audiences were passive recipients (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

Technological progress has transformed this model, as digital technologies reduced the dominance of traditional media and increased the importance of social media as interactive platforms. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as Internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 technologies that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Unlike traditional channels, social media emphasizes participation, interaction, and continuous information exchange among users (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

A key characteristic of social media is its interactive, collaborative nature, allowing users to actively participate in content creation and distribution, which strengthens engagement between individuals and brands. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also emphasize that social media users are no longer passive audiences but active contributors who participate in communication and content creation. In addition, the availability of multimedia formats enables rapid information sharing across large audiences (Chan-Olmsted and Kim 2023).

Although platforms differ in their features, users consistently engage with them to maintain relationships, manage networks, and express their identity, meaning that the fundamental motivations behind social media use remain largely unchanged (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023). This shift from passive consumption to active participation fundamentally changed how consumers engage with brands.

1.2.1. Emergence of Digital and Social Media Marketing

In this digital age, where rapidly growing technologies are radically changing everyday life, we have been introduced to digital and social media marketing. Digital and social media marketing uses various online tools, such as websites, social platforms, mobile advertisements and apps, and online videos, to connect with consumers anytime, anywhere on devices like computers, smartphones, and tablets. Today, nearly every company interacts with customers through multiple websites that address consumer needs and enhance shopping experiences. Social media platforms serve as virtual spaces where people share key information and life moments, making them excellent venues for real-time marketing. This allows marketers to engage consumers instantly by associating their brands with trending topics, events, causes, personal milestones, or other significant occurrences in consumers' lives. Direct and digital marketing enable companies to interact with targeted consumers in real time while building long-term relationships, offering convenient and immediate access to information and products (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018).

Furthermore, the rise of digital media has transformed marketing communication from one-way company messaging into continuous customer dialogue and relationship building. These developments have shifted marketing toward continuous, real-time interaction with consumers (Kotler and Keller, 2012).

1.2.2. Engagement and Interactivity in Digital Environments

Engagement, which refers to a psychological state that emerges from consumers' interactive experiences and relationships with a particular brand or organization (Brodie et al., 2011), has frequently been examined in organizational behavior, particularly in relation to its predictive capacity for financial outcomes (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

In the digital environment, engagement has become an especially significant area of interest. One way brands can strengthen engagement is by encouraging consumer interaction with the brand. Consumer-brand interactivity plays an important role in fostering deeper involvement and participation among audiences (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023). Social media platforms are designed to support interaction, conversations, relationship-building, and content sharing, all of which contribute to stronger user participation and engagement (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

The concept of interactivity has long been regarded as one of the key advantages of the internet. Its importance stems largely from its capacity to enable two-way communication. This communication does not occur solely between brands and consumers, but also among consumers themselves. As a result, digital platforms create opportunities for more dynamic and participatory exchanges than traditional one-directional forms of communication (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023). Digital environments also encourage continuous user-generated interaction, allowing consumers to actively shape online communication processes rather than simply receiving information passively (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Empirical research also indicates that higher levels of interactivity within digital content can increase user responses. For instance, posts that encourage audience participation, such as by posing questions or incorporating hyperlinks that prompt users to click, often generate greater numbers of likes and comments on social media platforms. These forms of interaction can enhance the visibility and perceived popularity of online content (Chan-Olmsted and Kim,

2023). This reflects the broader transformation of digital communication from passive content consumption toward active participation and co-creation among users (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

As a result, engagement is increasingly shaped by interactive content and user participation rather than passive exposure.

1.2.3. Trust and Consumer Relationships

Trust has long been considered one of the most important elements in building strong consumer-brand relationships. Earlier marketing research often assumed that trust mainly developed from customer satisfaction and positive experiences with a brand (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023). However, later studies argued that satisfaction alone is not enough to create long-term consumer relationships. Although positive experiences can influence attitudes in the short term, lasting relationships require consumers to perceive a brand or communicator as trustworthy (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

The growing importance of social media has also changed the way consumers make purchasing decisions. Instead of relying only on traditional advertising, consumers are constantly exposed to reviews, recommendations, and influencer-generated content on digital platforms. Because of this, purchasing decisions are increasingly shaped by social interactions and the opinions of other users or influencers rather than only by direct brand communication (Sohn and Kim, 2020).

Trust is often described as multidimensional. One aspect relates to reliability, meaning whether a brand or influencer can consistently meet expectations, while another concerns consumers' perceptions of honesty, intentions, and goodwill (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023). In influencer marketing, trust is especially relevant because followers are more likely to engage with influencers whom they perceive as authentic and credible. Interactive features such as

comments, reviews, and shared experiences can further strengthen this trust by making online communication more participatory and socially driven (Sohn and Kim, 2020).

Based on this, engagement and trust appear to be closely interconnected concepts in digital communication and influencer marketing. Greater levels of interaction and audience participation may create a stronger sense of connection between consumers and brands or influencers, which can support the development of trust. Similarly, consumers are often more inclined to interact with communicators they consider genuine, credible, and authentic. Regardless, engagement and trust should not be considered identical, since active interaction does not always reflect genuine trust or long-term loyalty (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

1.3. Influencer Marketing in the Digital Context

In the digital context, influencer marketing is effective because promotional messages are integrated into communication that appears personal and authentic. Instead of presenting direct advertisements, these messages are often delivered indirectly by individuals who share their personal experiences and stories. This storytelling approach can help create a sense of authenticity, although conveying authenticity in this way can be challenging. When done successfully, storytelling can foster emotional engagement and enable marketers to build long-term relationships with consumers (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

1.4. Evaluation of Social Media Marketing

Since influencer marketing is closely connected to the broader social media environment, it is important to understand the main advantages and challenges of social media marketing in order to better interpret influencer effectiveness and consumer behavior. Therefore, this section

provides an overview of both the opportunities social media platforms create for brands and the difficulties companies may face when using them for marketing communication.

1.4.1. Benefits of Social Media Marketing

On the positive side, social media platforms allow marketers to deliver targeted and personalized content to individual consumers and customer communities, enabling tailored brand communication. Their interactive nature makes them effective for initiating and participating in customer conversations and gathering valuable feedback. Social media also enables immediate engagement, allowing brands to reach customers anytime, anywhere with relevant content tied to brand activities and current trends, while supporting real-time marketing and ongoing consumer conversations (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018).

In addition, social media is often highly cost-effective. While creating and managing content requires resources, many platforms are free or inexpensive, offering higher potential returns than traditional media such as television or print, making them particularly advantageous for smaller businesses. Perhaps the most significant benefit of social media lies in its capacity to foster engagement and social sharing, supporting the building of customer communities and encouraging participation in shaping and distributing brand content, experiences, and ideas, thereby strengthening customer relationships and boosting brand presence across digital networks (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018).

1.4.2. Challenges of Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing also involves several challenges. Many companies are still exploring how to use these platforms effectively, and measuring outcomes can be difficult because the

effects of engagement and brand awareness are often difficult to quantify. In addition, social networks are predominantly controlled by users rather than brands. The aim of social media marketing is to integrate the brand into consumers' conversations and daily lives, but marketers cannot simply force their presence. Instead, they must earn the opportunity to participate by consistently providing engaging and valuable content, becoming a meaningful part of the online experience rather than an intrusive presence (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018).

Overall, while social media marketing offers significant opportunities for engagement and targeted communication, its effectiveness depends on brands' ability to balance control, authenticity, and user participation (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

These challenges have contributed to the growing importance of influencer marketing, where brands rely on individuals to communicate with audiences in a more authentic and engaging way (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Influencers and the Nature of Influence

Social media figures are commonly distinguished from traditional celebrities and are frequently described as micro-celebrities. Influencers are typically individuals who have accumulated a significant number of followers and are perceived as credible trendsetters within specific fields of interest. Since these personalities are usually seen as more authentic and approachable than conventional celebrities, audiences tend to relate to them more easily and may even imitate their preferences or behavior (Johnson and Sandström, 2023).

According to research on innovation diffusion, opinion leaders have a key role in spreading new ideas, behaviors, and products among consumers (Rogers, 2010). These individuals influence others within a social network because their opinions are trusted and respected. Public figures such as athletes, celebrities, and models often serve as opinion leaders because they naturally attract large audiences. Consequently, marketing campaigns often rely on these influential figures to promote products and motivate consumers to adopt them (Johnson and Sandström, 2023).

In this context, influencers can easily be considered a type of opinion leader. Their large audiences give them visibility and influence, allowing them to act as semi-celebrities who can introduce new trends, products, or ideas to their followers (Johnson and Sandström, 2023).

Influencer marketing refers to a rapidly expanding marketing practice that incorporates several related concepts. Although academic literature has not yet established a universally accepted definition, many studies highlight similar core characteristics. In general, influencer marketing is a form of marketing that leverages the influence of specific individuals to shape the attitudes, awareness, or decisions of people in their social networks. These individuals have persuasive

power that can either increase brand awareness or shape consumers' purchase intentions (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Social Influence

Mechanisms of social influence play a key role in understanding consumer behavior and marketing communication, especially online, where individuals are constantly exposed to others' comments, opinions, and content. Social Influence Theory (SIT) provides a detailed explanation of why individuals' attitudes and behaviors change in response to others. The theory distinguishes between three influence models: compliance, identification, and internalization. During compliance, the individual changes their behavior because of social expectations, outside pressure, or a reward of some type, without agreeing with the message internally. This mechanism is common with promotions or seasonal campaigns, where consumers make decisions based on short-term factors or motivators. Identification is a bit deeper. In identification, the individual changes their attitude toward a person close to them, like an influencer, in the hope of connecting with or becoming more like that person. In this case, the emotional dimension of this relationship is the significance. The deepest level is internalization; here, external influences become fully integrated into the value system, resulting in a permanent attitude and behavioral shift. This is mostly relevant for brands because this type might create long-term loyalty and stable consumer preferences (Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2026).

These mechanisms help explain how individuals respond to influence in digital environments. In the context of influencer marketing, social influence processes contribute to shaping consumer attitudes, trust, and behavioral intentions. Rather than relying solely on visibility and reach, influencer effectiveness is often linked to consumers' identification with influencers and the development of trust-based relationships. As a result, authenticity, emotional connection,

and perceived similarity play an important role in contemporary digital marketing communication (Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2026).

2.3. Types of Influencers

The central actors in influencer marketing are influencers, specifically social media influencers. These individuals typically build their presence on digital platforms by creating and sharing content with their audiences. Social media influencers are often categorized according to the platforms or formats they primarily use, such as bloggers, YouTubers, celebrities, or Instagram-based creators. Another common way to classify influencers is by audience size. Influencers can be divided into four main categories depending on their follower count: mega influencers (more than one million followers), macro influencers (between 100,000 and one million followers), micro influencers (between 1,000 and 100,000 followers), and nano influencers (fewer than 1,000 followers) (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023). This classification is summarized in Table 1 (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023).

Table 1: Influencer types by number of followers

Influencer type:	Number of followers:
Mega	More than 1,000,000
Macro	100,000 - 1,000,000
Micro	1,000 - 100,000
Nano	Less than 1,000

Source: own editing based on Alvarez-Monzoncillo (2023)

Although this classification is based on Alvarez-Monzoncillo (2023), it should be noted that the follower ranges of the different influencer types partly overlap in the original source. Therefore, these categories should be interpreted as approximate rather than strictly fixed classifications. To avoid confusion among respondents and ensure clearer categorization, the questionnaire used in this research applied simplified, non-overlapping follower ranges.

While it may appear intuitive that influencers with the largest audiences have the greatest marketing impact, follower count alone does not necessarily determine persuasive effectiveness. In practice, many industry professionals argue that micro influencers often exert greater influence within their communities. This is largely due to their closer interaction with followers and the perception of authenticity that characterizes their communication. Particularly in industries such as beauty and fashion, micro influencers are often considered the most effective segment, as their audiences tend to find them more relatable and trustworthy (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

2.4. Content Creation and Influencer-Follower Relationship

At the core of influencer marketing lies the content influencers create. Social media influencers function as content creators who specialize in specific thematic areas, sharing both topic-focused content and elements of their everyday lives through posts, videos, and other digital content. This combination of professional and personal content fosters familiarity and closeness between influencers and their followers (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

Compared to traditional celebrities, influencers often appear more accessible and relatable because they share personal routines and experiences, which strengthens the perceived relationship with their audiences and encourages emotional connection. Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020) argue that this stronger sense of connection increases the perceived

authenticity and relevance of influencer communication. As a result, influencers are perceived as trusted sources of recommendations, allowing brands to communicate messages in ways that appear authentic and relevant, making influencer marketing an increasingly attractive strategy for enhancing brand value and consumer engagement (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

2.5. Influencer Marketing vs Celebrity Endorsement

The differences between influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement can also be understood through the way consumers perceive these types of endorsers. Celebrity endorsement mainly depends on the popularity and visibility of well-known public figures, allowing brands to reach large audiences and attract attention quickly. However, consumers may sometimes view celebrity endorsements as less genuine or overly commercial, particularly when the connection between the celebrity and the brand does not appear authentic (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020).

In contrast, influencer marketing is usually more focused on specific target groups and niche communities. Influencers often maintain closer and more interactive relationships with their followers, which can make their recommendations appear more relevant and trustworthy. Because of this stronger sense of connection, influencer marketing may have a greater impact on engagement and consumer decision-making processes (Lee et al., 2024).

Another important difference is that influencers are often associated with particular lifestyles or areas of expertise, such as beauty, fitness, fashion, or technology. As a result, they are frequently perceived as more relatable and authentic than traditional celebrities (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020). Previous research also highlights that influencers are often seen as more authentic because they usually have greater control over the content they create and share with their audiences (Kapitan et al., 2022). Therefore, factors such as authenticity,

trustworthiness, and relatability play an important role in the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020; Kapitan et al., 2022).

These characteristics suggest that factors such as authenticity, trust, and influencer type may influence consumer responses, which are examined in the empirical part of this study.

While influencer characteristics play an important role in shaping consumer responses, recent research suggests that influencer effectiveness is also influenced by the characteristics of the content itself and the platforms through which it is delivered.

2.6. Platform Characteristics and Content Factors in Influencer Marketing

While influencer characteristics have received considerable attention in influencer marketing research, recent studies suggest that the effectiveness of influencer campaigns is also strongly influenced by the content itself and the platform on which it is distributed. As social media platforms continue to evolve, consumers increasingly interact with promotional content through visual and short-form formats, making content design an important determinant of marketing outcomes. Consequently, influencer marketing effectiveness depends not only on the credibility of the source but also on the way messages are presented to audiences. (Hsiao and Lin, 2025).

Instagram represents one of the most important environments for influencer marketing due to its strong emphasis on visual communication. Unlike traditional advertising formats, Instagram allows influencers to combine images, videos, captions, and interactive features to communicate brand messages. Research indicates that the effectiveness of sponsored content is shaped by a combination of image-related, text-related, and influencer-related characteristics. This suggests that successful influencer marketing should be viewed as the result of interactions between multiple content elements rather than solely the influence of the content creator. (Hsiao and Lin, 2025).

One of the most important content characteristics is informational value. Consumers frequently use influencer content as a source of information when evaluating products, services, and brands. Sponsored posts that offer useful explanations, product experiences, or practical recommendations may help consumers reduce uncertainty and support decision-making. Therefore, influencer content that delivers meaningful information is often more effective than content that focuses exclusively on promotional messages. (Hsiao and Lin, 2025).

In addition to informational value, originality and creativity have emerged as important drivers of engagement. Social media users are exposed to large volumes of content every day, creating intense competition for attention. Unique content formats, creative storytelling, and visually distinctive posts may help influencers stand out in crowded digital environments. Original content can also contribute to perceptions of authenticity, as followers may see creative, personalized posts as more genuine than highly standardized promotional messages. (Hsiao and Lin, 2025).

The increasing popularity of short-form video platforms has further transformed influencer marketing practices. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels allow influencers to integrate promotional messages into entertaining and lifestyle-oriented content that closely resembles ordinary social media activity. As a result, advertising messages often become embedded within everyday content consumption experiences, reducing the distinction between entertainment and marketing communication. This integration may increase audience engagement and encourage consumers to spend more time interacting with sponsored content. (Vassey et al., 2026).

Recent experimental evidence also demonstrates the importance of contextual presentation. Consumers do not evaluate promoted products in isolation; instead, they often interpret them within the broader context in which they are presented. Vassey et al. (2026) found that products promoted alongside positive lifestyle activities generated more favorable consumer responses

than similar content without such associations. These findings suggest that positive lifestyle imagery may influence consumer perceptions by transferring advantageous associations from the influencer and the surrounding context to the promoted product. (Vassey et al., 2026).

The study further highlights the importance of influencer credibility in shaping consumer responses to content. Participants who perceived influencers as credible were more likely to be influenced by the messages presented in influencer posts, whereas the same content produced weaker effects when credibility perceptions were lower. This finding suggests that content effectiveness depends not only on message design but also on how audiences evaluate the individual delivering the message. Consequently, the relationship between content characteristics and consumer responses is often influenced by pre-existing perceptions of the influencer. (Vassey et al., 2026).

Overall, recent research indicates that influencer marketing effectiveness is shaped by a combination of content quality, platform characteristics, contextual presentation, and audience perceptions. Informative content, originality, visual appeal, and positive lifestyle associations may all contribute to stronger consumer engagement and more favorable responses to sponsored posts. These findings suggest that successful influencer marketing strategies require careful attention not only to influencer selection but also to the design and presentation of the content itself. (Hsiao and Lin, 2025).

These findings indicate that influencer effectiveness depends not only on who communicates the message but also on how and where the message is presented. Building on this, the next chapter examines how authenticity and trust shape consumer responses to influencer communication.

2.7. Authenticity, Trust and Consumer Relationships

Authenticity generally refers to the idea of remaining true to oneself. Acting authentically means being consistent with one's values, beliefs, and personal identity. Behavior that reflects an individual's genuine principles and originality is often perceived as socially desirable, whereas a discrepancy between personal values and outward actions tends to be viewed negatively. Consequently, authenticity is frequently associated with sincerity, honesty, and integrity, and authentic behavior is often perceived as morally preferable to behavior that appears artificial or insincere (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023). This concept is particularly relevant in marketing, where perceived authenticity influences consumer trust.

2.8. Authenticity in Influencer Marketing

In an environment characterized by increasing uncertainty, consumers have become more attentive to authenticity to reduce perceived risks and ambiguity, making it increasingly important in contemporary marketing. Brands are therefore expected to communicate in ways that appear transparent, honest, and credible, although the concept lacks a single universally accepted definition and is commonly associated with consistency, individuality, reliability, credibility, and the ability to fulfill promises (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

At the same time, the relationship between marketing and authenticity is somewhat paradoxical, as traditional marketing strategies may undermine attempts to appear genuine because promotional messages are perceived as strategic. Despite this, authenticity has become a central element of modern marketing, as consumers increasingly value brands that appear trustworthy and transparent (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

Influencer marketing has emerged as a potential solution, enabling brands to leverage influencers' perceived authenticity, which makes their recommendations seem more genuine

and credible. Concepts such as homophily and social identity help explain this, as individuals are drawn to those they perceive as similar, strengthening relationships between influencers and followers and fostering emotional connection and trust (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

However, authenticity can also pose a challenge, as perceptions of genuineness can be undermined, for example, when influencers fail to disclose sponsored collaborations, leading to criticism and reputational damage (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023).

These mechanisms explain why authenticity plays a central role in influencer marketing.

2.9. Authenticity, Credibility and Influencer Effectiveness

In recent years, consumer attitudes toward influencer marketing have become increasingly skeptical, mainly because audiences are now more aware of sponsored content and paid collaborations (Shukla, 2023). As a result, authenticity, credibility, and transparency have become essential elements of influencer communication, strongly shaping how trust develops between influencers and consumers (Kapitan et al., 2022).

Although authenticity and credibility are closely related, they represent different aspects of influencer effectiveness. Authenticity mainly refers to whether influencers appear genuine, honest, and consistent with their personality and values. Consumers are more likely to perceive influencers as authentic when they share realistic experiences, express personal opinions, and communicate openly with their followers. Credibility, on the other hand, relates more to whether audiences consider influencers trustworthy, knowledgeable, and reliable when recommending products or sharing information. In this sense, authenticity is connected to perceived genuineness, while credibility reflects the influencer's reliability and persuasive power (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020).

Research also suggests that consumers increasingly rely on trustworthy and experience-based sources when making purchasing decisions, highlighting the growing importance of authenticity and credibility in influencer marketing. When influencers are perceived as both authentic and credible, followers are more likely to trust their recommendations and respond positively to sponsored content (Kapitan et al., 2022).

Differences between influencer types are also important in this context. Micro influencers often maintain closer and more interactive relationships with their followers, which can strengthen perceptions of authenticity, trustworthiness, and relatability. In contrast, larger influencers and celebrity-like creators may offer broader visibility and reach, but they are sometimes perceived as more commercial and less personal (Lee et al., 2024).

Similarly, influencers who focus on specific niche communities are often considered more credible within their area of expertise. Their recommendations may therefore appear more relevant and convincing to followers, which can positively influence consumer engagement and attitudes toward endorsed products (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020).

Credibility also plays an important role in shaping purchase intention. Influencer credibility is commonly associated with factors such as trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. While attractiveness may help capture attention, trust and expertise are usually more important in influencing whether consumers consider purchasing a product (Pracoyo and Ariyanti, 2025).

Before making an actual purchase, consumers typically develop purchase intention first, and this stage is strongly influenced by how authentic and credible they perceive the influencer to be. If followers believe that an influencer is honest, knowledgeable, and trustworthy, they are more likely to consider purchasing the promoted product later, even if they do not make an immediate purchase (Pracoyo and Ariyanti, 2025).

Overall, influencer marketing is increasingly moving beyond simple visibility and reach toward authenticity, credibility, and stronger consumer relationships. In this process, authenticity helps create emotional connection and perceived genuineness, while credibility strengthens trust in recommendations and increases the likelihood of positive consumer responses and purchase intentions (Lee et al., 2024).

In addition to authenticity and trust, psychological connections between influencers and followers also play an important role in influencer marketing effectiveness.

Although authenticity and credibility are generally associated with positive consumer outcomes, influencer marketing effectiveness is not without limitations. Recent studies highlight several factors that may weaken the relationship between positive attitudes and actual consumer behaviour.

2.10. Purchase Intention and the Limitations of Influencer Marketing

Although influencer marketing is frequently associated with increased purchase intentions, recent research suggests that the relationship between consumer attitudes and actual purchasing behavior is more complex than often assumed. While influencers can successfully generate awareness and stimulate interest in products, positive attitudes do not automatically result in completed purchases. Consumers may express a willingness to buy a recommended product yet ultimately decide against purchasing due to financial considerations, perceived risks, competing alternatives, or a lack of immediate need. Consequently, purchase intention should be interpreted as an important predictor of consumer behavior rather than a guarantee of actual purchasing activity (Caiado et al., 2023).

This distinction is particularly relevant in social media environments where consumers are exposed to large volumes of influencer-generated content on a daily basis. Continuous exposure

to product recommendations may encourage consumers to explore brands and products without necessarily leading to transactional outcomes. Therefore, the effectiveness of influencer marketing should not be evaluated solely through indicators such as purchase intention or engagement rates, as these measures may overestimate the actual commercial impact of influencer campaigns (Caiado et al., 2023).

Another important consideration concerns the growing sophistication of digital consumers. As influencer marketing has become increasingly widespread, consumers have become more aware of commercial partnerships and sponsored content. Rather than passively accepting recommendations, many social media users actively evaluate the motivations behind influencer endorsements and consider whether the promoted products genuinely align with the influencer's usual content and personal values. This suggests that consumers are becoming more critical participants in the communication process and are less likely to be influenced by promotional messages perceived as purely commercial (Migkos et al., 2025).

The increasing commercialization of social media has also contributed to the emergence of consumer skepticism. Frequent brand collaborations and excessive promotional content may lead followers to question the authenticity of influencer recommendations, particularly when sponsored posts dominate an influencer's content. In such situations, consumers may perceive endorsements as financially motivated rather than experience-based, reducing both trust and persuasive effectiveness. As a result, influencer marketing can generate negative reactions when commercial objectives become too visible or overshadow the personal and relatable characteristics that originally attracted followers (Migkos et al., 2025).

Related to this issue is the phenomenon often called influencer fatigue. As consumers encounter an increasing number of sponsored posts across multiple platforms, they may become less attentive to influencer recommendations and more resistant to advertising messages. This saturation effect can reduce engagement levels and limit the ability of influencers to shape

consumer decisions over time. Consequently, maintaining audience interest requires a careful balance between promotional content and non-commercial content that provides entertainment, information, or personal value to followers (Migkos et al., 2025).

Recent research also suggests that long-term collaborations between brands and influencers may help mitigate some of these challenges. Unlike one-off promotional partnerships, long-term relationships can create greater consistency and allow followers to perceive endorsements as more genuine and credible. Repeated associations between an influencer and a brand may strengthen perceptions of fit and reduce the likelihood that promotional content will be interpreted as opportunistic or purely profit-driven. Therefore, sustainable influencer marketing strategies increasingly emphasize continuity and relationship-building rather than isolated promotional campaigns (Migkos et al., 2025).

Overall, these findings indicate that influencer marketing effectiveness depends not only on generating positive attitudes and purchase intentions but also on overcoming consumer skepticism and maintaining credibility in an increasingly commercialized digital environment. Understanding the gap between intention and behavior, as well as the growing awareness of persuasive tactics among consumers, provides a more nuanced perspective on how influencer marketing operates and highlights the limitations of relying exclusively on influencer endorsements as a marketing strategy (Caiado et al., 2023).

One important explanation for increasing consumer skepticism can be found in the growing recognition of sponsored content and persuasive marketing tactics.

2.11. Understanding Sponsored Content: The Role of Persuasion Knowledge

As influencer marketing has become increasingly regulated, sponsorship disclosure has emerged as an important topic in both academic research and marketing practice. Regulatory

bodies in many countries require influencers to clearly indicate paid partnerships through labels such as “#ad”, “#sponsored”, or “paid partnership”. The primary purpose of these disclosures is to increase transparency and help consumers distinguish commercial content from organic recommendations. However, the consequences of sponsorship disclosure are more complex than initially assumed, as transparency can generate both positive and negative consumer responses (Liu and Zhao, 2024).

One explanation for these mixed findings can be found in persuasion knowledge theory. According to this perspective, consumers develop knowledge about marketing tactics and gradually learn to recognize persuasive attempts. When sponsorship disclosures are present, consumers become more aware of the commercial intent behind influencer recommendations. As a result, disclosures increase what researchers refer to as conceptual persuasion knowledge, meaning consumers are better able to identify content as advertising and understand its persuasive purpose (Willemssen et al., 2024).

At the same time, recognizing persuasive intent does not necessarily result in negative evaluations. Recent research highlights the distinction between conceptual persuasion knowledge and attitudinal persuasion knowledge. While the former refers to consumers’ ability to recognize advertising, the latter relates to skeptical attitudes towards persuasive messages. These dimensions are closely related but should not be considered identical. Consumers may fully understand that a post is sponsored while still perceiving the recommendation as useful, credible, or relevant. Consequently, the activation of persuasion knowledge does not automatically eliminate the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Willemssen et al., 2024).

Recent evidence suggests that sponsorship disclosure triggers two competing psychological mechanisms. The first is known as the awareness effect. When consumers recognize sponsored content, they become more conscious of the persuasive intentions behind the message and may evaluate recommendations more critically. This process can reduce perceptions of credibility

and increase suspicion towards both the influencer and the promotional content. As consumers become increasingly familiar with influencer marketing practices, the awareness effect may become more pronounced, particularly among experienced social media users (Liu and Zhao, 2024).

In contrast, sponsorship disclosure may also produce what has been described as the transparency effect. Openly communicating commercial relationships can signal honesty, authenticity, and ethical behavior. Rather than viewing disclosure negatively, consumers may appreciate the influencer's transparency about brand partnerships. In such cases, disclosure can strengthen perceptions of integrity and reduce feelings of deception or manipulation. This suggests that transparency may partially offset the negative consequences associated with increased advertising awareness (Liu and Zhao, 2024).

Interestingly, a recent meta-analysis found that sponsorship disclosure consistently increases persuasion knowledge and improves brand recall, while simultaneously reducing perceptions of influencer and message credibility. However, the overall effects on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions were found to be statistically insignificant. These findings indicate that although consumers become more aware of commercial intent, this awareness does not necessarily translate into lower willingness to purchase promoted products. The relationship between disclosure and consumer behavior, therefore, appears more nuanced than previously assumed (Liu and Zhao, 2024).

These findings have important implications for influencer marketing research. Rather than viewing sponsorship disclosure solely as a threat to influencer effectiveness, recent evidence suggests that disclosure represents a trade-off between transparency and persuasion. Consumers increasingly expect openness in commercial relationships, yet remain sensitive to perceived promotional motives. Understanding this balance is essential for explaining how contemporary

consumers process influencer recommendations and why sponsored content can remain effective even when its commercial nature is explicitly disclosed (Liu and Zhao, 2024).

2.12. Parasocial Relationships and Brand Perception

Influencer marketing plays an increasingly important role in shaping consumer perceptions and brand attitudes through social media interactions and influencer-generated content. Compared to traditional celebrity endorsements, influencer communication is often perceived as more authentic, trustworthy, and persuasive, especially when influencers are considered credible and knowledgeable within a specific lifestyle or interest area (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). As a result, influencers can significantly affect consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and brand perception (Al Sulaiti and Ben Mimoun, 2023).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing can largely be explained through psychological mechanisms such as parasocial relationships and perceived similarity. Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional connections that followers develop with influencers through repeated exposure to their content and online interactions (Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). Social media platforms strengthen these relationships by allowing influencers to share personal experiences, opinions, and everyday activities in a more direct and interactive way (Chung and Cho, 2017). According to Tukachinsky and Stever (2019), parasocial relationships develop gradually through repeated media exposure and increasing emotional involvement with media personalities. Through continuous communication, followers may begin to perceive influencers as relatable and familiar figures, which increases trust and strengthens the persuasive effect of influencer recommendations (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

Research also shows that followers are more likely to trust influencers whom they perceive as similar to themselves in terms of values, interests, or lifestyle (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

Influencers are often viewed as role models whose behaviors and consumption patterns followers may seek to imitate. The interactive nature of social media has also contributed to the emergence of trans-parasocial relationships, which involve more reciprocal forms of communication between influencers and audiences through comments, posts, and messages (Lou, Chee, and Zhou, 2023).

These psychological connections positively influence consumer behavior by increasing perceived credibility, strengthening brand attitudes, and encouraging purchase intentions and word-of-mouth behavior (Al Sulaiti and Ben Mimoun, 2023). Influencer marketing is often considered more effective than traditional advertising because influencer content blends naturally into the social media environment and creates stronger emotional connections with audiences (Lou, Chee, and Zhou, 2023). Macro influencers are generally associated with authority, while micro influencers are often perceived as more authentic and relatable.

While parasocial relationships explain the emotional connection between influencers and followers, other influencer characteristics may also contribute to persuasion and trust formation.

2.13. The Distinct Roles of Attractiveness, Expertise and Trust in Influencer Marketing

Source credibility has long been considered one of the most important factors influencing the effectiveness of marketing communications. Originating from communication theory, the concept has become increasingly relevant in influencer marketing as researchers seek to understand why certain influencers are more persuasive than others. Recent bibliometric evidence indicates that source credibility theory remains one of the most widely applied theoretical frameworks in influencer marketing research and is frequently examined alongside

parasocial relationship theory, highlighting the close connection between credibility and influencer-follower relationships (Yasa, Durmuş and Uslu, 2025).

Traditionally, source credibility has been explained through three main dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. While these dimensions are often discussed together, recent studies suggest that they may influence consumers through different psychological mechanisms. Rather than treating credibility as a single construct, researchers increasingly argue that different influencer characteristics contribute to consumer responses in distinct ways (Wu, 2026).

One of the most important distinctions concerns the roles of attractiveness and expertise. Attractiveness is generally associated with an influencer's physical appearance, personal style, and overall appeal. Attractive influencers tend to capture attention more easily and create stronger emotional connections with followers. As a result, attractiveness appears to play an important role in the development of parasocial interactions, as followers often perceive attractive influencers as more relatable, approachable, and socially engaging. Through repeated exposure to content, followers may gradually develop feelings of familiarity and emotional closeness that resemble aspects of interpersonal relationships (Wu, 2026).

Expertise, however, operates through a different mechanism. Rather than fostering emotional attachment, expertise primarily contributes to perceptions of competence and knowledge. Consumers are more likely to trust recommendations provided by influencers who are perceived as experienced, informed, and capable of evaluating products within a particular domain. In this sense, expertise functions as a signal of reliability, helping followers reduce uncertainty when evaluating products or services promoted through social media (Wu, 2026).

Recent research further suggests that parasocial interaction and trust should not be viewed as interchangeable concepts. Although both contribute to influencer effectiveness, they represent different psychological processes. Parasocial interaction reflects the emotional bond that followers develop with an influencer, whereas trust reflects a willingness to rely on the influencer's recommendations. Emotional closeness alone may not be sufficient to influence consumer decisions unless it also contributes to the development of trust. Consequently, parasocial interaction can be understood as a factor that strengthens trust by increasing familiarity and reducing perceived social distance between influencers and followers (Wu, 2026).

Trust has been identified as one of the most important drivers of consumer responses within influencer marketing. Beyond influencing purchase intentions, trust also contributes to follower loyalty and recommendation behaviour. Consumers who trust an influencer are more likely to continue following their content, engage with future recommendations, and share those recommendations with others. Interestingly, recent findings suggest that trust may have an even stronger impact on recommendation intention than on purchase intention, indicating that trusted influencers can play an important role in generating electronic word-of-mouth and extending brand communication beyond their immediate audiences (Wu, 2026).

These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of influencer effectiveness by demonstrating that different influencer characteristics contribute to consumer outcomes through distinct pathways. While attractiveness primarily facilitates the development of parasocial relationships, expertise strengthens perceptions of trustworthiness and competence. Together, these mechanisms help explain how influencer evaluations are translated into consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions, ultimately influencing loyalty, purchase decisions, and recommendation behaviour (Wu, 2026).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Purposes

This research examines how influencer size impacts consumer perceptions and behavior in social media marketing. It specifically investigates whether micro influencers are seen as more authentic than macro and mega influencers, and how this perceived authenticity affects consumer trust and purchase intentions.

The study also explores the role of parasocial relationships in influencer marketing, assessing whether smaller influencers foster stronger feelings of closeness and relatability. By examining these factors, the research aims to clarify the mechanisms that shape consumer responses to influencer-generated content.

This study applies a **quantitative research approach** to examine differences between micro and macro/mega influencers in terms of perceived authenticity, trust, and their influence on consumer behavior. A survey-based method was selected because it enables standardized data collection and comparison across respondents. The research is exploratory, focusing on identifying patterns rather than establishing causal relationships.

Primary **data were collected through an online questionnaire** created using Google Forms. The survey was distributed via social media platforms and online student communities using a non-probability convenience sampling method. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and data collection took place over a limited period.

The **questionnaire design** included closed-ended questions, multiple-choice items, and Likert-scale statements. The study focused on key variables such as social media usage, preferred platforms, influencer type, perceived authenticity, trust, and consumer behavior. Respondents were asked to evaluate a specific influencer they follow to ensure more consistent, realistic responses. In addition, parasocial relationship aspects were measured using indicators of

perceived closeness and relatability, such as “I feel like I know this influencer personally” and “I can relate to this influencer’s life.” Parasocial relationships were not measured as a composite scale but were approximated through these selected indicators.

The collected **data were analyzed** using descriptive statistical methods in Microsoft Excel, based on data exported from Google Forms, including frequencies, percentages, and mean values for Likert-scale items. A comparative analysis was used to examine differences among influencer types. Parasocial relationship indicators were analyzed using mean values and compared across influencer types. Although the questionnaire originally distinguished between four influencer categories (nano, micro, macro, and mega), for the purpose of analysis, macro and mega influencers were grouped together due to their similar characteristics in terms of reach and lower perceived personal interaction compared to smaller influencers. Nano influencers were not analyzed separately due to their low representation in the sample. As a result, the analysis focuses on a comparison between smaller (micro) and larger (macro/mega) influencers.

The theoretical part of the thesis reviewed the main concepts and mechanisms related to influencer marketing, including authenticity, trust, social influence, and parasocial relationships. Building on these theoretical foundations, the empirical part of the research aims to examine how these factors appear in consumer perceptions and behavior in practice.

3.2. Survey Results and Analysis

This section presents the results of the survey in relation to the hypotheses formulated in the study. The research examines whether micro influencers are perceived as more authentic than macro and mega influencers, whether perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust, whether consumer trust affects purchase intention, and whether stronger parasocial relationships are associated with smaller influencers.

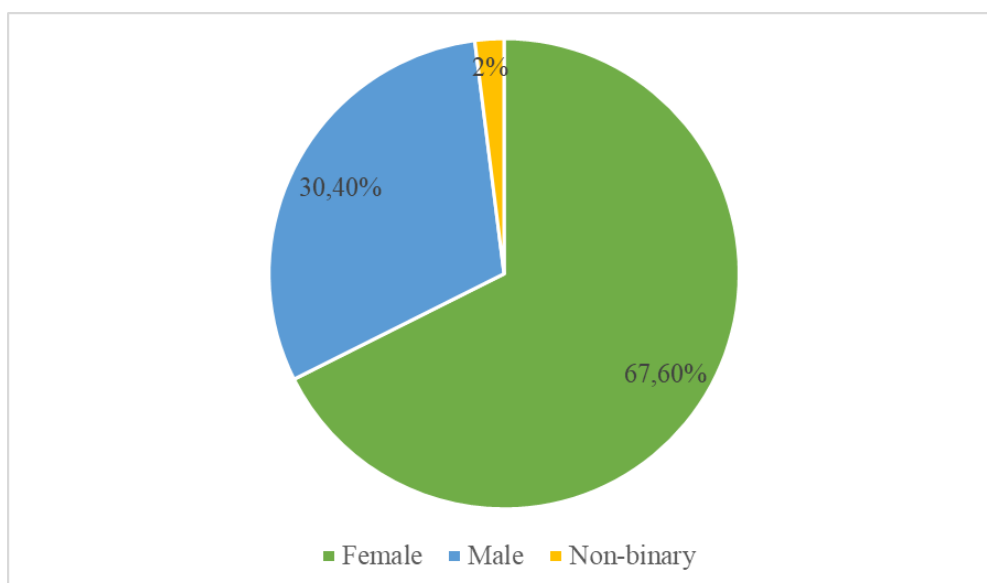
3.3. Sample Characteristics and Social Media Usage

Demographic profile of the respondents

The survey was completed by 102 respondents, providing a sufficient basis for identifying general tendencies within the sample. However, the demographic structure of the respondents should be taken into account when interpreting the results, as the sample is not evenly distributed by gender, age, or country of residence.

In terms of gender, the sample is predominantly female. 69 respondents were female, representing 67.6% of the total sample, while 31 respondents were male, accounting for 30.4%. In addition, 2 respondents identified as non-binary, representing 2% of the sample. This indicates that the findings mainly reflect the opinions and social media habits of female respondents. This is particularly relevant in the context of influencer marketing, as several frequently mentioned influencer categories, such as fashion and beauty, may be more strongly represented among female audiences. The gender distribution of the sample is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Gender distribution of respondents (%)



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

Regarding age, the respondents were mainly young people and young adults, key descriptive statistics of age are presented in Table 2. The youngest respondent was 14 years old, while the oldest was 42 years old. The average age of the respondents was approximately 20.9 years, and the median age was 20, indicating that half were aged 20 or younger. The largest age group was the 18-20 age group, with 43 respondents, representing 42.2% of the sample. This was followed by the 21-24 age group, with 22 respondents (21.6%). Respondents aged 14-17 accounted for 17.6% of the sample, while those aged 25-29 accounted for 14.7%. Only 4 respondents, or 3.9%, were aged 30 or above.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of respondents' age

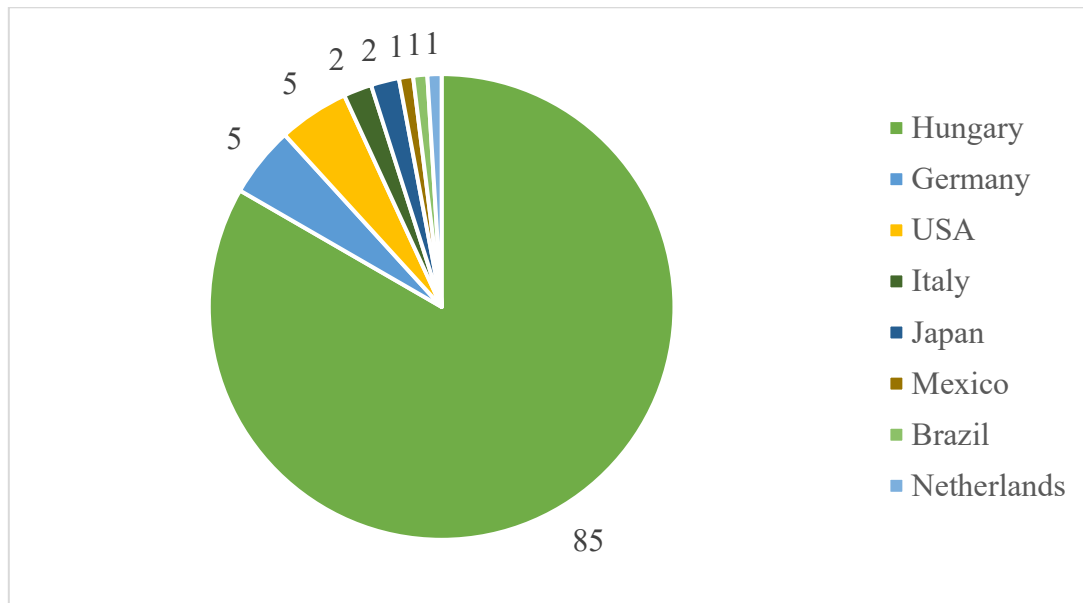
Statistics:	Minimum age	Maximum age	Mean age	Median age
Value:	14	42	20.9	20

Source: own calculation based on survey data (2026)

This age distribution shows that the sample is strongly concentrated among Generation Z and younger Millennials. This is highly relevant for the topic of influencer marketing, as these age groups are typically among the most active users of social media platforms and are frequently exposed to influencer-generated content.

The country distribution, illustrated in Figure 2, also shows a strong concentration. The majority of respondents, 85 people, lived in Hungary, representing 83.3% of the sample. Since the researcher is originally from Hungary, the dominance of Hungarian respondents was expected, as this population was more easily accessible through the researcher's personal and social networks. Germany and the USA were each represented by 5 respondents, accounting for 4.9% each. Italy and Japan were represented by 2 respondents each, or 2% each. Finally, Mexico, Brazil, and the Netherlands were each represented by 1 respondent, or 1% each.

Figure 2: Country Distribution of Respondents



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

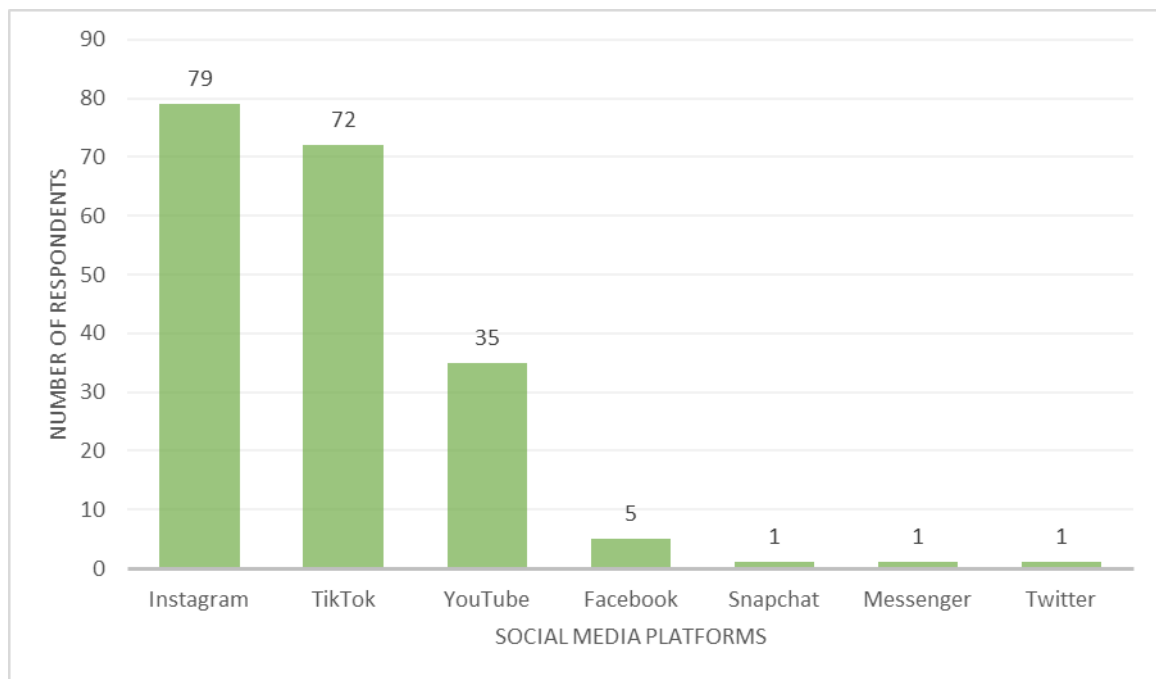
Overall, the sample can be described as predominantly young, female, and Hungarian. This means that the findings are especially useful for understanding influencer marketing among young Hungarian consumers, but the results should not be generalized to all countries or age groups without caution.

Most frequently used social media platforms

Respondents were asked which social media platforms they use most frequently, and they could select multiple answers. The results, presented in Figure 3, show that Instagram and TikTok dominate the sample's social media usage. The most frequently used platform was Instagram, selected by 79 respondents, which equals 77.5% of the sample. TikTok followed closely, with 72 respondents (70.6%) indicating that it is nearly as important as Instagram among this group. YouTube was selected by 35 respondents, representing 34.3%. Other platforms appeared much

less frequently: Facebook was mentioned by 5 respondents, while Messenger, Snapchat, and Twitter were each mentioned by only 1 respondent.

Figure 3: Most frequently used social media platforms



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

The most common platform combination was Instagram and TikTok, selected by 34 respondents. This suggests that respondents do not necessarily rely on a single platform, but rather use several social media channels simultaneously. Instagram appears to remain the central platform, while TikTok plays a major role in short-form entertainment and influencer content consumption.

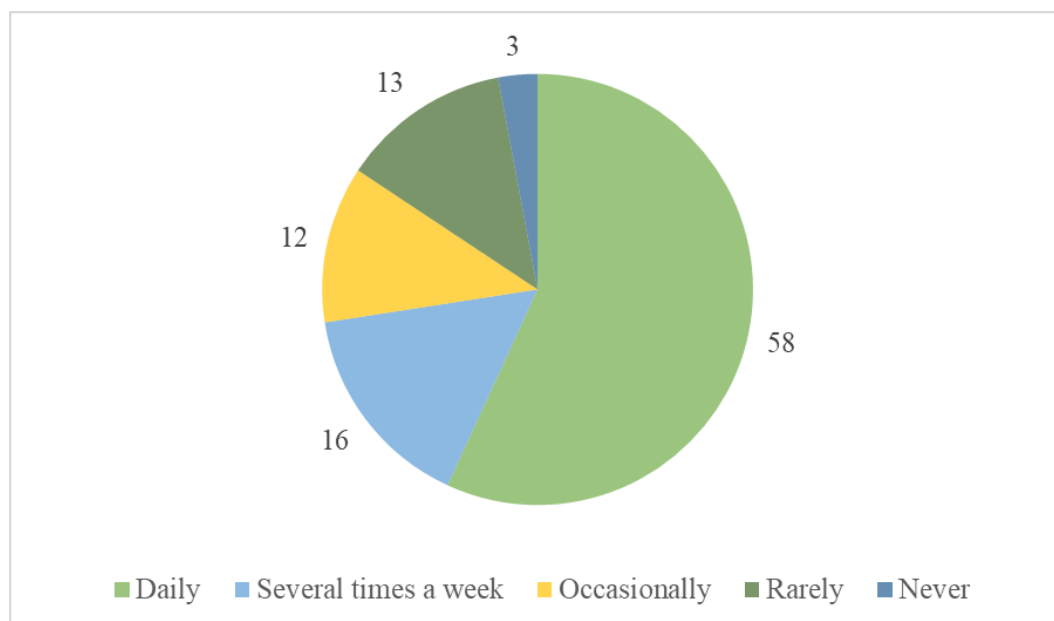
These findings suggest that influencer marketing campaigns targeting similar audiences should prioritize Instagram and TikTok, as these platforms offer the highest potential reach in this

sample. YouTube may still be relevant, but more as a secondary or complementary platform, especially for longer-form content.

Frequency of engagement with influencer content

The results, presented in Figure 4, show that engagement with influencer content is very frequent among respondents. 58 respondents (56.9%) reported engaging with influencer content daily. A further 16 respondents (15.7%) engage with such content several times a week. This means that 72.6% of respondents interact with influencer content at least several times per week. Only 12 respondents (11.8%) said they engage with influencer content occasionally, while 13 respondents (12.7%) reported rarely engaging with it. Only 3 respondents, representing 2.9%, stated that they never engage with influencer content.

Figure 4: Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms (Number of Respondents)



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

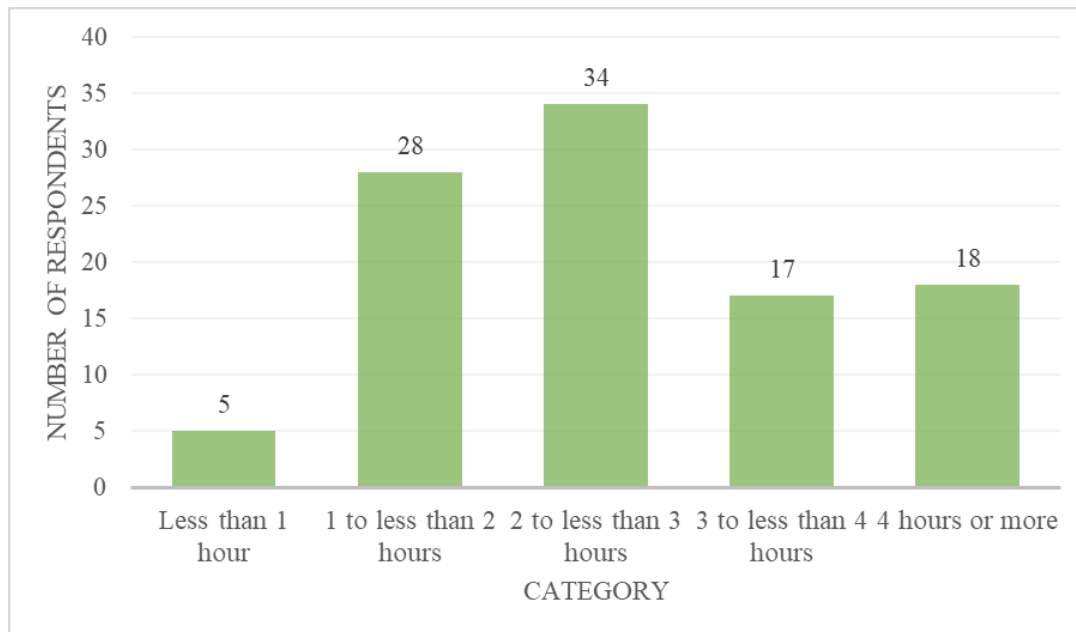
This indicates that influencer content is not an occasional part of the respondents' social media experience, instead, it is integrated into their everyday digital routines. The high level of daily engagement suggests that influencers have repeated opportunities to affect consumer perceptions, brand awareness, and purchasing intentions.

From a marketing perspective, this suggests that influencer marketing is effective not only through one-time exposure, but also through continuous, repeated interactions that strengthen consumer-influencer relationships.

Daily time spent on social media

The time respondents spend on social media, based on their self-reported estimates, presented in Figure 5, further underscores the importance of digital platforms in their everyday lives. The largest group, 34 respondents (33.3%), reported spending 2 to less than 3 hours per day on social media. The second-largest group, 28 respondents (27.5%), spends 1 to less than 2 hours daily. A further 17 respondents (16.7%) spend 3 to less than 4 hours per day on social media, while 18 respondents (17.6%) reported spending 4 hours or more per day online. Only 5 respondents (4.9%) spend less than 1 hour per day on social media.

Figure 5: Distribution of daily social media usage



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This means that 67.6% of respondents spend at least 2 hours per day on social media, and 34.3% spend at least 3 hours per day. This high level of usage increases the likelihood of repeated exposure to influencer content. As a result, influencers can become a familiar and consistent presence in respondents' daily media environment.

4. Results

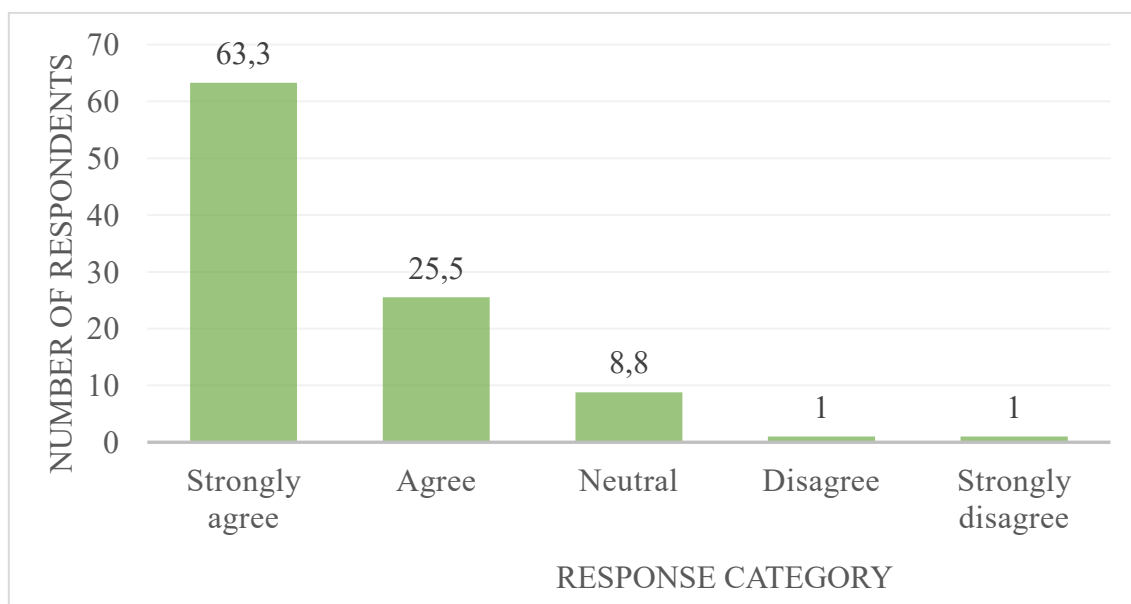
4.1. H1: Micro influencers are perceived as more authentic than macro and mega influencers

The following survey items are used to assess perceived authenticity and differences between influencer types.

“This influencer seems honest in their content.”

As shown in Figure 6, this statement received very strong agreement. The average score was 4.50 out of 5, the highest among the Likert-scale items. 91 respondents (89.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that the influencer they follow seems honest. Only 2 respondents, or 2.0%, disagreed, while 9 respondents, or 8.8%, gave a neutral answer.

Figure 6: Perceived honesty of the influencer



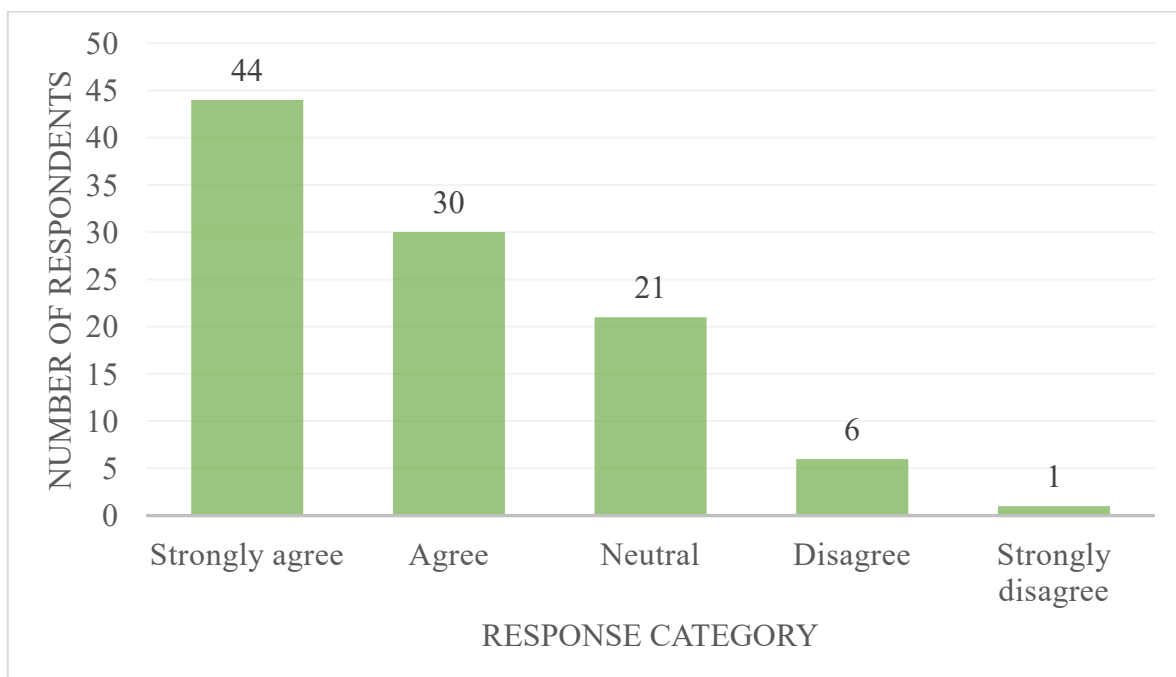
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This result indicates that perceived honesty is one of the strongest characteristics of the influencer-follower relationship in this sample. Respondents generally do not view their chosen influencers as dishonest. Instead, they perceive them as trustworthy personalities whose content appears sincere. This is highly relevant for influencer marketing because honesty is a key component of credibility. If followers believe that an influencer is honest, they may be more open to their recommendations, including sponsored content.

“This influencer shares real experiences, not just perfect moments.”

Figure 7 illustrates that this item also received a positive evaluation. The average score was 4.08 out of 5. 74 respondents (72.5%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. 21 respondents (20.6%) gave a neutral answer, while only 7 respondents (6.9%) disagreed.

Figure 7: Respondents' evaluation of influencer authenticity



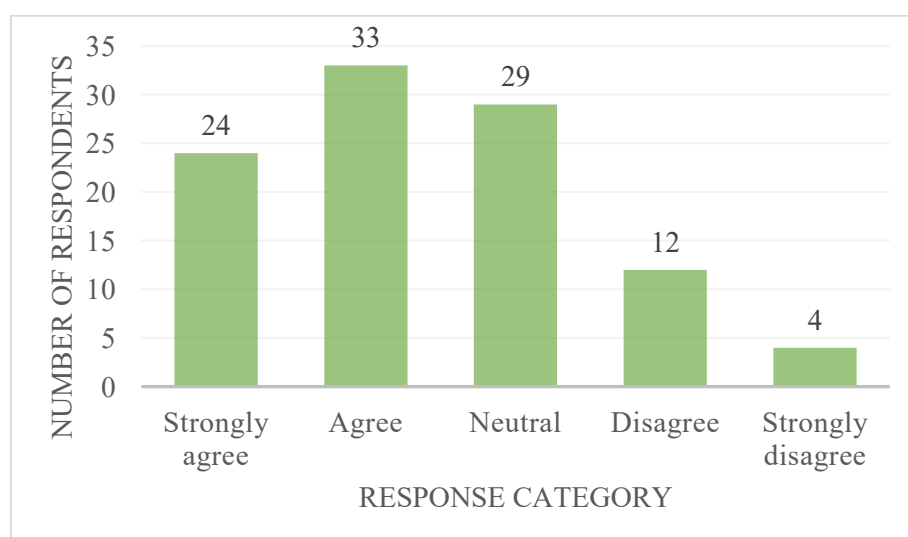
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

The results suggest that most respondents perceive their chosen influencers as relatively authentic and realistic. They do not see them as presenting only idealized or overly polished versions of life. This matters because authenticity is often linked to a stronger emotional connection and higher persuasive power. However, the fact that around one-fifth of respondents remained neutral suggests that not all influencer content is perceived as fully realistic. Some followers may enjoy influencer content even if they recognize that it is curated or partly idealized.

“This influencer does not appear overly commercial.”

This statement received more mixed responses than the previous two, as shown in Figure 8. The average score was 3.60 out of 5. 57 respondents (55.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that the influencer does not appear overly commercial. However, 29 respondents (28.4%) gave a neutral answer, and 16 respondents (15.7%) disagreed.

Figure 8: Respondents' perceptions of influencer commerciality



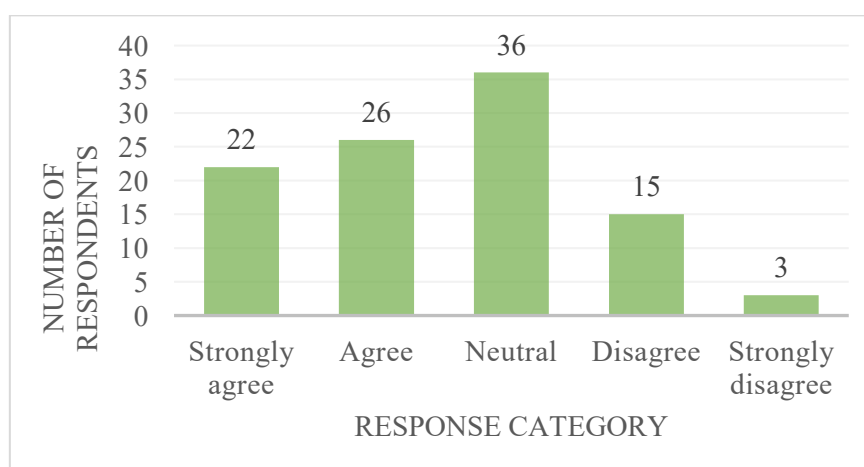
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This indicates that commerciality is a more sensitive issue. While more than half of the respondents do not see their chosen influencer as excessively promotional, a considerable proportion are uncertain or critical. This suggests that followers are aware of the commercial nature of influencer marketing. They may accept advertisements and sponsored content, but only if they do not dominate the influencer’s profile. Excessive commercial content may weaken perceived authenticity and reduce trust. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that consumers become more skeptical when influencer content appears excessively commercial or obviously sponsored (Shukla, 2023).

“Smaller influencers feel more authentic than larger influencers.”

Respondents showed moderate agreement with this statement (see Figure 9). The average score was 3.48 out of 5. 48 respondents (47.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that smaller influencers with fewer than 100,000 followers feel more authentic than larger influencers. 36 respondents (35.3%) were neutral, while 18 respondents (17.6%) disagreed.

Figure 9: Comparison of authenticity perceptions by influencer size



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This result suggests that many respondents associate smaller influencers with authenticity, but the opinion is not universal. The high neutral percentage indicates that authenticity may depend more on individual influencer behavior than follower count alone. This finding supports the argument that micro influencers may have an authenticity advantage. However, additional findings show that respondents still often follow macro and mega influencers. Therefore, smaller influencers may be perceived as more authentic, but larger influencers remain highly visible and influential.

Based on these results, **the hypothesis is partially supported.**

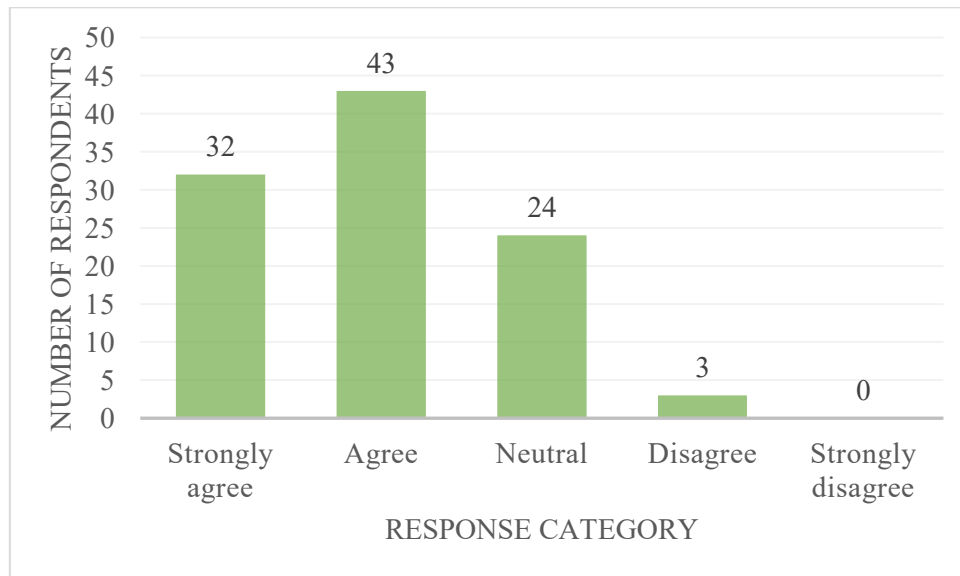
4.2. H2: Perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust

The following survey items are used to examine the relationship between perceived authenticity and trust.

“I trust the recommendations of this influencer.”

Trust in recommendations was also relatively strong, with an average score of 4.02 out of 5. 75 respondents (73.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that they trust the influencer’s recommendations, 24 respondents (23.5%) were neutral, and only 3 respondents (2.9%) disagreed.

Figure 10: Trust in influencer recommendations



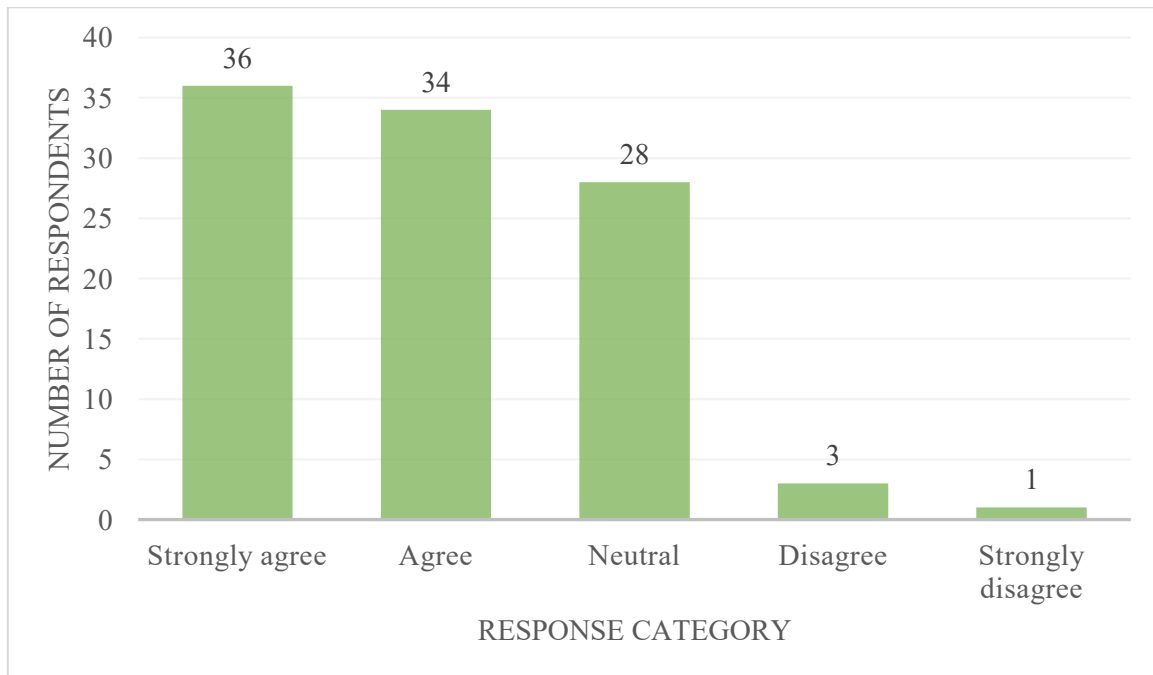
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This suggests that the majority of respondents assign real credibility to influencer recommendations. The low level of disagreement is particularly important, as it indicates that very few respondents actively reject the influencer's persuasive role. For influencer marketing, this finding is central. It demonstrates that influencers can function as trusted intermediaries between brands and consumers. Their recommendations may be perceived as more personal and more credible than standard advertising messages.

“I believe this influencer gives honest opinions, even about sponsored products.”

This statement, illustrated in Figure 11, also received positive results, with an average score of 3.99 out of 5. 70 respondents (68.6%) agreed or strongly agreed, 28 (27.5%) were neutral, and only 4 (3.9%) disagreed.

Figure 11: Perceived honesty in sponsored product recommendations



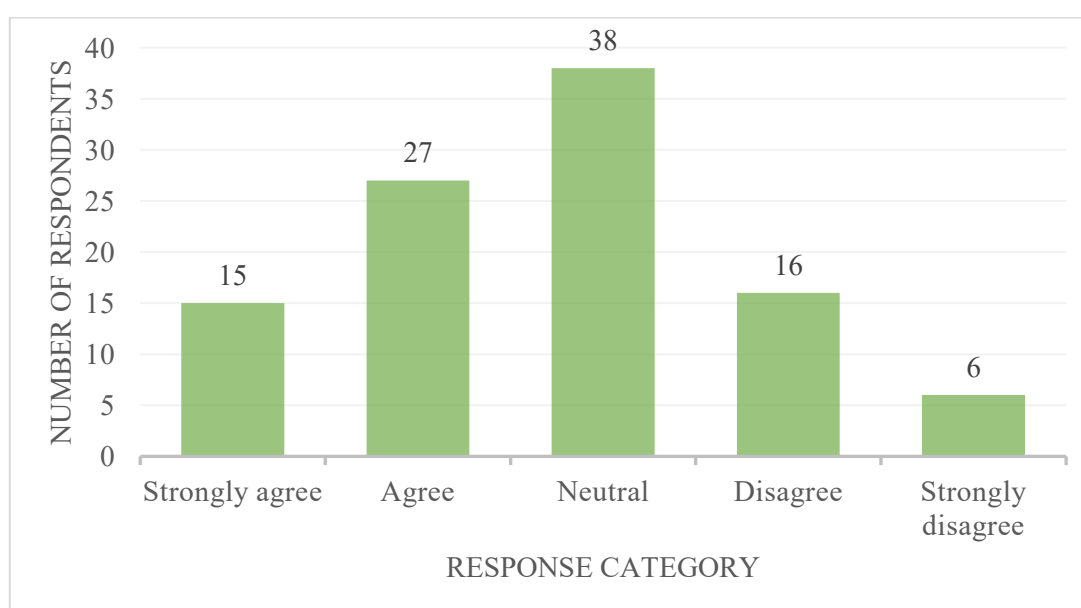
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This suggests that many respondents believe sponsored content can still be honest, as long as the influencer maintains credibility. The results imply that sponsorship itself does not automatically destroy trust. Instead, followers evaluate whether the influencer appears selective, transparent, and consistent with their usual content. The relatively high proportion of neutral responses also suggests some uncertainty. Respondents may generally trust influencers, but sponsored products introduce a more complex judgment. This supports the idea that transparency and authenticity are especially important in paid collaborations.

“I trust micro influencers more than celebrity or mega influencers.”

Trust in micro influencers was also moderately positive, but weaker than the authenticity statement (shown in Figure 12). The average score was 3.28 out of 5. 42 respondents (41.2%) agreed or strongly agreed. 38 respondents (37.3%) were neutral, while 22 (21.6%) disagreed.

Figure 12: Trust in micro influencers compared to celebrity and mega influencers



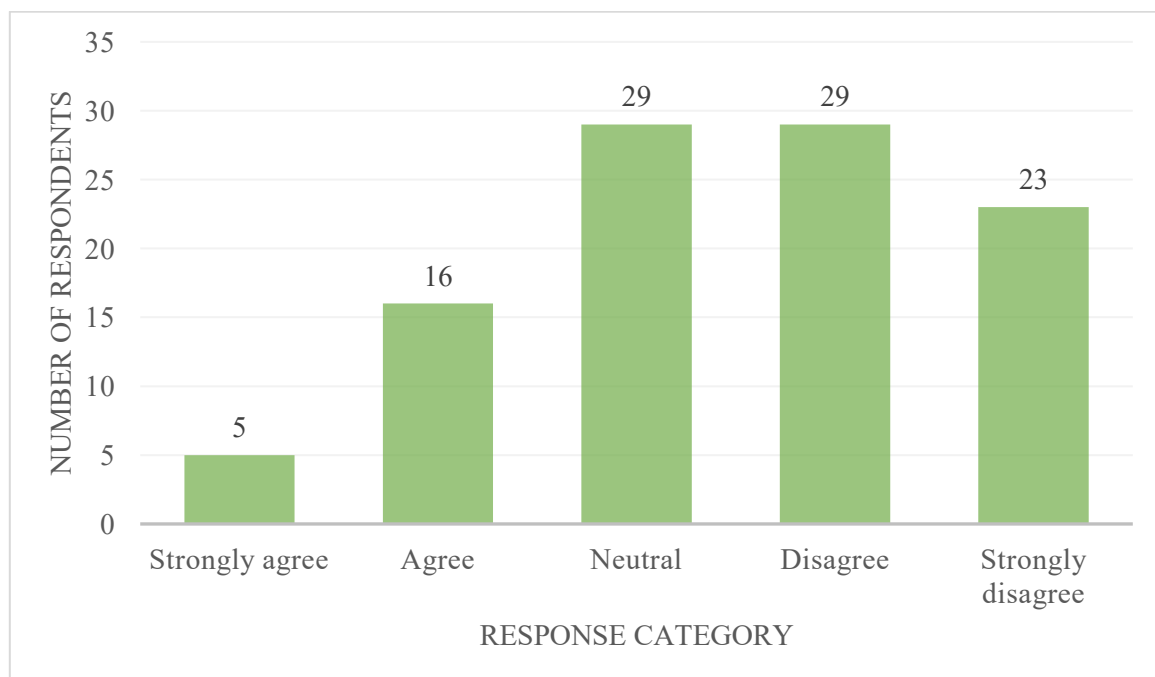
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This indicates that micro influencers have a trust advantage for many respondents, but not in a strong sense for the majority. A large neutral group suggests that respondents do not automatically trust someone more just because they are smaller influencers. Trust likely depends on perceived honesty, expertise, consistency, and transparency. This result is useful for the thesis because it shows that micro influencers may be effective, but their effectiveness should not be overstated. They are not universally trusted more than celebrities or mega influencers.

“I sometimes question the credibility of this influencer’s product recommendations.”

This reverse-style statement produced more divided results, which can be seen in Figure 13. The average score was 2.52 out of 5. 52 respondents (51.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, meaning that they generally do not question the influencer’s credibility. 29 respondents (28.4%) were neutral, while 21 respondents (20.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes question credibility.

Figure 13: Skepticism toward influencer product recommendations



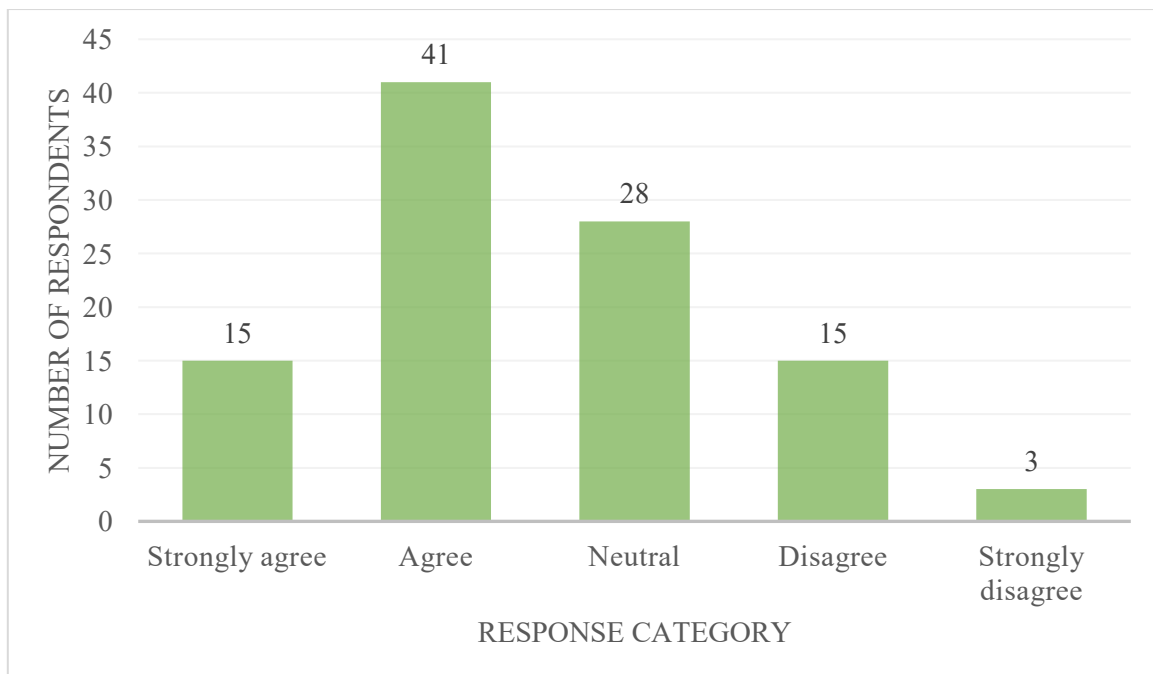
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This finding shows that skepticism exists, but it is not dominant. Around one-fifth of respondents actively question product recommendations, while about half do not. The relatively high neutral group suggests that many respondents may evaluate credibility depending on the situation, the product, or the type of sponsorship.

“I trust this influencer more than traditional advertisements.”

This statement shows in Figure 14 that influencers have an advantage over traditional advertising, but the result is not overwhelming. The average score was 3.49 out of 5. 56 respondents (54.9%) agreed or strongly agreed, 28 (27.5%) were neutral, and 18 (17.6%) disagreed.

Figure 14: Comparison of trust in influencers and traditional advertising



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This suggests that more than half of the respondents trust influencers more than traditional advertisements. This may be because influencers feel more personal, relatable, and familiar than corporate advertising. Traditional ads are usually perceived as clearly commercial, while influencer recommendations may appear more integrated into everyday life. However, the relatively large neutral group indicates that not all respondents make a strong distinction

between influencer marketing and traditional advertising. Some may recognize that influencer content is also commercial, especially when it is sponsored.

Based on these results, **the hypothesis is supported.**

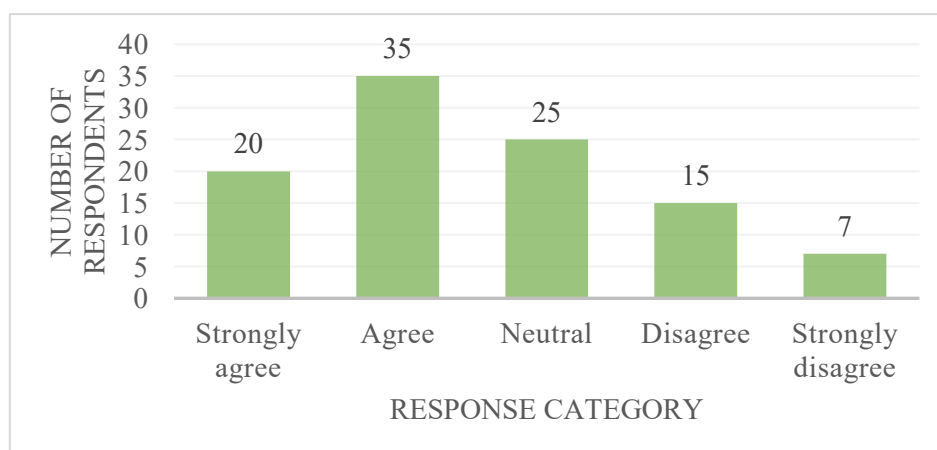
4.3. H3: Consumer trust positively influences purchase intention

The following survey items are used to examine the relationship between trust and purchase-related behavior.

“I would consider buying a product recommended by this influencer.”

This question directly addresses purchase intention. The average score was 3.45 out of 5. As shown in Figure 15, 55 respondents (53.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would consider buying a product recommended by the influencer. 25 respondents (24.5%) were neutral, while 22 respondents (21.6%) disagreed.

Figure 15: Purchase consideration based on influencer recommendations



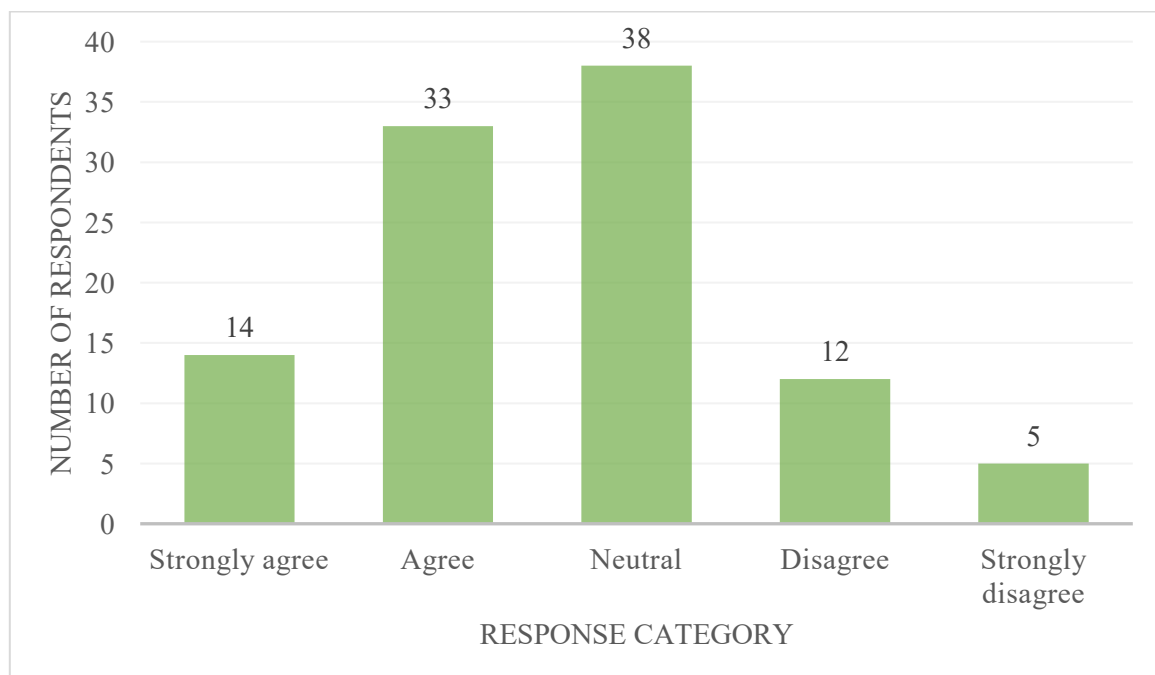
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This indicates that influencer recommendations have a clear effect on purchase consideration. More than half of the sample is open to buying products based on influencer recommendations, which demonstrates the commercial relevance of influencer marketing. However, the result also shows that consideration does not automatically lead to purchase. A significant share of respondents remained neutral or disagreed, suggesting that other factors, such as price, need, product type, brand reputation, and personal relevance, likely influence the final decision.

“I am more likely to try a product promoted by this influencer.”

This item received a slightly weaker but still positive result (see Figure 16). The average score was 3.38 out of 5. 47 respondents (46.1%) agreed or strongly agreed, 38 respondents (37.3%) were neutral, while 17 respondents (16.7%) disagreed.

Figure 16: Likelihood of trying influencer-promoted products



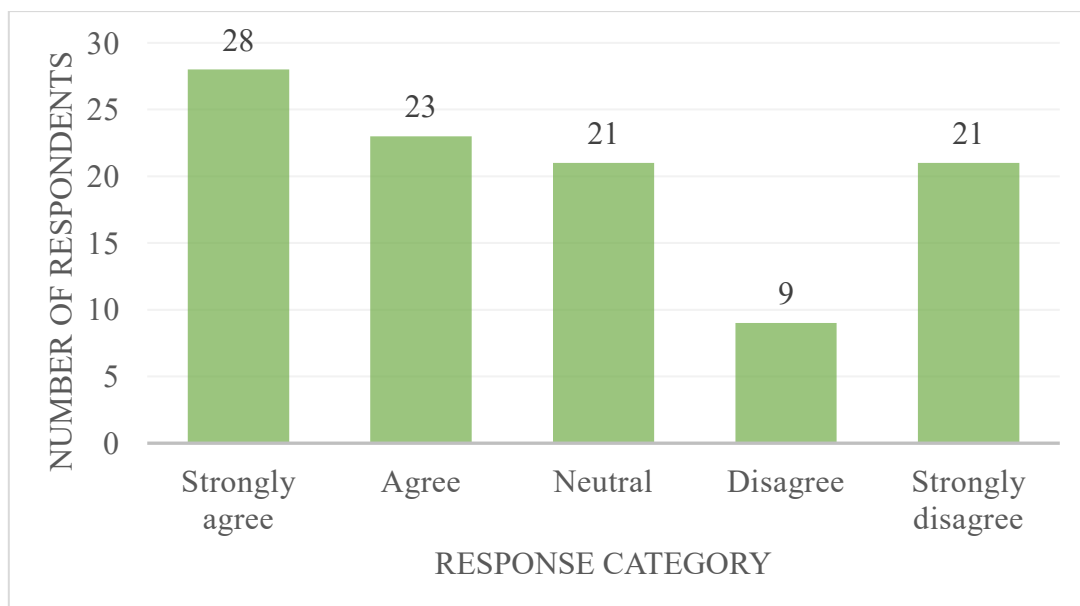
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

Compared to the previous question, respondents were slightly less confident that influencer promotion would make them more likely to try a product. This suggests that influencer content is better at raising awareness and interest than directly leading to product use. The high neutral percentage indicates conditional influence. Respondents may be willing to try a product if it matches their interests, appears useful, is affordable, or is recommended by an influencer they strongly trust.

“I have searched for a product after seeing it from this influencer.”

This statement shows a clear behavioral effect. The average score was 3.27 out of 5. Exactly 51 respondents (50%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had searched for a product after seeing it in an influencer's post. 21 respondents (20.6%) were neutral, while 30 respondents (29.4%) disagreed (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: Product search behavior following influencer exposure



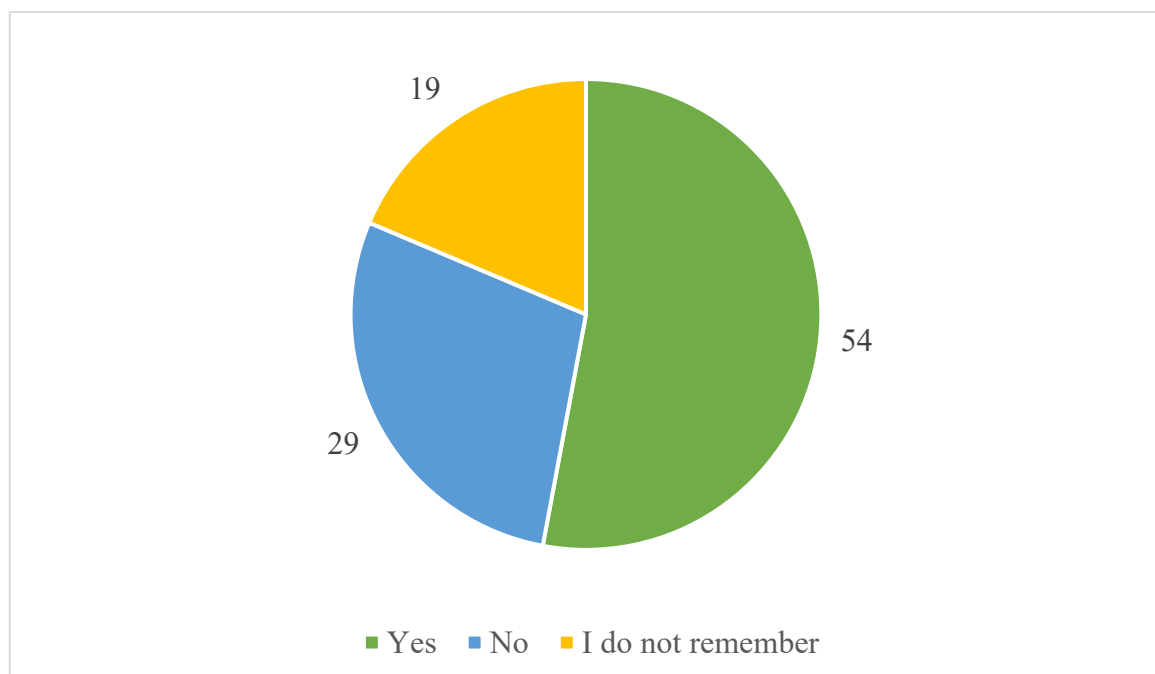
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This is an important finding because searching for a product is a concrete consumer action. Even if respondents do not always purchase immediately, influencer content can stimulate interest and information-seeking behavior. This suggests that influencers play an important role in the early stages of the consumer decision-making process, particularly in awareness, interest, and product discovery.

Previous purchase because of an influencer

Respondents were asked whether they had ever purchased a product because of an influencer. As illustrated in Figure 18, 54 respondents (52.9%) answered yes, 29 respondents (28.4%) answered no, while 19 respondents (18.6%) stated that they do not remember.

Figure 18: Influencer-driven purchase experience among respondents



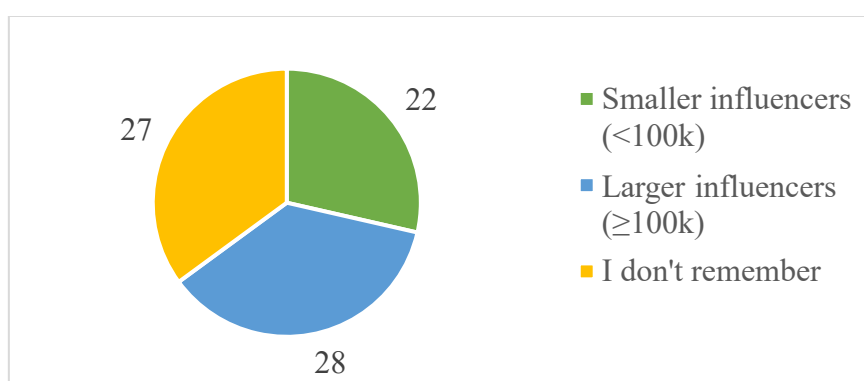
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This means that more than half of the sample has made at least one influencer-driven purchase. This is a strong indicator of the commercial impact of influencer marketing. At the same time, nearly one-third of respondents said they had not purchased a product because of an influencer. This shows that influencer marketing does not affect all consumers equally. Its effect may depend on the consumer's trust level, product category, financial situation, and personal interest in the promoted item. The "I do not remember" group is also meaningful. Some influencer-driven effects may be indirect or difficult for consumers to recall. Respondents may be influenced by repeated exposure without consciously attributing their purchase to an influencer.

Who influenced the purchase decision more?

When asked who influenced the purchase decision more, 28 respondents (27.5% of the total sample) selected larger influencers with at least 100,000 followers. 22 respondents (21.6%) selected smaller influencers with fewer than 100,000 followers. 27 respondents (26.5%) said they did not remember, while 25 responses (24.5%) were blank, likely because not everyone had made an influencer-driven purchase. Results are shown in Figure 19.

Figure 19: Influencer type with the greatest impact on purchase decisions



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

Among the valid answers, larger influencers slightly outperformed smaller influencers. This is interesting because earlier responses suggested that smaller influencers are often perceived as more authentic and closer to followers. However, in actual purchase influence, larger influencers still appear highly important. This shows an attitude-behavior gap. Respondents may associate smaller influencers with authenticity, but larger influencers may still have a stronger commercial impact due to their visibility, professional content, and broader exposure.

Based on these results, **the hypothesis is supported.**

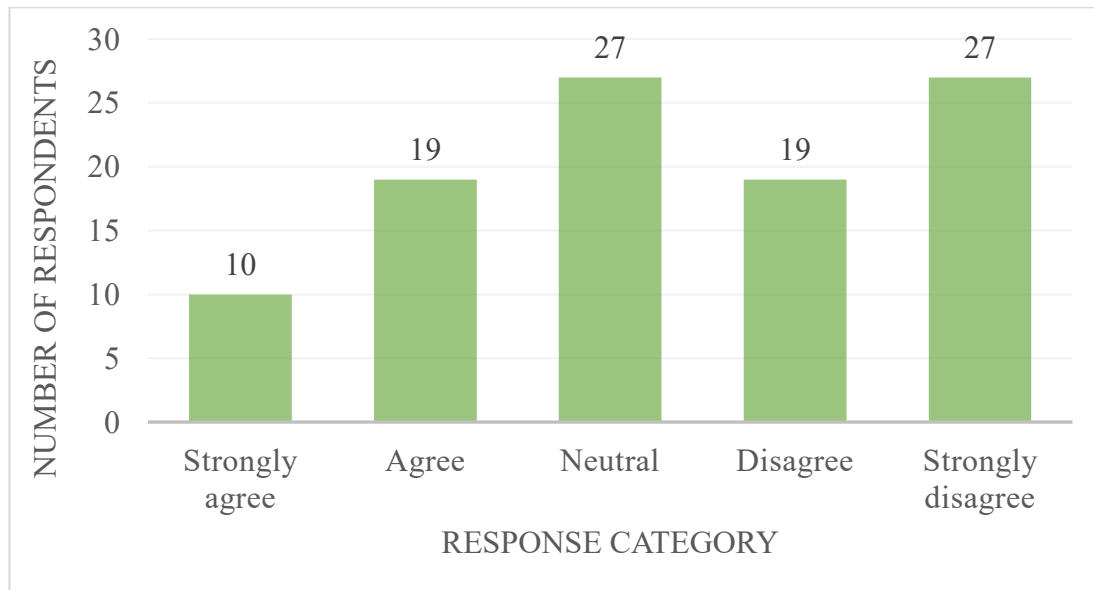
4.4. H4: Parasocial relationship strength is higher among micro influencers

The following survey items are used to assess parasocial relationships and perceived closeness.

“I feel like I know this influencer personally.”

This statement received a more moderate response; the average score was 2.67 out of 5. 29 respondents (28.4%) agreed or strongly agreed, while 27 respondents (26.5%) were neutral. The largest combined group, 46 respondents (45.1%), disagreed or strongly disagreed (shown in Figure 20).

Figure 20: Perceived personal connection with influencers



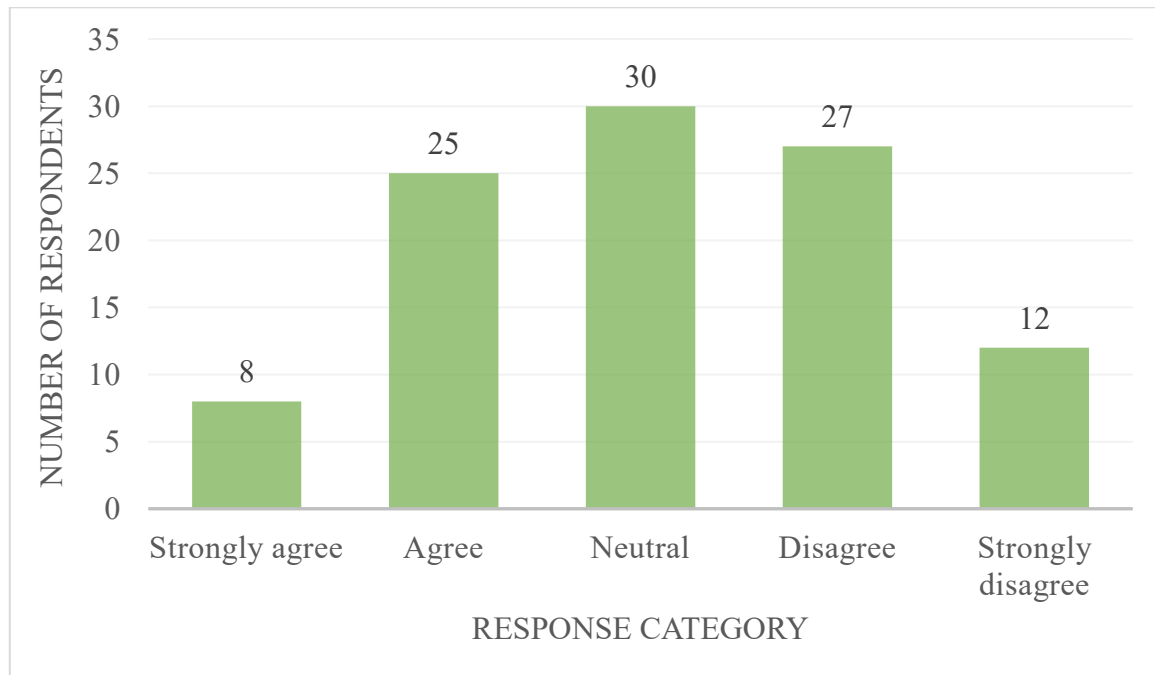
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This means that although some respondents experience a sense of personal familiarity with influencers, the majority do not. Many respondents may enjoy influencer content and trust recommendations without necessarily feeling that they personally know the influencer. This finding is important for understanding parasocial relationships. The data suggest that parasocial connection exists in the sample, but it is not universal. Influencer credibility may therefore depend not only on emotional closeness but also on perceived authenticity.

“I can relate to this influencer’s life.”

Relatability received mixed responses with an average score of 2.90 out of 5. As shown in Figure 21, 33 respondents (32.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they can relate to the influencer’s life. 30 respondents (29.4%) were neutral, while 39 respondents (38.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 21: Perceived relatability of influencers



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

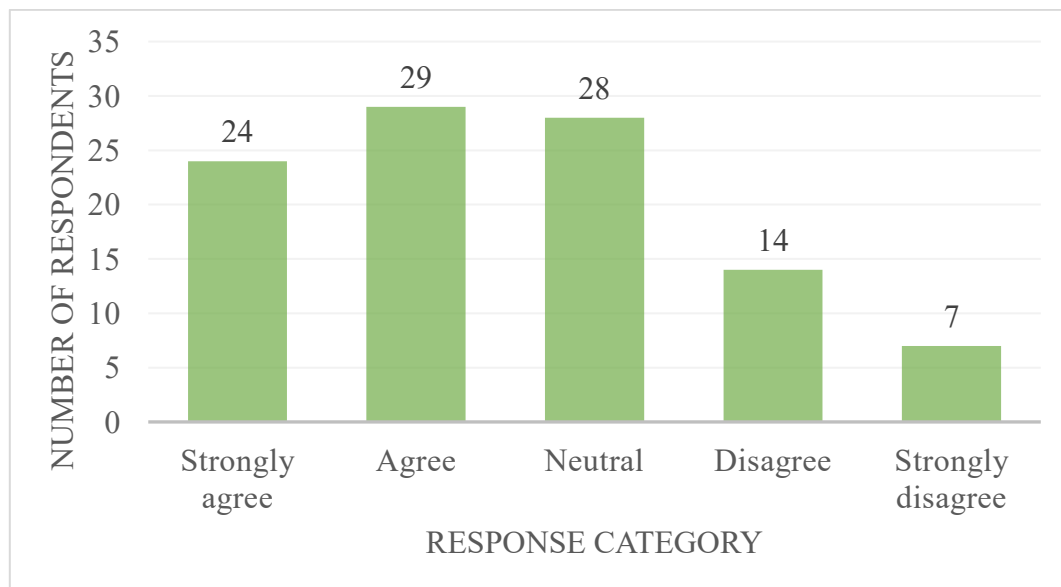
This suggests that many influencers are followed not necessarily because their lives are similar to the respondents' lives, but because they are interesting, entertaining, aspirational, or informative. Relatability is present for some followers, but it is not the dominant basis of influencer following in this sample. This may be connected to later findings showing that many respondents named macro and mega influencers. Larger influencers often present aspirational lifestyles rather than ones that are directly relatable. Therefore, respondents may trust or admire influencers even if they do not fully identify with their everyday lives.

“I feel closer to smaller influencers than to big celebrities.”

This statement, illustrated in Figure 22, received somewhat stronger agreement. The average score was 3.48 out of 5. 53 respondents (52.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel closer

to smaller influencers than to big celebrities. 28 respondents (27.5%) were neutral, while 21 respondents (20.6%) disagreed.

Figure 22: Perceived closeness to smaller influencers compared to celebrities



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This suggests that smaller influencers may create a stronger sense of closeness and accessibility. They may appear more ordinary, more responsive, and more similar to their followers than celebrities. This supports the idea that smaller influencers can create stronger parasocial proximity, even if they do not have the same reach as larger influencers. For brands, this means smaller influencers may be useful when the goal is trust, community, and perceived authenticity.

Based on these results, **the hypothesis is partially supported.**

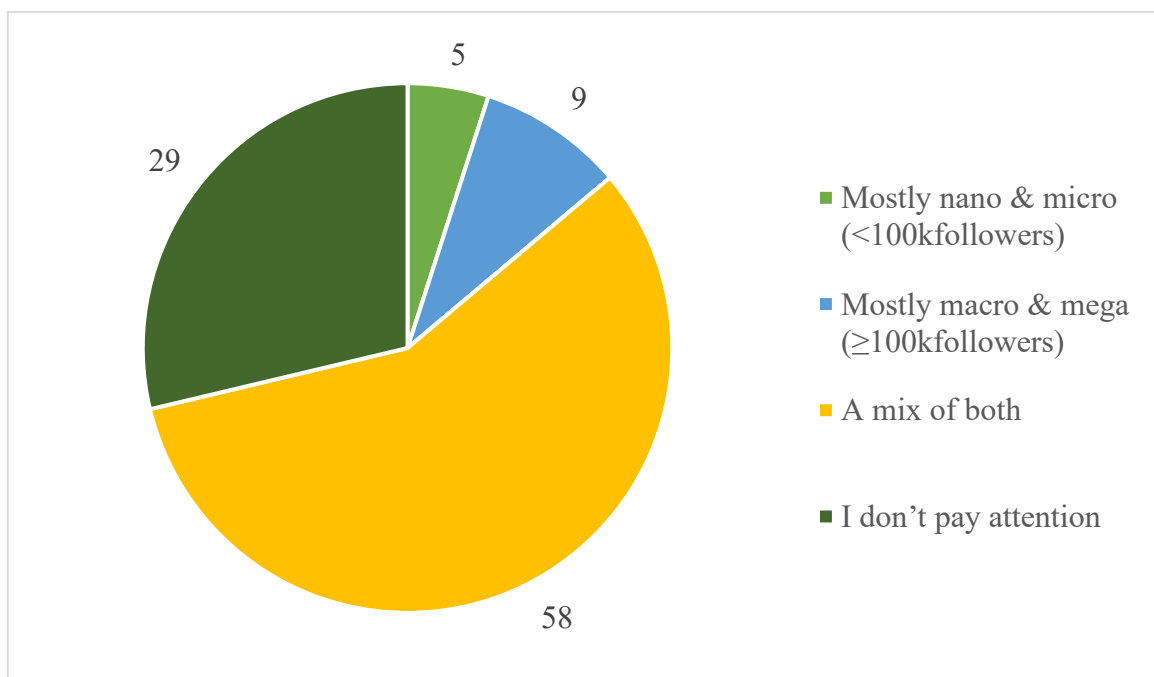
4.5. Additional Findings

Types of influencers usually followed

When respondents were asked what type of influencers they usually follow, the majority selected “a mix of both”, see Figure 23, meaning both smaller and larger influencers. This option was chosen by 58 respondents, representing 56.9% of the sample.

A large proportion, 30 respondents (29.4%), stated that they do not pay attention to influencer size. Only 9 respondents (8.8%) said they mostly follow macro and mega influencers with 100,000 or more followers, while 5 respondents (4.9%) mostly follow nano and micro influencers with fewer than 100,000 followers.

Figure 23: Types of influencers usually followed by respondents



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This result suggests that most respondents do not consciously organize influencers according to follower size. For consumers, influencer categories such as nano, micro, macro, or mega may be less important than the influencer's actual content, personality, and relevance. However, this does not mean that influencer size is irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that follower count is more of a marketing and academic classification than a category actively used by everyday followers.

Regularly followed influencer named by respondents

Respondents were asked to think of one specific influencer they follow regularly, rather than answering in general terms, as this approach was expected to yield more focused, consistent, and reliable responses grounded in an actual influencer-follower relationship. The answers were highly diverse, with most influencers mentioned only once. This shows that the respondents follow a wide variety of personalities, rather than concentrating on only a few highly dominant influencers.

Only a few names appeared more than once. For example, Keller Adél was mentioned three times, and Radics Zsombor was mentioned by two respondents, both of whom are smaller Hungarian influencers, and there were also 3 unclear or missing answers, such as a dot (shown in Table 3). The remaining answers included more Hungarian influencers, international content creators, athletes, streamers, lifestyle creators, beauty influencers, fitness influencers, and entertainment personalities.

Table 3: Most frequently mentioned regularly followed influencers

Influencer	Number of mentions
Keller Adél	3
Radics Zsombor	2
Other influencers (mentioned once)	94
Unclear or missing responses	3

Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026).

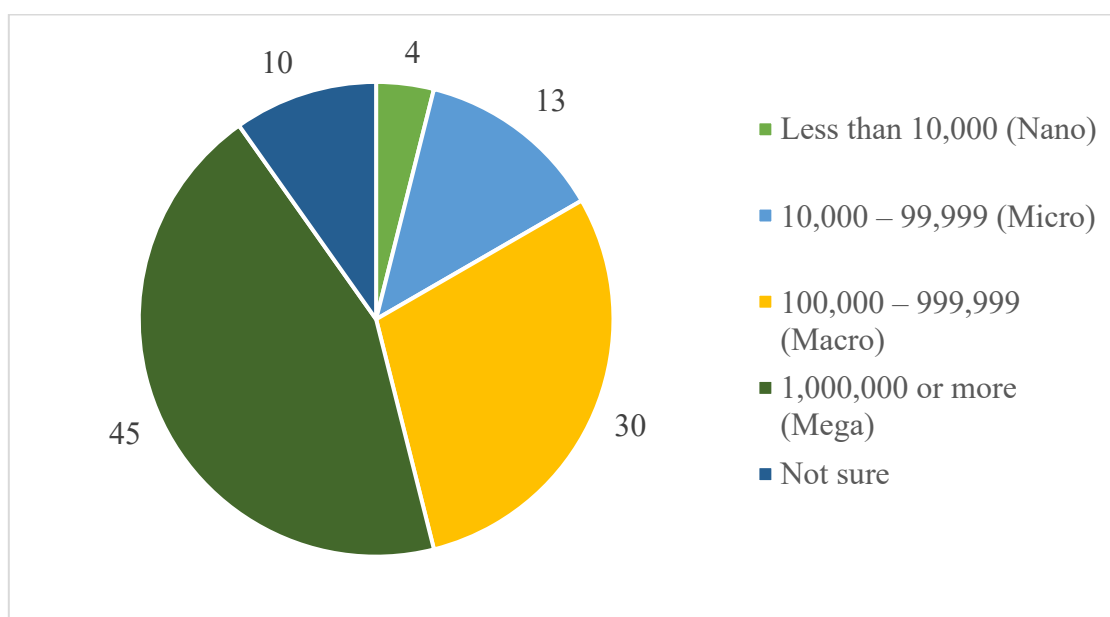
This diversity suggests that influencer following is highly individualized. Respondents choose influencers based on personal interests, content preferences, language, lifestyle relevance, entertainment value, or perceived authenticity. The wide range of answers also shows that influencer marketing does not operate through one homogeneous group of celebrities, but through a fragmented digital environment where many different creators can influence smaller audience segments. For the thesis, this finding can be used to argue that influencer marketing is strongly personalized and niche-oriented. Even when large influencers are present, respondents' choices are shaped by individual taste and personal relevance.

Approximate follower size of the named influencer

The results, illustrated in Figure 24, show that respondents most often named large influencers. 45 respondents (44.1%) stated that the influencer they follow has 1,000,000 followers or more, placing them in the mega influencer category. Another 30 respondents (29.4%) selected the macro influencer category, indicating influencers with between 100,000 and 999,999 followers.

In contrast, only 13 respondents (12.7%) named a micro influencer with 1,000 to 99,999 followers, and only 4 respondents (3.9%) named a nano influencer with fewer than 1,000 followers. A further 10 respondents (9.8%) were unsure of the influencer’s follower count.

Figure 24: Approximate follower size of the named influencer



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

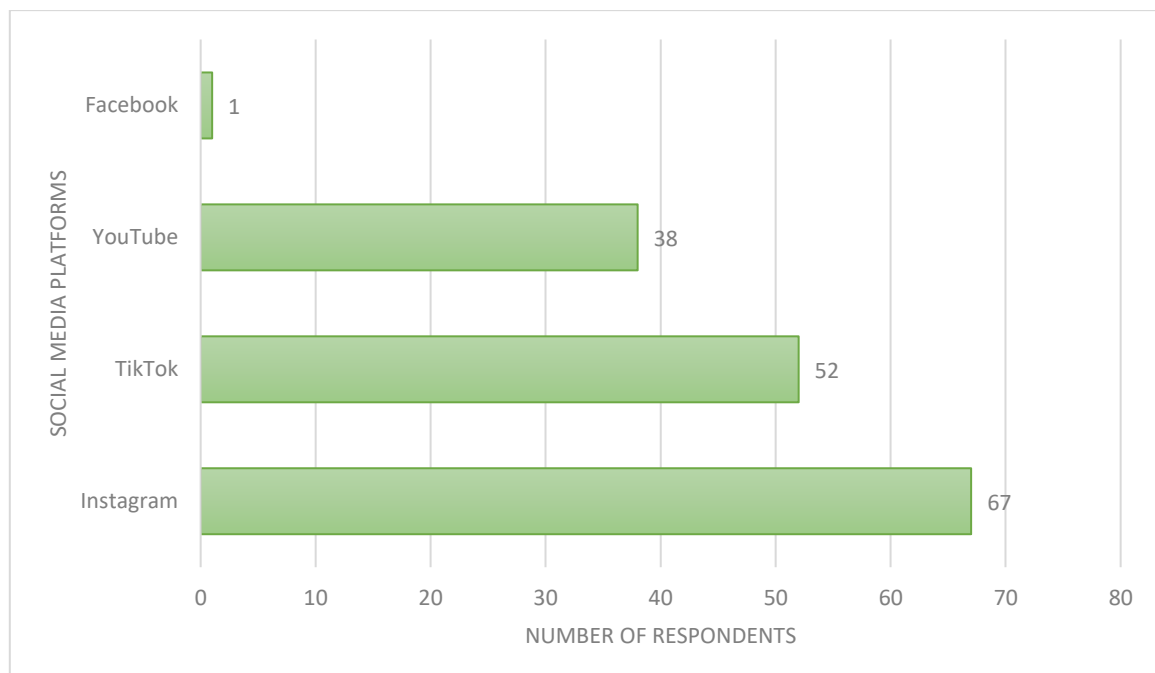
This finding is important because it contrasts with the earlier answers, in which most respondents claimed to follow a mix of both smaller and larger influencers or stated that they do not pay attention to size. In practice, when asked to think of one influencer they follow regularly, most respondents named macro or mega influencers. This again highlights a possible attitude-behavior gap. Respondents may value authenticity and relatability, which are often associated with smaller influencers, but their actual regular following patterns still include a strong presence of large influencers. Larger influencers, therefore, remain important because of their visibility, professional content production, and broad reach.

Platform where respondents mainly follow the named influencer

As shown in Figure 25, when respondents were asked where they mainly follow the influencer they named, Instagram again appeared as the strongest platform. This may indicate a relationship between general platform usage and influencer-following behavior, suggesting that users are more likely to follow influencers on the platforms they use most frequently. 67 respondents (65.7%) follow their chosen influencer on Instagram. TikTok was selected by 52 respondents (51.0%), while YouTube was selected by 38 respondents (37.3%). Facebook appeared only once, representing 1%.

The most common single-platform answer was Instagram, selected by 26 respondents. Another 22 respondents selected the combination of Instagram and TikTok, while 15 respondents followed their chosen influencer mainly on TikTok, and another 15 mainly on YouTube.

Figure 25: Platforms where respondents mainly follow the named influencer



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

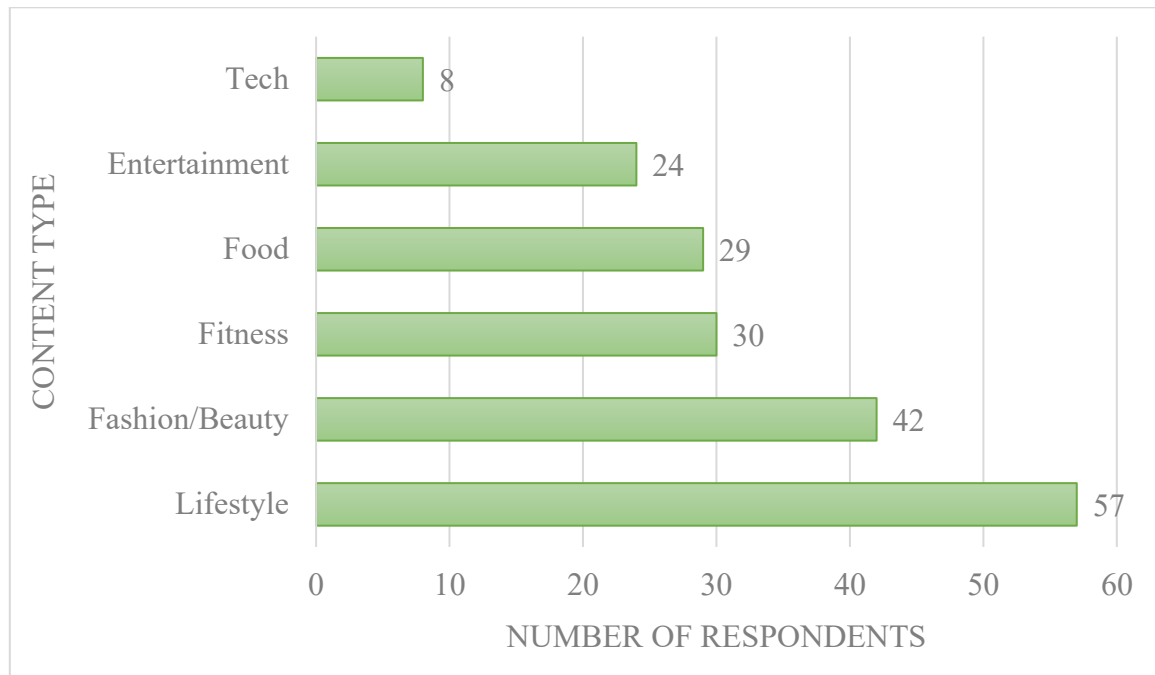
These results confirm the earlier finding regarding the most frequently used social media platforms, where Instagram and TikTok were identified as the dominant platforms in the sample. Instagram appears particularly important for maintaining regular influencer-following relationships, while TikTok is also highly relevant, especially for frequent exposure to short-form content. YouTube's role is smaller but still meaningful. It may be more suitable for longer videos, gaming, educational content, fitness content, or entertainment-based influencer relationships.

Main content type of the named influencer

Respondents were asked what type of content their chosen influencer mainly posts, and they could select multiple answers (see Figure 26). The most common category was lifestyle, selected by 57 respondents (55.9%), the second most common category was fashion/beauty, selected by 42 respondents (41.2%). Fitness was selected by 30 respondents (29.4%), while food-related content was selected by 29 respondents (28.4%). Entertainment was selected by 24 respondents (23.5%), while tech content was selected by 8 respondents (7.8%).

In addition to these main categories, several niche topics appeared, including cars, gaming and streaming, traveling, language learning, animal facts, news, politics, books, adult content, traditional stories, and experiences from different countries. Most of these niche answers were mentioned by only 1 respondent each, or 1% of respondents.

Figure 26: Six most frequently mentioned content types among named influencers



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

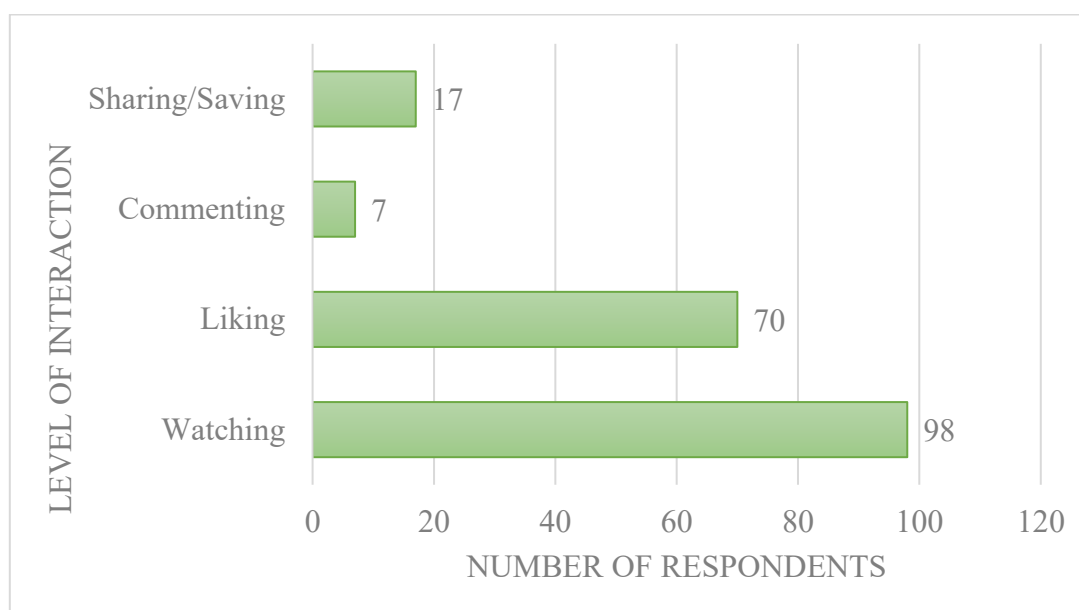
The dominance of lifestyle and fashion/beauty content suggests that respondents are especially exposed to influencers who present everyday life, appearance, consumption, personal routines, and aspirational lifestyles. These categories are highly relevant for influencer marketing because they naturally involve product recommendations, brand partnerships, and consumer choices. At the same time, the presence of niche categories shows that influencer marketing is not limited to beauty and fashion. It also extends to entertainment, gaming, sport, fitness, education, food, technology, and cultural content.

Level of interaction with the named influencer's content

The interaction data, illustrated in Figure 27, shows that engagement is mostly passive rather than active. Almost all respondents (98 people, or 96.1%) reported watching the influencer's

content, and 70 respondents (68.6%) reported liking it. However, more active forms of engagement were much less common. Only 17 respondents (16.7%) reported sharing or saving content, and only 7 respondents (6.9%) reported commenting.

Figure 27: Level of interaction with the named influencer's content



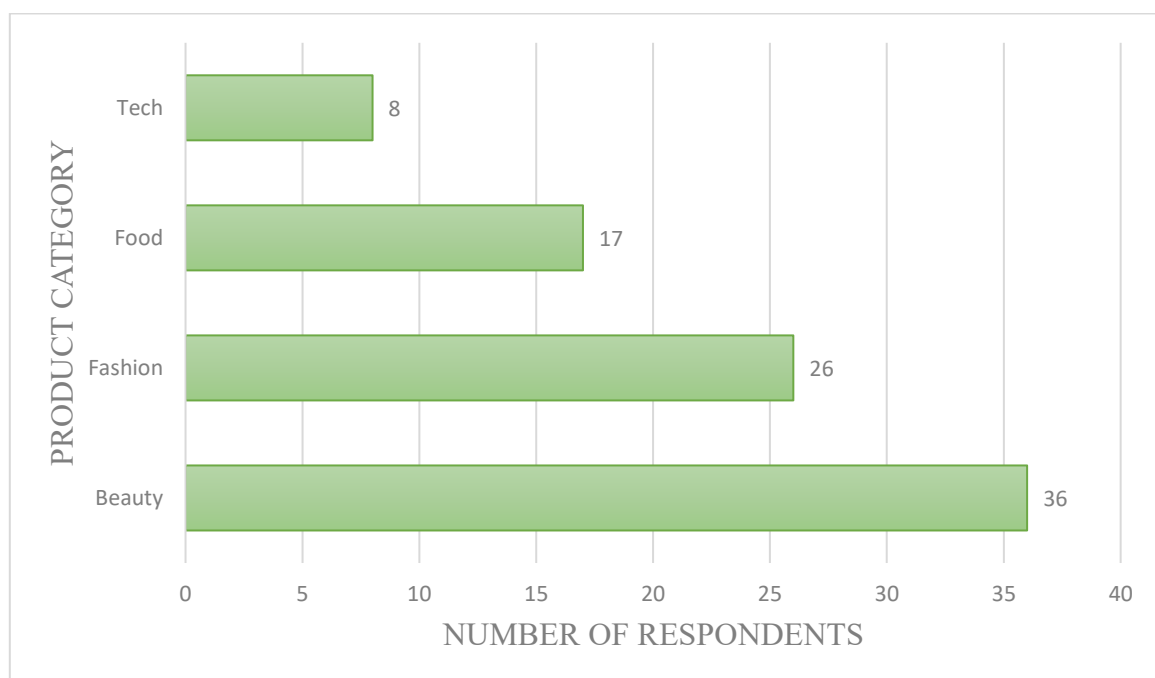
Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

This suggests that most respondents consume influencer content without actively participating in public interaction. They watch, and many also like, but relatively few comment or share. This is important because influence should not be measured only through visible interaction metrics. In other words, low commenting rates do not necessarily mean weak influence. Influencer impact may happen quietly through repeated exposure and personal consumption rather than public interaction.

Product categories purchased because of influencers

Among the product categories mentioned, beauty products were the most common (see Figure 28). Beauty was selected by 36 respondents (35.3% of the total sample), fashion by 26 (25.5%), food-related products by 17 (16.7%), and tech products by 8 (7.8%).

Figure 28: Four most frequently purchased product categories influenced by influencers



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

There were also several individual product categories mentioned once, including board games, horse equipment, books, gym equipment, coffee, home equipment, games, and fitness products.

These results show that influencer-driven purchases are especially common in categories that are visually demonstrable and connected to personal lifestyle. Beauty and fashion products are particularly suitable for influencer marketing because they can be shown in use, reviewed,

compared, and integrated into everyday content. Food and fitness-related products also appear relevant, likely because influencers can present them through routines, recommendations, recipes, workouts, or personal experiences. Tech is less common in this sample, but still present.

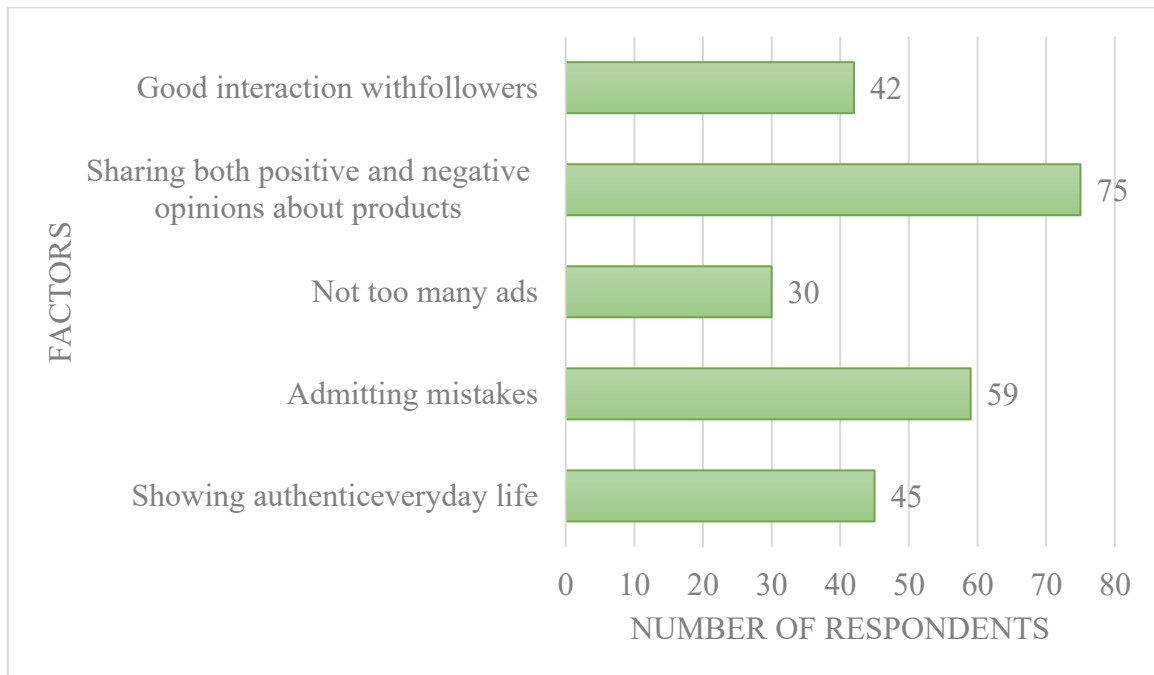
When does an influencer feel “real”?

Respondents could select multiple answers to indicate when an influencer feels authentic or “real” to them, results are shown in Figure 29. The most frequently selected factor was sharing both positive and negative opinions about products, chosen by 75 respondents (73.5%). This was the strongest authenticity indicator in the survey.

The second most important factor was admitting mistakes, selected by 59 respondents (57.8%). This suggests that respondents value imperfection and honesty. They do not expect influencers to appear flawless, instead, they appreciate openness and vulnerability.

Showing authentic everyday life was selected by 45 respondents (44.1%), while good interaction with followers was selected by 42 respondents (41.2%). Finally, only 30 respondents selected not too many ads (29.4%).

Figure 29: Factors contributing to perceived influencer authenticity



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

These findings show that authenticity is mainly associated with balanced, honest, and transparent communication. Respondents want influencers to present both advantages and disadvantages, admit mistakes, and show realistic aspects of everyday life. Interestingly, “not too many ads” was less frequently selected than product honesty or admitting mistakes. This suggests that advertisements are not necessarily a problem as long as the influencer remains transparent and credible. In influencer marketing, this means audiences do not automatically reject sponsored content. Instead, they reject content that feels fake, excessive, or disconnected from the influencer’s usual identity.

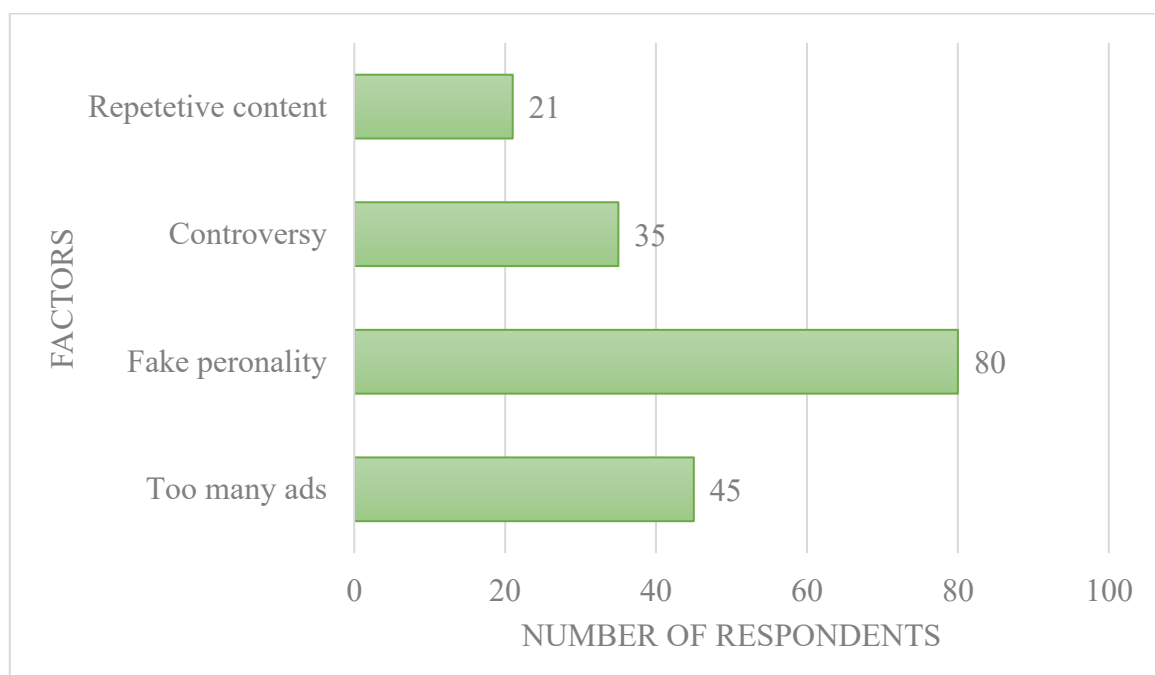
What instantly makes respondents unfollow an influencer?

As illustrated in Figure 30, the strongest reason for unfollowing was fake personality, selected by 80 respondents (78.4%). This was by far the most common answer, showing that perceived inauthenticity is the greatest threat to influencer-follower relationships.

The second most common reason was too many ads, selected by 45 respondents (44.1%). This confirms that over-commercialization can damage influencer credibility. While followers may accept sponsored posts, excessive advertising can make the influencer appear less genuine.

Controversy was selected by 35 respondents (34.3%), indicating that reputational issues and problematic behavior can also lead to unfollowing. Repetitive content was selected by 21 respondents (20.6%), indicating that content quality and variety also matter, though they are less important than authenticity and commercial balance.

Figure 30: Factors leading respondents to unfollow influencers



Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

These results highlight that influencer loyalty is conditional. Respondents are willing to follow and trust influencers, but this trust can quickly weaken if the influencer appears fake, overly promotional, controversial, or repetitive.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Overall Discussion

The survey results highlight a complex, multi-layered relationship between young consumers and social media influencers. Respondents are highly active on social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, and engage frequently with influencer content, often as part of their daily routine. This creates a digital environment in which influencers are consistently present and able to shape consumer attitudes over time through repeated exposure.

This study has some limitations. The sample is not fully representative, and the small number of participants means the results cannot be applied to everyone. Also, the answers are self-reported, so they may not always be completely accurate. Parasocial relationships were measured using limited indicators rather than a validated multi-item scale, which may restrict the depth of interpretation. Some inconsistencies were observed: some respondents initially indicated they do not follow influencers, but later named one. This suggests that influencer exposure may occur implicitly. A small number of responses contained non-interpretable entries, such as empty or non-meaningful answers. These were treated as missing data and excluded from relevant parts of the analysis.

The demographic composition of the sample is also important to consider. The majority of respondents are young, female, and Hungarian, reflecting a highly engaged group with strong social media and influencer content engagement. While this strengthens the relevance of the findings for this specific segment, it also limits the extent to which the results can be generalized to other populations.

The findings clearly show that Instagram and TikTok dominate as the main platforms for influencer consumption. This supports the idea that visual and short-form content plays a central role in modern digital marketing strategies, particularly among younger users.

One of the most interesting outcomes of the study is the contrast between perceived authenticity and actual following behavior. Many respondents indicated that smaller influencers are more authentic, more trustworthy, and psychologically closer to their audience. This supports the hypothesis that micro influencers are perceived as more authentic than macro and mega influencers, as well as the hypothesis that parasocial relationship strength is higher for micro influencers than for macro and mega influencers. However, when respondents were asked to name one influencer they follow regularly, the majority named macro or mega influencers. This suggests that while smaller influencers may have an advantage in terms of perceived authenticity and closeness, larger influencers still dominate in terms of visibility and reach.

The results related to trust also provide important insights. A large proportion of respondents agreed that influencers appear honest, share real experiences, and provide trustworthy recommendations. At the same time, respondents showed some awareness of the commercial nature of influencer content. This indicates that trust in influencers is not unconditional, but rather depends on the perceived balance between authenticity and promotional activity. These findings support the hypothesis that perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust.

The relationship between trust and consumer behavior is also evident in the data. More than half of respondents reported purchasing a product based on an influencer's recommendation, and many indicated they would consider buying products promoted by influencers. However, this influence is not always immediate or direct. Instead, influencer content often helps raise awareness and generate interest, which may later lead to purchasing decisions. This supports the hypothesis that consumer trust positively influences purchase intention.

In addition, the results suggest that elements of parasocial relationships are present in the influencer-follower dynamic. While respondents do not always feel a strong personal connection, indicators such as perceived closeness and relatability show that influencers can create a sense of familiarity and connection. These factors may strengthen influencers' persuasive impact, even if followers are not always consciously aware of them.

Overall, the findings suggest that both smaller and larger influencers play important yet distinct roles in shaping consumer behavior. Micro influencers appear to be more effective in building authenticity, trust, and a sense of closeness, while macro and mega influencers benefit from greater reach and visibility. As a result, the most effective influencer marketing strategies may involve a combination of both types, depending on the campaign's specific goals.

In conclusion, the survey confirms that influencer marketing is a significant and effective tool among young social media users. However, its effectiveness depends on several interconnected factors, including authenticity, trust, perceived closeness, and the integration of commercial content into the influencer's communication.

5.2. Comparison with Previous Research

The purpose of this section is to compare the findings of the present research with previous academic studies related to influencer marketing, authenticity, consumer trust, purchase intention, and parasocial relationships. While the empirical results of this study provide insights into Hungarian consumers' perceptions of influencers, it is also important to examine how these findings align with or differ from existing international literature.

The following comparative discussion focuses on four major hypotheses examined in the research. Previous studies on influencer marketing have consistently emphasized the importance of authenticity, credibility, emotional connection, and trust in shaping consumer

behavior on social media platforms. Therefore, comparing the current findings with earlier research deepens understanding of influencer effectiveness and positions the present study within the broader academic discussion of digital marketing and social media influence.

The comparison primarily relies on recent studies examining influencer credibility, parasocial relationships, homophily, trustworthiness, and purchase intention. Particular attention is given to how previous research supports or contradicts the findings of the present study, as well as to possible explanations for similarities and differences between the results.

H1: Micro Influencers Are Perceived as More Authentic Than Macro and Mega Influencers

The findings of the present study partially support the hypothesis that micro influencers are perceived as more authentic than macro and mega influencers. Previous literature strongly supports the idea that smaller influencers are often associated with greater authenticity, relatability, and emotional closeness.

Liu and Zheng (2024) emphasize that authenticity is one of the most important factors in the effectiveness of influencer marketing. According to their research, followers are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward influencers who appear genuine, relatable, and emotionally accessible. The authors argue that authenticity strengthens parasocial relationships and increases persuasive power, particularly when influencer communication feels natural rather than overly commercialized. Their findings suggest that followers often perceive influencers as more trustworthy when they present realistic experiences and maintain a communication style that resembles ordinary social interaction rather than traditional advertising.

Similarly, Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023) argue that micro influencers frequently create stronger engagement and interaction with followers than larger influencers. Their study

suggests that follower count alone does not determine influence effectiveness. Instead, smaller influencers often appear more authentic because their communication style feels more personal and less corporate. The authors also note that micro influencers generally maintain closer interaction with their audiences, which contributes to stronger perceptions of credibility and sincerity.

Rizzo et al. (2024) also support the importance of relatability and similarity in influencer-follower relationships. Their research highlights that followers are more likely to trust influencers whom they perceive as psychologically or socially similar to themselves. The study emphasizes that perceived similarity contributes significantly to emotional attachment and follower engagement. This supports the broader argument that micro influencers may benefit from appearing more accessible and relatable than celebrities or highly commercialized influencers.

At the same time, previous research also suggests that authenticity is not determined exclusively by influencer size. Liu and Zheng (2024) argue that authenticity depends heavily on communication style, emotional transparency, and consistency between influencer identity and promotional content. Influencers who appear overly commercial may lose credibility regardless of their follower count. Similarly, Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023) note that excessive advertising and overly promotional behavior can damage influencer authenticity and reduce persuasive effectiveness.

Another important aspect identified in the literature is the role of homophily. According to Liu and Zheng (2024), followers are more likely to emotionally connect with influencers whom they perceive as similar in terms of values, attitudes, or lifestyle. This perceived similarity contributes to stronger parasocial relationships and greater trust. Smaller influencers may benefit from this effect because their content often appears more realistic and less distant than the highly curated content of macro and mega influencers.

However, the literature also indicates that larger influencers continue to maintain substantial persuasive power despite lower perceived authenticity. Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023) explain that macro and mega influencers benefit from stronger visibility, professional content production, and greater digital reach. As a result, even if followers perceive smaller influencers as more authentic, larger influencers may still dominate social media environments because of repeated exposure and algorithmic visibility.

Overall, previous research strongly supports the argument that micro influencers are often perceived as more authentic, relatable, and emotionally accessible than macro and mega influencers. Nevertheless, the literature also demonstrates that authenticity depends not only on influencer size but also on communication style, transparency, emotional closeness, and the degree of commercialization present in influencer content.

H2: Perceived Authenticity Positively Influences Consumer Trust

Previous literature strongly supports the hypothesis that perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust. Across influencer marketing research, authenticity is consistently identified as one of the most important factors determining whether followers perceive influencers as trustworthy and credible.

Liu and Zheng (2024) argue that authenticity significantly strengthens parasocial relationships and consumer trust. According to their findings, followers are more likely to trust influencers whose communication appears emotionally genuine, realistic, and transparent. The authors emphasize that authentic influencers create stronger emotional connections because followers perceive their opinions and recommendations as sincere rather than purely commercial. This emotional realism increases the persuasive effectiveness of influencer communication and strengthens followers' willingness to engage with influencer-endorsed products and brands.

The study also highlights that authenticity is closely connected to consistency. Influencers who maintain a coherent online identity and promote products aligned with their usual content style are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy. In contrast, influencers whose sponsored content appears forced or disconnected from their established online persona may lose credibility. Liu and Zheng (2024) further note that consumers increasingly recognize the commercial nature of influencer marketing, making authenticity and transparency even more important in maintaining trust.

Similarly, Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023) identify trustworthiness as one of the central dimensions of influencer credibility. Their research demonstrates that consumers are more likely to trust influencers who appear honest, sincere, and reliable. The authors argue that influencer-generated content is often perceived as more trustworthy than traditional advertising because influencers communicate in a more personal and relatable way. Unlike corporate advertising, influencer communication often resembles ordinary social interaction, reducing the perceived distance between the influencer and the follower.

Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023) also emphasize that authenticity can be weakened by excessive commercialization. Their findings suggest that followers become more skeptical when influencers engage in too many sponsorships or appear overly profit-oriented. This indicates that authenticity is not only connected to personality but also to the balance between promotional and non-promotional content. Influencers who maintain realistic communication and avoid excessive advertising are more likely to preserve follower trust.

Fauziah and Mukhid (2026) similarly conclude that influencer credibility positively affects online consumer trust and purchasing behavior. Their research emphasizes that consumers rely on influencers because they perceive them as more knowledgeable and trustworthy than traditional promotional sources. The study also highlights the importance of content quality in

maintaining credibility. Informative, balanced, and useful content increases perceived authenticity and encourages consumers to trust influencer recommendations.

Another important theoretical contribution comes from Serban (2010), who discusses the Ohanian model of source credibility. According to this framework, trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness are central elements of persuasive communication. Serban (2010) defines trustworthiness as a set of characteristics, including honesty, sincerity, and reliability. This theoretical perspective strongly supports influencer marketing research that identifies authenticity and transparency as key determinants of consumer trust.

Rizzo et al. (2024) further strengthen this argument by emphasizing the role of similarity and emotional identification in influencer credibility. Their findings suggest that followers are more likely to trust influencers whom they perceive as relatable and psychologically similar to themselves. Perceived authenticity, therefore, emerges not only from honesty but also from emotional accessibility and relatability.

Taken together, previous literature strongly supports the hypothesis that perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that authenticity, transparency, emotional realism, and sincerity are essential components of influencer credibility. At the same time, the literature also suggests that authenticity is fragile and may be weakened by excessive commercialization, repetitive sponsorships, or communication styles perceived as artificial or manipulative.

H3: Consumer Trust Positively Influences Purchase Intention

Previous literature strongly supports the hypothesis that consumer trust positively influences purchase intention. Research on influencer marketing consistently shows that consumers are

more likely to consider purchasing products recommended by influencers they perceive as trustworthy, credible, and authentic.

Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023) found that influencer credibility has a direct positive impact on consumer purchase intention. Their study specifically emphasizes the importance of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness in shaping consumers' attitudes toward influencer-endorsed products. According to the authors, consumers are more likely to accept recommendations and consider purchasing products when influencers are perceived as honest and reliable. The study further argues that credibility increases persuasive effectiveness because consumers interpret influencer recommendations as more authentic and personally relevant than traditional advertising messages.

The authors also highlight the relationship between credibility and brand equity. Their findings suggest that trusted influencers positively shape consumers' brand evaluations, thereby indirectly increasing purchase intention. This demonstrates that influencer trust not only affects immediate purchasing decisions but also broader consumer attitudes toward products and companies.

Similarly, Fauziah and Mukhid (2026) conclude that influencer credibility significantly influences online purchase decisions. Their research identifies credibility as one of the most important determinants of consumer behavior in online marketplaces. According to the study, consumers rely heavily on influencer recommendations because digital purchasing environments involve uncertainty and limited physical interaction with products. Influencers, therefore, function as informational and emotional intermediaries, reducing perceived risk and increasing confidence in purchase decisions.

The study also emphasizes that trust works together with other important variables, including content quality, brand awareness, and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Informative and

useful influencer content increases consumer confidence and strengthens purchase intentions. This suggests that trust is not created solely by personality, but also by the quality and usefulness of an influencer's communication.

Liu and Zheng (2024) similarly argue that parasocial relationships and perceived influencer credibility positively affect purchase intention. Their research demonstrates that followers who feel emotionally connected to influencers are more likely to trust influencer recommendations and develop positive attitudes toward endorsed brands. According to the authors, emotional attachment strengthens persuasion because followers perceive influencer recommendations as more personal and sincere.

The study further explains that repeated exposure to influencer content increases persuasive effectiveness over time. Consumers who regularly interact with influencer content may gradually develop familiarity and trust, which can later influence purchasing decisions. This is especially important in social media environments where users are continuously exposed to influencer communication through algorithms and repeated digital interaction.

Another important contribution of Liu and Zheng (2024) concerns the role of informative content. The authors argue that informative and realistic influencer communication strengthens credibility and increases purchase intention. Followers are more likely to trust influencers who provide useful product information, balanced opinions, and realistic experiences rather than purely promotional content.

At the same time, previous literature also suggests that trust alone does not automatically lead to purchasing behavior. Fauziah and Mukhid (2026) emphasize that purchase decisions are influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including financial considerations, brand familiarity, content quality, and social influence. Similarly, Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023)

note that influencer marketing effectiveness may vary depending on product category, audience characteristics, and consumer involvement levels.

Another important observation concerns the continued influence of macro and mega influencers. Although smaller influencers are often perceived as more authentic, larger influencers may still generate stronger commercial impact because of their broader reach and higher visibility. Coutinho, Dias and Pereira (2023) explain that repeated exposure and large audience size remain highly influential in digital marketing environments. This suggests that trust and authenticity are important, but visibility and exposure frequency also significantly shape purchase intention.

Collectively, previous research strongly supports the hypothesis that consumer trust positively influences purchase intention. The existing literature consistently demonstrates that trustworthiness, credibility, emotional connection, and informative communication strengthen the effectiveness of influencer marketing and positively affect consumer purchasing behavior.

H4: Parasocial Relationship Strength Is Higher Among Micro Influencers Than Among Macro and Mega Influencers

Previous literature generally supports the hypothesis that parasocial relationship strength is higher among micro influencers than among macro and mega influencers. Research on influencer marketing consistently demonstrates that smaller influencers are often perceived as more relatable, emotionally accessible, and psychologically closer to followers.

Liu and Zheng (2024) emphasize that parasocial relationships are strongly influenced by authenticity and homophily. According to their study, followers are more likely to form emotional connections with influencers who appear relatable, realistic, and similar to themselves. The authors define homophily as perceived similarity between influencers and

followers regarding values, attitudes, lifestyles, or personality traits. This perceived similarity contributes significantly to emotional attachment and follower engagement.

The study argues that parasocial relationships function as an important mechanism behind influencer marketing effectiveness. Followers who feel emotionally connected to influencers are more likely to trust their recommendations and develop positive attitudes toward the brands they promote. Liu and Zheng (2024) further suggest that influencers strengthen these relationships through repeated interaction, informal communication, and content that resembles ordinary social interaction rather than traditional advertising.

Rizzo et al. (2024) similarly emphasize the importance of emotional identification and perceived similarity in influencer-follower relationships. Their research demonstrates that followers are more likely to engage with influencers whom they perceive as psychologically relatable. The study highlights that similarity and emotional accessibility contribute significantly to influencer credibility and follower behavior. This supports the broader argument that micro influencers may create stronger parasocial relationships because they often appear more approachable and realistic than larger influencers or celebrities.

The literature also suggests that smaller influencers benefit from reduced social distance. Liu and Zheng (2024) argue that followers frequently perceive influencers as “ordinary people” rather than distant celebrities. This perception strengthens feelings of familiarity and emotional closeness. Smaller influencers may therefore appear more authentic because their content often reflects everyday experiences, personal communication styles, and direct interaction with followers.

Another important aspect discussed in the literature is interaction frequency. Parasocial relationships are strengthened through repeated exposure and ongoing communication. Liu and Zheng (2024) explain that continuous social media interaction creates the illusion of intimacy

and friendship between influencers and followers. This emotional closeness increases engagement and trust over time.

At the same time, previous research also suggests that parasocial relationships should not be understood as universally intense emotional attachments. Followers may consume influencer content regularly without necessarily developing deep psychological bonds. Rizzo et al. (2024) note that parasocial interaction exists on a spectrum, ranging from moderate familiarity to stronger emotional attachment, depending on audience characteristics and influencer communication style.

Another important observation concerns the role of macro and mega influencers. Although smaller influencers may generate stronger emotional closeness, larger influencers continue to maintain substantial influence because of their visibility, aspirational image, and professional content production. Followers may admire and engage with larger influencers even without experiencing particularly strong parasocial attachment. This suggests that emotional closeness is only one dimension of influencer effectiveness.

The literature also highlights the importance of authenticity in strengthening parasocial relationships. Liu and Zheng (2024) argue that followers are more likely to emotionally connect with influencers whose communication appears honest, natural, and emotionally transparent. Excessive commercialization or artificial communication may weaken emotional attachment and increase consumer skepticism.

Overall, previous literature broadly supports the hypothesis that parasocial relationship strength is higher among micro influencers than among macro and mega influencers. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that authenticity, relatability, perceived similarity, and emotional accessibility strengthen parasocial relationships between influencers and followers. However, the literature also suggests that parasocial attachment varies in intensity and should be

understood as one important component of influencer marketing effectiveness rather than the sole explanation for influencer impact.

In summary, the comparison with prior literature demonstrates that the present study's findings are largely consistent with existing academic research on influencer marketing and consumer behavior. Previous studies strongly support the importance of authenticity, trustworthiness, emotional closeness, and credibility in shaping influencer effectiveness and consumer attitudes.

Regarding the first hypothesis, the findings partially support the assumption that micro influencers are perceived as more authentic than macro and mega influencers. Previous literature consistently emphasizes the authenticity advantage of smaller influencers, given their relatability and emotional accessibility. However, the current findings also suggest that larger influencers continue to maintain substantial influence due to their higher visibility and broader audience reach.

The second hypothesis, proposing that perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust, was strongly supported by both the present findings and previous literature. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that honesty, transparency, and realistic communication are central elements of influencer credibility and significantly strengthen consumer trust.

Similarly, the third hypothesis, stating that consumer trust positively influences purchase intention, was also supported. Previous research confirms that trusted influencers positively affect consumers' willingness to consider and purchase endorsed products. However, the findings also suggest that purchasing decisions are influenced by several additional factors beyond trust alone, including content quality, product relevance, and repeated exposure.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis, which proposed that parasocial relationship strength is higher among micro influencers than among macro and mega influencers, was partially supported. Previous studies strongly associate smaller influencers with emotional closeness and

relatability, although the present findings indicate that parasocial attachment among followers may often remain moderate rather than highly intense.

To conclude, the comparative analysis demonstrates that the findings of the present study align closely with broader international research trends in the influencer marketing literature. The results further confirm that authenticity, trustworthiness, emotional connection, and perceived relatability remain central factors influencing consumer attitudes and behavior in digital marketing environments.

5.3. Conclusions

This thesis examined the role of influencer marketing in shaping consumer attitudes and behavior in the digital environment, with a particular focus on the differences between micro influencers and macro/mega influencers. The findings confirm that influencer marketing has become a highly relevant part of modern marketing, especially among younger consumers who are active social media users and regularly exposed to influencer content. The empirical research results show that authenticity is one of the most important factors in influencer effectiveness.

In response to the main research question, the findings suggest that micro influencers are generally perceived as more authentic, trustworthy, and relatable than macro and mega influencers. This perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust and can also increase purchase intention. However, despite this authenticity advantage, larger influencers still remain highly influential due to their greater visibility and reach.

Most respondents perceive influencers as honest and relatively authentic, which strongly contributes to trust. Influencer marketing primarily impacts the initial phases of the consumer

decision-making process, such as creating awareness, generating interest, and encouraging information search, rather than consistently resulting in immediate purchase decisions.

Based on the analysis, the hypotheses can be evaluated in the following way, as presented in Table 3.

Table 4: The hypotheses examined during the research and their results

Hypothesis	Result
Micro influencers are perceived as more authentic than macro and mega influencers.	Partially supported.
Perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust.	Supported.
Consumer trust positively influences purchase intention.	Supported.
Parasocial relationship strength is higher among micro influencers than among macro and mega influencers.	Partially supported.

Source: own compilation based on survey data (2026)

Micro influencers are perceived as more authentic than macro and mega influencers - partially supported. The results indicate that many respondents associate smaller influencers with higher authenticity and closeness. However, this perception is not completely consistent, as a considerable number of respondents remained neutral, suggesting that authenticity depends not only on follower size but also on the influencer's content and behavior.

Perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust - supported. The findings clearly show that when influencers are perceived as authentic and honest, respondents are more likely to trust their recommendations.

Consumer trust positively influences purchase intention - supported. The results suggest that trust plays an important role in shaping consumer behavior. Many respondents indicated they would consider purchasing products recommended by influencers, and more than half had already made such a purchase.

Parasocial relationship strength is higher among micro influencers than among macro and mega influencers - partially supported. The data suggest that smaller influencers create a stronger sense of closeness and familiarity. However, overall parasocial connection was moderate, meaning that not all respondents feel a strong personal connection to influencers.

One of the most important findings of the study is the presence of an attitude-behavior gap. While respondents tend to perceive micro influencers as more authentic and relatable, their actual behavior shows that macro and mega influencers are still more dominant in terms of visibility and influence. This indicates that although authenticity is important, reach and repeated exposure also play a significant role.

In addition, the results show that influencer marketing works through a combination of factors, including trust, credibility, and perceived closeness. Even when strong emotional connections are absent, repeated exposure to influencer content can still shape consumer attitudes and behavior over time.

Overall, the findings suggest that different types of influencers serve different purposes. Micro influencers are better at building trust and authenticity, while macro and mega influencers are more effective at reaching larger audiences. Therefore, the most effective marketing strategies are likely to combine both types, depending on the campaign's specific goals.

Despite its contributions, the study has some limitations, including a non-representative sample and reliance on self-reported data. Future research could involve a larger and more diverse sample and apply more advanced analytical methods to gain deeper insights.

In conclusion, influencer marketing is a complex and continuously evolving field where success depends on balancing authenticity, trust, and reach in the digital environment.

5.3.1. Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to influencer marketing literature by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between influencer size, perceived authenticity, trust, and consumer behavior. The findings support previous studies showing that micro influencers are generally seen as more authentic and trustworthy than larger ones. The study also confirms the positive link between authenticity and trust and the role of trust in shaping purchase intention. By examining indicators of parasocial relationships, the research extends understanding of the psychological mechanisms behind influencer effectiveness and highlights the importance of emotional connection in digital marketing.

5.3.2. Managerial Contributions

These findings provide actionable guidance for marketers and companies developing influencer marketing strategies. Macro and mega influencers are effective for increasing visibility and reaching broad audiences, while micro influencers are better at building trust, authenticity, and strong audience relationships. Organizations should align influencer selection with campaign goals. Brands seeking credibility, engagement, and consumer trust may benefit from partnering with micro influencers, whereas larger influencers are more suitable for awareness campaigns.

The results also highlight the need for authentic communication and long-term audience relationships.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these results. First, the study used a small convenience sample, primarily of young Hungarian respondents, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce respondent bias and subjective perceptions. Third, the research examined perceived attitudes and purchase intentions rather than actual purchasing behavior.

Future research could address these limitations by using larger, more diverse international samples, adopting longitudinal designs, or examining actual consumer behavior through experimental methods. Further studies may also compare differences across social media platforms, product categories, or cultural contexts, and explore the impact of emerging influencer types and new forms of influencer-audience interaction.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anikó Lófia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping initial 'A'.

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Annex 1

The following questionnaire was used to collect primary data for the empirical part of this study.

INFLUENCERS IN DIGITAL MARKETING

Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this survey.

This questionnaire is part of a Master's thesis and explores social media usage and perceptions of influencers. Respondents were asked about their general habits and their opinions regarding a specific influencer they follow.

There are no right or wrong answers; the research focuses on personal experiences and views.

The survey is anonymous and used for academic purposes only.

Estimated completion time: 5-7 minutes.

Section 1 - General Social Media Usage

1. Which social media platforms do you use most frequently? *(Multiple choice)*
 - ☐ Instagram
 - ☐ TikTok
 - ☐ YouTube
 - ☐ Other
2. How often do you engage with influencer content (likes, comments, sharing, watching stories)?

- Daily
- Several times a week
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

3. How much time do you spend daily on social media?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1 to less than 2 hours
- 2 to less than 3 hours
- 3 to less than 4 hours
- 4 hours or more

4. What type of influencers do you usually follow?

- Mostly nano & micro (<100,000 followers)
- Mostly macro & mega ($\geq$ 100,000 followers)
- A mix of both
- I do not pay attention

Section 2 - Selected Influencer Profile

5. Please think of and name one influencer you follow regularly:

(Open-ended question)

(For the following questions, please answer specifically about this influencer.)

6. On which platform do you mainly follow this influencer? *(Multiple choice)*

- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Other

7. Approximately how many followers does this influencer have?

- ☐ Less than 10,000 (Nano)
- ☐ 10,000-99,999 (Micro)
- ☐ 100,000-999,999 (Macro)
- ☐ 1,000,000 or more (Mega)
- ☐ Not sure

8. What type of content does this influencer mainly post? *(Multiple choice)*

- ☐ Lifestyle
- ☐ Fashion/Beauty
- ☐ Fitness
- ☐ Food
- ☐ Tech
- ☐ Entertainment
- ☐ Other

9. How actively do you interact with this influencer's content? *(Multiple choice)*

- Only watching
- Liking
- Commenting
- Sharing/saving

Section 3 - Perceived Authenticity

(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

10. This influencer seems honest in their content.

11. This influencer shares real experiences, not just perfect moments.

12. This influencer does not appear overly commercial.

Section 4 - Trust

(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

13. I trust the recommendations of this influencer.

14. I believe this influencer gives honest opinions, even about sponsored products.

15. I sometimes question the credibility of this influencer's product recommendations.

16. I trust this influencer more than traditional advertisements.

Section 5 - Parasocial Relationship

(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

17. I feel like I know this influencer personally.

18. I can relate to this influencer's life.

Section 6 - Purchase Intention

(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

19. I would consider buying a product recommended by this influencer.

20. I am more likely to try a product promoted by this influencer.

21. I have searched for a product after seeing it from this influencer.

Section 7 - Micro vs Macro Perception

(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

22. Smaller influencers (<100,000 followers) feel more authentic than larger influencers
(≥100,000 followers).

23. I trust micro influencers more than celebrity or mega influencers.

24. I feel closer to smaller influencers than to big celebrities.

Section 8 - Past Behaviour

25. Have you ever purchased a product because of an influencer?

- ☐ Yes

- No
- I do not remember

26. If yes, what type of product was it? (*Multiple choice*)

- Fashion
- Beauty
- Food
- Tech
- Other

27. Who influenced you more in that decision?

- Smaller influencers (<100,000 followers)
- Larger influencers (≥100,000 followers)
- I do not remember

Section 9 - Perceptions (Behavioral Triggers)

28. When does an influencer feel “real” to you? (*Multiple choice*)

- Showing authentic everyday life
- Admitting mistakes
- Not too many ads
- Sharing both positive and negative opinions about products
- Good interaction with followers

29. What instantly makes you unfollow an influencer? *(Multiple choice)*

- Too many ads
- Fake personality
- Controversy
- Repetitive content

Section 10 - Demographics

30. Gender:

(Open-ended or predefined options)

31. Age:

(Open-ended)

32. Country:

- Hungary
- Italy
- Other