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Instagram as an Influencer Marketing Platform: A
Comparative Study of Consumer Perception between EU
and Non-EU Countries

End of Degree Project

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in marketing on Instagram, with a particular focus on comparing consumer perceptions between European Union (EU) and non-EU countries. With the advent of digital marketing, platforms like Instagram, now part of Meta, have become crucial for businesses seeking to leverage user interactions and influencer-created content. This thesis aims to elucidate how consumers from different regions perceive influencer marketing, specifically examining dimensions of trust and credibility, authenticity, and attitudes towards sponsored content.

The primary objectives of this thesis are to assess the trust and credibility consumers place in Instagram influencers, to analyse the importance of authenticity in influencer content, and to understand consumer attitudes towards sponsored posts. By comparing these factors between EU and non-EU countries, the study seeks to provide insights into regional differences in consumer behaviour and the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies. This comparative approach aims to enhance the understanding of how regional contexts influence consumer perceptions and engagement with influencer marketing on Instagram.

Through a detailed examination of these aspects, the work addresses several critical questions: the extent of consumer trust in influencers' product recommendations, the perceived importance of authenticity, and the varying attitudes towards sponsored content across different regions. The findings are likely to offer contributions to both theoretical frameworks and practical applications in digital marketing, highlighting the nuances of consumer interactions with influencers in the two markets. This comprehensive analysis underscores the significance of contextual factors in shaping the efficacy of influencer marketing strategies, ultimately aiming to inform more tailored and effective marketing practices.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, influencers, Instagram, social media, consumer perception, effectiveness

Resumen

Este trabajo estudia el papel de los influencers en las redes sociales en el marketing en Instagram, con un enfoque particular en la comparación de las percepciones de los consumidores entre los países de la Unión Europea (UE) y los no pertenecientes a la UE. Con la llegada del marketing digital, plataformas como Instagram, que ahora forma parte de Meta, se han vuelto cruciales para las empresas que buscan aprovechar las interacciones de los usuarios y los contenidos creado por los influencers. Este trabajo quiere esclarecer cómo perciben los consumidores de diferentes regiones el marketing de influencers, examinando específicamente las dimensiones de la confianza y credibilidad, la autenticidad y las actitudes hacia los contenidos patrocinados.

Los objetivos principales de este trabajo son evaluar la confianza y la credibilidad que los consumidores depositan en los influencers de Instagram, analizar la importancia de la autenticidad en los contenidos de los influencers y comprender las actitudes de los consumidores hacia las publicaciones patrocinadas. Al comparar estos factores entre los países de la UE y los no pertenecientes a la UE, el trabajo busca proporcionar información sobre las diferencias regionales en el comportamiento de los consumidores y la eficacia de las estrategias de marketing de influencers. Este enfoque comparativo pretende mejorar la comprensión de cómo los contextos regionales influyen en las percepciones y el compromiso de los consumidores con el marketing de influencers en Instagram.

A través de un examen detallado de estos aspectos, el trabajo aborda varias preguntas críticas: el grado de confianza de los consumidores en las recomendaciones de productos de los influencers, la importancia percibida de la autenticidad y las diversas actitudes hacia los contenidos patrocinados en diferentes regiones. Se espera que los hallazgos podría contribuir tanto a los marcos teóricos como a las aplicaciones prácticas del marketing digital, destacando las diferencias de las interacciones de los consumidores con los influencers en los dos mercados. Este análisis integral subraya la importancia de los factores contextuales a la hora de determinar la eficacia de las estrategias de marketing de influencers, con el objetivo final de informar prácticas de marketing más personalizadas y eficaces.

Palabras clave: Marketing de influencers, influencers, Instagram, redes sociales, percepción del consumidor, eficacia

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1. Introduction

This chapter serves as the introduction to the study, offering a succinct overview of the research topic. Initially, it elaborates on the motivation behind undertaking this study, providing context and rationale for the research. It then outlines the specific objectives the thesis aims to achieve, setting clear goals and expectations for the study. Lastly, the chapter details the structure of the thesis, guiding the reader through the organization and flow of the subsequent chapters. This structured approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the research's purpose, objectives, and the methodological framework employed throughout the thesis.

1.1 Motivations

The widespread adoption of smartphones, the Internet, and social media has become ubiquitous since the 2010s. In Spain, the percentage of the population using the Internet rose significantly, with 76.2 percent of people between the age of 16 and 74 online in 2014, increasing to 95.4 percent by 2023 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2023). Similarly, within the European Union (EU), the proportion of internet users surged from 67 percent in 2010 to 91 percent in 2023, with expectations of continued growth (European Commission, 2024).

In contemporary business environments, digital technology has become integral to daily operations, with a particularly notable impact on marketing. Digital marketing encompasses strategies such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), social media advertising, and influencer marketing, all of which enterprises employ to enhance engagement with their audiences, promote their products or services, and drive business growth. Each digital marketing strategy can have distinct effects on consumers, making it crucial for businesses to understand these impacts and their implications for consumer behaviour and overall business outcomes.

Before the advent of social media, marketers primarily used celebrities and traditional media to reach their target audiences. However, in today's social media era—dominated by platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—influencer marketing has emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping consumer perceptions and influencing purchasing decisions. Those who wield significant influence on social media platforms are referred to as key opinion leaders (KOLs) or, in this study, as social media influencers (SMIs). The rise of social media and the increasing time consumers spend online have expanded the reach of SMIs, enabling them to interact more effectively with their audiences and influence their behaviours.

1.2 Objectives

This study focuses on the following key digital marketing strategy: SMI marketing, with a particular emphasis on Instagram. Acquired by Meta, Instagram has become a favoured platform for marketers due to the interactions between users and their friends and later developed to become more authentic by the influencer-created contents. The primary objective of this thesis is to compare consumer perceptions of influencer marketing on Instagram between EU and non-EU countries, specifically through the lenses of trust and credibility, authenticity, and attitudes toward sponsored content.

1. Trust and Credibility:

Objective: Assess the levels of trust and credibility consumers attribute to influencers on Instagram in both EU and non-EU contexts, particularly regarding promoted products.

2. Authenticity:

Objective: Examine the importance of authenticity as perceived by Instagram users and identify any differences between EU and non-EU countries.

3. Attitudes towards Sponsored Content:

Objective: Analyse consumer attitudes toward sponsored content and determine the variations in these attitudes between EU and non-EU countries.

1.2.1. Research questions

Based on the objectives, the following research questions are formulated:

1. Trust and Credibility:

Question: To what extent do consumers in EU countries trust influencers on Instagram for product recommendations? Is there a significant difference in trust levels between EU and non-EU countries?

2. Authenticity

Question: How important is authenticity to consumers in EU countries? Does it hold the same level of importance for consumers in non-EU countries?

3. Attitudes towards Sponsored Content:

Question: What are the attitudes of consumers in EU countries toward sponsored content from influencers on Instagram? How do these attitudes differ from those in non-EU countries?

4. General Perception:

Question: How is influencer marketing on Instagram perceived by consumers in the EU? Is there any notable difference in perceptions among consumers in countries outside the EU?

These objectives and research questions underscore the study's endeavour to juxtapose consumer perspectives across distinct regional contexts, thereby enriching the understanding of the nuances within and beyond the EU market landscape.

1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis is structured into five comprehensive chapters: Introduction, Background, Methodology, Results, and Conclusions.

The first chapter provides a brief overview of the research topic, detailing the current trends in internet and social media usage. It also outlines the motivation for the thesis and the specific objectives the study aims to achieve.

Chapter two delves into the literature review, offering references from existing studies related to the research area. It discusses the types of SMIs and their roles in marketing, the strategic application of SMIs, the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC), and the communication model in influencer marketing. The chapter also highlights the significance of Instagram in influencer marketing and establishes a theoretical framework to support the development of hypotheses. A summary of key findings from previous research is provided to highlight the most relevant aspects.

In chapter three, the methodology is presented, encompassing the research design, approach, data collection methods, sample size, variables, and analytical tools. The chapter describes the use of statistical methods to test the hypotheses, with data collected through an online survey.

Chapter four focuses on the results, offering an empirical analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the hypotheses tested. It uses statistical software to tabulate results and answers the research questions posed at the beginning of the study.

Finally, chapter five concludes the thesis by summarizing the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the research. It also discusses the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for future research directions.

2. Background

In this chapter, the relevant existing literature is being applied into context. First of all, it discusses the evolution of influencers, the different types of influencers and their role in marketing. Next, it reviews the strategic use of influencers – how they are being selected – and the respective marketing strategies. Furthermore, the importance of integrated marketing communications (IMC) and what role does Instagram play in IMC are the topic of interest. Moreover, the communication model in influencer marketing, which comprises of sender (influencer), receiver (follower) and message (content), is being explored. Apart from that, the role of Instagram in influencer marketing is being evaluated via the platform's features and tools, its influence on consumer's behaviour and its impact on the marketing landscape. Finally, a summary of the main contextual features is provided at the end of this chapter in the form of recapitulation.

2.1. The commercialisation of social media stars

Social media has evolved from a platform for virtual community to a vital business tool. Marketers use social media in a variety of ways to promote their products and services. For example, they can create sponsored posts or product reviews with social media influencers (SMIs) to reach a wider audience. According to Buffer (2019), 73% of marketers believe social media marketing has been "somewhat effective" or "very effective" for their business and 68% say influencer marketing has been "somewhat effective" or "very effective".

However, the rise of the SMIs is a complex reality with both benefits and costs to society. There are concerns over the potential impact that SMIs can have on consumer behaviour, as they often promote products that may not necessarily be beneficial or necessary. Additionally, there have been instances where influencers have promoted products that are harmful or misleading to their followers. In an article by Forbes, it is mentioned that "influencers can sway consumer behaviour, but they can also make mistakes and have a negative impact on their followers" (Vigo, 2019).

To learn more about the influencer industry, we can turn to Emily Hund (2023), author of *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*. In an episode of the Marketing Trends podcast, she discusses the challenges and complexities of the influencer industry, including the need for authenticity and transparency. Hund notes that "there's a lot of pressure for influencers to be perfect, but ultimately it's their authenticity that will make them stand out".

Therefore, the rise of SMIs has transformed the way businesses approach marketing and advertising. Although there are potential risks and concerns

associated with influencer marketing, it remains a powerful tool for reaching a wider audience and promoting products.

2.1.1. Evolution of social media influencers

According to McCracken (1989), an influencer is an individual who has the power to affect the perceptions, behaviours, or actions of others. With the rise of social media, influencers have become a prominent figure in the marketing industry. Ahmad (2017) notes that SMIs have evolved from being simply popular users on social media platforms to a more complex and sophisticated industry.

Evolution of digital marketing has taken part since 1990s due to several cultural changes and the aftermath of global downturn (Brown & Hayes, 2008). The rise of the Business-to-Business (B2B) influencer marketing concept began. Influencer marketing is a new approach to marketing, important because sales forces both understand and support it. It directly addresses the most common sales barriers within prospective customers and focuses attention on those individuals on those individuals who advise decision-makers. These people influencers are crucial to the sales process and prospects themselves (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

In a literature review conducted by Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017), the authors explore the evolution of SMIs and their impact on society. The authors note that SMIs have become a key player in the marketing industry, with companies and brands leveraging their influence to reach a wider audience. The authors also discuss the potential risks and benefits associated with influencer marketing, including concerns over authenticity and transparency.

Overall, the literature suggests that the evolution of SMIs has had a significant impact on the marketing industry. While there are concerns over authenticity and transparency, influencer marketing remains a powerful tool for reaching a wider audience and promoting products. As the industry continues to evolve, it will be important to prioritise transparency and authenticity to ensure the trust and loyalty of consumers (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017).

2.1.2. Types of influencers

It is essential to consider the type of influencers given the research focus and objectives. Understanding the various categories of influencers can provide aid in developing a comprehensive influencer marketing strategy.

2.1.2.1 Based on platform

Influencers tend to appear in different social platforms based on their areas of interest as well as their focus or target audience. Popular platforms nowadays include but not limited to Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, etc. The following are some classifications of the influencers according to the platform they appear:

1. Instagram Influencers:

Instagram, a social media platform that has over 2 billion monthly active users (Dixon, 2024), has emerged as a powerhouse for influencer marketing, with influencers leveraging visually-driven content to engage audiences and promote brands. Instagram influencers often fall into categories such as lifestyle influencers, fashionists, fitness gurus, beauty enthusiasts, etc. each catering to specific interests and demographics.

2. YouTube Influencers/ Youtubers:

YouTube, with its approximately 2.5 billion monthly users (Dixon, 2024), possesses a diverse community of content creators, ranging from vloggers and gamers to DIY enthusiasts and educators. YouTube influencers are known for creating long-form, informative, and entertaining content that resonates with their subscribers. They often build loyal fan bases and monetise their channels through ads, sponsorships, and merchandise, as well as their own sub-businesses.

3. TikTok Creators/ TikTokers:

TikTok has emerged as a breeding ground for viral content and Gen Z influencers. TikTok creators, known for their short-form videos and creative storytelling, have the ability to quickly amass large followings and capture the attention of younger demographics. They often showcase their talents, humour, and authenticity to engage and entertain their audience. A study by Barta et al. (2022) suggests that TikTok influencers are particularly effective in driving engagement among younger audiences.

4. X Influencers:

While X (previously known as Twitter) may not be as visually driven as other platforms, it remains a powerful tool for influencer marketing, particularly in the realm of thought leadership, news dissemination, and real-time engagement. X influencers, including industry experts, journalists, and celebrities, wield influence through their expertise, wit, and ability to spark conversations in the form of posts which are also commonly known as “tweets”.

2.1.2.2 Based on followers size

Some popular categories of influencers based on the size of followers include (Coughlin, 2021):

1. Nano-Influencers (1K – 10K):

Nano-influencers have a very small but highly engaged following, typically consisting of family and friends. They are known for their authenticity and close

relationships with their followers, making them effective for word-of-mouth marketing.

2. Micro-Influencers (10K – 100K):

Micro-influencers have a slightly smaller but highly engaged following within a specific niche. They often have a more personal connection with their audience, making them effective for targeted marketing campaigns.

3. Macro-Influencers (100K – 1M):

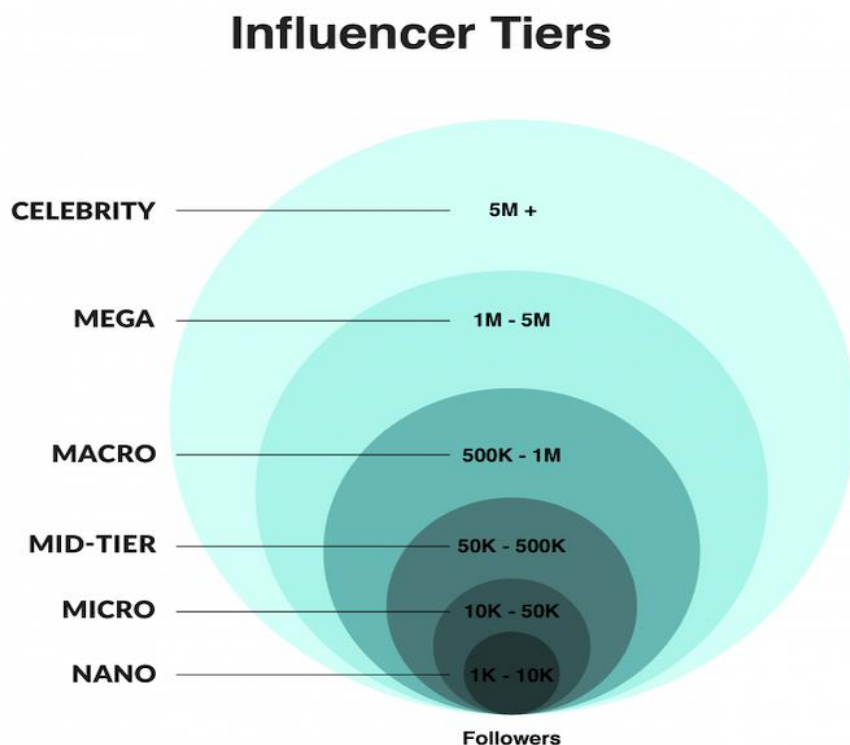
Macro-influencers have a larger following and broader reach compared to micro-influencers. They are often known as internet celebrities or social media stars who can help to reach a wider audience.

4. Mega Influencers (> 1M):

Mega or Celebrity influencers are well-known figures in the entertainment industry, sports, or other fields. They have a massive following and can significantly impact consumer behaviour and brand perception.

There is no clear definitions of the type of influencers based on the followers count. According to the findings of Bollingers (2022), the tiers of influencers (Figure 1) are as follow:

Figure 1. Categories of Influencers



Source: Bollinger (2022)

- Nano-Influencers: 1,000 – 10,000
- Micro-Influencers: 10,000 – 50,000
- Mid-tier Influencers: 50,000 – 500,000
- Macro-Influencers: 500,000 – 1,000,000
- Mega Influencers: 1,000,000 – 5,000,000
- Celebrity Influencers: > 5,000,000

2.1.2.3 Based on niche or area of interest

Influencers could be differentiated base on their niche and the areas of interest, some of the categories are listed below:

1. Tech and Gaming Influencers:

Among all the men population in the world, 54% follow gaming influencers and 46% follow influencers dealing with technology (Rakuten Marketing, 2019). Tech and gaming influencers cater to tech-savvy audiences, sharing reviews, tutorials, and gameplay videos on the latest gadgets, software, and video games. They collaborate with tech companies, gaming studios, and electronics brands to showcase products, provide insights, and engage with their passionate fan bases. Coughlin (2021) also mentioned that gaming equipment and eSports brands can collaborate with such gaming influencers to promote their products or run contests through social media platforms.

2. Bloggers and Vloggers

As stated by Coughlin (2021), bloggers and vloggers are known for creating highly informative and fun content. Travellers, parenting gurus, fitness coaches and other influencers who create blogs or vlogs fall in this category. Brands can partner with such influencers to try a variety of tactics to maximise influencer marketing since the followers usually are motivated to try their recommendations.

3. Photographers

Photographers are influencers who are good in creating stunning visual content (Coughlin, 2021). Their ability to produce fascinating photos that would catch the eyes of customers results in the high interest from major brands. Social platforms such as Instagram, where authentic posts and contents are commonly seen, would be their stage to shine.

4. Activists

As indicated in a blog written by Coughlin (2021), activists on social media are focused on building awareness about a social or political cause. Their audience is typically niche-specific and shares the same beliefs and values as the influencer.

5. Beauty and Fashion Influencers

By leveraging their expertise and creativity to showcase the latest trends, products, and styles, beauty and fashion influencers dominate the influencer marketing scene – with over 38% of revenue share in the global market in 2019 (Grand View Research, n.d.) and was valued at USD 3.01 billion in 2021 with the expectation to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 35.9% between 2022 and 2030 (Polaris Market Research, 2022). They often collaborate with brands to promote cosmetics, skincare products, clothing lines, and accessories, offering followers inspiration and advice on all things beauty and fashion-related.

6. Subject Matter Experts

These influencers usually are professionals in their own field, such as doctors, researchers, gadget experts, etc., who share their industry knowledge with their followers, answer doubt and industry knowledge (Coughlin, 2021).

7. Thought Leaders

According to Coughlin (2021), people like CEOs, founders, entrepreneurs, Nobel laureates, etc. fall in this category, they shape industry-wide opinions and trends. Some concrete examples such as Elon Musk, Bill Gates and Aung San Suu Kyi are considered thought leaders who influence a larger world audience.

Each type of influencer brings unique advantages and challenges, thus it is crucial selecting the most suitable influencers in order to execute a successful influencer marketing strategy. Furthermore, identifying the type of influencers that best resonate with the brand and its values can be a significant challenge, but it is essential for the effectiveness of the influencer campaign (Gorenko, 2020).

2.1.3. Role of influencers in marketing

Given the emergence of SMIs, these individuals, often with a large following on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, have gained prominence as trusted voices capable of influencing consumer behaviour and purchase decisions. It is crucial to explore the role of influencers in marketing, examining their impact on consumer perceptions, brand engagement, and purchase intent.

SMIs wield considerable influence over their followers, shaping their opinions, preferences, and purchasing behaviour. As noted by Brown and Hayes (2008), influencers have the power to sway consumer perceptions and attitudes towards brands through authentic and relatable content. Moreover, research by De Veirman et al. (2017) highlights the role of influencers in creating engagement and fostering a sense of community among their followers, which further enhances brand loyalty and advocacy.

The influence of SMIs extends beyond mere brand awareness, significantly impacting consumer behaviour and purchase decisions. According to a study by Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2021), consumers are more likely to trust recommendations from influencers they follow than traditional advertising or celebrity endorsements. This trust is often attributed to the perceived authenticity and credibility of influencers, as emphasised by Jin and Phua (2014), who found that authentic content resonates more with audiences and elicits stronger emotional responses.

H1: Instagram Influencers' trustworthiness and credibility is positively related to the consumers' attitude and perception toward SMI marketing.

2.2. The strategic use of social media influencers

In recent years, SMIs have emerged as powerful catalysts for brand visibility, engagement, and consumer trust. However, it requires effort in managing the influencers' partnership in order to unlock the full potential of influencer marketing to achieve their business objectives and avoid possible issues.

2.2.1. Influencer selection

The selection of influencers is a pivotal step in influencer marketing campaigns, as it directly impacts the effectiveness and success of brand collaborations.

1. Understanding Audience Alignment:

One of the fundamental principles of influencer selection is ensuring alignment between the influencer's audience demographics, interests, and values, and those of the brand. The higher the congruence between the contents and the consumer's values, such as thoughts and personality, the greater will be the psychological closeness between the consumer and the influencers, which may result in a higher influence of the latter on the former (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Based on a report by Matter (2023), 61% of marketers believe that relevancy is the most important factor when selecting influencers.

2. Evaluating Engagement and Reach:

In addition to audience alignment, engagement levels, reach, and influence within their respective niches are also evaluations done when selecting the influencers. According to a study by Campbell and Farrel (2020), not only the number of likes, metrics such as comments and shares are indicative of an influencer's ability to captivate and mobilise their audience, making them valuable partners for brands seeking to amplify their message since interactive digital marketing efforts are more effective than non-interactive ones. This is

especially true for the millennials, who show more interest in engaging in communities than just about the advertisements themselves (Newman, 2015).

3. Assessing Authenticity and Credibility:

Authenticity and credibility are paramount considerations in influencer selection, as they directly impact consumer trust and brand perception. Influencers are able to convince consumers, who deem influencers as having more trustworthiness, to make a purchase due to the authenticity and the control over their authentic endorsements of brands (Sommer, Van Esch, Soma, & Kietzmann, 2022). Furthermore, as studied by Helme (2023), authentic communication significantly bolsters perceived trustworthiness and credibility among consumers.

H2: Authenticity is positive related to the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers

H3: Authenticity is positive related to the consumers' perception towards SMI marketing

4. Considering Influencer-Brand Fit:

Beyond audience demographics and engagement metrics, another critical step in leveraging SMIs effectively is the overall fit and alignment between the influencer and the brand. Influencers, who show knowledge and interest in the brand or specific products, are more likely to create authentic and compelling content that resonates with their audience and will be perceived to be more trustworthy (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019).

2.2.2. Influencer marketing strategies

Influencer marketing has emerged as a highly effective strategy for brands seeking to reach and engage with their target audience in a more authentic and organic manner. Research by Khamis et al. (2017) suggests that influencer marketing generates higher levels of engagement and conversion compared to traditional forms of advertising, yielding a favourable return on investment for brands. Additionally, a meta-analysis conducted by Lee and Watkins (2016) found a positive correlation between influencer marketing campaigns and brand performance metrics such as brand awareness, brand attitude, and purchase intention. Consequently, it is crucial to create and develop marvellous influencer marketing strategies in order to maximise the possible advantages obtained from it.

1. Leveraging Influencer Types:

Brands have to tailor their influencer marketing strategies based on the type of influencers they collaborate with. Each type of influencers offers unique

advantages and appeals to different audience segments (Section 2.1.2.). Understanding the nuances of each influencer type is essential for maximising campaign effectiveness. A study by Smith, Fischer and Chen (2012) highlighted that user-generated contents (UGC) tend to present distinct characteristics on different platforms, which further emphasise the need to leverage influencer types to better fit the brand and boost the marketing campaign outcome.

2. Content Co-Creation:

Successful influencer marketing campaigns involve collaborative content creation between brands and influencers. Highlighted by Leong, Gu and Palmatier (2022), influencers' connections with their followers are important sources of their unique and in-depth insights. By involving influencers in the ideation and creation process, brands can ensure that the content resonates with the influencer's audience while staying true to the brand's messaging and values.

3. Authentic Contents:

Authenticity is key to the success of influencer marketing campaigns. Brands that allow influencers to share authentic stories and experiences resonate more with audiences and build trust over time since it would help to draw connections between consumers and influencers, as well as to increase credibility (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

H4: Authenticity is positive related to drawing connection between influencers and consumers.

H5: Sense of connection built between influencers and consumers is positively related to the consumers' attitude and perception toward SMI marketing.

4. Long-term Partnerships:

Building long-term relationships with influencers can yield greater returns for brands compared to one-off partnerships. Long-term partnerships with creators and influencers allow brands to tap into organic communities, thus accelerating brand awareness and trust (Moore, 2022). By nurturing quality relationships with influencers over time, brands can foster deeper connections with both the influencers and their audience, leading to increased brand loyalty and advocacy (Kosunen, 2020). This sustained engagement and collaboration with influencers not only enhance brand visibility but also contribute to building long-term trust and credibility, which are essential for sustainable campaign success (Kashyap, 2023).

2.3. Integrated marketing communication

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) plays a crucial role in modern advertising strategies by ensuring consistency and synergy across various promotional channels (Williams, n.d.). This approach involves integrating different communication tools and platforms to deliver a unified message to the target audience, thereby enhancing brand visibility and engagement.

2.3.1. Importance of channel integration in advertising

Efficient channel integration in advertising is essential for achieving seamless communication with consumers across multiple touchpoints. This integration ensures that consumers receive a unified brand experience across different touchpoints, leading to enhanced brand recognition and customer engagement (Laroche, Kiani, & Economakis, 2014). Laroche, Kiani and Economakis (2014) also highlighted that, by aligning messaging and branding elements cohesively through various channels such as TV, radio, print, and digital ads, companies can create a holistic brand experience that resonates with consumers and reinforces brand recall. This integrated approach not only maximises reach but also strengthens brand loyalty and drives customer interaction and retention.

2.3.2. The role of Instagram in integrated marketing communication

Instagram has emerged as a powerful platform for integrated marketing communication, offering brands a visually engaging medium to connect with their audience.

1. Brand Storytelling and Visual Communication:

Instagram's visually-driven platform provides brands with a powerful medium for storytelling and visual communication. Through compelling imagery, videos, and captions, brands can convey their brand identity, values, and narrative in a highly engaging and immersive manner to the customers (Frölich, 2021).

2. Influencer Collaboration and Wider Audience Reach:

Instagram's vast network of influencers, with more than 64 million accounts on all over the world (Andrii, 2023), enables brands to amplify their message and reach a wider audience through strategic collaborations. By partnering with influencers on Instagram, brand would be able to increase the chance to showcase their existing brands, products and services to the audience who they would never be able to reach by just accounting on their own publicity and social network.

3. User-Generated Content and Community Engagement:

Instagram provide a platform for influencers to foster a sense of community and belonging among followers. Influencers grow their audience not only through creative UGC but also through relationship building and the creation of a community around his or her profile on social media (Belova, 2023). Brands can encourage user participation, feedback, and sharing through branded hashtags, contests, and interactive features, strengthening their relationship with consumers and building brand loyalty (Cuevas-Molano, Matosas-López, & Bernal-Bravo, 2021).

4. Data-Driven Insights and Performance Measurement:

Instagram's robust analytics tools, named Instagram Insights, provide brands with valuable insights into audience demographics, engagement metrics, and content performance (Divya, Mehta, & Rayi, 2023). By leveraging these insights, brands can further refine their marketing strategies, optimise future content creation, and measure the impact of their Instagram efforts on business objectives.

Through Instagram, companies can leverage visual content, influencer partnerships, storytelling, interactive features, etc. to convey their brand message effectively (Rehman, Gulzar, & Aslam, 2022). By integrating Instagram into their IMC strategies, businesses can enhance brand awareness, foster customer relationships, and drive sales by tapping into the platform's extensive user base and engagement capabilities (Agustian, Hidayat, Zen, Sekarini, & Malik, 2023).

2.4. The communication model in influencer marketing

The communication model serves as a fundamental framework for understanding the dynamics of influencer marketing, it comprises several key components, including the sender, message and receiver (Leung, Gu, Li, Zhang, & Palmatier, 2022).

2.4.1. The influencer as the sender

In influencer marketing, influencers serve as the primary senders of brand messages, leveraging their credibility, and reach to disseminate content to their followers. As senders, influencers craft and disseminate content that aligns with the brand's messaging and resonates with their audience's interests and preferences (Leung, Gu, Li, Zhang, & Palmatier, 2022).

2.4.1.1. Credibility

Credibility stands as a cornerstone of influencer marketing, influencing the trustworthiness and authenticity of brand messages delivered by influencers. Influencers who demonstrate credibility by maintaining transparency, honesty, and consistency in their content garner greater trust and credibility from their audience, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Han & Balabanis, 2024).

H6: Transparency has a positive effect on the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers

2.4.1.2. Attractiveness

According to a study by Akhtar, Siddiqi, Gugnani, Islam, & Attri (2024), influencers attractiveness encompasses three aspects including vocal, physical, and expertise. The term "vocal attractiveness" highlights how much the influencer's voice timbre and tone can make listeners feel good and leave a positive impression. The term "physical attractiveness" encompasses the visual appearance and overall image of influencers, including audience evaluations of their appearance, personality, and fashion choices. The term "expertise" refers to the professional skills, talents, and knowledge that an influencer exhibits to exert influence over their audience. Influencers who demonstrate charisma, charm, and relatability tend to attract a larger following and elicit more favourable responses from their audience, thereby enhancing the persuasive impact of influencer marketing messages.

2.4.1.3. Expertise

Expertise refers to the knowledge, skills, and experience possessed by influencers within their respective niches or domains, influenced by factors such as education and accomplishments (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Influencers who demonstrate expertise by offering valuable insights, advice, and recommendations related to specific topics or industries, thereby enhancing their credibility and persuasiveness among their audience, given that consumers are more likely to be influenced by the expertise shown by the influencers (Baig & Shahzad, 2022).

2.4.2. The audience as the receiver

As noted in the study by Leung, Gu, Li, Zhang, & Palmatier (2022), audiences in influencer marketing act as receivers of brand messages, engaging with content shared by influencers and interpreting its meaning and relevance. As receivers, audiences play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness and impact of influencer marketing campaigns through their reactions, interactions, and perceptions. Based on the study by de Villiers, Tipgomut and Franklin (2020), the following are some of the main segmentation variables:

2.4.2.1. Geographic

Audience geographic pertain to their geographic location and regional preferences. Geographic segmentation allows brands to target audiences based on their location-specific needs, cultural nuances, and market characteristics (de Villiers, Tipgomut, & Franklin, 2020). Influencer marketing campaigns can be tailored to resonate with audiences in specific geographic regions, leveraging local customs and trends.

2.4.2.2. Demographics

Audience demographics, including age, gender, income level, education, lifecycle stage (single, married, etc.), occupation, religion, and family lifecycle (no children, with children, etc.), shape their taste and preferences, interests, as well as purchasing behaviour (de Villiers, Tipgomut, & Franklin, 2020). Demographic segmentation enables brands to target specific audience segments with tailored influencer content that resonates with their demographic profile.

2.4.2.3. Psychographics

Audience psychographics encompass socioeconomic status, values, interests, attitudes, lifestyles, and personality traits that influence consumer behaviour and decision-making (de Villiers, Tipgomut, & Franklin, 2020). Psychographic segmentation enables brands to target audiences based on shared psychographic characteristics, allowing for more nuanced and personalised influencer marketing strategies.

2.4.2.4. Behavioural characteristics

Audience behavioural characteristics encompass past behaviours, purchase history, benefits sought, current status, loyalty, brand interactions, engagement patterns, etc. (de Villiers, Tipgomut, & Franklin, 2020). Behavioural segmentation enables brands to target audiences based on their actions and responses to influencer content, facilitating personalised and targeted marketing efforts, which results in a more optimised marketing strategies.

2.4.3. Posts and content as messages

In influencer marketing, posts and content serve as the primary vehicles for conveying brand messages to audiences. Understanding the types of content and engagement techniques employed by influencers is essential for elucidating message effectiveness in influencer marketing campaigns.

2.4.3.1. Types of content

In general, the content has been conceptualised in 3 main categories:

1. Rational

Rational content is informational, educational, functional and processed intellectually, which includes current events, product specifications, features, performance, and other tangible cues (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, & Goodman, 2019; Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021). This type of content usually resonates with consumers who are more logical-thinking and show interest in understanding the facts and information.

2. Interactional

Interactional content is experiential, personal, emotional and more subjective, that encompasses entertaining content such as remarkable facts, the use of emotion, emoticons, mentions of holidays and humour, as well as teasers, slogans and wordplay; relational content such as posing questions and discussion topics to fans and using small talk or banter (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, & Goodman, 2019; Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021). This type of content direct itself to the psychological and social needs of the audience, it usually draws the attention of consumers who place less value on factual information and have greater emotional involvement (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, & Goodman, 2019).

3. Transactional

Transactional content - also referred as remunerative, brand resonance, sales promotion - comprises monetary incentives such as loyalty points, lucky draws, price promotions, special offers, giveaways, as well as contests and sweepstakes (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, & Goodman, 2019; Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021). Brands usually adopt this type of content to motivate consumers' engagement on various social platform with an aim to increase brand awareness, loyalty and retention.

2.4.3.2. Engagement techniques

Effective engagement techniques are vital for maximising the impact of influencer marketing campaigns, fostering audience interaction, and driving desired brand outcomes. Some of the engagement techniques employed by influencers to enhance audience participation, interaction, and brand engagement are as follow:

1. Call-to-Action (CTA):

CTAs, divided into several parts - getting attention, making it possible for the user to take action and make the user take the appropriate action from the user perspective, prompt audience action and interaction, encouraging them to like, comment, share, or engage with influencer content (Mejtoft, Hedlund, Cripps,

Söderström, & Norberg, 2021). Well-crafted CTAs motivate audiences to participate actively, which results in amplifying brand reach, visibility, and engagement metrics.

2. Interactive Content:

In accordance to GGI Insights (2024), interactive content, such as polls, quizzes, and interactive stories, invites audience participation and engagement. Interactive elements stimulate audience curiosity, drive interaction rates, and foster a sense of co-creation and involvement. Moreover, interactivity and presence have a significant favourable impact on influencer marketing. As mentioned in a study by Chen, Nguyen, & Jaroenwattananon (2021), users might have more positive feelings and may find the experience more enjoyable with interactive contents which allow them to feel the presence of the influencers. In other words, users who perceive social presence are more likely to be involved and absorbed in the communication; hence, they tend to be more focused, which could lead to the flow experience, affecting the actual engagement behaviour.

3. Storytelling:

Storytelling techniques captivate audience attention, evoke emotions, and convey brand narratives in a compelling and memorable manner. Narrative-driven content resonates with audiences on an emotional level, fostering deeper connections and brand affinity (Abrorovich, 2023).

2.5. The role of Instagram in influencer marketing

Instagram's inception as a photo-sharing app in 2010 marked the beginning of a new era in digital marketing (Instagram, n.d.). Over the years, Instagram has evolved into a powerhouse platform for influencers to connect with their followers and for brands to reach their target audience through authentic and engaging content. The platform's visual-centric nature, user-friendly interface, and diverse features have made it one of the preferred choices for influencer collaborations and brand promotions. Highlighted by Geysler (2024), Instagram has still emerged as one of the leading platforms for influencer marketing although its usage for influencer marketing this year has unexpectedly dropped below 50% - coming right behind the rising star, TikTok (68.8%). A report by DataReportal (n.d.) demonstrated that 62.7% of the audience on Instagram uses the platform to discover new products, which is the 3rd most sought-after activity right after posting or sharing photos or videos (70.4%) and looking for funny or entertainment content (64.8%), highlighting the platform's another role in informing people's buying decisions.

2.5.1. Platform features and tools

Instagram offers a plethora of features and tools that enable influencers and brands to engage with their audience effectively, as well as to facilitate marketing collaborations and content creation. Over time, Instagram has introduced various features and updates, such as Instagram Stories, IGTV, Reels, and Shopping, transforming it into a robust ecosystem for influencer-brand collaborations (Instagram, n.d.).

1. Instagram Stories:

Instagram Stories allow users to share everyday moments and ephemeral content, including photos, videos, and interactive elements, which disappear after 24 hours (Instagram, n.d.). Influencers could leverage Stories to provide behind-the-scenes glimpses, conduct Q&A (Question & Answer) sessions, host polls and share real-time updates, fostering a sense of immediacy and authenticity.

2. IGTV (Instagram TV):

IGTV enables users to create and share long-form vertical videos, offering influencers an additional platform to showcase their creativity and engage with their audience on a deeper level (System, 2018). Influencers could utilise IGTV to share tutorials, product reviews and vlogs, providing valuable long-duration content that resonates with their followers.

3. Instagram Reels:

Instagram Reels are short-form videos of up to 90 seconds, featuring music, effects, and editing tools (Instagram, n.d.). Influencers could make use of Reels to showcase their talent, creativity, and personality, tapping into trending challenges and viral content to reach a wider audience and increase engagement.

4. Instagram Shopping:

Instagram Shopping allows brands to tag products in their posts and Stories, enabling users to discover and purchase items directly within the app (Instagram, n.d.). Influencers could exploit Shopping tags to showcase sponsored or their own products, share recommendations, and drive traffic to brand websites, facilitating seamless shopping experiences for their followers.

5. Instagram Insights

Instagram Insights is a feature within the Instagram app that provides users with valuable analytics and data about their account's performance and audience engagement (Meta, 2024). Influencers could make the most out of the metrics, such as audience demographics, post performance, Stories insights, IGTV insights and promotions insights, to track their performance on the platform,

understand their audience better, and make informed decisions about their content strategy and marketing efforts.

2.5.2. Instagram's influence on consumer behaviour

Instagram is believed to wield significant influence over consumer behaviour, shaping perceptions, preferences, and purchasing decisions. The platform's visually compelling content, influencer endorsements, and interactive features have revolutionised the way consumers discover, evaluate, and engage with brands. Moreover, Instagram's immersive shopping experiences, shoppable posts, and user-generated content foster trust, authenticity, and brand loyalty among followers, driving higher levels of engagement and conversion.

1. Visual Appeal and Aspirational Content:

One of the key factors contributing to Instagram's influence on consumer behaviour is its visually-driven nature. Instagram's emphasis on high-quality images and engaging visuals potentially captivates users' attention and evokes emotional responses. Studies have shown that visually appealing creative content on Instagram can evoke positive emotions, such as joy and excitement, which can influence users' perceptions of brands and products (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021).

2. Influencer Endorsements and Social Proof:

Instagram influencers play a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour by endorsing products and brands to their followers. Influencers' recommendations are perceived as authentic and trustworthy, leading followers to view endorsed products more favourably and consider purchasing them (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2021; Jin & Phua, 2014). The phenomenon of social proof, wherein individuals are influenced by the actions and opinions of others, further amplifies the impact of influencer endorsements on consumer behaviour (Fu, Liu, Zhu, & Seong, 2024).

3. Interactive Shopping Experience:

Instagram's features such as shoppable posts and product tags offer users a seamless shopping experience directly within the app (Instagram, n.d.). By enabling users to discover and purchase products without leaving the platform, Instagram transforms browsing into buying, driving impulse purchases and increasing conversion rates (Santana, 2022). The convenience and accessibility of Instagram shopping contribute to its influence on consumer behaviour.

2.6. Summary

After reviewing the literature studies, the rise of influencer marketing is undeniable. Instagram's pervasive influence has revolutionised the marketing landscape - placing greater emphasis on visual aesthetics, storytelling, and influencer partnerships, offering brands unprecedented opportunities to engage with their audience and drive business outcomes and ushering in a new era of influencer-centric advertising strategies. Brands are increasingly leveraging Instagram's platform features, such as Stories, IGTV, and Reels, to craft compelling narratives, showcase products, and engage with their audience in real-time. The rise of SMIs, user-generated content, influencer collaborations, as well as the well-developed IMC and communication model underscore Instagram's pivotal role in driving brand awareness, affinity, and conversion. Numerous previous studies have attempted to measure the effectiveness, impact and consumer perception of influencer marketing on Instagram at a global or national level, or targeting specific industries, therefore on top of those researches, this study aims to explore and compare the consumer perception of influencer marketing on Instagram between European Union (EU) and non-EU countries.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents and describes the methodology employed in this study. First and foremost, it shortly discusses about the research design with the specific approach taken as well as the details of the data collection method. Secondly, the sample selection is being reviewed, showing the criteria for appropriate responses, as well as the final data and sample collected in this study. Followed by the different type of variables identified in the methodology, and lastly, the disclosure of the data analysis techniques and analytic tool is included at the end of this chapter.

3.1. Research design

The purpose of research design, with certain defining characteristics – testing hypotheses, careful observation and measurement, systematic evaluation of data and drawing valid conclusions, is to answer questions and acquire new knowledge (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2010). In this case, the research design is carried out to test the hypotheses and respond to the research questions in hand.

3.1.1. Quantitative vs. qualitative approach

Two prominent approaches in research methodology are quantitative and qualitative methods, each offering distinct methodologies, tools, and philosophical underpinnings. Qualitative research is characterised by its emphasis on understanding social phenomena through rich, descriptive data. It prioritises depth, context, and subjective interpretations, aiming to explore meanings, experiences, and perspectives through methodologies and non-standardised data (Rahman, 2017). On the other hand, quantitative research, characterised by its reliance on numerical data and statistical analysis to measure and analyse phenomena, emphasises objectivity, generalisability, and replicability, aiming to quantify relationships, patterns, and trends through structured methodologies and empirical data (Rahman, 2017). It could also lend to non-probability sampling methods (Berndt, 2020). In this study, a quantitative approach is applied for the above-mentioned purpose.

3.1.2. Data collection methods

This research employed a mixture of non-probability sampling methodologies to collect data, aiming to validate the hypotheses and address the research questions. When employed for the generation of a prospective hypothesis or study objective, convenience sampling – a method which the researcher announces the study and participants self-select if they wish to participate (Stratton, 2021), proves beneficial. Although convenience sampling has its limitations, strategies can be implemented to enhance the credibility of this widely-used and straightforward method (Stratton, 2021). Apart from that, snowball sampling - a technique whereby the researcher identifies and selects

available respondents who meet the criteria for inclusion in his study and asks for referrals of other individuals from the already selected respondents, who would also meet the criteria and represent the population of concern (Obilor, 2023) – is adopted to increase the possibility of successful responses. In addition, purposive sampling is also exerted to select only those subjects that satisfy the objectives of the study based on the researcher's conviction, which would help to result in lowering the margin of error in data collection since the data sources are a closer fit to the research context (Obilor, 2023).

Data aggregation was facilitated by disseminating the online survey link across multiple social media platforms to enhance survey visibility and a wider audience reach given the increased use of mobile devices nowadays. A cover letter detailing the objectives and importance of the study was attached to the initial page of the online questionnaire. Assurances were provided to participants regarding the confidentiality of their data to safeguard their anonymity from external entities. Following this, demographic details including gender, age, and country of residence were solicited. Subsequently, responses pertaining to the study were elicited.

3.2. Sample selection

An essential aspect in the planning of an empirical investigation involves rationalising the size of the sample to be gathered. The primary objective of justifying the sample size in such studies is to elucidate how the acquired data is anticipated to yield significant insights aligned with the inferential objectives of the researcher (Lakens, 2022).

3.2.1. Criteria for selecting appropriate responses

The selection of a purposive sampling approach was deliberate, as it ensured that participants possessed specific knowledge pertinent to the study's subject matter, thereby enhancing the relevance and reliability of the findings. Thus, a filter question was incorporated into the survey instrument, stipulating that respondents must be active users of Instagram. This approach represents a frequently employed methodology in prior research concerning online behaviours (Koay, Teoh, & Soh, 2021; Barta, Belanche, Fernández, & Flavián, 2023).

3.2.2. Data and sample collected

During the period from 13 February 2024 to 23 March 2024, a total of 288 usable data were collected for this study, which has surpassed the lower limit targeted. 75.35 percent of the respondents reported that they use Instagram multiple times a day and 73.95 percent has been using Instagram for more than 3 years, highlighting their significance presence on the social media. However, there are 4 missing responses for the age variable due to misreading of questions and 8 missing responses for the gender variable due to unwillingness to disclose the

information. None of the observations are removed from the sample, since not many missing responses from each observation, in order to keep as many data as possible in the sample for a better further analysis.

3.3. Variables

A variable is a quantity which can vary from one individual to another (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Variables such as dependent, independent and control variables are fundamental concepts in research methodology, and understanding them is crucial for designing and interpreting studies accurately.

3.3.1. Dependent variables

If one variable depends or is a consequence of other, it is termed as dependent variable (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). A dependent variable is the variable that is observed, measured, or affected as a result of changes in the independent variable. It is the outcome variable that researchers are interested in understanding or predicting (Chandler & Munday, 2011). In this study, the consumer attitudes and perception of the SMI marketing on Instagram – the outcome factor of this study - is the dependent variable.

3.3.2. Independent variables

The variable that is antecedent to the dependent variable is termed as an independent variable (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Also known as experimental variable, an independent variable is a variable that can be manipulated or controlled by the researcher (Viglia, Zaefarian, & Ulqinaku, 2021). It is the variable that is hypothesised to have an effect on the dependent variable (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Two independent variables are used in this study, namely trust and credibility, and authenticity. They are measured with the use of the 5-point Likert scale.

3.3.3. Control variables

Control variables, also known as extraneous variables, are additional variables that are not related to the purpose of the study, but may influence the relationship between the independent and dependent variables in a study (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Unlike independent and dependent variables, control variables are not the primary focus of the research but are included to ensure the validity and reliability of the study's findings by minimizing the potential for confounding effects (Sponheim, 2023; Pourhoseingholi, Baghestani, & Vahedi, 2012). Age, gender, country of residence (EU or non-EU) are the control variables employed in this study.

3.4. Data analysis techniques and analytic tools

Data analysis serves as a cornerstone in the research process, facilitating the interpretation and understanding of collected data. In this study, some of the common data analysis techniques in research methodology, including descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (Lee J. , 2020), as well as comparative analysis, are employed.

3.4.1. Descriptive statistics

According to Green, Manski, Hansen and Broatch (2023), descriptive statistics involve the summarization and presentation of data in a meaningful and interpretable manner. This technique aims to describe the central tendency, variability, and distribution of variables within a dataset. Common measures of central tendency include the mean, median, and mode, while measures of variability include the range, standard deviation, and variance (Lee J. , 2020). Descriptive statistics also encompass graphical representations such as histograms, bar charts, and box plots, which provide visual insights into the characteristics of the data (Green, Manski, Hansen, & Broatch, 2023). By employing descriptive statistics, researchers could gain a preliminary understanding of the dataset's key features and identify potential trends or outliers. In this study, the main measures adopted are the mean, standard deviation, as well as bar charts for visual representation.

3.4.2. Inferential statistics

Inferential statistics extend beyond the description of data to make inferences or predictions about populations based on sample data (Lee J. , 2020; Green, Manski, Hansen, & Broatch, 2023). This technique involves hypothesis testing, estimation, and probability theory to draw conclusions about relationships or differences between variables (Salvatore & Reagle, 2002). There are two main families of tests: tests of difference and tests of relationship or prediction (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2021). In this study, inferential statistics are instrumental in validating hypotheses and drawing meaningful conclusions from empirical data. Common inferential statistical tests include regression analysis, correlation analysis and many more (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2021). In this study, the Pearson's correlation analysis and the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) are used for testing the validity of the data. Additionally, the regression analysis is employed to execute the hypothesis testing. These tests allow researchers to determine the strength of relationships, and make generalisations to broader populations.

3.4.3. Analytic tool

The analytic tools are the instruments used to organise, clean, extract and visualise data. In the era of big data, there are many analytic tools in the market due to the high demand, organisations are competing to make their software and tools open-sourced (Gudivada, 2017).

In this study, R is applied as the analytic tool for the data collected. According to Gudivada (2017), R is a widely acclaimed open-source programming environment utilized for statistical computing, graphical representation, and visualization purposes. It encompasses a diverse array of statistical functionalities catering to linear and nonlinear modelling, classification, clustering, time-series analysis, as well as traditional statistical testing, among various other applications. Notably, the author also mentioned that R exhibits a high level of extensibility, boasting an extensive repository of packages tailored to address domain-specific requirements. In addition, due to the extreme popularity of R, data access connectors are also available to access the Relational Database Management System (RDBMS) and other data sources from R.

4. Results

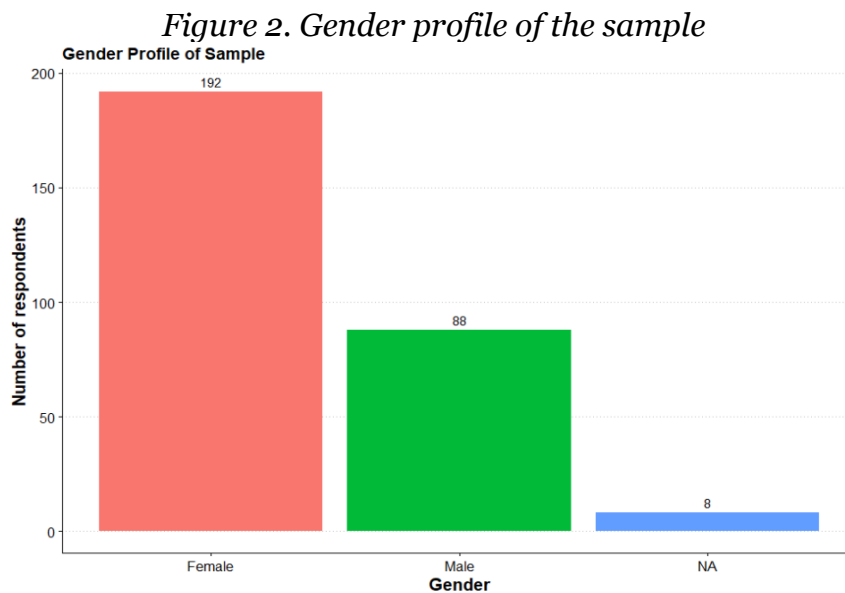
This chapter consists of mainly two parts: numerical and statistical results, as well as the interpretation and discussion of the statistical analysis. The former includes univariate statistic such as demographic, online behaviour as well as trust and authenticity analysis. It also consists of comparative analysis, validity control via correlation analysis and ANOVA model, reliability control via Cronbach’s alpha test, as well as regression analysis of the data and sample collected. The latter includes the exposition of the results obtained and the discussion of the research questions.

4.1. Univariate statistics

4.1.1. Demographic

1) Gender

This research study sample contains 288 respondents and their gender profile is as follows: 192 females, 88 males and 8 prefer not to say (represented by NA in Figure 2 and Table 1). The females contributed to 66.67 percent of the sample while the male respondents’ contribution was 30.55 percent (Table 1). This phenomena seems to be a norm and it has been studied that females are more likely to volunteer and participate in a research study (Otufowora, et al., 2021; Smith W. G., 2008).



Source: Self elaboration

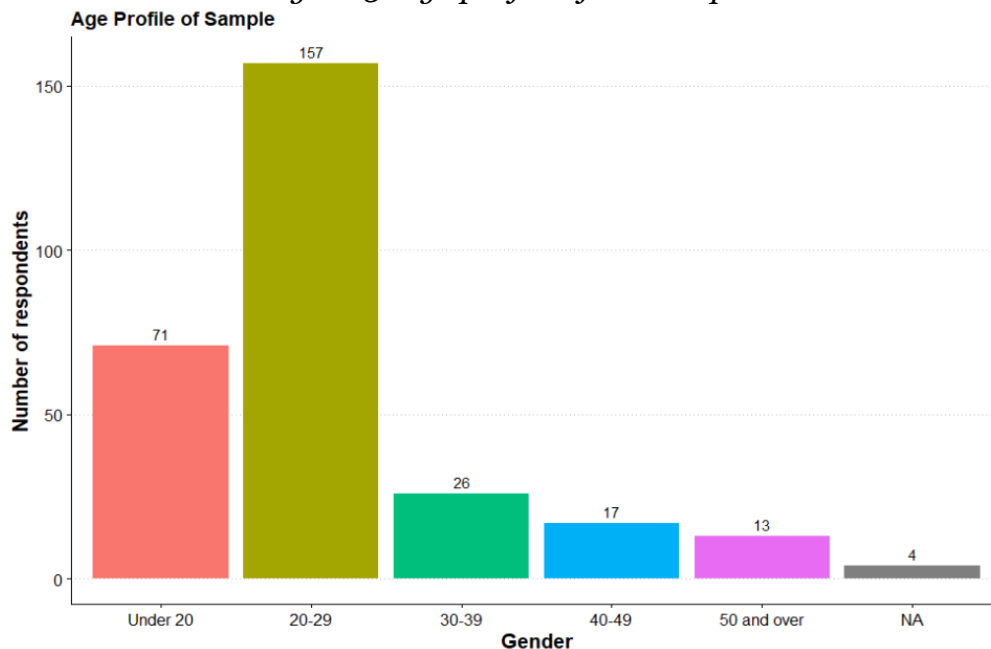
Table 1. Gender statistics

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	192	66.67
Male	88	30.56
NA	8	2.78
Total	288	100.00

Source: Self elaboration

2) Age

This study focuses on consumer perception, necessitating the consideration of age as a control variable. Within the framework of the online questionnaires, age segmentation was conducted into 5 distinct categories, excluding inappropriate responses labelled as 'NA' in Figure 3 and Table 2. Among the total cohort of 288 respondents, 71 are under 20 years old which corresponded to 24.65 percent of the total respondents. Notably, 157 respondents belong to the age bracket of 20-29 years old which accounted for 54.51 percent of the total sample, highlighting its substantive representation. Additionally, 26 respondents fall within the age group of 30-39 years old and it contributed approximately 9.03 percent to the study. Those aged 40-49 represented 5.9 percent of the sample with 17 respondents. Finally, individuals aged over 50 constituted 4.51 percent of the sample, comprising 13 individuals. Unfortunately, there were 4 responses (≈ 1.39 percent) deemed irrelevant and therefore unrecorded.

Figure 3. Age profile of the sample

Source: Self elaboration

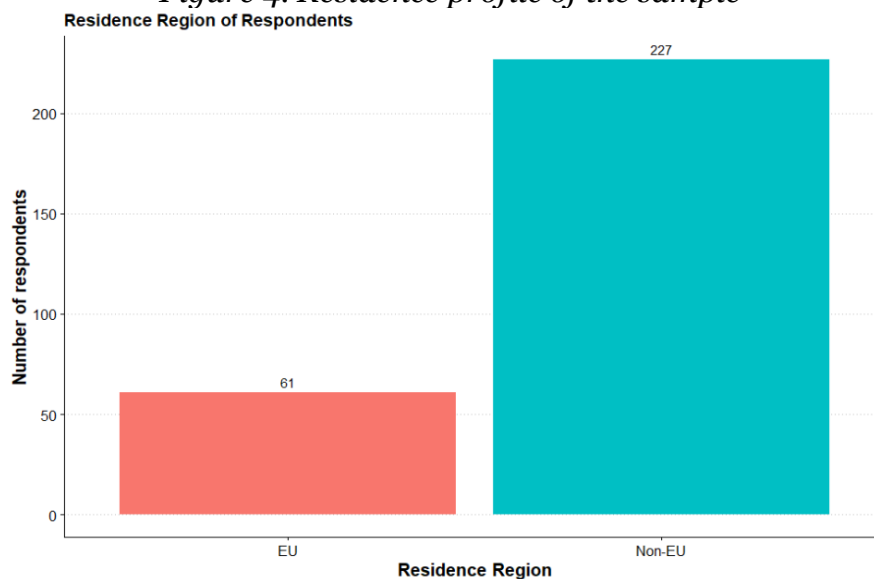
Table 2. Age statistics

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Under 20	71	24.65
20-29	157	54.51
30-39	26	9.03
40-49	17	5.90
50 and over	13	4.51
NA	4	1.39
Total	288	100.00

Source: Self elaboration

3) Residence region

As the title emphasises, this study revolves in a comparison of consumer perspectives in EU and non-EU countries. Hence, the residence region of the respondents could be deemed as the core control variable. As seen in Figure 4 and Table 3, the sample population consisted of 227 individuals residing outside the European Union, constituting 78.82 percent of the total sample. On the other hand, EU residents comprised 21.18 percent of respondents, totalling 61 individuals.

Figure 4. Residence profile of the sample

Source: Self elaboration

Table 3. Residence region statistics

Region	Frequency	Percentage
EU	61	21.18
Non-EU	227	78.82
Total	288	100.00

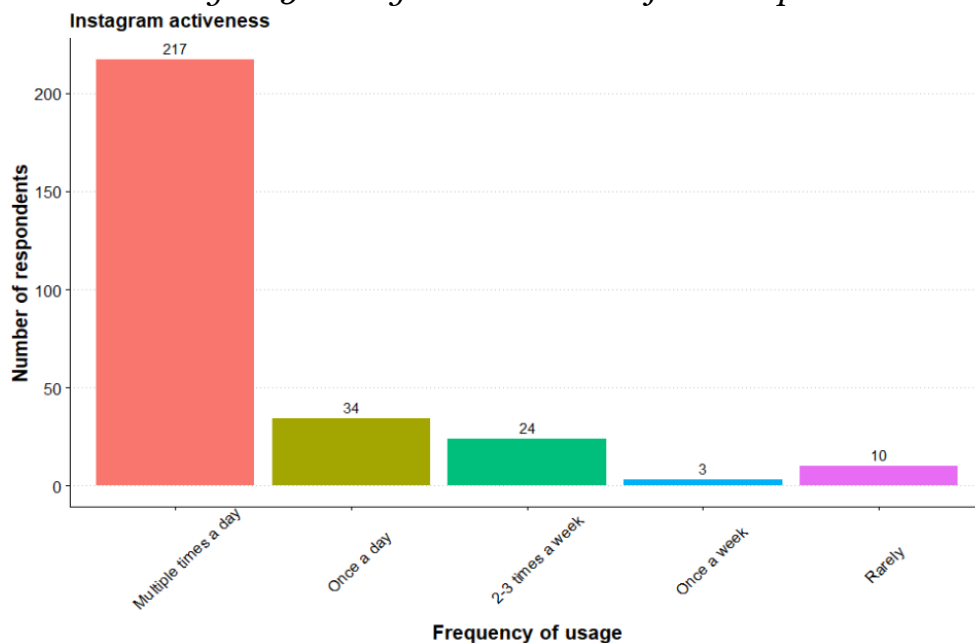
Source: Self elaboration

4.1.2. Online behaviour

1) Instagram activeness

In this study, all 288 respondents reported having used Instagram at some point, indicating the absence of non-users within the sample. Consequently, all 288 responses are deemed valid for further analysis. Among these respondents, the majority, comprising 217 individuals, reported using Instagram multiple times a day, representing 75.35 percent of the total sample. Additionally, 34 respondents reported using Instagram once a day, constituting 11.8 percent of the total respondents. Furthermore, 24 respondents indicated using Instagram 2 to 3 times a week, contributing approximately 8.3 percent to the study. The remaining respondents identified themselves as less active Instagram users, either using the platform once a week or rarely. All of the above can be observed in Figure 5 and Table 4.

Figure 5. Instagram activeness of the sample



Source: Self elaboration

Table 4. Instagram activeness statistics

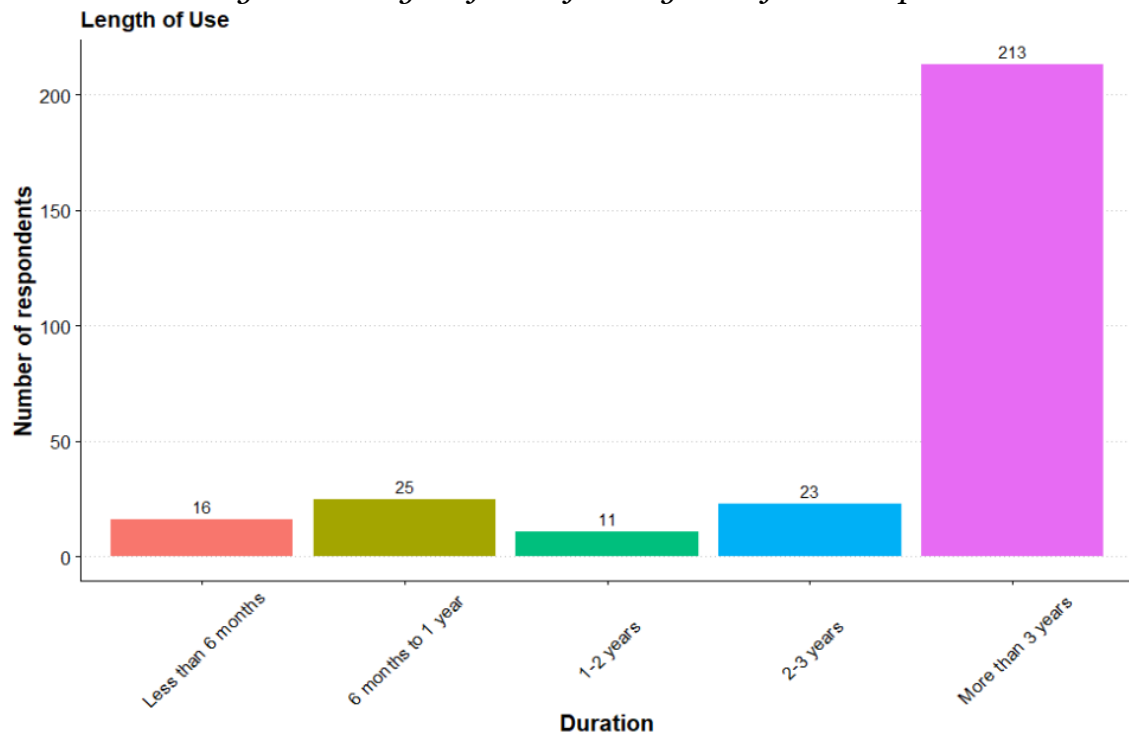
Activeness	Frequency	Percentage
Multiple times a day	217	75.35
2-3 times a week	24	8.33
Once a day	34	11.81
Once a week	3	1.04
Rarely	10	3.47
Total	288	100.00

Source: Self elaboration

2) Length of use

Based on the findings presented in Figure 6 and Table 5, a significant proportion of respondents, constituting 74 percent of the sample, reported using Instagram for more than three years, representing 213 individuals. Among the total sample of 288 respondents, users with experience ranging from 2 to 3 years and 6 months to 1 year were almost evenly distributed, with 23 and 25 individuals, respectively, contributing to a combined total of 16.7 percent. Additionally, 11 respondents reported using Instagram for 1 to 2 years, comprising approximately 3.8 percent of the study's sample. Finally, 16 individuals indicated having used Instagram for less than 6 months, accounting for 5.6 percent of the sample.

Figure 6. Length of Use of Instagram of the Sample



Source: Self elaboration

Table 5. Length of use of Instagram statistics

Duration	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 6 months	16	5.56
6 months to 1 year	25	8.68
1-2 years	11	3.82
2-3 years	23	7.99
More than 3 years	213	73.96
Total	288	100.00

Source: Self elaboration

4.1.3. Trust and authenticity

In this study, a Likert scale of five was employed, where 1 represents the lowest and 5 indicates the strongest affirmation. Table 6 displays the results of participants' perceptions.

Regarding the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs, the mean score was 2.8576, indicating that most individuals neither agreed nor disagreed that SMIs are trustworthy and credible. The standard deviation (sd) of 0.833 suggests a slight concentration of responses around the mean, indicating some variability in opinions.

Similarly, the authenticity of SMI marketing campaigns was rated, yielding a mean score of 3.8438 with an sd of 0.9947. These descriptive statistics suggest that authenticity in influencer marketing is considered important, as the mean score is relatively high (≈ 4 out of 5) and responses are moderately variable.

Table 6. Descriptive analysis statistics

variables	n	min	max	mean	sd
Trustworthiness	288	1	5	2.8576	0.8330
Authenticity	288	1	5	3.8438	0.9947

Source: Self elaboration

4.2. Comparative analysis

This analysis holds particular significance due to the comparative nature of the study. Consequently, several key aspects are examined across both EU and non-EU countries, including the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of SMIs, awareness of SMI marketing, the importance of authenticity in SMI marketing, the extent of influence of SMI marketing on purchasing decisions, and consumers attitudes towards SMI marketing.

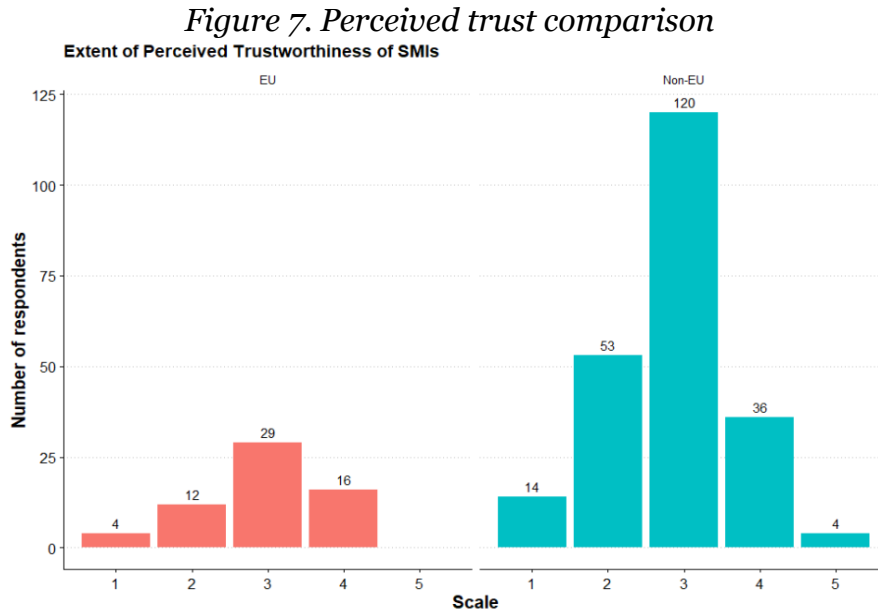
4.2.1. Perceived trustworthiness and credibility

As depicted in Figure 7, there is a notable similarity in the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs between both EU and non-EU countries, with the majority of respondents – 29 (47.54 percent) and 120 (52.86 percent) respectively - expressing neither complete trust nor distrust in SMIs. However, it is noteworthy that within non-EU countries, there exists a small subset of respondents, a total of 4 out of 227 (1.76 percent), who perceive a complete trust in SMIs while there is none in EU countries.

Additionally, a t-test has been carried out to examine the similarity of the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs in the two regions. The p-value obtained (0.4279) is greater than the common alpha level of 0.05. This implies that there is not enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis. In other words, there is no statistically significant difference in the mean trustworthiness scores between the EU and Non-EU groups.

Moreover, the confidence interval (-0.1456 to 0.3404) includes zero, which further suggests that the true difference in means could be zero, reinforcing the conclusion that there is no significant difference between the groups.

Based on the results of the Welch Two Sample t-test, we conclude that there is no significant difference in trustworthiness between the EU and Non-EU groups in the sample provided.



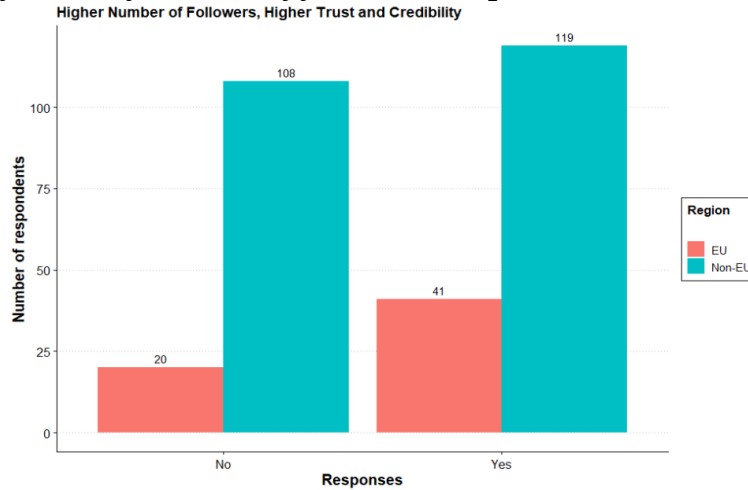
Source: Self elaboration

4.2.1.1. Influence of number of followers on SMI trustworthiness and credibility

In general, more consumers in both the EU and non-EU regions perceive that a higher number of followers would lead to greater trust in SMIs and their marketing campaigns. However, there is a notable difference in the influence of the number of followers on consumer perceptions between the EU and non-EU regions. Figure 8 illustrates that individuals in the EU region are significantly more influenced by the number of followers when assessing the credibility of SMIs. The proportion of individuals who agreed that SMIs with a higher number of followers create a higher level of trustworthiness and credibility was twice as high as those who disagreed with the statement. In contrast, in the non-EU region, the difference between those who agreed and disagreed with the statement was only 4.85 percent.

In this case, a Pearson's Chi-squared test is executed. A p-value of 0.0550 (>0.05) showing insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis, thus claiming that there is no significant association between the influence of number of followers on SMI trustworthiness and the region of residence of the respondents. However, given its proximity to the common alpha level of 0.05, this association in the sample provided could be further explored.

Figure 8. Influence of number of followers on perceived SMI trustworthiness



Source: Self elaboration

4.2.2. Awareness of SMI marketing campaigns

Overall, consumers exhibit a relatively high level of awareness regarding SMI marketing campaigns, with a mean of 0.8785 and an sd of 0.3273. There is a slight difference in awareness levels between the EU and non-EU regions, with a higher awareness observed in the EU region, as depicted in Table 7.

The p-value of the Chi-squared test (0.0301) lower than 0.05 rejects the null hypothesis, highlighting the statistically significant association between influencer marketing awareness and the region of residence. Hence, this proves that the comparison of awareness between regions is valid.

Table 7. Influencer marketing awareness by region

region	n	min	max	mean	sd
General	288	0	1	0.8785	0.3273
EU	61	0	1	0.9672	0.1796
Non-EU	227	0	1	0.8546	0.3533

Source: Self elaboration

4.2.3. Importance of authenticity

As shown in Table 8, consumers in general assign significant importance to the authenticity of SMI content, with a mean score of 3.8438 out of 5 and an sd of 0.9947. In addition, the data collected indicates that there is only a slight difference in the mean and sd values between the two regions, suggesting a similarity in the perceived importance of authenticity among consumers in both the EU and non-EU regions.

The similarity discovered above could be further depicted from the two sample t-test. The p-value (0.5055) is greater than 0.05 which the rejection of the null hypothesis is impossible due to lack of evidence and concludes that there is no difference in the mean scores of the importance of authenticity to the individuals

in the two regions. The confidence interval that includes zero further indicates that the difference in the mean values may be zero.

Table 8. Importance of authenticity by region

region	n	min	max	mean	sd
General	288	1	5	3.8438	0.9947
EU	61	1	5	3.9180	0.9712
Non-EU	227	1	5	3.8238	1.0021

Source: Self elaboration

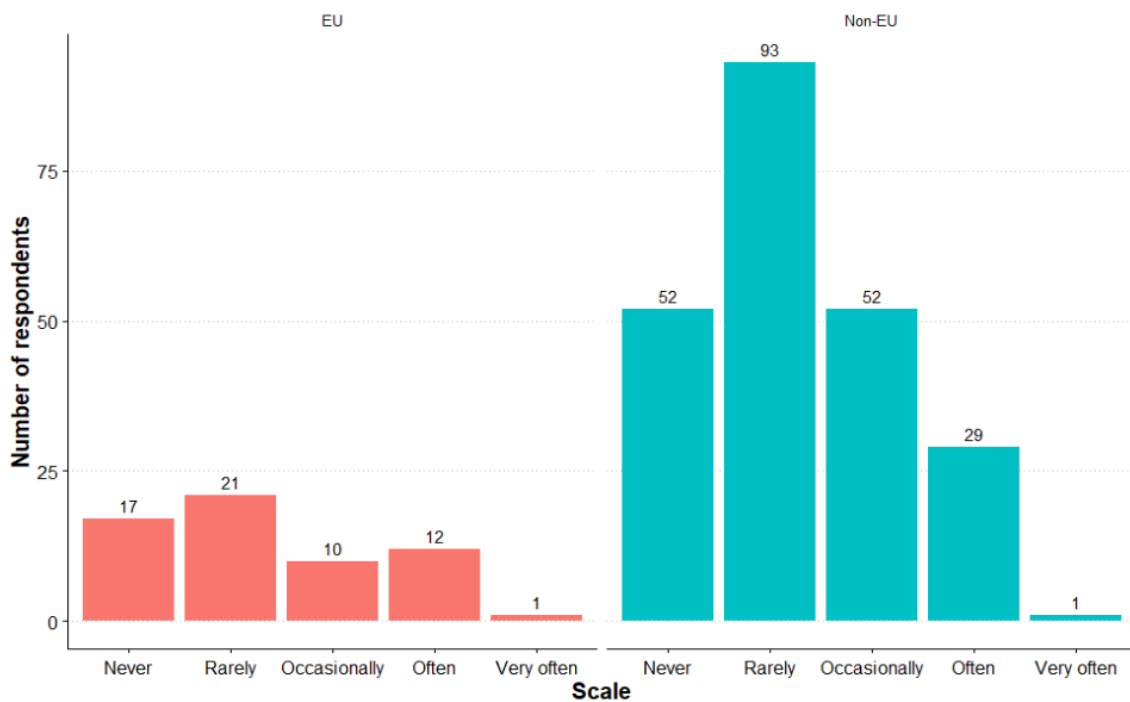
4.2.4. Successful purchases due to SMI marketing

Based on the findings presented in Figure 9, it is evident that a significant proportion of respondents rarely or never engage in purchasing SMI promoted items. Specifically, out of the total sample of 288 respondents, 183 individuals, accounting for approximately 63.54 percent, reported rarely or never making such purchases.

Upon further examination of the data by region, it is observed that both EU and non-EU regions exhibit slightly distinct patterns. In non-EU region, the distribution of purchase behavior demonstrates a right-skewed pattern. The majority of individuals reported rarely purchasing items promoted by SMIs, followed by those who either never or occasionally made such purchases, and finally, a smaller proportion who often or always bought these items. On the other hand, in the EU countries, while the majority still reported rarely purchasing SMI-promoted items, the differences among other purchase frequencies are less pronounced. Notably, there are relatively more individuals who reported purchasing often compared to those who purchased occasionally. This indicates a relatively more evenly distributed purchase behavior among EU respondents, suggesting that a higher proportion of consumers in these regions may be more inclined to make frequent purchases based on SMI promotions compared to their EU counterparts.

The results of the Chi-squared test corroborate with the claim above. The p-value (0.3351) higher than the common alpha level of 0.05 indicates insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis and concludes that the frequencies of purchase of the promoted items and the regions of residence are not statistically associated. However, a warning message about possible inaccurate approximation of Chi-squared test was shown. Thus, a Fisher's Exact Test, which is more reliable for low expected frequencies, is carried out. Similarly, the p-value (0.2631), which is higher than 0.05, indicates that there is not enough evidence to conclude that there is a significant association between the influence of SMI marketing on purchase behaviour and the residence regions, further exerting the inexistence of association between the two variables.

Figure 9. Frequency of purchase of promoted items by region
Frequency of Purchase of Promoted Items

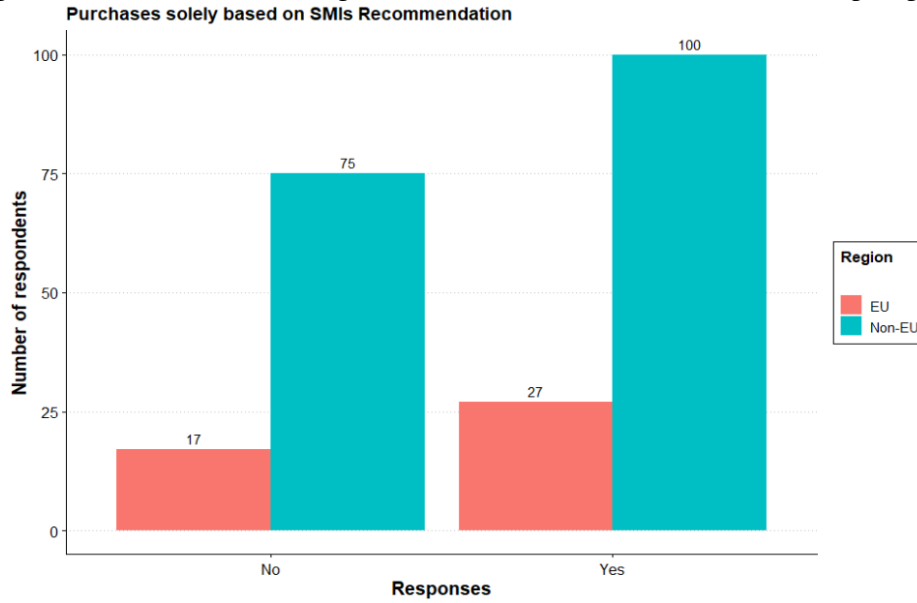


Source: Self elaboration

With reference to Figure 10, out of the total 219 respondents who have made purchases of promoted items – comprising 44 from the EU region and 175 from non-EU regions, excluding those who have never made a purchase – only 127 individuals made decisions solely based on recommendations from SMIs. Specifically, 27 respondents are from the EU region, while the remaining 100 are from non-EU regions. This group collectively represents 57.99 percent of those who have purchased at least one promoted item. Further examination of the data reveals that within the EU region, 61.36 percent of respondents who made purchases of promoted items relied solely on SMI recommendations. Conversely, in the non-EU region, 57.14 percent of respondents made their purchasing decisions based solely on SMI recommendations.

The Chi-squared test has a p-value (0.7367) higher than 0.05 which does not provide sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis and suggests that there is no significant association between the two regions.

Figure 10. Purchases solely based on SMIs recommendation by region



Source: Self elaboration

4.2.5. Consumers attitude towards SMI marketing

In general, individuals show a neutral stance towards trying or purchasing items promoted or recommended by SMIs. This is evident in Table 9, where the mean score is 2.9444 out of 5, with an sd of 0.9932. When analysing each region separately, the EU region exhibits a slightly higher mean of 3.082 and a higher sd of 1.0999, while the non-EU region shows a slightly lower mean of 2.9075 and a lower standard deviation of 0.9618. These findings suggest a similar perception by consumers in both regions regarding their willingness to try or purchase SMI-promoted items.

The results of the two sample t-test further validates the similarity of the consumers' attitude towards SMIs marketing. The p-value of 0.2623, higher than 0.05, shows the impossibility to reject the null hypothesis without sufficient evidence and concludes that there is no difference in the mean scores between the two regions. The confidence interval ranges from -0.1329 to 0.4818 further demonstrates the possibility of zero difference in mean scores between two regions.

Table 9. Willingness to try SMI promoted items by region

region	n	min	max	mean	sd
General	288	1	5	2.9444	0.9932
EU	61	1	5	3.0820	1.0999
Non-EU	227	1	5	2.9075	0.9618

Source: Self elaboration

4.3. Validity

Validity is a critical aspect of the research quality, and according to Bell, Bryman, & Harley (2022), it focuses on whether the variables truly capture the intended concept.

4.3.1. Correlation analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis, a natural analytical approach that explores relationships between variables (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2022), is employed in this study.

In this research, the dependent variable is the consumer attitudes and perception of the SMI marketing on Instagram. Figure 11 illustrates that the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs exhibits the strongest correlation with customers' attitudes and perceptions toward SMI marketing on Instagram, demonstrating a correlation coefficient of 0.56. In contrast, the authenticity of SMIs content shows a weaker correlation with the customers' attitudes and perception towards SMI marketing on Instagram, yielding a correlation coefficient of 0.20. Moreover, the independent variables display relatively weak correlations among themselves, with a correlation coefficient of 0.19.

Figure 11. Correlation between independent variables



Source: Self elaboration

4.3.2. Analysis of variance (ANOVA)

ANOVA was conducted to assess whether the independent variables significantly influence the dependent variable. As presented in Table 10, all independent variables yielded p-values well below 0.05, leading to the rejection of the null hypotheses. Thus, indicating a statistically significant impact on customers' attitudes and perceptions toward SMI marketing on Instagram.

Table 10. Analysis of variance (ANOVA)

```

* **Trustworthiness**:
```

 	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	Pr(>F)
Attitude	1	63.16	63.16	132.8	1.697e-25
Residuals	286	136	0.4755	NA	NA

Table: Analysis of Variance Model

```

* **Authenticity**:
```

 	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	Pr(>F)
Attitude	1	11.68	11.68	12.27	0.000535
Residuals	286	272.3	0.9521	NA	NA

Table: Analysis of Variance Model

Source: Self elaboration

The presence of correlation between the dependent and independent variables, as well as the confirmation through ANOVA that all independent variables exert a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable, validates the research findings. This alignment underscores the validity of the study.

4.4. Reliability

In a comprehensive context, reliability encompasses the consistency or precision of measurements (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2022). Various conceptualisations of consistency exist, and this study employs Cronbach's alpha as a measure of reliability.

4.4.1. Cronbach's alpha test

Cronbach's test assesses the internal consistency of measurements within a research study to determine if the measures are suitable for quantitative analysis (Barbera, Naibert, Komperda, & Pentecost, 2020). Authors often employ various qualitative descriptors to interpret the alpha values obtained from the test (Taber, 2018). While there is a common rule of thumb suggesting that an alpha value of 0.6 or 0.7 or higher is acceptable, there is no universally exact alpha value that applies to all cases. As depicted in Table 11, the alpha values obtained in this study generally fall within the range of 0.6 and above.

Table 11. Cronbach's alpha

	Alpha
Trustworthiness	0.76
Authenticity	0.65
Attitude	0.80

Source: Self elaboration

4.5. Regression analysis

To assess the hypotheses, a regression analysis was conducted. According to Lee S. W. (2022), regression analysis is employed as a method to deepen the understanding of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. This statistical technique could examine how changes in the independent variables are associated with changes in the dependent variable, thereby providing insights into the nature and strength of these relationships. All the analysis below are primarily done at a 95% confidence level (CL).

H1: Instagram Influencers' trustworthiness and credibility is positively related to the consumers' attitude and perception toward SMI marketing.

From Figure 12, it is evident that the coefficient associated with the independent variable "Trustworthiness" is 0.6714, with a corresponding p-value that falls below the conventional significance level of 0.05. This finding suggests a significant positive relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs and consumers' attitudes and perceptions toward their marketing on Instagram.

Figure 12. Regression model - Trustworthiness

```

Call:
lm(formula = Attitude ~ Trustworthiness, data = TFG)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-3.3829 -0.3686 -0.0400  0.6314  1.9600

Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   1.02577    0.17339   5.916  9.4e-09 ***
Trustworthiness 0.67142    0.05826  11.525 < 2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.8222 on 286 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.3171,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.3147
F-statistic: 132.8 on 1 and 286 DF,  p-value: < 2.2e-16

```

Source: Self elaboration

H2: Authenticity is positive related to the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers

Referring to Figure 13, it is evident that authenticity exhibits a significant positive association with the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of SMIs, with a coefficient of 0.1570 and a p-value of 0.0014 (<0.05).

Figure 13. Regression model - Authenticity

```

Call:
lm(formula = Trustworthiness ~ Authenticity, data = TFG)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-2.0392 -0.5681  0.1178  0.2749  2.1178

Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   2.25403    0.19311   11.672 < 2e-16 ***
Authenticity   0.15704    0.04864    3.228  0.00139 **
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.8197 on 286 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.03516,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.03179
F-statistic: 10.42 on 1 and 286 DF,  p-value: 0.00139

```

Source: Self elaboration

H3: Authenticity is positive related to the consumers' perception towards SMI marketing

Examining Figure 14 reveals that authenticity exhibits a significant positive relationship with consumers' perception towards SMI marketing, as indicated by a coefficient of 0.2025 and a p-value of 0.0005 (<0.05).

Figure 14. Regression model - Authenticity (I)

```

Call:
lm(formula = Attitude ~ Authenticity, data = TFG)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-2.17857 -0.77360  0.02392  0.82143  2.22640

Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   2.16613    0.22952    9.438 < 2e-16 ***
Authenticity   0.20249    0.05782    3.502  0.000535 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.9743 on 286 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.04113,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.03777
F-statistic: 12.27 on 1 and 286 DF,  p-value: 0.000535

```

Source: Self elaboration

H4: Authenticity is positive related to drawing connection between influencers and consumers.

Authenticity demonstrates no significant relationship with the sense of connection between influencers and consumers. As shown in Figure 15, although the coefficient associated with authenticity is -0.0015, its p-value 0.621 is higher than 0.05 which indicates no any significance to include this variable in the regression model.

Figure 15. Regression model - Authenticity (II)

```
Call:
lm(formula = Sense_of_Connection ~ Authenticity, data = TFG)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-0.5489 -0.5046  0.4659  0.4954  0.5101

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  0.56363    0.11814   4.771 2.93e-06 ***
Authenticity -0.01475    0.02976  -0.496  0.621
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.5015 on 286 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.0008578, Adjusted R-squared:  -0.002636
F-statistic: 0.2455 on 1 and 286 DF, p-value: 0.6206
```

Source: Self elaboration

H5: Sense of connection built between influencers and consumers is positively related to the consumers' attitude and perception toward SMI marketing.

As depicted in Figure 16, the sense of connection established between SMIs and consumers exhibits a positive relationship with consumers' attitudes and perceptions towards SMI marketing on Instagram. This relationship is evident from the p-value significantly lower than 0.05, and a coefficient of 0.5572.

Figure 16. Regression model - Sense of connection

```
Call:
lm(formula = Attitude ~ Sense_of_Connection, data = TFG)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-2.2192 -0.6620 -0.2192  0.7808  2.3380

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  2.66197    0.08013  33.221 < 2e-16 ***
Sense_of_Connection 0.55721    0.11254   4.951 1.26e-06 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.9549 on 286 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.07894, Adjusted R-squared:  0.07572
F-statistic: 24.51 on 1 and 286 DF, p-value: 1.263e-06
```

Source: Self elaboration

H6: Transparency has a positive effect on the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers

Figure 17 illustrates the significance of transparency in the regression model, with a small p-value lower than 0.05. The coefficient value of 0.3894 suggests a positive relationship between transparency and the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of SMIs.

Figure 17. Regression model - Transparency

```
Call:
lm(formula = Trustworthiness ~ Transparency, data = TFG)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-2.6350 -0.4669  0.1437  0.5331  2.9224

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  1.68825    0.17272   9.775 < 2e-16 ***
Transparency  0.38935    0.05548   7.018 1.64e-11 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.7708 on 286 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.1469,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.1439
F-statistic: 49.25 on 1 and 286 DF,  p-value: 1.64e-11
```

Source: Self elaboration

4.6. Interpretation and discussion

4.6.1. Hypothesis Summary

Table 12. Hypothesis summary

Hypothesis	Supported/Not supported
H1: Instagram Influencers' trustworthiness and credibility is positively related to the consumers' attitude and perception toward SMI marketing.	Supported
H2: Authenticity is positive related to the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers	Supported
H3: Authenticity is positive related to the consumers' perception towards SMI marketing	Supported

H4: Authenticity is positive related to drawing connection between influencers and consumers.	Not supported
H5: Sense of connection built between influencers and consumers is positively related to the consumers' attitude and perception toward SMI marketing.	Supported
H6: Transparency has a positive effect on the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers	Supported

Source: Self elaboration

4.6.2. Answers to research questions

Consumer perception of SMI marketing on Instagram encompasses several dimensions, including trust and credibility, as well as authenticity. These dimensions could serve as indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of SMI marketing campaigns, considering that consumers are the ultimate target audience.

1. Trust and Credibility:

To what extent do consumers in EU countries trust influencers on Instagram for product recommendations? Is there a significant difference in trust levels between EU and non-EU countries?

Consumers in the EU region demonstrate a balanced behaviour towards SMIs, showing neither significant trust nor distrust. The trust levels between EU and non-EU consumers do not exhibit a noticeable difference. Despite a small group of non-EU consumers expressing complete trust in SMI recommendations, the overall perceived trustworthiness tends to be slightly lower than that of EU consumers.

While a higher number of followers typically indicates a wider audience reach, its impact on trust levels remains uncertain. In this study, respondents from both regions tend to perceive higher levels of trust and credibility in SMIs with more followers, but this association is relatively more pronounced in the EU region. The disparity in respondents' responses (Figure 8) suggests that EU consumers place greater importance on the number of followers when evaluating SMI trustworthiness and credibility. In contrast, consumers in the non-EU region appear to be relatively indifferent by the number of followers when assessing trustworthiness and credibility. However, the Chi-squared test specifies no association between the influence of number of followers on perceived SMI trustworthiness and the region of residence. Nevertheless, the p-value yielded is

just slightly higher than 0.05, hence the association between the two variables could be further explored with external factors.

2. Authenticity

How important is authenticity to consumers in EU countries? Does it hold the same level of importance for consumers in non-EU countries?

Authenticity exhibits similar importance to consumers in both EU and non-EU regions, with mean scores close to 4 out of 5, and it forms a direct relationship with the perceived trust and credibility of SMIs. The similar significance in the role played by authenticity in shaping consumers' perceptions of the trustworthiness and credibility of SMIs in the EU and non-EU regions is also proven by the Welch two sample t-test.

3. Attitudes towards Sponsored Content:

What are the attitudes of consumers in EU countries towards sponsored content from influencers on Instagram? How do these attitudes differ from those in non-EU countries?

In general, consumers express a neutral stance toward trying the sponsored content, products, or services recommended by SMIs, irrespective of their region of residence. Moreover, a majority of individuals, in both EU and non-EU regions, have never or rarely made purchases of the marketed products on Instagram. Among those who have made purchases, slightly more than half have based their purchase decisions solely on the recommendations of SMIs or through sponsored content. Nonetheless, there is insufficient evidence to prove statistical association between the purchase behaviour and decision, and the region of residence. Therefore, it can only be concluded the willingness to try the recommendations of SMIs are similar between EU and non-EU regions, which were examined by the Pearson's t-test.

4. General Perception:

How is influencer marketing on Instagram perceived by EU consumers? Is there any difference in countries outside the EU?

While individuals in EU and non-EU regions possess a relatively similar point of view on the SMI marketing on Instagram, the awareness of influencer marketing are different between the two regions. The non-EU individuals are relatively less aware of the SMI marketing, compared to those in EU countries. Their perception is also possibly less influenced by the number of followers but this might be due to other external factors since there is no evidence to prove association.

5. Conclusions

The primary aim of this work was to investigate and compare consumer perceptions of SMI marketing on Instagram between EU and non-EU countries. The study established a background context and developed six hypotheses to guide the analysis. Out of these, five hypotheses were supported by the findings, while the fourth hypothesis was not corroborated by the data.

The research questions posed at the beginning of the study have been thoroughly addressed. The results indicate that consumer perceptions in EU and non-EU regions show minimal differences regarding SMI marketing on Instagram. Key aspects such as trust and credibility, authenticity, and overall consumer attitudes towards SMI marketing were evaluated, and no significant regional disparities were found. This suggests a largely consistent consumer outlook on SMI marketing across these geographical areas.

5.1. Implications

5.1.1. Theoretical implications

This study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by offering insights into consumer perceptions of SMI marketing on Instagram, specifically comparing views between EU and non-EU countries. According to the author's research and understanding, there are no other studies that have explored this particular comparative aspect in detail.

Given the novelty of this research, it can serve as a foundational reference for future studies in the field. The study opens up opportunities for more detailed and sophisticated investigations into various dimensions of consumer behaviour, marketing strategies, and brand engagement related to SMI marketing. As such, it can act as a valuable tool for researchers, marketers, and brands seeking to uncover new insights and develop more effective marketing strategies tailored to diverse consumer segments

5.1.2. Practical implications

This research has substantial implications for both local and international businesses that are either currently launching or planning to launch their marketing campaigns via SMIs on platforms like Instagram. The findings suggest that consumer perceptions of SMI marketing do not significantly differ between EU and non-EU countries. As a result, strategic decisions regarding the selection of SMIs for brand promotion may not need to vary drastically across these regions.

However, it remains crucial for businesses to tailor their marketing strategies and carefully select SMIs based on attributes such as trustworthiness, credibility, and

authenticity. These factors significantly influence consumers' attitudes and perceptions of influencer marketing. Collaborating with the right influencers can enhance brand awareness and effectively communicate product or service offerings. The personal credibility and perceived trustworthiness of an influencer are vital criteria in this selection process. Controversial influencers, or those with questionable content credibility, can negatively impact a business.

Additionally, the authenticity of influencers and their content plays a crucial role in the success of marketing campaigns. Authenticity has a notable impact on consumer perceptions, making it essential for SMIs to present genuine and relatable content. Interestingly, the research indicates that the sense of connection between consumers and SMIs does not significantly influence consumer perceptions. Therefore, brands do not necessarily need to prioritise influencers who have strong personal connections with their followers.

In executing SMI marketing strategies, brands should consider partnering with influencers who are perceived as trustworthy, credible, and authentic. The number of followers can also be a useful metric, as it may enhance the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of SMIs. Furthermore, brands in sectors such as food and beverages, travel, fashion and beauty can benefit from collaborating with SMIs to create high-quality, visually appealing content that aligns with the personal interests of their target consumers, thereby achieving a better return on investment (Annex II).

In summary, while regional differences in consumer perceptions are minimal, the emphasis of the brands should be on selecting influencers who embody trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity to maximize the impact of SMI marketing campaigns.

5.2. Critique and Limitations

Like all research endeavours, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The first limitation pertains to the sample size and data collection methodology. Although 288 responses are considered adequate based on a 95 percent confidence level and a 5 percent margin of error, as calculated using Cochran's formula (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Divakar, 2021), the study employed convenience sampling. This method was necessitated by constraints related to budget, time, and accessibility to the target population, which in turn affects the reliability and generalisability of the findings. Consequently, the confidence level of the results obtained is influenced by the inherent biases and limitations of convenience sampling.

Moreover, this study did not consider cultural and income backgrounds, which could be significant determinants in understanding consumer perceptions of SMI marketing. Including these factors in the research could possibly lead to different interpretations of the outcomes. Cultural background can influence consumer

behaviour and attitudes, shaping how individuals perceive authenticity and trustworthiness in influencer marketing. Similarly, income levels might affect purchasing decisions and the perceived value of products endorsed by influencers. Therefore, incorporating these variables could provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing consumer perceptions and the effectiveness of SMI marketing.

5.3. Suggestion for future research

For future research, improved data collection techniques could enhance precision levels, yielding more reliable results. Further research with larger, more randomly selected samples could enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings. Researchers interested in comparing consumer perceptions of SMI marketing on Instagram are encouraged to conduct more extensive and comprehensive quantitative studies to either confirm, extend, or challenge the findings of this study.

An intriguing direction for future research could involve analysing engagement metrics such as “likes,” “comments,” and “shares” on SMI marketing content. This approach would provide deeper insights into consumer perceptions in different regions. Another potential research avenue could compare consumer perceptions between two distinct regions, such as the EU and Asia. This would help to understand cultural influences on SMI marketing effectiveness.

Additionally, future studies might use this research as a reference to examine the impact of influencers across different industries, thereby testing the generalisability of these findings in varied contexts. Researchers could also investigate the relationship between perceived brand image or reputation and SMI marketing outcomes. This would be valuable in assessing the overall effectiveness of SMI marketing across different regions and consumer demographics.

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Annex I. Sustainable Development Goals

Table 13. Relativity between the thesis and the Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goals	High	Medium	Low	Not Applicable
SDG 1. No poverty				X
SDG 2. Zero hunger				X
SDG 3. Good health and well-being				X
SDG 4. Quality education				X
SDG 5. Gender equality				X
SDG 6. Clean water and sanitation				X
SDG 7. Affordable and clean energy				X
SDG 8. Decent work and economic growth	X			
SDG 9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure		X		
SDG 10. Reduce inequalities		X		
SDG 11. Sustainable cities and communities				X
SDG 12. Responsible consumption and production				X
SDG 13. Climate action				X
SDG 14. Life below water				X
SDG 15. Life on land				X
SDG 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions		X		
SDG 17. Partnerships for the goals		X		

Source: Self elaboration

This study holds significant implications for several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By exploring consumer perceptions between EU and non-EU countries, this thesis offers valuable insights that align with goals aimed at fostering economic growth, innovation, reducing inequalities, enhancing ethical practices, and encouraging global partnerships.

One of the primary contributions of this research is its potential to drive sustainable economic growth. Understanding how SMIs influence consumer behaviour allows businesses to optimize their marketing strategies. Effective influencer marketing can lead to increased sales, brand loyalty, and job creation in various sectors, including retail, fashion, beauty, and technology. By tailoring marketing efforts to the preferences and behaviours of different regional markets, businesses can achieve more efficient resource utilisation and economic stability. This aligns with **SDG 8**, which focuses on promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work

for all. The study highlights the importance of leveraging digital platforms like Instagram to reach and engage with consumers. This not only helps in driving sales but also in creating new job opportunities within the digital marketing ecosystem, including roles for content creators, marketing strategists, and data analysts. By fostering economic activities through innovative marketing strategies, the research supports the broader goal of economic growth and employment.

Innovation is a cornerstone of modern marketing, and this research underscores the necessity of adopting innovative techniques to stay competitive. By comparing consumer perceptions across different regions, the study encourages businesses to think creatively about how they engage with their audience. This aligns with **SDG 9**, which promotes industry, innovation, and infrastructure. The research findings suggest that businesses should adopt tailored influencer marketing strategies. This encourages innovation in the way companies approach their marketing efforts, from the selection of influencers to the crafting of messages that resonate with diverse audiences. Embracing digital marketing innovations can also lead to the development of more advanced marketing infrastructures, supporting the broader goal of resilient and inclusive industrial growth.

SDG 10 focuses on reducing inequality within and among countries. By examining consumer perceptions in both EU and non-EU regions, the study highlights disparities and opportunities for more equitable marketing practices. Businesses can use these insights to ensure their marketing strategies are inclusive and reach a diverse audience, thus reducing inequalities in access to information and commercial opportunities. The study shows that while there are slight regional differences in consumer behaviour and perceptions, the core principles of trust, credibility, and authenticity remain significant across borders. This suggests that businesses can develop universal marketing principles that promote equality while still respecting regional specificities. By addressing and bridging these gaps, the research contributes to the goal of reducing inequalities in the global marketplace.

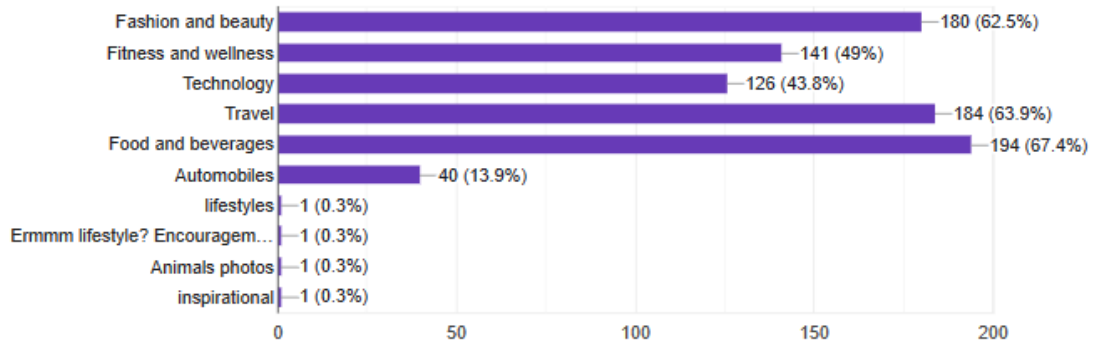
Furthermore, the study supports the development of ethical marketing practices by highlighting the importance of transparency and credibility. This contributes to building consumer trust and promoting fair business practices. Ethical marketing practices are essential for maintaining consumer trust and ensuring long-term business success. The study suggests that businesses should prioritise selecting influencers who are perceived as trustworthy and authentic. By doing so, they can avoid the pitfalls of controversial or dubious influencer behaviour that might harm their brand's reputation. This commitment to ethical practices aligns with the principles of **SDG 16**, fostering inclusive and trustworthy business environments.

The importance of partnerships is central to **SDG 17**, which seeks to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development. The research underscores the role of collaborations between businesses and influencers, highlighting the potential of these partnerships to enhance marketing effectiveness. By fostering collaborations with influencers who resonate with diverse audiences, businesses can amplify their reach and impact. These partnerships can drive progress towards multiple SDGs by leveraging the unique strengths of each partner. The study encourages businesses to consider regional differences and consumer perceptions in their marketing strategies, promoting a more collaborative and integrated approach to global marketing.

In conclusion, the research on SMI marketing on Instagram offers significant contributions to various SDGs. By providing insights into consumer perceptions across different regions, the study supports economic growth, innovation, reduced inequalities, ethical practices, and global partnerships. These contributions highlight the interconnectedness of digital marketing practices with broader SDGs. As businesses and researchers continue to explore the implications of influencer marketing, they can draw on these findings to inform strategies that are both effective and aligned with the principles of sustainable development.

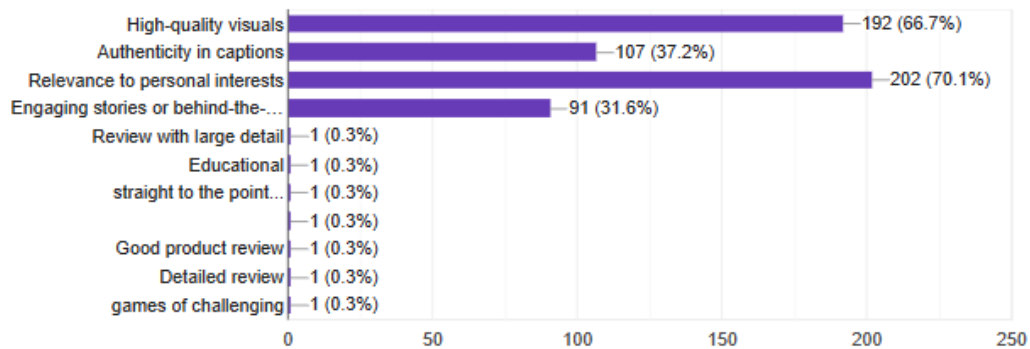
Annex II. Content Preferences

Figure 18. Preferred SMI promotion seen on Instagram



Source: Self elaboration

Figure 19. Most eye-catching factor of SMI contents



Source: Self elaboration.