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The Impact of Social Media Platforms on Influencer-Follower Relationships

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Masters in Marketing

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ISCTE - IUL

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Department of Marketing, Operations and Management

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Resumo

O mundo moderno é caracterizado por avanços tecnológicos drásticos, e o campo do marketing não se tem mantido inalterado ao longo desta mudança. Embora os *influencers* das redes sociais sejam reconhecidos como uma nova onda de formadores de opinião, muito está ainda por compreender no domínio do marketing de *influencers* e na forma como este pode ser introduzido em diferentes indústrias. Este estudo aplica o tema à indústria da beleza, centrando-se no impacto das características das plataformas de redes sociais nas relações entre *influencers* e seguidores e na recepção destes últimos a publicações patrocinadas. Através de uma entrevista assíncrona com 55 participantes, foi possível determinar que certas características da plataforma, como a duração do conteúdo, têm um impacto directo sobre a profundidade da relação entre *influencers* e seguidores, e que relações mais profundas são menos susceptíveis a serem afetadas por publicações patrocinadas.

Palavras-chave

Marketing de *influencers*, indústria da beleza e cosmética, relações *influencer*-seguidor

JEL Classification

M31, M37

Abstract

The modern world is characterized by drastic technological advancements, and the field of marketing has not remained unchanged throughout this shift. While social media influencers are being recognized as a new wave of opinion leaders, much is yet to be fully understood in the realm of influencer marketing and the way it can be employed as a tool in the context of different industries. This research applies this topic to the beauty industry, focusing on the impact of social media platform characteristics on influencer-follower relationships and the latter's reception to sponsored posts. Through an asynchronous interview with 55 participants, it was possible to determine that platform characteristics, such as content length, have a direct impact on the depth of the relationship between influencers and followers, and that deeper relationships are less likely to be strained by sponsored posts.

Keywords

Influencer marketing, beauty and cosmetic industry, influencer-follower relationships

JEL Classification

M31, M37

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Glossary

eWOM – electronic Word-Of-Mouth;

GRWM – “Get Ready with Me”; content in which an influencer shows the process of getting ready and the beauty routines it entails;

Haul – content in which an influencer displays their most recent purchases;

Swatches – content in which an influencer applies a sample of a make-up product to their skin to demonstrate its formula, color, and finish.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, the world has borne witness to an increasingly rapid technological development across all areas of human experience. The emergence of a new surge of opinion leaders, the social media influencers, occurred as a natural progression in the modern digital world. As a strategy, influencer marketing utilizes the influence of major opinion leaders to encourage brand awareness and purchase intention (Lou and Yuan, 2019), with influencers becoming a channel for the promulgation of the brand's message (Lim et al., 2017). The rise in popularity of these online personalities has strengthened brands' interest in partnering up with them (Vrontis et al., 2021) as a way of reaching consumers in a seemingly more organic and trustworthy manner (Van der Waladt et al., 2011, as cited by de Cicco et al., 2020). In exchange for financial gain or additional benefits in the form of commissions, free physical goods, or exposure in the brands' own social media accounts, influencers are being recruited to demonstrate, review, and recommend the products that brands are sending out to them.

Nowadays, due to the implementation of laws regarding mandatory sponsorship disclosures, influencers are required to disclose to their public when they are directly profiting from posted content (Jung and Im, 2021). To brands, partnering up appears to be the perfect opportunity to approach customers they may otherwise not have reached and target a specific sector of the market. To influencers, this step means upgrading the value of their work, especially after doing social media for some time without any financial gain. To consumers, however, it can signify the loss of faith in an influencer they had perceived to be trustworthy, and who they may now view as a "sellout" (Jung and Im, 2021; Lim et al., 2017). Alternatively, followers may regard the sponsorship as an opportunity for the influencer to recommend a brand they were already passionate about while being directly compensated for it (Bishop, 2021). The reception of a sponsorship can depend on various factors, from the depth of the influencer-follower parasocial relationship to the congruence between the sponsored post and the influencer's usual content (Belanche et al., 2021; de Cicco et al., 2020).

This research focuses on the topic of social media influencer marketing and addresses the impact of sponsorship disclosure on followers' perception of the influencer, on reception of the sponsored post, and on consequent purchase intention. A number of authors, including Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019), Ki et al. (2020), and Kim and Kim (2019), have declared differences in platforms to be potential factors affecting the results of their empiric work. Additionally, the authors mentioned this element as being of interest to study in

future research efforts, but only from the scope of being a potential variable in the main investigation on the effects of disclosure, and not as a main causal agent in it. Taking this into account, the **research problem** is a contextualization of the aforementioned elements within a framework that has yet to be investigated: whether the social media platform is a relevant causal variable on the followers' relationship with the influencer and, thus, their trust and perception of the sponsored post. From the outset, a platform that provides mainly visual, fast-paced content in itself may not elicit the same emotional response as one that relies on longer, more informative content. Additionally, there is the possibility that the difference in platform affects the way influencers and followers connect, directly impacting their relationship. This can, in turn, result in a different reception to sponsored posts, as a closer parasocial relationship is less likely to be strained by a partnership (Gerrarth and Usrey, 2021; Ki et al., 2020).

This research will particularly focus on the beauty industry, partly due to my affinity for the area, as well as some previous personal experience as a make-up micro-influencer. Having been in contact with brands and other influencers with similar content, I believe this work can provide useful insights into the partnership process in a way that is advantageous for both the brand and the influencer. The beauty industry comprises consumer goods for cosmetics and body care and includes make-up, skin care, and other personal hygiene products. In 2023, the industry is expected to generate a global revenue of around 571 billion US dollars (Statista Consumer Market Insights, 2021). A significant driving force in this industry is the employment of influencer marketing to target consumers in authentic ways so as to incite purchase intention, as evidenced by Estée Lauder's allocation of 75% of their marketing budget to digital and influencer marketing (Pearl, 2019). As such, it is vital that brands understand the inner workings of the relationship between an influencer and their followers to ensure a seamless and efficient partnership.

In favor of allowing an extensive analysis of the subject, this research will adhere to the following structure: firstly, a comprehensive investigation of the existing literature will take place, so as to contextualize the topics of influencer marketing, homophily, credibility, and congruence. A second chapter detailing the research methodology process, as well as the objective of the study and the research instrument used to collect the required empirical evidence, will follow. The two final chapters will feature a thorough analysis of the findings, in addition to pinpointing all research limitations and detailing recommendations for future work.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Influencer Marketing

Lim et al. (2017) found endorsement to have a heavy positive impact on company reputation and business goals; so much so that brands find themselves continuously searching for more cost-efficient and effective endorsers. In an increasingly digital world, it is only natural to progress into the newest wave of opinion leaders: the social media influencer.

Influencer marketing is a viral marketing approach in which an online creator shapes consumers' attitude through tweets, posts, blogs, or any other formats of communication on social media (Ferguson, 2008; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018). This type of strategy can be harnessed by brands through their investment in specific online personalities to create or promote branded content to their own followers or the brand's target consumers (Yodel, 2017, cited by Lou and Yuan, 2019). Influencer marketing "uses the influence of key individuals or opinion leaders to drive consumers' brand awareness and/or their purchasing decisions" (Lou and Yuan, 2019, p. 59), with influencers being employed as a vehicle to publicize a brand's message, in hopes of reaching the target segment (Lim et al., 2017). Opinion leaders are individuals who exert a strong influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Godey et al., 2016, as cited by Vrontis et al., 2021), usually via word-of-mouth (Moldovan et al., 2017, as cited by Vrontis et al., 2021). This usually occurs as a result of their superior status, social prestige, personal appeal, or expertise (Lin et al., 2018; Xiong et al., 2018, as cited by Vrontis et al., 2021).

Social media can facilitate brand-related eWOM through a variety of interactive practices, such as online brand communities, influencer marketing, blogging, and company-sponsored discussion boards (Childers et al., 2018; Kapoor et al., 2018, as cited by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). These practices allow companies to engage in both collaborative processes with potential customers and with influencers to promote their products to their following (Hajli et al., 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2019, as cited by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Approaching specific relevant influencers to target potential customers may enhance and add value to the interaction with customers, increase the effect of marketing actions, and generate benefits for the brand (Ananda et al., 2016, as cited by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). However, consumers have been found to make active efforts to resist apparently manipulative brand communication tactics (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016; Liljander et al., 2015, as cited by Singh et al., 2019) and, as a result,

influencers might be perceived to be acting in the interests of the brand rather than in the interests of consumers (Liljander et al., 2015, as cited by Singh et al., 2019).

Abhishek and Srivastava (2021) identified six domains of interest in influencer marketing: the mechanism of influencer marketing, the impact of influencer marketing, the persuasive cues, the likability factors of influencers, the authenticity of influencers, and understanding followers. Vrontis et al. (2021) justified the rise in influencer marketing as deriving from the increasing interest of brands in stimulating influencers to endorse and promote their products/services upon realizing the benefits this strategy can bring. Brands rely on influencers to promote beneficial consumer responses regarding their interests, allowing both the influencers and their followers to participate in the co-creation of the brand image on social media (Martínez-López et al., 2020, as cited by Vrontis et al., 2021). Brands benefit from investing into influencer marketing mainly because of the positive impact of influencers' presence on consumers' perception (Singh et al., 2019). As a result, an increasing number of marketers reported that they are planning to use influencer marketing as their always-on strategy instead of implementing it as a one-off, tactical campaign (Linqia, 2019, as cited by Ki et al.).

Finally, it is worth highlighting all the elements involved in this strategy. According to Lou and Yuan (2019, p. 59), there are “three important entities involved in influencer marketing: brands, consumers, and influencers”. The depth of the relationships between the participants will dictate the success of the marketing strategy.

2.2. Homophily and Parasocial Relationships: Influencer-Follower

Social media influencers have recently emerged as valuable third party endorsers, equipped with the tools necessary to share product and brand information (Lim et al., 2017). Recommendations from these online personalities tend to enhance consumers' positive perceptions about a brand and, consequently, their purchase intentions (Lu et al., 2014, as cited by Singh et al., 2019). This effect can be particularly heightened when influencers are able to form a connection with consumers/followers (Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Lee and Watkins, 2016, as cited by Singh et al., 2019).

The concept of meaning transfer relates to the way influencers can successfully encourage product engagement and brand loyalty as a result of their ability to communicate to a niche segment (Lim et al., 2017). This competence has further ramifications, with social media influencers being often regarded as trustworthy, reliable, and knowledgeable because of “their amiability in building rapport with consumers” (Berger et al., 2016, as cited in Lim et

al., 2017, p. 20). In fact, as cited by Lou and Yuan (2019), Swant determined through a Twitter study that consumers may hold similar feelings of trust for influencers as the ones they hold for their friends (2016). The development of these parasocial relationships determine how effective the marketing efforts will be. Additionally, Lou (2021) suggests that the evolution of parasocial relationships in a progressively digital world has allowed for a more forgiving attitude regarding sponsored posts. Followers seem to have mostly positive opinions regarding sponsored posts, interpreting sponsorship disclosures as proof of transparency and honesty (Lou, 2021). Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) also determined that followers' awareness of paid endorsements is related to the audience's ad recognition skills, as well as the established relationship between influencer and follower (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).

When identifying what followers desire to perceive from influencers, some have posited that followers focus on the influencer's personal qualities (Audrezet et al., 2018, as cited by Ki et al., 2020), while others believe followers focus more on the influencer's content (Kim and Kim, 2019, as cited by Ki et al., 2020). Croes and Bartels (2021) appointed six main factors as motivators for users to follow influencers, including information sharing, information seeking, coolness and trendiness, entertainment, companionship, and boredom. These motivations may vary according to user demographics, but they frequently work together to play an important role in consumer eWOM and purchase behavior (Croes and Bartels, 2021). Additionally, Belanche et al. (2021) found that influencers often choose to focus on a niche audience with whom they share similar interests. This preference can be seen as a consequence of the concept of homophily, which describes the similarity between the information source and the message receiver (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018).

Zhang and Choi (2022) emphasized influencers' effectiveness in affecting follower attitude and decision-making, justifying it by highlighting the importance of influencer-follower relationships and emotional attachment. The authors determined that the interestingness, novelty, reliability, and understandability of an influencer's content could increase followers' emotional attachment to them, as well as incentivize users to recommend the influencer to others, increasing their popularity and bringing in more value for the brand (Zhang and Choi, 2022). Kim and Kim (2021) investigated whether the source characteristics of an influencer have an impact on the formation of follower trust, and if this trust leads to influencer and brand loyalty, and the desired marketing outcomes. The authors determined that while the impacts of expertise, authenticity, and homophily on loyalty and marketing outcomes affected trust, the impact of physical attractiveness did not (Kim and Kim, 2021). When it comes to the relationship between physical attractiveness and purchase intention, Lim et al.

(2017) highlighted a positive correlation between the two, as the first appears to have a high tendency in motivating the acceptance of advertising.

Vrontis et al. (2021) bring attention to the different types of social media influencers, depending on follower counts: celebrity influencer, mega-influencer, macro-influencer, micro-influencer, and nano-influencer. Micro-influencers, for example, are individuals who have reached between 1,000 and 40,000 followers on a social platform (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020, as cited by de Cicco et al., 2020). They are starting to gain advertisers' attention, as their engagement numbers outreach those of mega-influencers, despite the difference in following (de Cicco et al., 2020). This phenomenon is supported by further evidence affirming that greater popularity does not necessarily imply higher influence on followers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Romero et al., 2011, as cited by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). When a micro-influencer endorses a product, their followers usually perceive them as a trustworthy and credible reviewer within that area of expertise, being skilled enough to test, evaluate, and then promote a product worthy of endorsement (Van der Waldt et al., 2011, as cited by de Cicco et al., 2020).

Media dependency theory suggests that dependency will be greater when the source of information provides resources that are relevant to the achievement of personal and social goals and the satisfaction of the individual's needs (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984, as cited by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Studies that have applied media dependency theory to the context of influencers show that the greater the consumer's connection with social media, the greater the likelihood that they will be involved in purchase-related activities (Hahn and Kim, 2013; Ruiz-Mafé and Sanz-Blas, 2006, as cited by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). The authors also found that the perceived impact of influencers on followers leads to brand engagement in self-concept, which supports the suggestion that followers engage with influencers through mutual personal and intimate interactions – the influential power of digital influencers contributes to increasing followers' expected value of recommended brands (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). The authors also confirmed a positive impact of engagement on the intention to consume the products of brands endorsed by digital influencers, which supports the idea that there is a direct link between value and behavioral intention in online environments (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

Human brand theory relates to the ways in which a media persona can develop into a human brand by providing a sense of attachment to their audience and yielding positive marketing results (Thomson, 2006, as cited by Ki et al., 2020). Consumers who have developed

an attachment to a particular brand are more likely to embrace that brand's products (Yeung and Wyer, 2005, as cited by Ki et al., 2020), which can also be applied to the human brand theory and, consequently, to the influencer context. Ki et al. (2020) determined that the stronger the emotional bond the influencer develops with their followers, the more effectively they influence them to accept their endorsements. The authors highlighted that to maximize the influencers' marketing effectiveness, market practitioners must collaborate with influencers who have formed intense relational bonds with their followers, even if their following is not very large (Ki et al., 2020). Lastly, Ki et al. (2020) also found that the more influencers satisfy their followers' needs for ideality, relatedness, and competence, the more they perceive influencers as human brands who have strong emotional bonds with their followers.

2.3. Credibility, Purchase Intention, and Social Learning Theory

Purchase intention is a widely used marketing tool used to evaluate the effectiveness of a marketing strategy and, in turn, forecast sales and market share (Morwitz, 2014, as cited in Lim et al., 2017). There is a correlative relationship between purchase intention and social learning theory. Social learning theory determines social interaction to be a generator of motivation and favorable attitude, through the help of socialization agents (Subramanian and Subramanian, 1995; Moschis and Churchill, 1978; as cited by Lim et al., 2017). A consumer's intention to purchase a product is affected by the socialization agent – the social media influencer (Lim et al., 2017). As previously determined, influencers gain credibility and popularity by developing communal relationships based on a collaboration of mutual benefit with followers (Cocker & Cronin, 2017, as cited by Singh et al., 2019).

Perceived information credibility and source credibility are two factors that greatly influence consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions and behaviors in traditional media platform advertising (DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 1996; Sallam & Wahid, 2012; Teng, Khong, Goh, & Chong, 2014, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018). Xiao et al. (2018) determined the influencer marketing model to be different because of the influencers' continuous presence on popular social media platforms, presenting content that the followers are consuming by choice. Source credibility is a characteristic that influences individuals' perception of the persuasiveness of the speaker (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018). Source credibility usually affects information credibility (Wathen and Burkell, 2002, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018).

Expertise is the extent to which a speaker is perceived as a source that can make good assertions (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018), and can derive from the

source being knowledgeable or experienced in an area to them having a credible title (Gass & Seiter, 2011, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018). Trustworthiness refers to the apparent integrity of the source and the individuals' trust in the source to communicate correct and truthful assertions (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21; McGinnies & Ward, 1980; as cited by Xiao et al., 2018). The perceived effectiveness of a persuasive message is dependent upon the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of a source (Hovland et al., 1953, as cited by Xiao et al., 2018). Xiao et al. (2018) found the role of trustworthiness to be more important than expertise, homophily, and likability in credibility evaluations.

Lee and Easton (2021) determined that the authenticity of a social media influencer depends on elements like sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. These dimensions have different effects on consumers' reactions, their willingness to follow the influencer, and their intention to purchase the products being recommended (Lee and Easton, 2021). Through that lens, Lou and Yuan (2019) highlighted the difference between the traditional celebrity and the influencer, as the latter has a status of expertise in a specific area (for example, beauty), has cultivated a sizable number of followers (with marketing value to brands), and regularly produces valuable content through social media. Lou and Yuan (2019) also determined that there are four dimensions that impact the trust followers have in influencers and, consequently, in branded posts: the informative value of influencer-generated content, the influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity to followers. Xiao et al. (2018) also found that followers' trust on influencer reviews depends greatly on factors like trustworthiness, social influence, argument quality, and information involvement. Perceived information credibility is valued by consumers and impacts brand and content attitude (Xiao et al., 2018). The three types of social media advertising value – informativeness, entertainment, and credibility – were all shown to influence consumers' perceived value of advertising and, thus, their purchase intentions (Lou and Yuan, 2019). This occurs as a result of followers' perspective of influencers as trustworthy providers of quality information, with a higher informative value relative to their entertainment (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Lou and Yuan (2019) determined influencer expertise to not be a relevant influencer characteristic affecting trust in branded posts. Conversely, Aaker and Myers (1987) found that influencers who are viewed as experts tend to be more persuasive and, thus, more efficient at promoting purchase intention (as cited in Lim et al., 2017). Jung and Im (2021) determined that influencer centrality and trustworthiness positively impact consumers' empathic response and immersion in the influencer's post. This consequently affects consumer attitude regarding the product and the brand, although these effects may vary depending on the degree of disclosure

of the sponsorship (Jung and Im, 2021). If the influencer generating the sponsored post is perceived as trustworthy and an expert in their niche, followers are more likely to be accepting of the advertising content (Metzger et al., 2003; as cited in Lim et al., 2017). Bishop (2021), on the other hand, emphasized the impact of brand suitability, brand friendliness, and brand risk in relation to the influencer on the way a sponsored post is received by followers, as well as which influencers brands choose to partner with. How each influencer scores in each factor determines the likelihood of a brand choosing to partner up with them (Bishop, 2021).

Information promoted by social media influencers is frequently perceived as trustworthy, reliable, and motivating to consumers, who are more inclined to follow their favorite influencers' recommendations (Lim et al., 2017). Lou and Yuan (2019) found influencer trustworthiness to negatively affect brand awareness and purchase intentions – followers seem to doubt influencers' motives in the creation of branded posts, even if they regard the influencer themselves with some trust. Gerrath and Usrey (2021) also posed the possibility of sponsored product reviews having negative effects on the way followers view the influencer, especially when it comes to their credibility and authenticity. This seems to be a consequence of the personal nature of influencer reviews, as well as the depth of the parasocial relationship (Gerrath and Usrey, 2021). The authors determined that both influencer type and motivation affects followers' perceptions on authenticity and honesty (2021).

Leite et al. (2022) analyzed the manner in which influencers' intimate self-disclosure can impact followers' perception of their credibility, and determined that in general, the reception to the self-disclosure depended on the appropriateness of the information. High levels of intimate self-disclosure are more damaging to influencer credibility, which can impact the persuasiveness of product promotions and sponsored posts (Leite et al., 2022). Singh et al. (2020) identified issues associated with brands engaging influencers in marketing campaigns, like the inference of manipulative intent, which can negatively affect the perception of trustworthiness and reputation. This type of consumer reaction can result in more careful curation efforts by brands when choosing which influencers to collaborate with, with a preference for influencers whose content is both informative and trusted by followers (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Lim et al. (2017) also determined the persuasiveness of influencers to be a key factor in consumer purchase intention and positive WOM (Lim et al., 2017). The inclusion of a more prominent disclosure also appears to increase ad recognition and perceived transparency, offsetting the negative response users have when facing covert forms of advertising (Campbell and Evans, 2018, as cited by de Cicco et al., 2020). Finally, it is worth noting that when consumers believe the endorser to have acted with manipulative intent,

negative attitudes towards both the content and the influencer are increased (Wojdyski and Evans, 2020, as cited by de Cicco et al., 2020).

2.4. Congruence between the Influencer, the Consumer, and the Brand

Belanche et al. (2021) noted the important role of influencers in providing information to followers, as well as in determining consumer purchasing intentions through their reviews and recommendations. The authors determined that the three contributors to the campaign (the influencer, the consumer, and the brand) must be congruent with each other for the sponsored post to be received positively (Belanche et al., 2021). On a similar note, de Cicco et al. (2020) highlighted how influencer-product congruence positively affects attitude, credibility, and continuance intention to follow. Higher congruence also enhances perceived sponsorship transparency, making it harder for followers to distinguish genuine endorsements from sponsorships and affecting ad recognition (de Cicco et al., 2020). Lim et al. (2017, p. 22) agreed, stating that “social media influencers as the spokesperson for a brand must exhibit an appropriate match with the product features”, as congruence between an endorser and the brand is the most important factor in encouraging consumers’ purchase intention. Followers evaluate information more favorably if they perceive themselves to fit well with the influencer, but also if the influencer seems to fit well with the brand they are promoting (van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019, as cited by Belanche et al., 2021).

Belanche et al. (2021) also suggest that consumers seek balanced and safe situations and avoid unbalanced and risky situations – purchasing a product recommended by an influencer that is congruent to them is safer than purchasing a product endorsed by an influencer they deem to be incongruent. This preference shapes their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward products sponsored by the influencers they follow on social media (Belanche et al., 2021). The authors also found that the product acts as a reflection of the consumer’s actual self while also helping them attain an ideal self that resembles the influencer who endorsed the product and who functions as a role model for the consumer (Belanche et al., 2021).

De Cicco et al. (2020) found that higher congruence reduces ad recognition, which can lead to misinformed behavior. Higher influencer-product congruence can result in a more easily disguised commercial intent (Kim and Kim, 2020, as cited by de Cicco et al., 2020), as users find it harder to recognize persuasive intent when it accompanies a highly congruent influencer-product match. When the advertised product is congruent with the usual content posted by the influencer, advertising recognition decreases, which results in lower perceived sponsorship

transparency – this will, in turn, impact followers’ attitudes and behavioral intents toward the influencer (de Cicco et al., 2020). On the other hand, when a more prominent and clear disclosure is displayed, higher congruence between a sponsored product and a product influencer can lead to higher perceived sponsored transparency (de Cicco et al., 2020).

Table 1 – Literature review summary table

Authors	Themes	Further Research
Abhishek and Srivastava (2021)	A comprehensive bibliometric analysis of influencer marketing and its impact as a strategy.	Accompany the evolving nature of influencer marketing, as it is a new research area.
Belanche et al. (2021)	The role of psychological congruence among the influencer, the consumer, and the brand in explaining consumers’ behavior when encountering product recommendations.	Expand the study to other social networks and analyze a different industry sector beyond fashion.
Bishop (2021)	Analysis of algorithmic influencer management tools designed to support marketers in selecting influencers for advertising campaigns.	Analyze the degree of influencers’ awareness of these management tools.
Croes and Bartels (2021)	The motivations young adults have for following social media influencers and the relationship between those and buying behavior.	Investigate how young adults' motivations for following social influencers change over time, and the effects of that change.
De Cicco et al. (2020)	Influencer–product congruence and the importance of clear disclosure regarding ad recognition, sponsorship transparency, and possible outcomes.	Investigate how brands can benefit from influencer–product congruence. Explore the effects of proper disclosure at different levels of congruence.
Dhanesh and Duthler (2019)	The effects of awareness of paid endorsements by social media influencers on followers’ cognitive persuasion knowledge, attitudinal persuasion knowledge, and behavioral intentions.	Examine whether gender makes a difference in followers’ relationship building with influencers.
Gerrath and Usrey (2021)	The way in which influencers’ followers react to incentivized reviews, and the effects of those reviews on credibility, WOM, and revisit intention.	Explore the effects of incentive types on follower reactions – whether financial incentives are more negatively received than indirect incentives.
Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019)	The effectiveness of digital influencers in shaping followers’ perceptions toward recommended brands and affecting brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value, and purchase intention.	How followers’ behavior changes over time, and if reactions differ from one social media platform to the other.

Jung and Im (2021)	Analysis of the relationship between influencers' characteristics, the efficacy of social media posting, and consumers' product attitude, as well as the critical role of sponsorship disclosure in this mechanism.	Explore how marketers could offset the negative effect of sponsored postings, since sponsorship disclosure has now become mandatory.
Ki et al. (2020)	How certain characteristics of the influencers' personas (inspiration, enjoyability, and similarity) and content curation abilities (informativeness) affects followers' perception of the influencers as human brands.	Explore whether the proposed model is applicable to other popular social media platforms, with TikTok being a relevant platform to investigate in the future.
Kim and Kim (2021)	Investigation on whether the source characteristics of an influencer can function as relational resources in the formation of follower trust, and whether followers' trust in the influencer leads to their loyalty to the influencer and desirable marketing outcomes.	Investigate potential moderators that could affect the direction of marketing strategies, like consumer age, influencer topic, and the type of social media platform.
Lee and Eastin (2021)	A proposed measurement scale for public perceptions of the authenticity of social media influencers, taking into consideration their persuasiveness as brand endorsers.	Investigate how each dimension of influencer authenticity interacts with the variations of the consumer's individual features.
Leite et al. (2022)	The effect of self-disclosure on influencers' credibility and its dependency on perceived message appropriateness.	Investigate whether perceptions of influencers' self-disclosure differ between the different types of influencers.
Lim et al. (2017)	The influence of source credibility, source attractiveness, product match-up, and meaning transfer on the effectiveness of influencers.	Investigate the role of brand-consumer communication in generating a genuine connection to promote products.
Lou (2021)	The relationship between influencers and followers and the latter's attitude toward influencer-sponsored posts, depending on several psychological mechanisms.	Test the role of cultural orientation and values in the parasocial relationship and influencer advertising.
Lou and Yuan (2019)	The roles of advertising value and source credibility in the context of Influencer Marketing.	Explore the role of cultural factors in social media following. Investigate additional factors relating to media channels or receivers.
Singh et al., (2020)	The impact of potential issues associated with brands engaging influencers, such as inference of manipulative intent, which negatively affects perceived trustworthiness and corporate reputation.	Investigate the impact of consumers' individual traits on the resistance of persuasiveness attempts by the brand.

Vrontis et al., (2021)	A consolidation of previous research done on Influencer Marketing within the context of social media with the aim of understanding what contributes to the appeal of influencers, as well as their influential power in shaping consumer attitudes and behavior.	Investigate consumers' emotional responses and reactions to social media influencer marketing.
Xiao et al. (2018)	YouTube influencer marketing and the way it navigates consumer perception of information credibility. The impact of trustworthiness, social influence, argument quality, and information involvement in perceived information credibility on YouTube and, in turn, brand and video attitudes.	Address the potential differences between micro-influencers and macro-influencers and their impacts on consumers' perceptions.
Zhang and Choi (2022)	The attributes of influencers' content that affect their relationships with other users and ways to increase emotional attachment between both parties.	Explore whether influencers' content affects consumers' attitudes toward them on levels other than emotional attachment.

Source: Author's elaboration.

3. Research Methodology

Converging the themes addressed in the literature review, the **research problem** is a contextualization of these components within a framework that has yet to be investigated: whether the social media platform is a relevant causal variable on the followers' relationship with the influencer and, thus, their trust and perception of the sponsored post. From there, a key **research question** can be drawn: what impact does the platform on which sponsored beauty content is posted have on followers' perception of the influencer and of the sponsored post? The key research question can then be segmented into five different research questions, each with their own research objective:

Research Question 1: What characterizes the emotional relationship between the influencer and their followers? – The goal of this question is to investigate the degree to which emotional relationships between influencers and their followers form and establish baseline information on followers' feelings regarding the influencers they follow.

Research Question 2: Do social media users trust sponsored content posted by the influencers they follow? – The aim of this question is to examine the level of trust followers exhibit towards influencers and determine if it is connected to the depth of the influencer-follower emotional relationship.

Research Question 3: What conditions incentivize followers' purchase intentions concerning sponsored posts? – The objective of this question is to ascertain users' willingness to financially support sponsored posts by influencers they follow and determine if it is connected to the level of trust and the depth of the influencer-follower emotional relationship.

Research Question 4: Which social media platform characteristics are most valued by followers when engaging with beauty content? – This question aims at pinpointing the most used social media platforms in the context of the beauty community and determining which characteristics of said platforms contribute to that preference.

Research Question 5: Which social media platforms foster deeper emotional relationships between an influencer and their followers? – The intent of this question is to determine which social media platforms foster stronger emotional influencer-follower relationships and establish if the characteristics of said platforms have an impact on the depth of these relationships, on trust, and on purchase intention.

The following table draws attention to relevant points in the reviewed authors' suggestions for future research. This study's research question and objectives address pertinent ideas that have been introduced by the authors, directly expanding on the existing literature.

Table 2 – Integration of the main issues from the literature review with the study’s research questions and objectives

Key Research Question: What impact does the platform on which sponsored beauty content is posted have on followers’ perception of the influencer and of the sponsored post?		
Main Issues (Author, Year)	Research Question	Research Objective
Motivations for young adults to follow influencers, buying behavior (Croes and Bartels, 2021).	RQ1: What characterizes the emotional relationship between the influencer and their followers?	RO1: Investigate the degree to which emotional relationships between influencers and their followers form. The objective is to establish baseline information on followers’ feelings regarding the influencers they follow.
Follower behavior, self-concept, purchase intention (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).		
Influencer inspiration, enjoyability, and similarity as characteristics (Ki et al., 2020).		
Source credibility and attractiveness, product match-up, meaning transfer (Lim et al., 2017).		
Cognitive and attitudinal persuasion knowledge, eWOM and purchase intention (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).	RQ2: Do social media users trust sponsored content posted by the influencers they follow?	RO2: Examine the level of trust followers exhibit towards influencers and determine if it is connected to the depth of the influencer-follower emotional relationship.
Sponsored reviews, credibility, WOM (Gerrath and Usrey, 2021).		
Influencer characteristics, follower behavior (Jung and Im, 2021).		
Self-disclosure, credibility, message appropriateness (Leite et al., 2022).		
Influencer-follower relationship, follower behavior (Lou, 2021).	RQ3: What conditions incentivize followers’ purchase intentions concerning sponsored posts?	RO3: Ascertain users’ willingness to financially support sponsored posts by influencers they follow and determine if it is connected to the level of trust and the depth of the influencer-follower emotional relationship
Psychological congruence between the influencer, the consumer, and the brand (Belanche et al., 2021).		
Influencer-product congruence, ad recognition, and sponsorship transparency (De Cicco et al., 2020).		

Types of influencers, consumer behavior (Xiao et al., 2018).	RQ4: Which social media platform characteristics are most valued by followers when engaging with beauty content?	RO4: Pinpoint the most used social media platforms in the context of the beauty community and determine which characteristics of said platforms contribute to that preference.
Follower trust, loyalty, and purchase behavior (Kim and Kim, 2021).	RQ5: Which social media platforms foster deeper emotional relationships between an influencer and their followers?	RO5: Determine which social media platforms foster stronger emotional influencer-follower relationships and establish if the characteristics of said platforms have an impact on the depth of these relationships, on trust, and on purchase intention.
Influencer characteristics (Zhang and Choi, 2022).		

Source: Author's elaboration.

3.1. Methodology

The literature review has addressed multiple points regarding followers' reception of sponsored posts. Conversely, the research has opened a path that has yet to be investigated, and that Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019), Ki et al. (2020), and Kim and Kim (2019) deem relevant for future studies. As such, an asynchronous interview in the form of an online survey was conducted to investigate the impact of three dimensions: the social media platform's characteristics (in particular, the length of the content), the influencer-follower relationship, and the follower reception to sponsored posts.

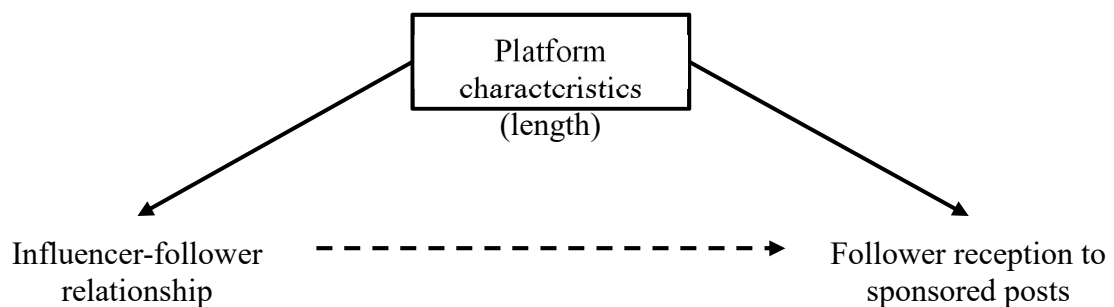


Figure 1. Systematization of the proposed study

Figure 1 shows a systematization for the proposed study. The goal is to analyze the impact that the characteristics of the social media platform, particularly content length, have on follower reception to sponsored posts and on the influencer-follower relationship. This

assessment is relevant when determining the connection between the influencer-follower relationship and follower reception to sponsored posts.

The aim of this study was to interview consumers of beauty content who are present on various social media platforms, with an ideal sample size ranging from 20 to 50 participants. The survey was distributed mainly through Reddit and other beauty forums, as well as word-of-mouth, so as to avoid gathering a majority of users from a platform under analysis (which could otherwise happen if the survey was distributed through one of the investigated platforms). The survey investigated followers' reception to sponsored posts in order to understand if sponsorships benefit or hinder the relationship between the influencer and the follower. By assessing the participants' most used platforms, it was possible to determine whether the platform the sponsored content is being held on has any impact on the way it is perceived and on trustworthiness.

The goal of the study was, then, to understand if the characteristics of the platform where the beauty influencer posts sponsored content have an impact on follower reception to sponsored posts, as well as on the parasocial relationship between influencers and followers. Additionally, the interview addressed the impact that the influencer-follower parasocial relationship has on follower reception to sponsored posts.

The survey featured questions regarding the platforms from which participants consume most of their beauty content, and assessed their reception to sponsored posts in regards to influencer credibility, trustworthiness, and overall opinion. The interview also investigated the participants' social media journeys in order to understand their relationship with beauty influencers. The platforms under analysis were Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

3.2. Research Instrument

The interviews were structured to take around ten minutes to complete and were conducted through GoogleForms, using a script comprising two sections, with a total of three multiple-choice questions, and five open-ended questions. The data was collected from 22 November 2022 to 7 January 2023.

The first section of the survey, "Demographic Questions", aims to characterize the interviewee by collecting the following data:

1. Participant's gender
2. Participant's age
3. Participant's occupation

The second section, “Study Questions”, intends to address the research objectives and explore the participants’ relationship with beauty influencers and the sponsored content they post, as well as the impact that the platform that content is housed in has on both of those aspects. As has been established in table 2, these questions intend to build on the research of previous authors.

1. Please reflect on your social media journey. How would you describe your emotional relationship with your favorite beauty influencers?

– This question references RQ1 (what characterizes the emotional relationship between the influencer and their followers?) and RO1 (investigate the degree to which emotional relationships between influencers and their followers form and establish baseline information on followers’ feelings regarding the influencers they follow), and expands on research by Croes and Bartels, Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, Lim et al., and Ki et al..

2. If your favorite influencer were to publish a sponsored post, would you trust it and continue to support them (please note: in this context, supporting the influencer means liking their post, cheering them on, and/or staying subscribed)?

– This question addresses RQ2 (do social media users trust sponsored content posted by the influencers they follow?) and RO2 (examine the level of trust followers exhibit towards influencers and determine if it is connected to the depth of the influencer-follower emotional relationship), and adds to research by Dhanesh and Duthler, Gerrath and Usrey, Jung and Im, and Lou.

3. Under which conditions would you financially support a collaboration or paid sponsorship promoted by your favorite influencer?

– This question addresses RQ3 (what conditions incentivize followers’ purchase intentions concerning sponsored posts?) and RO3 (ascertain users’ willingness to financially support sponsored posts by influencers they follow and determine if it is connected to the level of trust and the depth of the influencer-follower emotional relationship), expanding on research by Belanche et al. and de Cicco et al..

4. Please identify your most used social media platforms when engaging with beauty content, explaining why.

– This question references RQ4 (which social media platform characteristics are most valued by followers when engaging with beauty content?) and RO4 (pinpoint the most used social media platforms in the context of the beauty community and determine which characteristics of said platforms contribute to that preference), expanding on research by Xiao et al.

5. Please consider the social media platforms you have mentioned on question 4. How would you describe your relationship with the beauty influencers you follow there?

– This question addresses RQ5 (which social media platforms foster deeper emotional relationships between an influencer and their followers?) and RO5 (determine which social media platforms foster stronger emotional influencer-follower relationships and establish if the characteristics of said platforms have an impact on the depth of these relationships, on trust, and on purchase intention). This question expands on research by Kim and Kim and Zhang and Choi.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Sample Characterization

The following section intends to provide a demographic characterization of the 55 participants across three segmentation variables: gender, age, and occupation.

Regarding the first variable, gender, the vast majority of participants were women (87.3%), while three participants were male (5.5%), and four participants identified as another gender (7.3%). Secondly, the participants' ages spanned across a varied spectrum, with seven participants being under 18 (12.7%), 14 participants being between 18 to 25 years old (25.5%), and 20 interviewees being 25 to 35 years old (36.4%). Additionally, eight participants were between 35 to 45 years old (14.5%), and six were over 45 years old (10.9%).

Finally, most participants were employed (49.1%), followed by 14 participants that were students (25.5%), and eight participants that were self-employed (14.5%). The last six interviewees were unemployed (10.9%).

4.2. Results Analysis

This chapter presents a qualitative analysis of the data collected from an interview where 55 participants, selected through convenience sampling, reported on their relationship with beauty influencers, as well as their reaction towards sponsored posts. The study also seeks to understand the relationship between the individual's relationship with influencers and the social media platform on which they connect.

Employing the software program NVivo, the data was segmented according to identifiable themes, with word frequency queries being utilized to pinpoint any commonly used words and establish inter-thematic connections. These networks have been decoded in this chapter.

Theme 1: Participants' Feelings and Perception regarding Beauty Influencers and Sponsored Posts.

Sub-Theme 1: Participants' Feelings towards Beauty Influencers

One's emotional attachment to an influencer is based on characteristics such as authenticity, consistency, content quality, and ability to fulfill the needs of their followers. Generally, beauty consumers become attached to influencers who possess these attributes, as

they encourage trust on the influencer and on the product being promoted. Within the scope of beauty influencing, there have been many cases of dishonesty, which has led to careful engagement on both sides. According to the available evidence, individuals become emotionally attached to beauty influencers for several reasons, including the previous establishment of trust and the need for reliable information. In this regard, a major finding from the dataset is that most participants are very careful about whom they become emotionally attached to, endeavoring to make their own research and assessment before following a beauty influencer. This practice can help prevent occurrences of misplaced trust that can generate problems down the line. A participant revealed how assessment can help them discern which influencers to follow:

“When I follow any influencer, whatever the area, it will be because, for some time, the inputs have been positive and fair. I need to have a relatively objective assessment of what I think the person stands for to follow them. From there my relationship is one of trust and confidence.” – Participant 30

As previously stated, individuals follow beauty influencers for various reasons, and evidence has shown that the majority of people become attached to these influencers because of their ability to answer their beauty related questions. Beauty, in particular within the fields of make-up and skin care, comprises countless techniques that require skill and practice to perfect. In order to attain this level, consumers seek out trustworthy beauty influencers whose look they want to emulate and that provide quality information to provide them with tips and instructions, as well as product recommendations.

“I began following beauty influencers because I was struggling with acne and I wanted to find a skin care routine that would help with that. From then, I started wearing make-up and became hooked. I follow a lot of the bigger make-up and beauty influencers, like Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star.” – Participant 33

Alternatively, some participants reported that, for them, the technical aspect of the content was always secondary to the need for personal relationships and emotional connections. A participant reported that their social media journey emerged from feelings of loneliness, with influencers taking on the role of companion and inspiring them to dedicate more time to themselves.

“I joined social media when my children left home and I was feeling more alone. The television felt impersonal and I was looking for friends. I stumbled upon Reddit and then YouTube. I started following several lovely ladies who made videos about make-up and skin care products. In turn, I started taking care of myself like I hadn’t in years! I am very thankful to them for that!” - Participant 50

Nonetheless, not all participants followed influencers because of current beauty concerns. In fact, evidence shows that individuals can become emotionally attached to an influencer they have been following for a long time and that has served certain purposes for them in the past. From this point, it can be difficult for users to renounce access to content produced by an influencer they have become attached to.

“I think that over time and according to the interest I have in some influencers, which is reflected in the continuity of following that same influencer, a relationship of trust and almost friendship ends up developing. I tend to buy or try products suggested by them or at least they are an excellent source of information for my buying decision” – participant 25

“I started watching beauty YouTube with Emily Noel. I love her make-up content, and now I have been with her on her journey. I have laughed and cried with her about things that have happened in her life. I have also added others along the way.” – Participant 9

A critical aspect of note is the interpersonal relationship between individuals and beauty influencers. The visible relationship between beauty influencers and their existing followers is a contributing factor to whether or not a new follower becomes emotionally attached to the influencer. For instance, when a beauty influencer takes time out of their day to reply to comments and messages, as well as answer questions and provide information specific to someone’s needs, they create an image of selflessness and generosity that transcends beauty influencing as a mere job. To support this, the dataset revealed that some participants prefer to follow influencers with a smaller number of followers, as they believe them to be more interactive, responsive, sincere, and friendlier than those with a larger following.

“I like expressing myself with make-up and I follow influencers that do more creative looks, who are all smaller influencers in following. The emotional relationship I have with them depends a lot on who they are, but usually if they have a smaller following, I tend to like them more because I feel like they interact more with their followers. I think smaller influencers are more sincere and friendly than the big ones”. – Participant 51.

Sub-Theme 2: Individuals' Reactions towards Sponsored Posts

One of the ways most influencers generate income is through sponsorships – paid posts in which they advertise certain products in order for the brand to reach a larger audience. A major matter of contention surrounding these posts is the genuineness and quality of the sponsored products. Throughout the study, the participants' reactions towards sponsored posts were both positive and negative. Most interviewees reported their willingness to support sponsored posts as being a product of the trust they have in that beauty influencer. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, regardless of a possible positive opinion, participants tend to check the advertised product's quality and value themselves, a process that can dictate the future of their relationship with the influencer.

“Usually yes, sponsored posts and collaborations are main sources of their income so it's normal for the viewer to support these. I would consider unsubscribing if the influencer lost my trust posting something out of character or problematic.” – Participant 3

Furthermore, individuals tend to attach little to no significance to posts sponsored by brands known to produce quality products, as any trustworthy influencer worth their salt is expected not to engage in the promotion of low quality products. Alternatively, participants responded negatively to sponsorships if the post appeared inorganic and artificial, with the influencer showing no interest in using the product in the future. In these cases, the influencer seems to be promoting the product solely for personal gain, having little trust in the product and its ability to perform.

“It all depends on previous experience (if they do them regularly but then you never see the product again in regular posts, I'll skip the sponsored one, but if they're using something from a brand they have a track record with liking and using, I'll watch).” – Participant 5

Regarding the option to financially support a collaboration or a sponsorship, participants were selective with the products in which they chose to invest. Though judgment can occasionally be clouded by emotional attachment, evidence has shown that consumers would only be willing to purchase a product they deemed worthy. There are various reasons for someone to want to financially support a sponsorship, including post and product quality, a need or desire for that type of product, and the financial capability to do so.

“I support by buying collaborations if the collaboration personally appeals to me. Otherwise, it's throwing money at colored powder that just sits and never gets used. That said, I've bought several, including ones in collaboration with influencers I've never heard of because it's a trusted brand and an interesting color story.”- Participant 5

“Nowadays when I purchase things I generally try to only buy things that I genuinely need so if my favorite influencer came out either a collaboration product I would like to say I would only buy it if I needed it.” – Participant 12.

However, while this may hold true for the majority of participants, it is important to point out that there were respondents who, regardless of the situation, would always support a sponsored post by their favorite influencer, and participants who declared they would never financially engage with sponsorships.

Theme 2: Relationship between Social Media Platforms and Followers’ Feelings towards Influencers.

Influencers have their own preferences when it comes to the platforms on which they wish to release content. Similarly, the respondents also showed different preferences regarding the social media platforms on which they enjoy consuming content. The majority of participants indicated their preferred social media platforms to be YouTube (46.3%), Instagram (31.7%), and TikTok (18.3%). Notably, most participants used different platforms to fulfill different needs, with YouTube allowing for longer, in-depth content, and Instagram and TikTok providing quick access to fast-paced content.

“YouTube, I’m a visual person, and find it an easy platform to use, and navigate. Like slightly long form content, 15/20 minutes or so.” – Participant 8

“Instagram to quickly see photos of new products or for creative inspiration. And YouTube for more in depth reviews or discussions about products and ideas around beauty. – Participant 13

“My most used platforms are Instagram and YouTube. I like Instagram for make-up look inspiration or to follow influencers and see how they live their lives. I like YouTube more for other make-up content like hauls, tutorials, GRWM, and other long talking videos (by my favorite influencers)” – Participant 21

Subsequently, it was observed that the majority of respondents have some kind of emotional relationship with their favorite beauty influencers on their most used social media platforms, with participants who preferred YouTube having the deepest connections to their favorite influencers. Instagram was often reported as a means for respondents to access more information about their favorite YouTubers, and TikTokers elicited little emotional response. Overall, YouTubers induced the strongest feelings in participants, with many describing these relationships as akin to friendship.

“I rely on my favorite YouTubers to help me get through the day and I see them as my friends (it’s like we’re on zoom). I would miss them dearly if they stopped uploading and I wouldn’t know what to do. I think I’d just rewatch their videos forever.” – Participant 51

“On Instagram, I mostly follow people with make-up styles that I like or influencers that I found on YouTube and want to keep up with. On YouTube I follow influencers whose personalities I love. I feel like that “friendship” I mentioned in I mostly occurs on YT, when I can listen to the influencer for hours. (Especially in GRWM)” – Participant 22

Specifically, YouTube’s longer content was mentioned as a valuable asset and a determining factor when choosing a favorite platform. Several participants described longer YouTube videos as being favorable in the areas of both information seeking and entertainment value. Furthermore, participants felt that longer videos allowed for a natural integration of social media content in day-to-day tasks.

“I use YouTube the most, because I like to watch videos while doing other things. I also prefer longer videos where YouTubers describe each step well/take their time describing things. I tried TikTok for a while but I didn’t like it for that reason: they were always rushing.” – Participant 50

“YouTube. I enjoy watching videos that go in depth about beauty products and/or make-up looks with demos and swatches. The personalities of the influencers that I like also come across best in longer format videos, so I enjoy that aspect as well.” – Participant 12

It is important to mention that some participants reported no emotional relationship with beauty influencers on any of the platforms, instead using social media from a purely utilitarian standpoint. To some, influencers will always present themselves differently from who they are, making the development of an emotional relationship impossible.

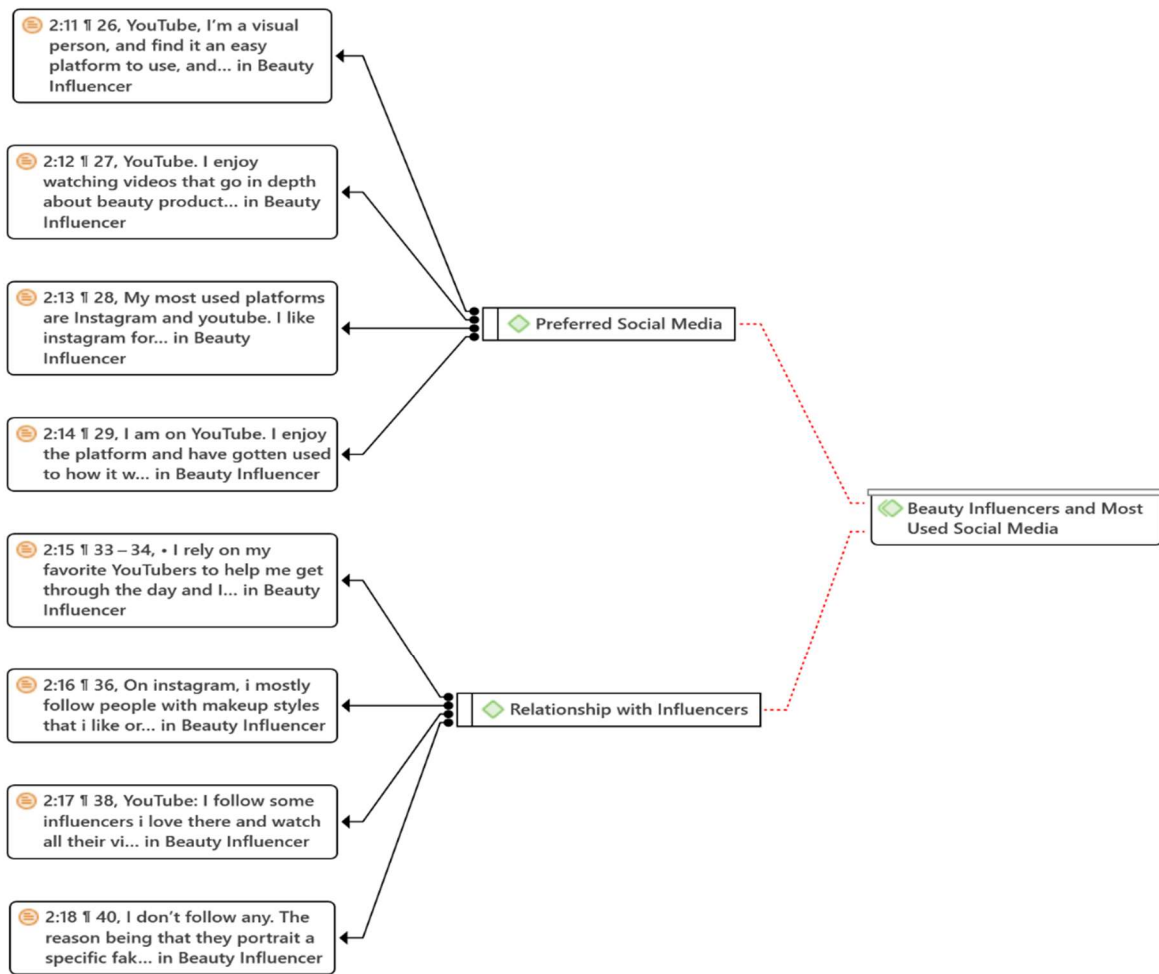


Figure 1. Network Analysis Showing the Relationship between Social Media Platforms and Influencer-Follower Relationships.

Source: Survey Output, 2023.

Figure 1 features a network analysis diagram that represents the relationship between social media platforms and influencer-follower relationships. The most represented social media platform in the diagram is, unequivocally, YouTube. Additionally, the participants who chose YouTube as their favorite platform justified their answers by characterizing it as a website that is easy to use, where they can find in-depth content.

5. Discussion and Findings

This study was developed with some research objectives in mind: analyzing the participants' emotional relationship with their favorite beauty influencers throughout their social media journey; determining their receptiveness and potential purchase intention when their favorite beauty influencer posts a sponsored post; and ascertaining the participants' most used social media platforms when engaging with beauty content and how that aspect shapes their relationships with beauty influencers.

The study's findings expanded on Croes and Bartels' (2021) defined motivators for users to follow influencers, corroborating the dimensions of information seeking, entertainment, and companionship, and adding characteristics such as authenticity, consistency, content quality, availability and, in some cases, even follower count. This last element directly addresses Leite et al.'s (2022) suggestion of an analysis on whether followers' perceptions can differ depending on the type of influencer. In a similar vein, it clarifies Xiao et al.'s (2018) idea that the potential differences between micro-influencers and macro-influencers could potentially impact consumers' perceptions. Those aspects were also found to be essential in the scope of trust building, and participants revealed themselves to be cautious before following a beauty influencer and becoming emotionally invested in them.

Additionally, the findings show the receptiveness to sponsored posts as ranging from negative to positive, with most participants doing additional research to verify the advertised product's quality and only choosing to purchase it if they intrinsically need or desire it. If the sponsoring brand is known to sell quality products, the relationship between the follower and the influencers is likely to be unaffected by the sponsorship. If, on the other hand, the brand is not reputable and the post appears inorganic, the follower will likely lose trust in the influencer. Nonetheless, most respondents were in accordance with regards to trust being the main factor affecting the way a sponsored post is received. These findings expand on Belanche et al.'s (2021) analysis of the role of influencer-brand congruence in the followers' receptiveness of product recommendations, and address the authors' suggestion of applying that theory to a different industry. Similarly, they address De Cicco et al.'s (2020) suggestion that the impact of sponsorship disclosure should be investigated in association with influencer-product congruence.

As expected, the participants' most used social media platforms when consuming beauty content were YouTube for more in-depth content, and Instagram and TikTok for fast-paced content. Moreover, participants who chose YouTube as their social media platform of

preference displayed the strongest emotional connections to their favorite influencers. Instagram was often reported as a means for respondents to follow their favorite YouTubers on a different platform and get to know more about their personal lives. TikTok was preferred for its quickness and accessibility, but elicited very little emotional response. These results clarify Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández' (2019) proposal for future research, verifying that followers' perceptions do shift depending on the social media platform. This component tests Ki et al.'s (2020) theory that the effect that certain characteristics of the influencers' personas and content have on followers' perceptions is not consistent throughout different social media platforms, as well as Kim and Kim's (2021) suggestion that other factors, such as the type of social media platform, can impact followers' trust on influencers.

Table 3 presents the main theoretical and practical contributions of this study to the existing literature and specifically clarifies how it expands on the authors' investigation and suggestions for future research.

Table 3 – Systematization of the study's main contributions to the existing literature

Author, Year	Main Topics	Main Theoretical/Practical Contributions
Croes and Bartels, 2021	The motivations young adults have for following social media influencers and the relationship between those and buying behavior.	Corroborates the authors' list of motivators for users to follow influencers and adds the characteristics of authenticity, consistency, content quality, availability and follower count.
Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019	The effectiveness of digital influencers in shaping followers' perceptions toward recommended brands and affecting brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value, and purchase intention.	Verifies that followers' perceptions shift depending on the social media platform – YouTube elicits the strongest influencer-follower emotional connections, and TikTok evokes the weakest emotional responses.
Ki et al., 2020	How certain characteristics of the influencers' personas (inspiration, enjoyability, and similarity) and content curation abilities (informativeness) affects followers' perception of the influencers as human brands.	Confirms that the effect that certain influencer characteristics have on followers' perceptions is not consistent throughout different social media platforms – YouTube generates the deepest emotional connections.
Lim et al., 2017	The influence of source credibility, source attractiveness, product match-up, and meaning transfer on the effectiveness of influencers.	Verifies that brand-consumer relationship is an important factor affecting the reception of sponsored posts – if the brand is reputable, the influencer-follower relationship will likely not be affected by the sponsorship.

Gerrath and Usrey, 2021	The way in which influencers' followers react to incentivized reviews, and the effects of those reviews on credibility, WOM, and revisit intention.	Determines that financial incentives are not received any more negatively than indirect incentives, as long as there is an established emotional connection between the influencer and the follower.
Jung and Im, 2021	Analysis of the relationship between influencers' characteristics, the efficacy of social media posting, and consumers' product attitude, as well as the critical role of sponsorship disclosure in this mechanism.	Establishes a method for marketers to offset the negative effect of sponsored posts – choosing influencers that post longer content can mean better reception to sponsored posts.
Leite et al., 2022	The effect of self-disclosure on influencers' credibility and its dependency on perceived message appropriateness.	Confirms that followers' perceptions can differ depending on the type of influencer and follower count – smaller influencers who post longer content generate stronger emotional connections with their followers.
Belanche et al., 2021	The role of psychological congruence among the influencer, the consumer, and the brand in explaining consumers' behavior when encountering product recommendations.	Expands on the analysis of the role of influencer-brand congruence in the followers' receptiveness of product recommendations, applying this theory to the beauty industry.
De Cicco et al., 2020	Influencer-product congruence and the importance of clear disclosure regarding ad recognition, sponsorship transparency, and possible outcomes.	Investigates the impact of sponsorship disclosure in association with influencer-product congruence – followers are more likely to approve of a sponsorship if they feel the product fits the influencer's profile.
Xiao et al., 2018	YouTube influencer marketing and the way it navigates consumer perception of information credibility. The impact of trustworthiness, social influence, argument quality, and information involvement in perceived information credibility on YouTube and, in turn, brand and video attitudes.	Confirms that the potential differences between micro-influencers and macro-influencers do impact consumers' perceptions – users tend to form stronger relationships with influencers that present a smaller follower count.
Kim and Kim, 2021	Investigation on whether the source characteristics of an influencer can function as relational resources in the formation of follower trust, and whether followers' trust in the influencer leads to their loyalty to the influencer and desirable marketing outcomes.	Establishes that other factors – type of social media platform – can affect followers' trust on influencers.

Source: Author's elaboration.

The reported feelings of quasi-friendship in regards to YouTubers supports the proposed theory that a social media platform that houses longer content is more likely to stimulate stronger emotional relationships between an influencer and their followers. Therefore, it is possible to determine that the characteristics of the platform where beauty influencers post sponsored content do have an impact on the parasocial relationship between influencers and followers and on trust. As has been determined, trust is the main factor in whether or not a sponsored post is well received. Thus, it can be inferred that the characteristics of the platform housing the content indirectly affect the followers' receptiveness to a sponsored post.

In general, this study advances Jung and Im's (2021) suggestion of investigating how brands could offset the negative effect of sponsored posts by establishing certain parameters to be considered before partnering up with an influencer. It can be in a brand's best interest to seek influencers that already exhibit a strong emotional connection to their followers, as their sponsored posts tend to be better received. Selecting influencers that produce longer content, particularly YouTubers, can be an effective method to ensure that those desirable emotional connections are present.

The study provides valuable information regarding the characteristics – of both the influencer and the platform they post on – that encourage trust in followers. Keeping these results in mind can aid marketers in taking the step that garners the most positive results. This research presents an innovative angle for brands to consider when selecting influencers for partnerships and its application is not confined to the beauty industry. While the focus of this investigation has been on that particular field, the findings transcend its limitations and can be implemented across all other areas where influencer marketing is a valuable tool.

6. Conclusion

The study addresses the research question “what impact does the platform on which sponsored beauty content is posted have on followers’ perception of the influencer and of the sponsored post?” Through an interview with 55 participants, it was possible to determine that the characteristics of the platform where beauty influencers post sponsored content significantly affect the influencer-follower parasocial relationship, especially on the dimension of trust. This last point is crucial, as trust was found to be the main factor in the receptiveness of a sponsored post. There is, then, an indirect relationship between the characteristics of the platform where the influencer posts and the followers’ reception to a sponsored post.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this research advances the literature by investigating many authors’ suggestions for future research. Determining that there are significant variations in the way different types of social media platforms affect influencer-follower relationships opens up new doors into understanding the relationship-forming process. As far as practical contributions are concerned, the beauty influencer industry is a specific niche that operates in a different way than many others. It is a highly profitable industry that addresses the physical aspect of its participants, and a considerable number of beauty influencer followers join the community very early in life, during their formative years. As many participants pointed out, they regard the content creators they have followed for a long time as important figures in their life. That inherent trust, combined with a strong product and powerful branding, can be an exceptionally advantageous tool in marketing. This study verified that there is a substantial link between emotional connection and reception to sponsored posts. Additionally, the research determined that longer content promotes stronger influencer-follower relationships. From this point, the applicability of this study is boundless. All areas ranging from the fitness and fashion industries to the gaming community can benefit from this research, as it streamlines a method that maximizes the chances of a sponsored post being well received.

Nevertheless, the conducted research follows an empirical approach and thus requires future studies to expand the scope of its investigation, collecting data from a broader, more comprehensive population, hence strengthening its statistical value and applicability. The study’s sample is largely composed of women and considering that the way different genders experience online spaces varies so starkly, future research efforts may find value in further investigating these realities. Additionally, as previously mentioned, this study focuses on a very specific niche within the realm of influencer marketing. Interesting results may be obtained if the study’s parameters are applied to different industries or areas of interest besides beauty.

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