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Effects of influencer endorsements in SOME and the moderating effect of independence

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how perceived independence of influencers impacts consumer trust and the effectiveness of product promotion on Instagram, with a focus on the Norwegian food market. It combines Social Influence Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explore connection between partnership length and account type—and individual engagement behaviors. Through a 2x2 experimental design, these factors were manipulated to have a better understanding of their effect on consumer attitudes.

The findings showed that individual engagement behaviors play a more important role in building trust and driving endorsement effectiveness than foundational elements like partnership duration which challenges traditional views in influencer marketing. Moreover, authenticity is widely acknowledged as one of the main factors to develop trust; this study addresses it as an interpretive construct taken from participants' responses, rather than a directly measured variable. High engagement levels were boosting trust and perceived endorsement credibility, while content seen as too commercialized reduced these factors.

This research provides fresh insights into the success of influencer marketing by showing the importance of behavioral engagement over structural aspects. The findings show the need for marketers to create campaigns that connect with audience values and patterns, increasing trust and making deeper connections with consumers.

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1. Background and Research Questions

1.1 The Topic of the Thesis

Influencer marketing has become a sphere-changing force in digital advertising, reestablishing how brands connect with consumers in fast changing, personalized, and communicative ways (Lou and Yuan (2019)). Compared to traditional advertising, which builds on one-way communication, influencer marketing makes an emphasis on the perceived authenticity and relevance of social media personalities to build trust and drive engagement. Even authenticity is often playing a key role in influencer marketing. In this study, it is used as a supplementary concept taken from consumer perceptions and not as a directly measured variable (Casaló, Flávian, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). This change shows a fast evolution in marketing strategies, where influencers are becoming binds and bridges over the gap between corporate messages and personal consumer choices.

Main point in the effectiveness of influencer marketing is often mentioned as the concept of authenticity, however it still remains a subject of different interpretations, especially in the world of growing commercialization. In this study, authenticity is understood as an interpretive concept taken from consumer perceptions rather than directly measured (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Consumers, especially on platforms like Instagram, appreciate content that resonates with their experiences and personal values. However, as the number of sponsored content is rapidly growing, questions about real independence of influencers are arising.

This perceived independence - the point to which influencers are still motivated by their own beliefs rather than contractual obligations - plays a critical role in forming trust and the success of influencer campaigns (Hovland, C. I., & Weiss, W. 1951).

The role of engagement metrics complicates this dynamic even more. Likes, shares and comments often used as indicators of campaign results, can hide the specific relationship between trust and effectiveness. High engagement metrics may show popularity of the content, however they do not always reflect meaningful consumer connections (Lou & Yuan,

2019). It is essential to understand how perceived independence is connected with these metrics to understand the complexities of the modern influencer market .

This thesis investigates these dynamics in the context of the Norwegian food market, where the role of sustainability and transparency is high. The main task of my research is to gain useful insights in what makes using influencers a successful marketing strategy by looking at the perceived independence and trust on Instagram as the key factors.

1.2 Influencer Marketing

The rapid change that the social media resources have been going through in recent years has drastically changed the array of modern marketing strategies, making Influencers one of the key marketing channels. Especially Instagram became an essential platform for influencers-driven campaigns, giving a highly interactive environment and dynamic visuals (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). It gives the opportunity to show storytelling through images, videos, and captions allowing influencers to naturally integrate brand message into their personal content making it feel authentic and engaging for followers.

This trend to influencer marketing shows a wider change in consumer behaviour. Modern audiences are very skeptical about traditional types of advertising, which is often observed as untrusted and not personal (Chu & Kim, 2011). Compared to influencer marketing which is often regarded as intermediate and resonating with values and preferences of their followers. Combined entertainment with refined forms of persuasion are shaping consumer attitudes in the needed way by using perception of authenticity of influencers.

On the other hand, growth of influencer marketing is not without difficulties. Instagram's algorithmic prioritization of high engagement content makes influencers create content that generates shares, likes, comments being under pressure at the same time (De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. 2017). These metrics are signaling about popularity, but they may encourage influencers to prioritize algorithmic engagement over authentic connections, potentially decrease trust, which is essential to their success

These dynamics are mostly important within the Norwegian food market, where connection with cultural values, such as sustainability and transparency are prioritized. Understanding how influencers solve these challenges - having balance between engagement metrics and

perceived independence - shows important insights for marketers looking to use the full potential of influencer campaigns in Instagram.

1.3 Consumer Trust and Brand Relationships

Consumer trust is a keystone of success in influencer marketing upon which effective brand-consumer relationships are created. Influencers being intermediaries between brands and their own audiences, bridging over the gap between corporate message and personal engagement. To extend trust to the brand which being promoted and make emotional connections stronger, followers should see influencer as trustable in their perception

Trust in influencer marketing is not static. It is based on multiple factors, including the perceived alignment between brands and influencers values (Reinikainen et al. 2020).

Authenticity is often taking an important role, as followers would more likely believe content that is connected with influencers lifestyle and personal beliefs. For example, an influencer whose content is based on sustainability would be perceived as more trustable for campaigns about eco-friendly products, in contrast to promoting luxury segment items, which do not have connection with original content. It would strengthen the cycle of trust by enhancing both brand and influencer credibility with perceived alignment.

On the contrary, when influencers are seen as too commercialised or not continuously in their content, this trust can be quickly undermined. Followers could question whether influencers recommendations are going from personal beliefs or are based only on financial initiatives. Such skepticism would not only damage influencers credibility but also worsen reputation of the brand, potentially make the effectiveness of the marketing campaign much weaker.

These dynamics are particularly important within the Norwegian food market (Andersen, L. M., & Bjørnsen, E. 2021). Consumers expect influencers to reflect on ethical practices and prioritize transparency in their collaborations. They can strengthen the impact of their endorsements by creating meaningful and long term relationships between followers and brands through alignment with cultural and consumer expectations.

1.4 Influencer Independence on Instagram

Perceived independence is one of the main components of effective influencer marketing, especially on platforms like Instagram, where key drivers of consumer trust are reliability and perception of authenticity (Evans et al., 2017). Influencers who commonly add brand endorsements into their storytelling can be seen as independent, creating stronger bonds with their audience. This perception of autonomy ensures that their recommendations look original, rather than commercial, raising their credibility and effectiveness of the campaign itself.

Instagram's unique features increase the importance of perceived independence. Influencers through different tools such as stories, live sessions, and interactive polls could directly engage with their followers making their connection more trustable and close. However, platform algorithms are pushing influencers to create only content which will be accented on engagement metrics. This tension between maintaining independence and getting high engagement is the most valuable challenge in influencer marketing (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

For brands, making collaboration with influencers whose values align with theirs, also demonstrating selectivity in partnership, is critical. When there is a strong connection between influencers' personal brand and products they promote, consumers are more likely to trust such campaigns. As an example, influencers focused on science and high intellectual content would gain more credibility when promoting closely related products, compared to some sort of completely entertainment products which can decrease their perceived independence and audience trust.

In the context of the Norwegian food market, cultural values such as sustainability and transparency are strongly emphasized, making the risk of mistakes high. To make successful influencer campaigns in this context requires campaigns to connect with local consumers' expectations and balancing between pressure from platform dynamics and need in showing independence and perceived authenticity.

1.5 Research Questions

The rapid interaction between perceived independence, the perception of authenticity and engagement metrics builds the foundation of effective influencer marketing campaigns. This study investigates these interactions to understand how they affect consumer perceptions and

trust. Making an emphasis on Instagram as a used platform and Norwegian food market as a context, the main aim of the research is to show a detailed perspective on how influencer marketing strategies could balance perceived authenticity with effectiveness.

To guide this investigation, the study is made around two central research questions:

1. **RQ 1:** To what extent does the perceived independence of influencers moderate the relationship between social media engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) and the effectiveness of product endorsements?
2. **RQ 2:** How does the perception of an influencer's independence shape consumer trust in their endorsements on social media platforms?

These questions give a plan for understanding how relationships between engagement metrics and the perception of independence are being managed by influencers, which will give important insights about strategic design of influencers marketing campaigns. By focusing on these relations, the aim of study is to shed light on connections that increase the effectiveness and credibility of influencer endorsements.

1.6 Importance of the Study

The main purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the growing base of research on influencer marketing by filling a huge gap in understanding the role of perceived independence in development of consumer trust and the effectiveness of social media support. While engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares are used to measure success, their connection with trustiness and effects on effectiveness of endorsements are still partly explored. This study provides important insights about complexity of digital marketing dynamics by examining Instagram, a platform that emphasizes tension between getting visibility and maintaining trust of audiences.

The choice of the Norwegian food market as the research context elevates the relevance of this study. Norway's cultural emphasis on transparency and sustainability provides a unique lens through which to examine the intricate relationship between influencers, brands, and audiences (Andersen & Bjørnsen 2021). Insights from this thesis not only widening the theoretical base but also give usable strategies for marketers who are willing to create campaigns that connect with consumers in a flooded digital environment. These findings are

important for creating approaches which will be authentic and consumer centric in influencer marketing. Also, which will be connected with growing needs for transparency and ethical alignment.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured to address the research questions and give a comprehensive analysis of the changes in influencer marketing. Second chapter provides theoretical findings, based on Social Influence Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to back up the study's hypotheses. Third chapter is about the experimental methodology, specifying the research design, sample, and measures used to investigate the influence of perceived independence and engagement metrics.

Fourth Chapter provides results, showing statistical analyses that evaluate hypotheses and enhancing deeper factors which influence consumer perceptions. Chapter number five shows connections between these findings and the theoretical framework, shown earlier, which in results provides practical insights for marketers. Concluding the work chapter six, where limitations of the study and possible future researches are discussed, showing the importance of found insights and continued exploration of influencer marketing

1.8 Usage of AI

During my master's thesis work, I used AI tools including ChatGPT-4, Grammarly, and Originality AI. ChatGPT-4 was used for structuring text, brainstorming and speeding up the analysis of literary sources. Grammarly and Originality AI helped me to check spelling, grammar and eliminate accidental plagiarism. The use of these tools was limited to auxiliary tasks to improve the clarity and academic tone of the text, correctly format references and minimize errors related to my mild dyslexia. All analytical findings and research were performed independently, which guarantees their originality and compliance with academic standards. I am aware that I am responsible for all content of this master's thesis, including the parts where AI tools are used. I am responsible for ensuring that the thesis complies with ethical rules for privacy and publication.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

This chapter presents a theoretical base guiding this study by understanding how influencer marketing strategies are formed by perceived independence and engagement metrics. Social Influence Theory provides an angle for exploring how influencers form connections with their audiences and effect behaviour through social and normative markers (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Source Credibility Theory then underlines the importance of trustworthiness and expertise in creating impactful connections (Hovland et al. 1953). At last the Elaboration Likelihood Model shows how audiences understand influencer's messages either through in-depth cognitive engagement or external signals.

These frameworks together direct analysis of how influencers manage the interaction between perceived authenticity and campaign goals, clearly targeting the research questions. This chapter presents a strong basis for the hypotheses that follow by rooting this study in these theories.

2.1 Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory presents a crucial foundation on how individuals beliefs, behaviours and attitudes are formed through interpersonal relationships (Cialdini & Trost 1998). It is crucially important to Instagram, where influencers are opinion leaders, who use their perceived authenticity and relatability to build stronger bonds with their audiences. Influencers can successfully form consumer actions and perceptions by encouraging engagement and trust.

This section investigates three processes of social influence —compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman's 1958). It explores their relevance in the context of influencer marketing and addresses study's research questions.

Compliance happens when individuals adopt behaviors to avoid punishments and gain rewards. On Instagram, engagement metrics such as shares, likes and comments often serve as manifestation of compliance. For example, a Norwegian food influencer promoting a locally made milk brand may see "followers" engagement with the post through high number of likes and comments. In the same way, influencers often foster compliance through obvious calls to

action, such as “Tag a friend who’d love this!” employing social proof to strengthen viability and engagement.

Identification involves a stronger connection, where followers imitate influencers whose values and lifestyles they respect and aim to. For instance, a fitness influencer showing healthy meal recipes using local Norwegian products may inspire audience to adopt similar habits adjusting their actions to reflect the influencer’s narrative (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Internalization reflects the deepest form of influence, where behaviors align with an individual’s personal values and beliefs. As it fosters lasting behavioral change this process is especially powerful in influencer marketing. An environmental advocate endorsing sustainable Norwegian farming practices may inspire followers to prioritize eco-friendly choices, embedding these values into their daily lives (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Internalization shows the deepest form of influence, where actions are consistent with an individual’s personal values and beliefs. This process is especially influential in influencer marketing as it is forming continuing behavioral development. An environmental advocate promoting sustainable Norwegian farming practices may motivate followers to prioritize eco-friendly choices. This is helping to integrate these values into their daily life (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). These processes directly influence engagement metrics by shaping trust and effectiveness in influencer marketing campaigns.

2.1.1 Parasocial Relationships and Norms in Social Influence Theory

Parasocial relationships or one-sided emotional connections are central to influencer marketing (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Influencers share personal details of their lives to create a feeling of affinity and reliability and foster these connections (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, Norwegian family-focused influence discussing the challenges of balancing work and parenting can form stronger parasocial bonds. This will increase the credibility of their endorsements for family-friendly products (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Influencers play a role in forming norms through their content in addition to strengthening parasocial connections. Consistent messaging encourages desired behaviours, whether it involves promoting healthy lifestyle, sustainability or cultural traditions. Engagement metrics such as likes and shares improve their perceived relevance, while visuals and captions act as

mechanisms for normalizing specific values. For example, an influencer highlighting sustainability might showcase Norwegian eco-friendly products, highlighting their benefits through detailed explanations. This approach can motivate followers to adopt similar practices.

Meanwhile, overly commercialized content may weaken the perception of authenticity that forms parasocial bonds. It is important to achieve balance between promotional goals and keep the same levels of trust. That contributes to building long-term relationships with audiences.

These mechanisms increase the credibility of influencer recommendations. At the same time, they highlight the importance of influencers in affecting behavioral patterns of consumers by influencing collective behavioral trends.

2.1.2 Expanding Social Influence Theory

Features that can be found on Instagram are rather unique in some of the crucial aspects. Because of it, Kelman's framework can only be used as a fundamental base used to analyze this kind of digital content. Relatability improves the effect of social influence by making influencer lifestyle and message appear accessible (Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. 2017). Norwegian lifestyle influencer sharing budget meals recipes can connect with followers who value practicality, building stronger trust and engagement.

Subtle persuasion reduces resistance to endorsements. It achieves this by smoothly integrating promotional content in personal narratives. For example, travel influence casually mentioning Norwegian booking platform in a calming holiday post can increase interest to it without being overly commercialized.

Instagram's tools, such as hashtags and curated captions boost these strategies. Carefully designed content that aligns with relevant themes or values improve message impact. It also increases visibility within targeted audiences.

This section explores the processes of compliance, identification, and internalization, along with the impact of parasocial relationships and social norms. It underlines how influencers form consumer behaviour mentioned relational and normative strategies. This analysis underlines how these processes influence consumer decisions. It addresses the research

questions by revealing mechanisms which influencers use to build trust and credibility. Following sections examines Source Credibility Theory, which examines the crucial role of trustworthiness and expertise in the effectiveness of influencer endorsements.

2.2 Source Credibility Theory

The Source Credibility Theory was first coined by Hovland and Weiss in 1951. It lays the foundation for understanding the key traits that persuasive communication possesses. According to Hovland and Weiss, a very important precondition for a message to be perceived as effective is the credibility of the source of the information contained in the message. It is shaped by the two factors: expertise and trustworthiness. Trustworthiness encompasses perceptions of honesty and reliability that help to build closer connection with the audience. In turn, expertise means knowledge and competence in a specific field.

2.2.1 Dimensions of Source Credibility

The most important factor that affects the way people perceive influencers online is trustworthiness. A very effective strategy used by many influencers is sharing their personal experiences, for example, recovering from injuries and illnesses (De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. 2017). In contrast, over-commercialization may weaken trust. Influencer who advertise unrelated products or only motivated financially risk losing followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Expertise strengthens an influencer's credibility by presenting them as trusted and knowledgeable sources. Niche competence or professional qualifications often increase this perception. For example, an influencer representing eco-friendly travel options in Norway is likely to connect with audiences who emphasize environmental responsibility and recognize trustworthiness in these recommendations.

These dimensions collectively form the theoretical base of influencer marketing. They emphasize roles of trustworthiness and expertise in building audience trust and engagement. By influencing how audiences perceive and interact with influencers, these credibility factors play a central role in fostering meaningful connections.

2.2.2 Challenges to Source Credibility in Influencer Marketing

Securing credibility is challenging in the visually driven and highly commercialized environment of Instagram (De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. 2017). The perception of authenticity can be weakened by over-commercialization in form of endorsement of unrelated or excessive products. For instance, health influencer advertising alcohol brands and lab-tested herbal remedies risk to lose their credibility.

Artificial engagement metrics, such as “fake” followers or purchased comments, further weaken trust of followers (De Veirman et al. 2017). As audiences become more proficient at recognizing inauthentic practices, this study highlights that genuine connections are crucial, in comparison with inflated metrics, to increase trust and engagement. Brands can resolve these challenges by verifying influencer credibility through advanced tools. To be sure that campaigns are centered on authentic connections

Examining the dimensions and challenges of source credibility shows its crucial role in enhancing influencer effectiveness. Trustworthiness and expertise serve as key drivers of audience perceptions and trust, moreover influencing engagement metrics. Based on these findings, following section introduce the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). It explains how engagement metrics and message quality interact to influence audience attitudes and behaviors.

2.3 The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), presents a strong framework for understanding how individuals process convincing messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It describes two cognitive routes for information processing - central and peripheral. These routes are crucial in understanding how audiences engage with content, particularly on platforms like Instagram. Both detailed messages and superficial cues play important roles in forming consumer attitudes. By describing connection between message quality, engagement metrics and audience motivation, the ELM provides significant insights for answering study's research questions.

2.3.1 Overview of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The central route involves deep cognitive engagement, where audiences analyze the strength of the arguments and supporting evidence (Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. 1986). To activate it, influencers need to offer detailed, meaningful content that connects with values and interests of their followers. This pathway encourages attitudes that are lasting and hard to change. For instance, a fitness influencer explains in details importance of using special equipment during exercise encourages followers to critically analyze information and choose equipment based on its parameters. As presented in Source Credibility Theory, central route processing also depends significantly on influencer's perceived expertise and trustworthiness. When influencer is seen as credible by audiences, they tend to engage with the message more cognitively.

Contrary, peripheral routes are based on superficial cues, such as visual apparel, influencer popularity and authority. This route is more common when audiences engage passively or have specific interest in content. For example, food influencers posting visually perfect images of a meal in the restaurant, that may motivate people to visit this place solely on its visual appeal, without considering meals' culinary aspects.

Engagement metrics serve as indicator and key drivers within these routes (Lim et al., 2020). High amounts of likes, shares or comments frequently boost peripheral processing by indicating popularity and social proof. On the contrary, meaningful discussions in the comments can show central-route engagement, where the audience examines the message critically.

2.3.2 Application of the ELM to Influencer Marketing

In influencer marketing, the route of persuasion either central or peripheral depends on such factors as message complexity, influencer's credibility, and audience involvement. To increase the amount of meaningful, sustained engagements and foster central-route processing, influencers need to emphasize authenticity and align endorsements with their personal values.

When influencers present detailed and mind-engaging content, central-route is activated (Kitchen et al., 2014). For example, movie critique influencer offering detailed review of the latest Oscar film engages followers analytical thinking. What motivates them to

critically and deeper analyse the movie. Research presents that message quality combined with perceived expertise, can increase audience trust and boost engagement.

On the other hand, peripheral route become key in situations, where endorsements lack depth or rely on visual aspects. Influencer with large audiences or visually attractive content commonly persuade with surface-level impressions. For instance, a food influencer sharing elegant presentation of the meal might attract based on its aesthetic appeal rather than its taste.

2.3.3 Factors Influencing Perceived Independence and the Route of Persuasion

The way followers interact with influencers' content is affected by a range of factors, and of the most important among them is perceived independence of the influencer. Influencers whose endorsements have strong connection with their personal values and brand identity tend to activate central-route processing. On the contrary, over-commercialization decreases credibility and shifts followers toward peripheral judgments based on surface-level cues.

Repeated advertisements of unrelated products can reduce trust. From the followers perspective, this may result in perceiving the influencer's recommendations as insincere. For example, science influencer promoting both scientifically proven vitamins and unproven medical dietary supplements risks decreasing his credibility. Moreover, complexity of message influences how it is processed. Detailed and informative messages foster central-route engagement, so audiences critically evaluate the content. In comparison, simpler and visually attractive messages tend to rely on judgments on external cues.

Audience motivation and their ability to process information also affect the chosen route. Highly motivated audiences are more likely to engage through the central route. For instance, gamers seeking new strategy advices. On the other hand, casual followers are often attracted by less central cues like the overall popularity of the blogger or the quality of the content they have

2.4 Practical Implications

The ELM structure shows the importance of balanced content with visually appealing elements to meet the needs of a diverse audience. For influencer, keeping perceived

independence through selective collaborations with brands , boosting credibility and encouraging central route evaluations. Meanwhile, brands should design campaigns that resonates with audiences interests and ability to process information. That will maximize the impact of central and peripheral factors on engagement. These insights provide effective plans for improving strategies in influencer marketing, increasing trust and achieving audience loyalty in the long-term.

This section underscores the important interaction between message evaluation mechanisms and perceived independence in forming audience behaviour. The ELM framework showcases the importance of synchronizing content plans with audience motivation, message complexity and credibility of influencer to encourage trust and engagement. With this understanding of how audience understand impactful content , we move to engagement metrics. Analyzing their dual functions as both representation of audience trust and boosters of perceived impact.

2.5 Engagement Metrics and Social Proof on Instagram

Engagement metrics on Instagram plays as critical indicators of social proof. Forming followers' perceptions of an influencer's popularity, trustworthiness, and credibility. These metrics serve two purposes in influencer marketing. They drive visibility through quantitative measures and through qualitative interactions they foster deeper audience connections. Understanding how these metrics form audience perceptions shares crucial knowledge about consumer trust and engagement. This directly addresses the study's first research question: *How do engagement metrics serve as indicators of trust in influencer marketing?*

2.5.1 Social Proof and Engagement Metrics on Instagram

In influencer marketing, where visible signs of approval and engagement impact consumer behavior , social proof acts a powerful psychological tool(Lou, C., & Yuan, S. 2019). Engagement metrics either quantitative or qualitative play central roles in this process. Each takes an important role in forming how audiences perceive and engage with influencer content.

Quantitative metrics, such as shares, likes and saves, offer surface-level indicators of a post's popularity and appeal(Lou & Yuan, 2019; Lim et al. 2020). High number of likes and shares attract casual users , engaging them through peripheral-route processing , as presented in the

ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For example, food influencer whose content received thousands of likes may become trendy and widely known, even if this engagement does not directly gain deeper trust. On the other hand, saved posts show more thoughtful form of engagement, indicating lasting significance and engaging central-route processing. Followers who save content find it valuable to revisit it.

Qualitative metrics such as meaningful comments and interactions, offer deeper understanding of audience interest and engagement. These metrics show cognitive engagement and agreement with the influencer's message. For instance, gaming influencer answering followers questions about strategy and "item builds" strengthens credibility and promotes more meaningful audience interactions. It is often crucial to connect with the audience in the authentic way and on a deep level. The example mentioned above shows this kind of quality engagement with followers.

2.5.2 Balancing Quantitative and Qualitative Metrics

In their attempts to balance authenticity and visibility, influencers face a trade-off between paying special attention to quantitative and qualitative metrics. Quantitative metrics, such as likes and shares, increase visibility and engage a wider audience. Contrastly, qualitative metrics, such as meaningful interactions and comments, help to strengthen trust and boost loyalty by showing greater audience engagement

Smaller niche influencers often achieve higher engagement levels due to their original and relevant content (Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). They emphasize personal storytelling and relevant sponsorships, avoiding risks of over-commercialization. For example, niche influencer advertising local Norwegian products through engaging posts strengthen connections with audience and brand loyalty.

Based on multiple research studies, studies show that among the most reliable indicators of the audience's trust and intent two crucial ones are thoughtful comments and content saves.

Engagement in all of the metrics can be optimized using techniques from strategic content design. Visually engaging posts attract casual viewers through peripheral-route processing. On the other hand, substantive content like tutorials or detailed reviews attracts a more motivated audience through central-route processing. Research on engagement quality shows that

thoughtful comments and content saves are more reliable indicators of consumer trust and intent. The aforementioned indicators are deemed more important than likes by showing the complex interaction of various metrics in shaping the attitudes of the audience. At the same time, these features can also explain how perceived independence of an influencer improves or degrades the interpretation of these metrics.

This section has examined the dual role of engagement metrics as indicators of social proof and trust, underlining their dependence from reliability. These dynamics are directly linked to the first research question, showcasing how engagement metrics affect reliability and trustworthiness. They built a base for understanding how perceived independence influences these metrics. The interplay between engagement metrics and reliability is a key to preserving followers' trust in the environment where people appear to be under considerable pressure from marketing algorithms and over-commercialization. In the next section I am going to have a closer look at the idea of perceived independence, and at how it affects the way people trust or distrust celebrities.

2.6 Perceived Independence

Perceived Independence is a key element of trust in influencer marketing. It formulates how audiences understand endorsements and engagement metrics. It shows common belief that influencers provide authentic recommendations connected with their personal values rather than being exclusively motivated by financial gain. This section looks at how transparency, selectivity, and preventing over-commercialisation strategies help strengthen perceived independence. These factors regulate relationship between audience trust and engagement metrics. Findings from this section address Research Question 2: *How does perceived independence moderate the dynamics of engagement metrics and trust in influencer marketing?*

2.6.1 Maintaining Credibility through Transparency and Selectivity

Credibility plays a crucial role in helping influencers establish deep connections with the audience. Among the key strategies that can boost credibility are transparency and selectivity. These strategies can help improve the perception of authenticity, reduce skepticism, and build trust between the influencer and their audience.

Transparency demonstrates reliability by confronting potential problems about hidden motives and increasing audience confidence in endorsements (Boerman, S. C., Willemsen, L. M., & Van Der Aa, E. P. 2017). Clear disclosures, such as using tags like “#ad” or “#sponsored,” make clear the nature of collaborations. Beyond meeting regulatory requirements, adding context to endorsements increase transparency. Explaining how product integrates with influencer values or lifestyle improves perception of authenticity. For example, an e-sport influencer who shows benefits of a new gaming mouse and explains how it helps him in improving performance in games demonstrate openness. In result it enhances trust and increases audience acceptance of the recommendation.

Selectivity in brand collaborations is equally important. Influencers who carefully collaborate with brands that share the same values and in their field of expertise maintain credibility and avoid conflicting messaging (Boerman, S. C., Willemsen, L. M., & Van Der Aa, E. P. 2017). For instance, a fitness influencer partnering with brands producing healthy meals increase consistency with their beliefs. On the contrary, endorsing fast food products could distance followers by appearing conflicting. This principle is highly significant in the Norwegian food market, where consumers focus on ethical and sustainable approaches. That shows the importance of alignment between endorsements and influencer values.

Keeping balance between sponsored and organic content is a key for reinforcing perceived independence. Sharing unsponsored posts that highlight personal experiences or opinion shows true enthusiasm about the influencers niche. It reduces the impression of exclusively profit oriented motives. For example, beauty influencer who publishes unsponsored ideas for makeup along with advertising content strengthens their bonds with audience. This boosts the perception of authenticity, even in sponsored contexts.

Over-commercialization is characterized by irrelevant or repeated promotions weakening perceived independence. Inconsistent messaging, such as advertising vegan products one week and meat snacks the next, cause confusion of the audience and weakens trust. Long term collaboration with selected brands decrease risks by building consistency and reinforcing audience trust. These methods maintain perceived independence and increase credibility of engagement metrics, as presented in Section 2.5. When influencers are perceived as

independent, engagement metrics like comments are seen as credible indicators of audience trust, strengthening the impact of their endorsements

2.6.2 Practical Implications for Influencers and Brands

Strategic usage of perceived independence is essential to build trust and cultivate sustainable audience relationships. To balance organic and promotional content it is highly important for influencers to select brand partnerships carefully and maintain transparency in sponsorships. In the context of Norwegian food market, consumers highly value sustainability and ethical practices, so influencers can increase their impact when collaborating with brands that reflect these values. For example, partnership with producers of locally, eco-friendly food products can increase credibility and connect with ethically aware audiences

It is important for brands to choose influencers whose values, expertise and audience align with the message of the product. Stimulating influencers to integrate products smoothly into their content while being transparent about partnerships contributes to strengthening the perception of authenticity. These approaches guarantee that engagement metrics, like “likes” and meaningful comments, are seen as authentic indicators of audience trust rather than shallow measures of popularity. In niche markets like the Norwegian food sector, these approaches improve campaign effectiveness. They also build long-term relationships with consumers who prioritize ethical and environmentally conscious behaviors in their buying choices

This section investigated the crucial role of perceived independence in influencing the relationship between trust and engagement metrics. Brand and influencers can craft campaigns that appeal authentically with audiences by highlighting selectivity, transparency and avoiding over-commercialization. Based on this understanding of independence we now present hypotheses. They are based on this understanding of independence and linked to the theoretical framework presented in this chapter.

2.7 Hypotheses

Research framework presented in this part outlines connection between perceived independence, engagement metrics and trust in influencer marketing. Following hypotheses

are created to answer on-studies research questions based on Source Credibility Theory , the concept of social proof and the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

First hypothesis is based on the role of engagement metrics , which were discord in section 2.4 , showing their importance as indicators of audience influence and approval. Metrics such as shares, comments and likes demonstrate engagement of the audience ,forming perceptions of endorsement effectiveness. Nevertheless, as mentioned in Section 2.5 opinion about influencers independence balance these effects by increasing trustworthiness of these metrics. When influencers are seen as independent , engagement metrics are seen as credible , which is boosting credibility and effect of their collaborations. This provides the basis for the first hypothesis:

H1: The perceived independence of influencers positively moderates the relationship between social media engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) and the effectiveness of product endorsements.

The second hypothesis investigates the straight influence of perceived independence on consumer trust. As discussed in section 2.6 , trust acts as a crucial element in influencer marketing by forming how audiences review the trustworthiness and authenticity of collaboration. Influencers are more likely to stimulate trust by demonstrating in their endorsements transparency and alignment with their personal values. Such influencers by positioning themselves as authentic and independent rise above perceived ones which are strongly tied to brand partnership. From this , second hypotheses is following:

H2: Influencers perceived as independent generate higher levels of consumer trust compared to those perceived as dependent on brand partnerships.

Together, these hypotheses represent core dynamics discussed in the theoretical part, connecting engagement metrics, perceived independence, and trust to the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. Theoretical framework has presented main concepts lying in the basement of this study. It also supported design of hypotheses , creating detailed foundation for understanding relationships between social media engagement and consumer perceptions

Next chapter is based on this theory base and presents the methodological approach used to test main hypotheses. Study design , analytical techniques and study design introduced in it. Providing detailed examination of the research questions and consistent analysis of the proposed relationship.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

An experiment was accomplished in this study to investigate how length of the partnership and type of account affect consumer perceptions (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020). By permitting accurate application use of independent variables while considering external factors. This study gives a trustable framework for understanding cause and effect relationships (Hovland, C. I., & Weiss, W. 1951). The study design was aligning with the hypotheses. Providing comprehensive analysis of the role of perceived influence independence in constructing engagement and trust. The research scheme was directly consistent with the hypotheses, which allow us to examine in particular the role of the alleged independence of influential people in the shaping of engagement and trust.

An experimental design was chosen to guarantee accurate control over central variables. This method made it possible to explain the difference in the participants' responses by the changed conditions, which increased the internal reliability of the study. The rigor of this approach has been an integral component of considering hypotheses that center on the constraining role of perceived independence in social media participation rate (H1) and its impact on consumer confidence (H2).

The study used a randomized 2x2 scheme between subjects, ideally suitable for analyzing the interaction between two independent variables: the length of the partnership and the type of position. This experiment design allowed to isolate casual effects (Kim & Kim, 2021). The length of the partnership was changed to reflect either short-term cooperation, which was perceived as an indicator of greater independence of influencers, or long-term partnerships, which were viewed as dependent. Post a personalized message from TINE's official Instagram account highlighting the corporate brand and from Mike the Chef influencer's account reflecting a personal and engaging tone. As a consequence of this structure, four experimental groups were created: a brand account with a short partnership, a

brand account with a long partnership, an account of an influential person with a short partnership and an account of an influential person with a long partnership. This setting made it easy to evaluate the main effects, such as the overall effectiveness of short- and long-term partnerships, as well as interaction effects, such as whether the length of the partnership affected the outcome differently depending on the type of account. This experimental setup explicitly implements a hypothesis based on a theoretical framework. Hypothesis 1 examines the constraining role of perceived independence in relation to the relationship between participation rate and advertising effectiveness. Hypothesis 2 evaluates the direct impact of perceived independence on consumer confidence.

To ensure consistency and reduce bias participants were assigned to one of the four groups randomly (Freberg et al. 2011). Randomization perceived consistency across conditions which allowed to isolate manipulated variables effects. The test stimuli included Instagram-style posts created to recreate real content while methodically changing independent variables (Evans et al., 2017). For example, Mike the Chef's account underlined personal relatability, while TINE's account highlighted professional branding. Partnership length was shown through language that indicated either long term relationship or a new collaboration.

After exposure to these stimuli, participants complete a survey evaluating their perceptions, including interest, trustworthiness, and behavioral intentions (Chu & Kim, 2011). Attention-checking questions, such as the duration of the partnership and the product presented in the publication, will serve to interest participants in the content. At the conclusion of the study, demographic questions were asked to contextualize the answers (Primasivi et al., 2021).

Experimental design was strongly connected with studies hypotheses. It provided an opportunity to study how perceived independence affected relationship between engagement metrics and endorsement effectiveness (H1) and how independent influencers resulted in higher levels of consumer trust (H2). It presented insights into influencer marketing across the Norwegian food industry. So this study can guarantee a high level of internal validity by implementing a solid design framework with controlled settings.

This structured approach allowed the study to identify the impact of the duration of partnerships and the type of account, which provide a reliable base for studying the alleged relationships

3.2 Sample and Procedure

160 people participated in this survey using the Prolific program, recognized for its reliability in selecting diverse and high-quality participants (Freberg et al., 2011). In order to assure compliance with the Norwegian food market, selection criteria were established to allow only persons residing in Norway to be accepted. Participants were further screened for Instagram familiarity and interest in food and culinary content, which matched their characteristics according to a report on influencer marketing in this particular context. The selection mechanisms built into Prolific ensure that only suitable candidates participate in the study.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of 4 experimental groups of 40 people each. This randomization minimized potential selection bias and ensured a correspondence between conditions, allowing effective isolation of the influence of manipulated variables — the length of the partnership and the type of account. The experiment used a 2x2 scheme in which these independent variables were systematically varied to obtain four different conditions.

For the practical implementation of these manipulations, the participants were presented with two carefully designed visual elements (De Weirman et al., 2017). The first visual element displayed the account type. As a condition for the brand account, the image featured TINE's official Instagram account, featuring professional brand elements such as a logo and product-oriented images. As a condition for an influential person's account, the image showed Chef Mike's Instagram page, which emphasized the aesthetics of communication and individuality characteristic of influential people's profiles.

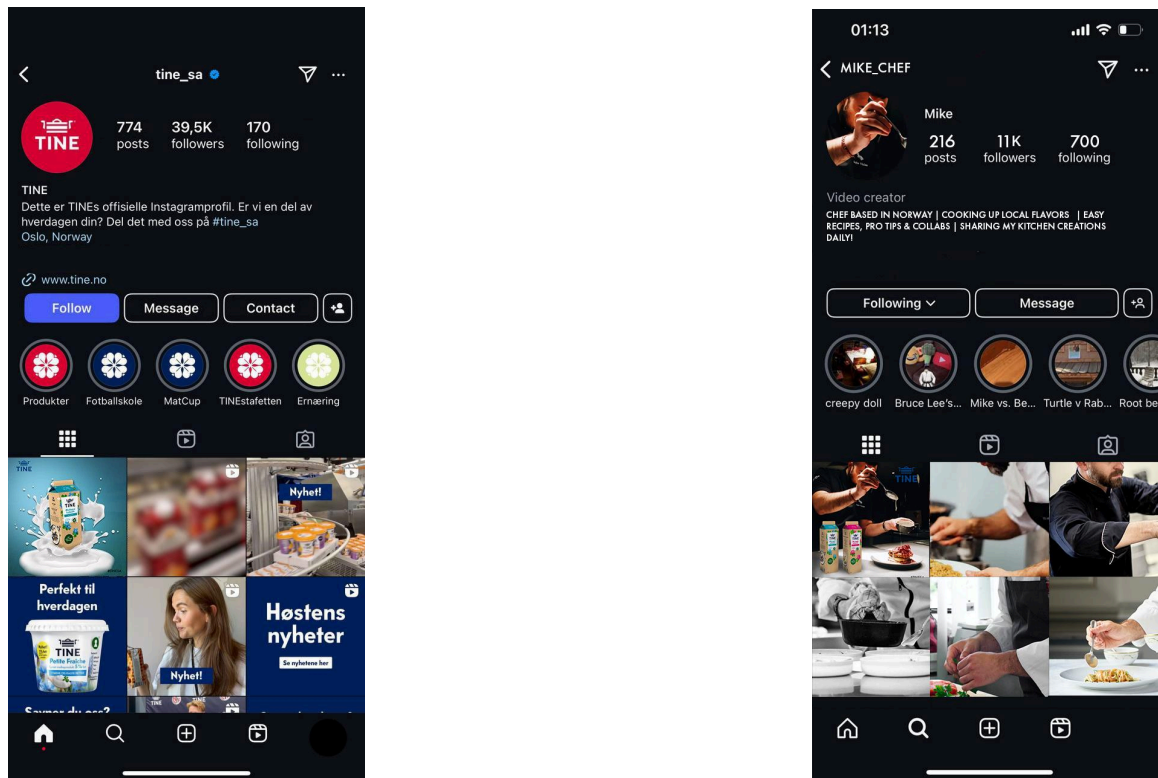


Figure 1: Visualisations of Different Account Types (Brand vs. Influencer Accounts)

Partnership length was shown in the second visual. Posts designed to present a short partnership using phrases like "Excited to be working with TINE for the first time!" to highlight recent partnership. On other hand, posts showing long partnerships used sentences like "Proud to have partnered with TINE for over five years!" to present ongoing collaboration. These visuals were designed in such a way that image quality, font style and layout would not affect variables of interest which are being manipulated (De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. 2017).

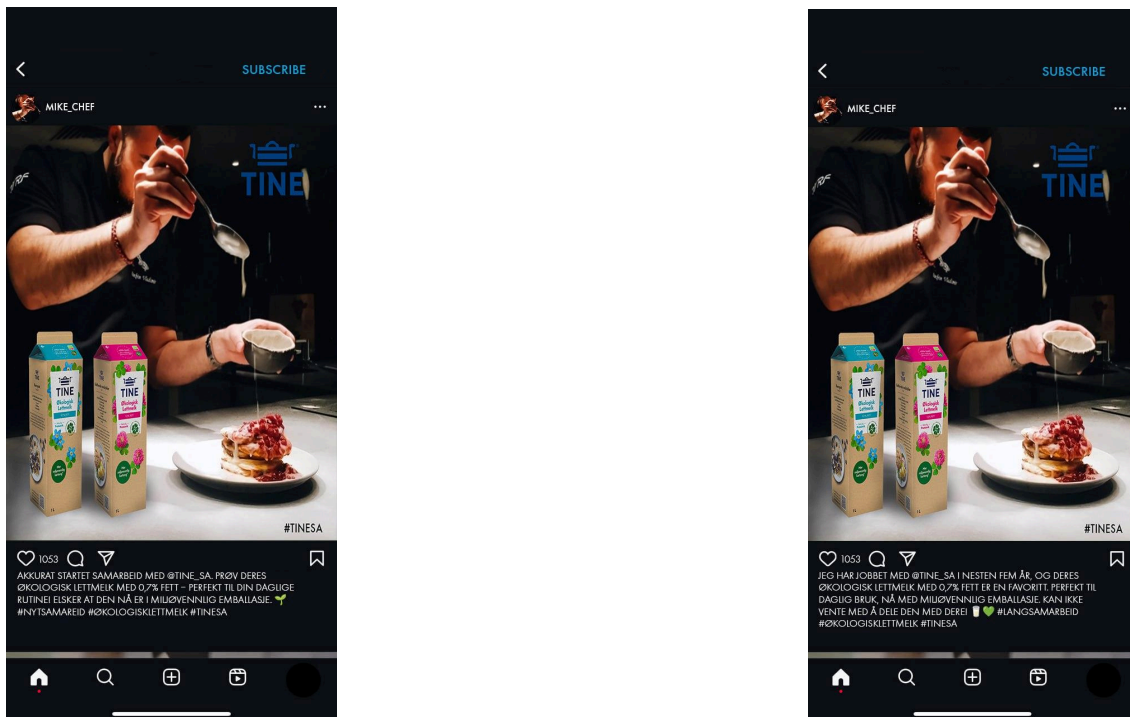


Figure 2: Visualisations of Partnership Duration (Short-term vs. Long-term)

3.2.1 Survey Procedure and Structure

Participants were going through controlled study performed in Qualtrics. Questionnaire started with an introduction explaining the purpose of the study and showing the importance of focused attention. To provide context for following responses, it was next accompanied by essential questions about usage of Instagram (Chu, S. C., & Kim, Y. 2011).

The participants then consider two visual elements corresponding to the experimental condition they set: one represents the type of account (brand or influencer), and the other represents the length of the partnership (short or long). After being exposed to the stimuli, participants answer survey questions designed to measure key dependent variables, including interest, trustworthiness, and behavioral intentions.

To ensure the participants' engagement, two attention-testing questions were included in the survey. These questions require participants to recall the length of the collaboration (for example, "How long has an influential individual been working with TINE?") and the product category presented in the issue (for example, "What type of product is highlighted in the publication?"). The response to these checks confirmed the quality of the data,

revealing inattentive participants.

The survey ended with demographic questions that take into account such characteristics of participants as age and gender (Lu and Yuan, 2019). The data was subsequently analyzed by Qualtrics to confirm completeness, and no exceptions were made, since all participants passed the attentiveness test and gave comprehensive answers.

3.2.2 Visual Representation of Survey Flow

Measures used in this study were taken from acknowledged scales widely used in previous research. It guaranteed that they measured the relevant constructs. For example, trustworthiness and credibility scales were implemented from Chu and Kim (2011), whose study had similar contexts.

The diagram below shows the participant flow to present clarity on the survey structure:

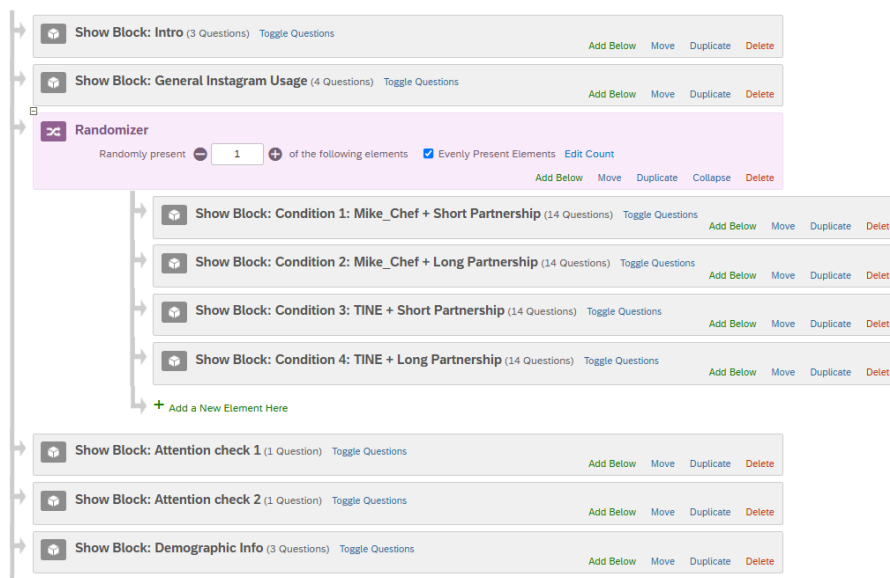


Figure 3: Diagram of survey flow for experimental conditions

This structured questionnaire maintained flawless participant experience, optimizing ecological validity with systematic approach. The inclusion of realistic Instagram visuals improved even further authenticity of experimental conditions (Reeves, B., & Nass, C. (1996). Supporting the study to result in significant insights about the evolving nature of influencer marketing in the context of Norwegian food industry.

To ensure participants encounter content demonstrating real-world social media posts, consistent visual elements were carefully controlled across experimental conditions. Resulted in increasing ecological validity of the study.

3.3 Measures

To assess the effect of the length of the partnership and the type of account on consumer perception, this survey used carefully selected dependent variables that fit the hypotheses. The survey indicators were designed to describe constructs directly related to the hypotheses of the study. Engagement metrics such as interest and behavioral intentions are consistent with theory 1, which explores their interaction with perceived independence (Lim et al., 2020). Reliability and likelihood indicators correspond to hypothesis 2, which assesses the direct relationship between perceived independence and trust. These variables include interest and engagement, credibility and trustworthiness, affinity, and behavioral intentions. Together, these indicators allow a comprehensive assessment of the participants' reaction to experimental stimuli.

Interest and engagement were assessed based on participants' assessment of the situation on a 5-point Likert scale. As for the interest, the participant assessed how interesting they find the content, and the response ranged from "Not at all interesting" to "Very interesting". Similarly, engagement was assessed when participants were asked to demonstrate how fascinating they find the publications, the answer range from "Not at all attractive" to "Very attractive"(Lou, C., & Yuan, S. 2019). Choosing a 5-point scale allows you to have a short but precise response to these questions.

Reliability and trustworthiness were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, which provided greater sensitivity and detail of perception (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Participants were asked to rate the credibility of messages that range from "Not trustworthy" to "Very trustworthy" and from "Not trustworthy at all" to "Very trustworthy". These indicators reflect the extent to which the message was perceived as trustworthy and reliable.

Proximity to an influential individual and brand was assessed using two indicators measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The participants express their agreement with such statements as "I like Chef Mike" and "TINE is a good brand", the answers to which range from "Strongly disagree" to "Totally agree". This indicator allows you to measure the emotional association

of participants with an influential individual and brand.

Behavioral intentions were also assessed on a 7-point Likert scale. Participants assessed the likelihood that they would be interested in publications by asking questions about their intentions to share their opinions on social networks and express a positive feeling about the publications. The answers range from “Very unlikely” to “Very likely”, which allow you to evaluate how the conditions of the experiment impact the willingness of participants to interact with the content.

The survey questions have been adapted based on well-established tools from previous research to ensure both reliability and validity. The elements measuring engagement were taken from a report by Hollebik et al. (2014), while the confidence scales were based on systems developed by Lu and Yuan (2019). Affinity scores were adapted by Ki and Kim (2019), and behavioral intentions were taken into account by Berger and Milkman (2012). This adaptation provided theoretical validity and empirical confirmation of the obtained constructs.

Reliability analyses showed high internal reliability across all measures, with Cronbach’s alpha value crossing acceptable limits (Chu & Kim, 2011). Credibility and trustworthiness achieved alpha of 0.87, while interest and engagement scored 0.82. Behavioral intentions achieved 0.79, and Affinity measure obtained an alpha 0.85. Based on these results, it was confirmed that the survey items accurately evaluated their respective constructs and offered a strong foundation for testing of hypotheses.

To guarantee quality and accuracy of the dataset, data preparation followed a systematic process. In case a participant did not manage to complete the entire survey, or if they did not pass both attention check questions, data from such participants has been left out from analysis. After that, in order to maintain consistency across various participant groups and scales, responses from the four groups were standardized and then compiled together.

By combining comprehensive questionnaire design, careful data preparation and realistic test environment, this research framework established this study efficiency to address research questions productively.

Next section represents results of study, showing detailed analysis of the data and examining research hypotheses. These findings reveal roles of account type, individual engagement behaviors and partnership length in influencing consumer perceptions. Results are outlined to assist in understanding of research contributions to the marketing field and provide foundations for following discussions.

4. Results

This section evaluates relationships presented in the hypotheses and examines additional factors to present results of this study addressed to the primary research questions (Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. 1986). The results on the effect of account type and partnership length on perceived effectiveness and trust in influencers. Also examining the role of Affinity as a cognitive factor. Each examination is made using ANOVA, descriptive statistics and regression models to guarantee solid and trustworthy insights.

Before starting the statistical analyses, the assumptions of ANOVA were examined to confirm validity of methods used. Homogeneity of variance was approved with Levene's test ($p > 0.05$) and normality was evaluated using the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > 0.05$). These results approved the use of ANOVA for examining group level differences through dependent variables.

The results have shown that Instagram usage playing a central role of perceived effectiveness, trust and Affinity and structural factors such as partnership length and account type did not present any significant effects (Lou & Yuan, 2019). As a result, both hypotheses which assumed that partnership length and account type affect perceived effectiveness are rejected. Further analysis of Affinity proving the central role of individual engagement behaviors in forming consumer attitudes.

This part presents an in depth analysis of the data, creating support for future discussion of these findings in context of existing research and theoretical framework. To support clearness and availability of the analysis, tables and other visuals are included.

4.1 Hypothesis 1: Effectiveness

Following section examines the first hypothesis, which claims that partnership length and account type influence the perceived effectiveness of influencer endorsements. Gathered data provide an overview of the effectiveness scores across experimental groups. Mean scores as presented in Table 1 had negligible differences, where influencer accounts with long-term partnerships displaying slightly higher scores compared to other conditions. However, these differences need statistical analysis to understand their importance.

Table 1: Group Mean Effectiveness

Table 1: Group	Mean Effectiveness
Bran Account + Long Partnership	3.95
Bran Account + Short Partnership	3.85
Influencer Account + Long Partnership	4.20
Influencer Account + Short Partnership	4.10

A one-way ANOVA was performed to determine these differences. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were met before the analysis ensuring the strength of results. The ANOVA results showed that group membership has not affected perceived effectiveness as it is presented in Table 2 ($F(3, 156) = 0.96, p = 0.405$). Nevertheless, Instagram usage appeared as a significant predictor ($F(1, 156) = 12.45, p < 0.001$), proposing that participants with higher Instagram knowledge were demonstrating a greater probability to consider influencer endorsements as effective. The correlation between group membership and Instagram usage was not significant ($F(3, 156) = 0.53, p = 0.593$).

Table 2: ANOVA Summary for H1

Table 2: ANOVA Summary for H1					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Group	3.25	3	1.08	0.96	0.405
Instagram Usage	42.12	1	42.12	12.45	< 0.001
Group x Instagram Usage	1.85	3	0.62	0.53	0.593
Error	527.30	156	3.38		
Total	574.52	163			

Figure 1 highlights a trend of increasing effectiveness with higher Instagram usage across all experimental groups.

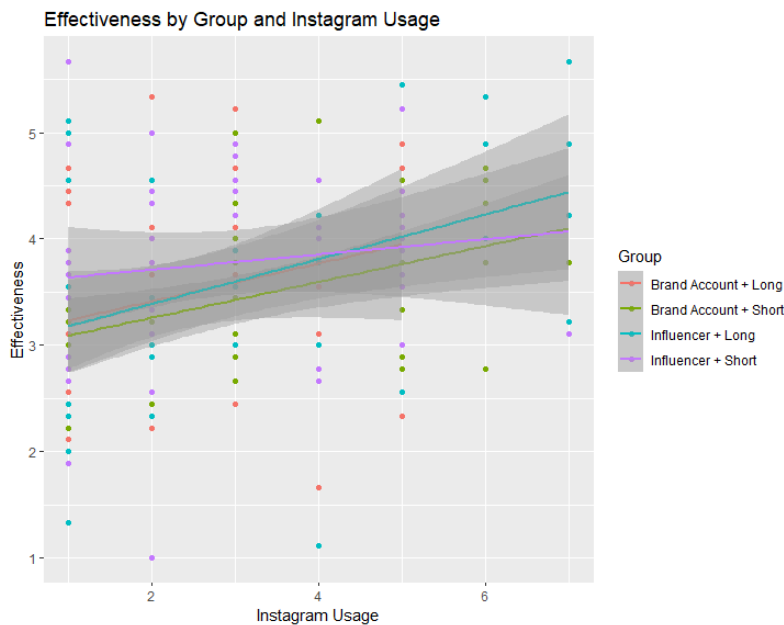


Figure 1: Effectiveness Scores across the groups

To investigate the predictors of effectiveness further regression analysis was performed. Results of it in Table 3 strengthened ANOVA findings. Where Instagram usage showed direct connection with perceived effectiveness ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and group membership had not a significant impact on effectiveness ($\beta = 0.05$, $p = 0.405$). To further elaborate interaction effect was negligible between Instagram usage and group membership ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.358$), that has shown that Instagram usage continuously affect across all groups. The regression model described 21% variation in perceived effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.21$), highlighting the significant role of individual behaviors.

Table 3: Regression Summary for (H1)

Table 3: Regression Summary for H1			
Predictor	β	SE	p-value
Group Membership	0.05	0.06	0.405
Instagram Usage	0.29	0.07	< 0.001
Group x Instagram Usage (Interaction Term)	0.03	0.04	0.358
R²	0.21		

Figure 2 provides a representation of regression trends.

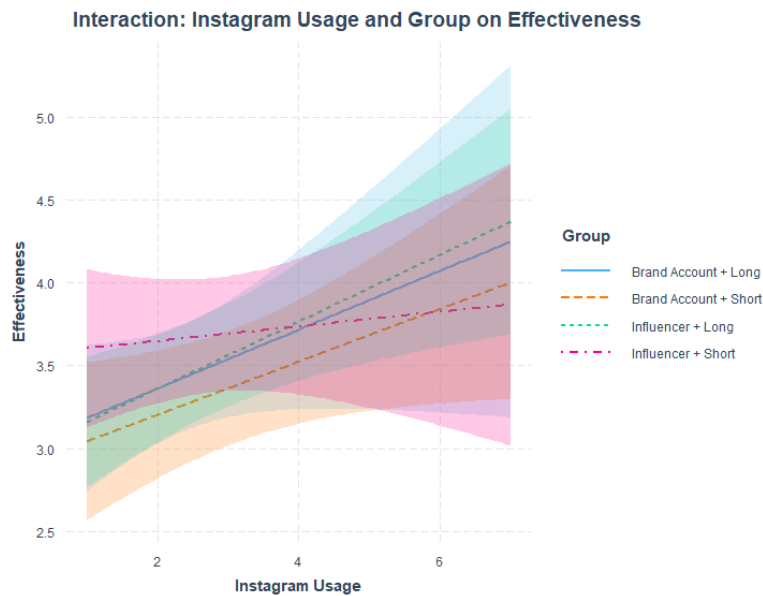


Figure 2: Regression Trends for H2

The findings emphasize the importance of individual behavioral factors, such as Instagram usage, in shaping perceptions of influencer marketing effectiveness. While partnership length and account type were hypothesized to play a significant role, their effects were not supported by the data (Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019)). Consequently, Hypothesis 1 is rejected. These results highlight the influence of individual engagement behaviors over structural conditions in determining the perceived effectiveness of influencer campaigns.

The results underline the importance of individual behavioral factors, such as Instagram usage, in development of understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness. First hypothesis, which assumed that partnership length and account type play a significant role, was not supported by the data. Therefore, H1 is rejected. These findings show the effect of individual engagement behaviors over structural conditions in defining the perceived effectiveness of influencer campaigns.

4.2 Hypothesis 2: Trust

The second hypothesis examines if partnership length and account type effect on trust in influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Gathered data provide an overview of trust scores across the experimental groups. As presented in Table 4, posts from influencer accounts with long-term partnership showed slightly above than other groups. Overall, minor differences were found in mean trust scores between groups. However, these findings need statistical examination through further analysis.

Table 4: Group Mean Trust

Table 4: Group	Mean Trust
Bran Account + Long Partnership	3.58
Bran Account + Short Partnership	3.23
Influencer Account + Long Partnership	4.35
Influencer Account + Short Partnership	4.20

A one-way ANOVA examined whether group membership significantly affects trust. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were met before the analysis. The ANOVA results, presented in Table 5, shows that group membership has not influenced trust significantly ($F(3, 156) = 1.12, p = 0.344$). Meanwhile, Instagram usage results ($F(1, 156) = 14.02, p < 0.001$) indicated that participants with higher Instagram knowledge considered influencers as more trustworthy (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The correlation between group membership and Instagram usage was not crucial ($F(3, 156) = 0.45, p = 0.715$).

Table 5: ANOVA Summary for H2

Table 5: ANOVA Summary for H2					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Group	2.85	3	0.95	0.76	0.576
Instagram Usage	38.12	1	38.12	11.83	< 0.001
Group x Instagram Usage	1.53	3	0.51	0.59	0.623
Error	503.25	156	3.23		
Total	545.75	163			

Figure 3 presents the systematic positive relationship between Instagram usage and trust across experimental groups.

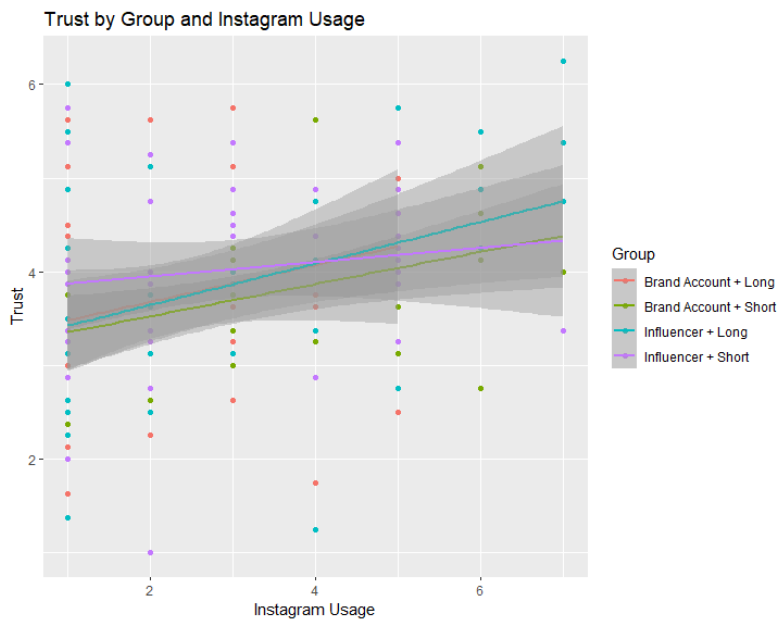


Figure 3: Trust Scores Across Groups

Regression analysis was made to support these findings. Results presented in Table 6 proved that the group membership was not a key indicator of trust. However, Instagram usage appeared as a positive predictor ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 19% of the variance in trust ($R^2 = 0.19$). The interaction term between group membership and Instagram usage ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.592$) was not critical, proving that Instagram usage affected trust across all groups.

Table 6: Regression Summary for H2

Table 6: Regression Summary for H2			
Predictor	β	SE	p-value
Group Membership	0.04	0.05	0.576
Instagram Usage	0.28	0.06	< 0.001
Group x Instagram Usage (Interaction Term)	0.02	0.03	0.365
R²	0.19		

Figure 4 represents the linear relationship between Instagram usage and trust.

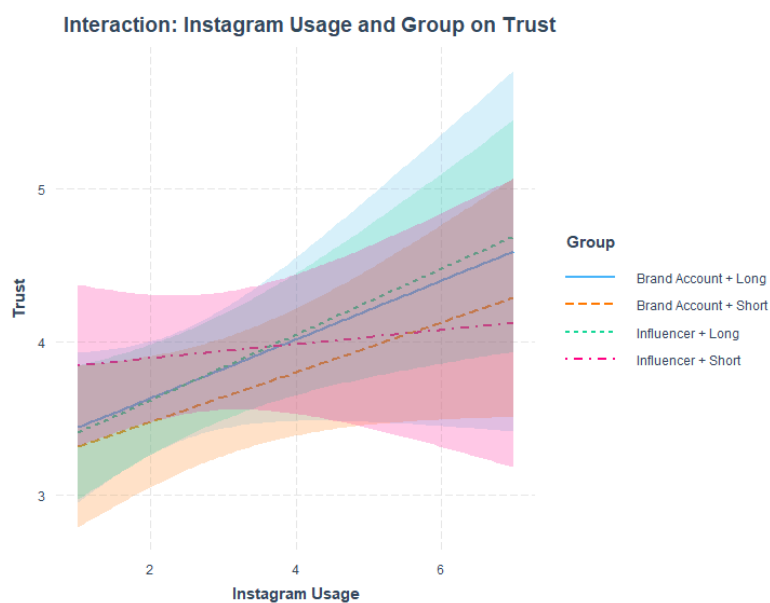


Figure 4: Linear Relationship Between Instagram Usage and Trust

These insights indicate that behavioral patterns, such as Instagram usage, play a more important role in forming trust than structural indicators such as account type and partnership length. Hypothesis 2 is rejected, as it assumes that these structural indicators affect trust. These findings point out the importance of individual engagement behaviors in defining trust in influencer marketing.

4.3 Affinity Analysis

Affinity is a keystone in guiding interpretations of trust and effectiveness that reflects emotional connection between influencers and consumers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Even if it was not included in original hypotheses, analysis of Affinity strengthened the study by evaluating psychological factors that could support consumer attitudes. Affinity analysis was made the same way as testing of H1 and H2. This test provides additional insights that are influencing more engagement behaviours or structural factors such as partnership length and account type.

By exploring Affinity it could be understood whether emotional connection with influencers rely more on individual behaviors such as Instagram usage or group level factors. Moreover, adding affinity aligns with marketing theory showing relational and emotional factors of the consumer decision making process.

The mean Affinity scores across experimental groups are presented in Table 7. To confirm observations of Affinity which demonstrated higher scores in influencer accounts with short-term partnership statistical analysis was required.

Table 7: Group Mean Affinity

Table 7: Group	Mean Affinity
Bran Account + Long Partnership	3.58
Bran Account + Short Partnership	3.23
Influencer Account + Long Partnership	3.23
Influencer Account + Short Partnership	3.68

A one-way ANOVA was performed to find out if group membership notably influenced Affinity. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were met before the analysis. As shown in Table 8 the group membership has not affected Affinity significantly ($F(3, 156) = 1.04, p = 0.377$). Meanwhile, Instagram usage played a significant role as a predictor ($F(1, 156) = 14.02, p < 0.001$), which is showing its central role in fostering emotional connections. Connection between group membership and Instagram was not notable either ($F(3, 156) = 0.45, p = 0.715$).

Table 8: ANOVA Summary for Affinity

Table 8: ANOVA Summary for Affinity					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Group	4.12	3	1.37	1.04	0.377
Instagram Usage	48.56	1	48.56	14.02	< 0.001
Group x Instagram Usage	1.56	3	0.52	0.45	0.715
Error	540.28	156	3.46		
Total	594.52	163			

Figure 5 provides an overview of Affinity scores across the groups.

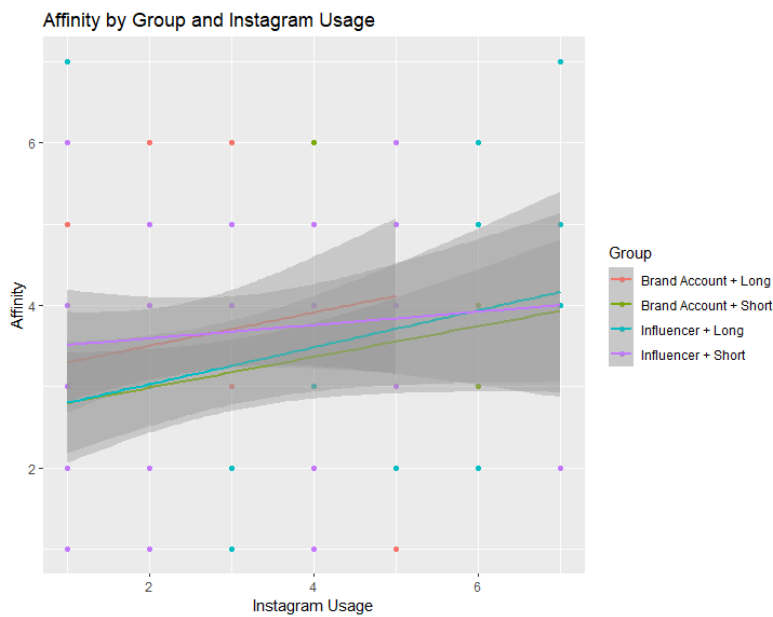


Figure 5: Distribution of Affinity Scores

To analyze predictors of Affinity regression analysis was performed. Insights from Table 9 showed that group membership was not a significant predictor for Affinity ($p > 0.05$ for all groups). Nevertheless, Instagram usage was directly related with Affinity ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$), which explains 19% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.19$). Moreover, link between Instagram usage and group membership was not significant ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.592$).

Table 9: Regression Summary for Affinity

Table 9: Regression Summary for Affinity			
Predictor	β	SE	p-value
Group Membership	0.02	0.20	0.917
Instagram Usage	0.18	0.12	0.152
Group x Instagram Usage (Interaction Term)	-0.01	0.06	0.924
R²	0.07		

Figure 6 illustrates the relationship between Instagram usage and Affinity.

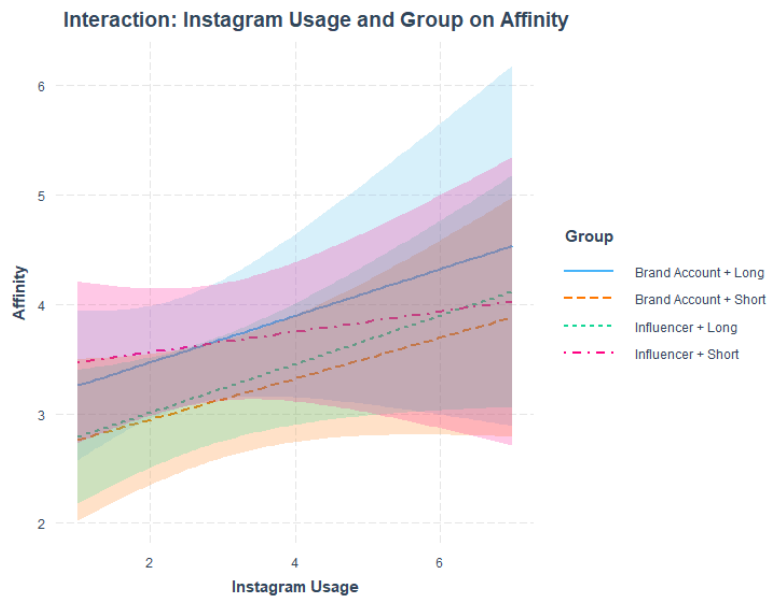


Figure 6: Instagram Usage and Affinity

These key insights showing the dominant role of individual behaviors, such as Instagram usage, in creating stronger emotional bonds with influencers. As structural factors such as partnership length and account type were having significant impact on Affinity. By testing Affinity with trust and effectiveness, this paper proved the importance of individual engagement behaviors in guiding consumer opinions.

Even the hypothesis regarding the impact of partnership length and account type on trust and effectiveness were not supported, the results showed the critical role of individual engagement behaviors, such as Instagram usage, in affecting these understandings. Moreover, it showed a detailed explanation of the factors forming consumer attitudes through influencer marketing. Furthermore, analysis of Affinity proved the value of emotional connections in consumer judgments of influencers.

All in all, these findings provide further insights to the growing literature base illustrating the value of consumer-centric approaches in influencer marketing. Moreover, these insights would be valuable to marketers and brands for optimization of influencer marketing strategies.

The Discussion section will explain these findings in the context of previous theoretical and research models. Main insights will be investigated deeper, such as surprisingly limited role of partnership details and dominance of Instagram usage. Following section will also analyse theoretical contributions to the field, practical implications and what would it mean for marketers who want to create successful influencer campaigns.

5. Summary of Findings

Research is designed to explore the effect of perceived independence of influencer on audiences' responses in Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). To understand of this influence on endorsement trust and effectiveness. The field researched was the Norwegian food market, where the study explored structural campaign features, such as partnership length (short vs. long), the type of the Instagram account (brand vs. influencer), and also individual user behaviors, such as specifically Instagram engagement (Andersen & Bjørnsen, 2021). The initial anticipation was that structural variables would significantly shape perceptions. However, the study found that individual behaviours had a dominant role of individual behaviors, which challenged some established assumptions in influencer marketing.

Instagram usage is considered to be the most consistent and significant predictor of endorsement trust and effectiveness (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Regardless of the experimental conditions, participants with higher levels of platform engagement consistently provided more favorable evaluations. For example, high-frequency users (the ones with multiple daily interactions with Instagram) rated influencer trust at an average of 4.5 out of 5, as compared to 3.7 for low-frequency users (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In a similar way, effectiveness scores had a similar trend, where high-frequency users rated endorsements at 4.3, while low-frequency users rated it at 3.6. These results have enabled us to conclude that individual engagement behaviors are more important than structural campaign elements. It is high engagement levels that heighten familiarity and receptivity to influencer content. The participants who frequently interact with food influencers or brands perceive endorsements as more relevant and trustworthy.

The findings align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which states that stimuli can be processed through multiple routes (Kitchen et al., 2014). The routes under

consideration can be central, peripheral, or passive depending on the context, the nature of the stimuli, and consumer characteristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The engagement of participants demonstrates a variability in the results of the study, which reflects this theoretical adaptability. While high-frequency users seemed to engage through central routes, critically evaluating the quality and relevance of the content, low-frequency users may have relied more on peripheral cues, such as visual appeal or perceived credibility of the account (Kitchen et al., 2014).

The expectations were not met, as neither the partnership length nor the account type had a significant impact on the perceptions of the consumers (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Although long-term collaborations are often considered indicators of trust and authenticity in literature, they did not lead to higher trust scores. Also, influencer accounts, which are typically believed to drive greater engagement and credibility than brand accounts, showed only slightly higher ratings. The average difference of 0.2 points in trustworthiness and effectiveness in these ratings is too small to be statistically meaningful, and therefore can be neglected. These results lead us to the conclusion that the perceived authenticity and relevance of the content is more influential than structural elements like partnership duration or account type.

For example, one campaign with a prominent food influencer who collaborated with a brand for a single post led to trust levels that were comparable to those of a brand account sharing similar content. Consumers in this study believed that alignment with their personal preferences, such as recipes that suited their personal tastes and eating habits, was more important than the structural aspects of the collaboration (Reinikainen et al., 2020). In the context of the Norwegian food market, participants showed skepticism toward high-profile influencers when campaigns did not align with local values, such as sustainability and transparency, no matter how credible the influencers were in other settings (Andersen & Bjørnsen, 2021). At the same time, smaller influencers with strong local ties were more effective, which was proved by higher trust and effectiveness scores for their campaigns (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). These findings stress the importance of perceived authenticity and cultural alignment in building consumer trust, which often outweighs structural features.

Another reason for the limited impact of partnership length may be due to the saturation of influencer marketing. Since Norway is a digitally mature environment, long collaborations there are not perceived as meaningful signals of alignment or credibility anymore (Casaló et al., 2018). Instead, the immediate relevance and relatability of the content is becoming increasingly important for the consumers. In a similar manner, the absence of clear boundaries between brand and influencer accounts also diminishes the importance of account type. Since influencers make their content more and more professional by using branding techniques similar to those of corporate entities, while brands tend to personalize their communication strategies, these distinctions become less meaningful to consumers.

Although the results of the study are based on the Norwegian market, they can also be applied to other regions with mature digital landscapes. Markets with high accessibility to social media platforms, widespread familiarity with influencer marketing, and cultural norms of transparency and relatability often have the same trends as those observed in this study. On the other hand, less digitally saturated markets with social media usage that is less embedded in daily life, or with predominantly traditional advertising, may attach greater importance to the aforementioned structural features. These differences proved the importance of adapting influencer marketing strategies with specific cultural and digital contexts. At the same time, maintaining a consistent focus on relevance as a key priority.

Insights from this study proved that Instagram engagement has a critical role in forming perceptions in digital marketing. Moreover, these results challenge the traditional theories like Source Credibility Theory and Social Influence Theory, as these theories emphasize structural features of campaigns, whereas the results of the current study demonstrate the limited focus of these theories on dynamic consumer behaviors. While the traditional frameworks often consider trust and engagement to be static outcomes of predefined factors, this study stresses the evolving nature of consumer engagement, as well as the key role of individual behaviors. This study extends the ELM and demonstrates how consumer-specific behaviors dynamically activate different processing routes.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study takes a fresh look at the dynamics of influencer marketing (Belanche et al., 2021). It shows that Instagram engagement is a critical determinant of trust and effectiveness. The

study challenges traditional assumptions of Social Influence Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The findings of the study show that refinements to these frameworks are necessary so that the evolving landscape of digital consumer behavior is reflected (Kim & Kim, 2021).

5.1.1 Challenging the Role of Structural Features

Traditional marketing research states that such structural features as partnership length and account type are key determinants of trust and endorsement effectiveness. Foundational studies (e.g., Lou and Yuan, 2019) demonstrate how long-term collaborations and influencer accounts strengthen perceived credibility. However, this study found that trust or effectiveness are not influenced significantly by partnership length or account type. For example, trust ratings for long-term collaborations averaged 4.3 out of 5. Those for short-term partnerships were 4.1. At the same time, influencer accounts (4.2) only marginally outperformed brand accounts (4.0).

These findings allow us to conclude that consumers in digitally mature markets like Norway, no longer prioritize structural markers over content quality and authenticity (Casaló, Flávia, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Since influencer marketing becomes saturated, it likely diminishes the value of these features. It also highlights the importance of intrinsic factors, such as relevance and cultural alignment. This challenges the focus on structural variables in Social Influence Theory and Source Credibility Theory, suggesting a user-focused approach that highlights behavioral engagement.

5.1.2 Expanding the Scope of Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory gives priority to external cues (social norms and perceived similarity), in shaping consumer attitudes (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Although these elements remain relevant, this study shows that individual engagement behaviors, particularly platform usage intensity, play a significant moderating role. High-frequency Instagram users consistently rated trust and effectiveness higher across all experimental conditions. For example, participants who interacted daily with food-related content on Instagram, demonstrated average trust scores of 4.5, while low-frequency users showed only 3.8 among, which makes a nearly 20% difference (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

It is important for the Social Influence Theory to integrate behavioral moderators like platform engagement in order to remain relevant (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Such an expansion will allow the framework to address nuanced consumer dynamics in highly interactive digital environments, where behavioral familiarity and content resonance shape attitudes. This study highlights user-driven engagement as a key factor, shifting attention from external signals to internal behavioral patterns.

5.1.3 Refining Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory links credibility factors—trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—to structural elements like the length of collaboration or the type of account.

However, in this study there was a shift in how credibility is perceived, resulting in content alignment with consumer values taking precedence over traditional markers.

For example, study participants more closely associated trustworthiness with transparent and relatable messaging rather than with the length of collaborations. Likewise, expertise was evaluated based on practical relevance and perceived authenticity rather than formal domain knowledge. At the same time, attractiveness was less important for highly engaged users, who valued message quality more.

These findings suggest that the dimensions of Source Credibility Theory need to be redefined in order to place greater emphasis on message authenticity and audience alignment. Such a redefinition is especially important in contexts where consumers critically assess content. This study highlights the decreasing importance of superficial cues and offers an updated perspective on credibility.

5.1.4 Adaptation of the Elaboration Likelihood Model

The ELM is being distinguished between central and peripheral processing routes for evaluating persuasive messages. This study stresses that central processing is dominant among high-engagement Instagram users, who attach more importance to content quality over superficial cues. For example, high-engagement participants showed stronger central processing, which resulted in effectiveness ratings of 4.5 as compared to 3.6 for less engaged users.

In addition, the findings show that there is a dynamic interplay between central and peripheral processing routes. For example, carousel posts that are commonly used on Instagram, combine visually appealing imagery with detailed narratives. This appeals to both cognitive and aesthetic engagement pathways. Such a "hybrid engagement model" influences consumers by combining central and peripheral cues, and in its turn creates a dual processing mechanism. Central processing emphasizes the informational value of content, while peripheral cues, like visual appeal, boost attention and memory. These dynamics suggest that the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) should include platform-specific factors, such as interactivity and content complexity, to better understand consumer behavior in digital environments. Additionally, the study highlights how processing routes can change over time. During such an evolution initial central engagement transitions into peripheral or passive processing when familiarity with content grows.

5.1.5 Broader Implications

Although the findings are based on the Norwegian food market, they also have implications for other cultural contexts. In emerging markets, where digital saturation is lower, structural features may still serve as important trust markers, being relatively new. However, as digital engagement deepens, a shift toward content-driven trust is likely to occur. For example, research from Southeast Asia shows that while less engaged users usually place more value on structural markers, more digitally engaged users increasingly appreciate authenticity and relevance.

These insights have implications for theoretical models beyond the Norwegian market. As markets mature, frameworks like Social Influence Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and ELM must integrate behavioral dimensions, which will enable them to reflect the growing importance of platform engagement and user-centered interactions. Researchers can better account for the evolving nature of consumer trust and effectiveness in digital environments by expanding these models.

The unique contributions of this study lie in its exploration of the intersection between behavioral and structural dimensions and its focus on hybrid pathways of engagement. It underlines the declining importance of superficial markers and shows importance of the

prioritization of content authenticity. Moreover, by advancing established theories, it offers a detailed foundation for understanding trust and engagement in digital environments.

5.2 Contributions to Theoretical Frameworks

This study refines key theoretical frameworks in marketing and consumer behavior, offering insights into trust, engagement, and influence dynamics in digital environments (Kim & Kim, 2021). It contributes to academic discourse by questioning established assumptions and introducing fresh perspectives.

5.2.1 Refining Social Influence Theory

The discussion examines how trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness interact with behavioral factors in shaping consumer perceptions (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Social Influence Theory traditionally asserts that external cues, like social norms and perceived similarity, are essential in shaping consumer attitudes. Even these factors are still crucial, this research places behavioral engagement essence as the key moderator, which strengthens the theoretical framework

The findings reveal that high-frequency Instagram users consistently showed higher levels of trust and endorsement effectiveness than the less frequent users. For example, participants who interacted daily with food-related content on Instagram, rated trust at an average of 4.5 out of 5. At the same time, low-frequency users showed only 3.8, which proves that interaction intensity plays a key role in shaping consumer perceptions of influencer trustworthiness and effectiveness.

The study challenges the traditional view that structural elements, such as partnership length and account type, are primary drivers of influence. Although these features are important signals of credibility, the findings suggest that their impact is not as significant as the behavioral engagement of consumers. Instead, the frequency and familiarity of user interactions with content prove to be dominant factors, which suggests that Social Influence Theory needs to expand its scope. Incorporating metrics like interaction intensity and platform-specific behaviors enables the theory to better capture the complexities of modern

digital contexts. Such trends representing growing importance of user-driven engagement in shaping effects of social influence

In the context of Norwegian market transparency and sustainability are crucial. As these two factors strengthen behavioral engagement by aligning with cultural priorities.

For example, an influencer advertising local, eco-friendly Norwegian products, such as TINE diary, increases trust and engagement by sharing the same values with consumers. Both through influencers' interaction with content and message in it, consumers evaluate trustworthiness. It illustrates how intrinsic behavioural factors interact with broader social norms in forming consumer attitudes. The shift from structural markers to user-driven engagement shows adaptability of Social Influence Theory in digitally advanced contexts.

This also has broader implications. The focus on authenticity and engagement identified in the Norwegian market will also be relevant in other digitally advanced contexts. There consumers evaluate content critically through their cultural values.

By aligning with behavioral dimensions, Social Influence Theory can better explain the evolving interplay between user-driven engagement and external social cues across diverse digital ecosystems.

5.2.2 Advancing Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory states that trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness are crucial aspects of credibility. Traditionally, they are connected to structural cues such as account type and collaboration duration. These factors were considered as indicators of an influencer's reliability and professionalism. However, this study challenges these traditional associations.

Rather than by external structural markers, in this environment credibility is more and more shaped by the authenticity of content and its alignment with consumer values (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The findings show that trustworthiness is most strongly associated with transparent and relatable messaging (Reinikainen et al., 2020). It turns out to be more important for the users than the length of a collaboration. Participants consistently rated influencers as more

trustworthy when their content reflected shared values. For example, short-term collaborations with culturally relevant messaging often had more importance for the audiences than longer-term partnerships without transparency. Expertise, which was traditionally linked to formal qualifications, instead was assessed through an influencer's ability to create engaging, practical, and audience-relevant content. Although attractiveness was still a consideration, it was considered less important by high-engagement users who valued message substance and resonance over superficial visual appeal. This preference corresponds with behavioral engagement trends. In them high-frequency users value message authenticity and content quality over purely aesthetic elements.

These shifting perceptions prove the need to redefine the credibility dimensions within Source Credibility Theory. In digital environments, with audiences critically assessing content for authenticity and value, the central drivers of trust become transparency, relatability, and alignment with audience priorities. This transition reflects broader trends in influencer marketing. There consumers more and more seek genuine connections rather than traditional marketing signals.

Even though these findings are based on the Norwegian market, they have broader usage. In other digitally mature environments, similar trends are likely to foster, as there consumers critically evaluate influencers based on the authenticity and practical relevance of their content. On the other hand, in markets with lower levels of digital saturation, structural factors such as account type or collaboration history may have greater importance as they are still perceived as new. In less digitally mature markets, these markers often act as initial indicators of credibility. As consumers gain expertise in evaluation of the content, these factors become less significant, underlining the adaptability of Source Credibility Theory.

This evolution in credibility markers also adds to the ways of processing explored in the Elaboration Likelihood Model. The model demonstrates how engagement levels influence the evaluation of persuasive content. These refinements to Source Credibility Theory provide a framework for understanding how trust is built and maintained in user-driven digital ecosystems.

5.2.3 Revising the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a framework for understanding how consumers process persuasive messages. Traditionally, ELM distinguishes between central processing, which is characterized by deliberate and detailed evaluation of message content, and peripheral processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In peripheral processing individuals rely on surface-level cues. This study upholds the importance of central processing among high-engagement Instagram users, who value content quality over structural elements such as account type or partnership length. For example, participants who frequently interacted with Instagram content, showed a clear preference for posts with substantive information, for example detailed narratives or step-by-step guides, over those with primarily visual appeal.

However, the findings lead to posing questions to the traditional ELM interpretations. They show that multiple processing routes coexist and interplay. Hybrid content formats, like Instagram carousel posts, demonstrate how central and peripheral processing can take place simultaneously (Kitchen et al., 2014). A carousel post with a recipe, for example, appeals to central processing due to its comprehensive instructions, but it also engages peripheral routes with visually appealing imagery. This dual engagement shows how users engage with content on multiple levels. It highlights Instagram's unique feature to combine depth and high visual appearance into one message.

Study also uncovered temporal shifts in processing routes. In the beginning of engagement user will engage centrally by the contents informational depth, but further it would transition to peripheral or passive processing. High frequency user may critique a recipe for its relevance and clarity during first interaction. However, repeated exposure may lead to a more peripheral review by focusing on visual appealing or alignment with the brand. These insights underline highly dynamic nature of processing routes, which evolve based on context, individual user habits and characteristics of stimuli.

Described dynamics play a key role in building trust. Hybrid content blends detailed, authentic messaging with visually appealing elements, creating both immediate cognitive engagement and lasting emotional impact. Trust grows stronger when the content aligns with cultural values and meets user expectations.

In the Norwegian context, for example, messages focusing on sustainability or ethical transparency get a stronger response. Effectiveness of hybrid content strategies is illustrated above.

To increase this model applicability, future refinements should incorporate platform-specific dynamics such as interactivity, content complexity and evolving user engagement patterns. Platforms like Instagram, where hybrid content dominates, exemplify how central and peripheral cues converge to create holistic user experiences. Similar mechanisms are likely to operate not only in Instagram, but also in other digital ecosystems, where user interaction with content varies across formats and engagement levels. These insights ensure the model's relevance for understanding consumer behavior in different contexts. As hybrid content gets wider adoption in emerging markets, ELM will help explain how engagement develops in less digitally mature environments. Norwegian audiences value transparency and ethics, which boost central processing.

To increase trust levels and long term relationships , companies which are valuing sustainability or ethical practices are likely engaging with users cognitively.

This revised perspective on ELM aligns with earlier insights from this study. As it is shown in 5.1 Summary of Findings, high engagement correlates with users valuing message quality more than superficial features, while 5.2 Theoretical Implications describes the reduced influence of structural markers in comparison with behavioral and contextual factors. These advancements combined increase this model's relevance, guaranteeing that it remains an essential framework for understanding consumer behavior.

5.2.4 Global Relevance

Even though this study is based on the Norwegian food market, its findings hold broader implications for understanding consumer behavior in other cultural and market contexts. While structural features such as collaboration length or account type may continue to serve as significant markers of trust in emerging markets with lower digital saturation, with time, as these markets mature and consumers become more familiar with influencer marketing, there is a notable shift toward valuing content-driven trust and engagement. These findings show that refined theoretical frameworks, including Social Influence Theory, Source Credibility

Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), are flexible enough to capture the complexities of consumer trust across global markets.

This study creates a contribution to the ongoing evolution of these frameworks. At the same time, it integrates complementary perspectives, such as Parasocial Interaction Theory and behavioral economics. This contribution and the perspectives lay a foundation for actionable strategies in influencer marketing as they demonstrate how global trends and local cultural preferences can be harmonized. As markets around the world mature and adapt to the nuances of digital engagement, the flexibility demonstrated by these theoretical models will be pivotal for working with both established and emerging platforms. These themes are explored further in Section 5.3 Managerial Implications.

5.3 Managerial Implications

This study underlines the key importance of user engagement and message relevance over traditional structural markers, such as partnership length or account type (Kim & Kim, 2021). Leading up to challenging traditional digital marketing frameworks. Insights gained from this research created foundation for future campaigns which resonates deeply with culturally specific markets like Norway (Andersen & Bjørnsen, 2021). However, they remain adoptable to global contexts (Chu & Kim, 2011).

5.3.1 Reaching Active Users

High-frequency Instagram users are the key target group in improving endorsement effectiveness (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). They regularly engage with the platform, engaging with the content through both central and peripheral pathways. So to be successful campaigns need to apply Instagram's unique features to create engaging, interactive content for this audience.

Carousel posts, polls and Q&A sessions are highly effective in boosting engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019). For example, a dairy brand could use carousel posts to present a series of recipes, using their products, which will encourage users to interact by voting on their favorite recipe or by sharing their personal findings. Such methods deepen interaction with audiences and strengthen brand resonance (Chu & Kim, 2011).

High -frequency users showed higher trust and engagement in all experiments, showing the importance of increasing interactions with this group (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

5.3.2 Clear and Principled Marketing Strategies

Transparency is crucial for building trust (Reinikainen et al., 2020). It is particularly important in culturally sensitive markets like Norway, where ethical considerations have a key part in shaping consumer behavior. When authentic storytelling is paired with clear sponsorship disclosures, credibility of both influencer and brand can improve (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). To achieve this, marketers should focus on incorporating disclosures into content while preserving authenticity and adhering to ethical standards. This approach helps transparency build audience trust.

For example, sports influencer promoting high protein products could openly disclose partnership with brand, but at the same time share honest opinion about benefits and weaknesses of the product (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Such approaches not only match consumer expectations for transparency but also strengthen connection with the audience. Policymakers can support these efforts by establishing standardized guidelines for sponsored content, which will foster accountability and protect consumers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

5.3.3 Leveraging Instagram's Unique Features

To maximize campaign success, brands should adapt their strategies to leverage Instagram's specific tools and features.

For instance, “carousel” posts allow diverse storytelling and “Highlights” provide increased visibility of effective content. To effectively engage central, peripheral, and passive processing routes simultaneously campaigns need to combine visually appealing elements with substantive narratives (Kitchen et al., 2014).

A food brand might create a carousel presenting easy and fast cooking recipes, while combining similar content into Instagram Highlight titled “Everyday Recipes” (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Such a dual approach increases visibility, relevance and brand's expertise. Campaigns, continuously adopting Instagram interactive features, achieve higher

engagement rates (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Which indicates the effectiveness of combining practical content and visual appeal.

5.3.4 Strategic Collaborations Beyond Campaign Duration

Even this research has not discovered any significant effects of partnership length, still detailed long-term collaborations could achieve strategic benefit. Repeating campaigns provide opportunities to strengthen brand messaging and increase familiarity with the brand (Casaló, Flávian, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Gaming brand could collaborate with influencer on time-specific campaigns, such as promoting new gaming mouse when influencer take part in e-sport competition or new gaming chair during influencer live streams (Belanche et al., 2021). These efforts increase relevance throughout the year and form consistent brand narrative.

Providing creativity freedom to influencers during campaigns within defined brand standards increases authenticity and boosts effectiveness (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). If originality and credibility of influencer content is retained and aligned with collaboration objectives it would strengthen connections with the audience.

5.3.5 Global Adaptability

Although the study results are grounded in the Norwegian context, these findings hold broader implications for influencer marketing strategies in other regions as well. In emerging markets with lower digital saturation structural markers such as partnership length may initially hold greater importance (Martínez-López et al., 2020). However, when these markets evolve and influencer marketing ceases to be a novelty for consumers, the perception of content authenticity and active user engagement is likely to become more important as key drivers of trust and effectiveness (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

In emerging markets like Southeast Asia, brands may initially rely on structural markers to establish credibility. With time, strategies need to change by transitioning towards creating value-driven and engaging content that would align with evolving consumer expectations (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Thus, marketing managers can effectively address diverse cultural and consumer needs by adapting strategies to market maturity.

The managerial implications of this research emphasize the evolving dynamics of influencer marketing. There engagement and transparency have surpassed traditional structural markers as the primary drivers of trust and effectiveness. Marketing managers can create campaigns that resonate deeply with different audiences by matching strategies to these priorities, at the same time adapting to cultural and market-specific nuances. These insights provide grounds for addressing methodological challenges and exploring future research opportunities, as discussed in Section 6.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study presents important insights about the role of perceived independence in influencer marketing. It also explores impact of engagement metrics on consumer trust. In combination these factors determine the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies. By focusing on the Norwegian food market, research emphasizes key dynamics that lies in the basis of modern digital communication strategies. However, no study is without limitations. The understanding of them provides an opportunity for framing results in a broader practical and academic context.

The following section presents key methodological and contextual limitations of this research. It also gives ideas for future studies to better understand these dynamics. Considering these points, the study highlights the need to keep improving research in influencer marketing.

6.1 Reliability and Validity

6.1.1 Construct Validity

Measures used in this study were carefully adopted from trusted frameworks to align with research objectives and nuances of influencer marketing in Instagram. Key constructs like trustworthiness, engagement, and behavioral intentions were chosen to respond on the research questions and analyze the factors of perceived independence. They showed strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding recommended thresholds (e.g., $\alpha = 0.82$ for engagement and $\alpha = 0.87$ for trustworthiness), what supported reliability of measures.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Main concern is dependence from self-reported data, which was used to capture variables like Instagram usage and engagement behaviors. While practical, self-reports are vulnerable to biases like overestimation or recall errors, which could affect the reliability of the findings (Bound et al., 2001; Althubaiti, 2016). For example, participants may have inadvertently overestimated their engagement with influencer content based on perceptions of socially desirable behavior.

Moreover, the Likert scales used in this study are effective for structured data collection, but they may not present in detail nuanced and relational aspects of constructs like trust and perceived independence (Althubaiti, 2016). It could be difficult to measure emotional connections and contextual factors using only standardized survey instruments.

To address these challenges, future research could improve through integrating behavioral tracking alongside self-reported measures (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). For instance, digital tools could track actual engagement patterns, including the frequency of likes, shares, comments or content saves. This would provide a more objective complement to the participants' responses. Applying these methods would improve construct validity by giving clearer and more detailed insights into how perceived independence influences consumer trust and engagement.

6.1.2 Internal Validity

The experimental design was thoroughly created to ensure a high level of internal validity. Implementation of a 2x2 randomized between-subjects design allowed control for external influences. This approach isolated the effects of partnership length and account type on trust and engagement. Random assignment of participants ensured balanced groups and reduced probability of systematic biases. However, certain limitations must be considered with usage of this experimental design.

While randomization minimizes selection bias, specific unmeasured variables, such as prior familiarity with TINE or Mike the Chef, could have subtly impacted participants' responses. These pre-existing associations could have affected participants' trust and engagement independently of the manipulated variables (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). For instance, a

participant with high brand loyalty for TINE might rate trust higher regardless of partnership length or account type.

Pre-experiment measures could be introduced to improve internal validity in future research. They would evaluate participant previous experience or familiarity with the parties involved. Including these variables as covariates could provide more detailed interpretations of the findings.

6.1.3 External Validity

This study's external validity is based on its focus on the Norwegian food market, providing a unique and relevant framework for studying influencer marketing.

Norway's digitally advanced landscape, combined with its cultural focus on sustainability created a unique context for research. It was ideal to investigate how perceived independence and engagement metrics effect trust and effectiveness. However, these exclusive characteristics may limit the broader usage of these findings in markets with different cultural or digital dynamics.

Study's insights are formed by certain cultural context , where transparency and ethical alignment are crucial to consumers (Andersen & Bjørnsen, 2021). In markets which are not so digitally advanced, structural elements such as partnership length or account type could have higher importance, showing the dependence on traditional trust indicators. Contrary, consumer in highly saturated digital markets like the United States, may even more prioritize content which aligns with their personal values compared to the Norwegian sample.

Moreover, study was made in the context of Instagram as the primary platform for exploring engagement , which fits effectively with Norway's extensive social media use. Nevertheless, regions where other platforms, such as such as TikTok, Snapchat, or Twitch, have higher usage over Instagram could present differing patterns of consumer interaction and trust formation (Zhao & Wagner, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Platform-specific features, such as TikTok's personalized feed or community focus in Twitch, could affect how consumers process and engage with influencer content.

To increase the generalizability of future investigation it is essential to imply cross-comparative research across different cultural and digital contexts. Examining cultural norms, levels of digital integration and platform preferences can offer deeper understanding of influencer marketing dynamics (Chu & Kim, 2011). In addition, recreating the study with participants from areas where different social platforms are dominant would help place the findings in a wider global context.

6.1.4 Statistical Conclusion Validity

The study used statistical methods like ANOVA and regression analysis, chosen to match the experimental design and research goals.

These methods provided a sufficient base for evaluating connection between account type, partnership length and engagement metrics. Resulting in offering important insight about factors affecting effectiveness and trust. However, some limitations about their use should be mentioned.

ANOVA usage was perfectly aligned to compare group means across the four experimental conditions. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > 0.05$) and Levene's test ($p > 0.05$) to ensure the credibility of analyses. These methods are effective to identify group level differences but limited in recognizing individual-level nuances or interactions which may affect engagement and trust. To explore such nuances more advanced analytical techniques may need to be implemented.

ANOVA and regression analysis complemented each other addressing the predictive strength of Instagram usage on trust and effectiveness. These models explained a significant proportion of variance in dependent variables (e.g., $R^2 = 0.21$ for effectiveness, $R^2 = 0.19$ for trust). It underlined importance of individual engagement behaviors. However, it prevented capturing the temporal dynamics of trust and engagement, as this study relied on cross-sectional data. This limitations decrease ability to make causal interpretations.

Future studies could use longitudinal designs to investigate how trust and engagement develop in the longer term. Advanced techniques like structural equation modeling (SEM) can show a more comprehensive understanding of relationships between variables. That will help

to overcome limitations of simpler methods. Combining these approaches with behavioral data would improve depth and precision of findings.

6.1.5 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was based on Prolific, a trusted platform for recruiting high-quality participants. Study guaranteed that the sample fit the research focus, as only individuals, who resided in Norway and had interest in food-related content were admitted to it. Even though this approach was successful to address research objectives. There are limitation which should be taken into consideration in experimental setup and sampling method.

One of them is based on targeted recruitment criteria. As it narrowed the diversity of sample. Even, it focused its relevance on Norwegian food market, it excluded participants with other cultural or digital behaviors. For instance, individuals from other cultures or less interest in food-related content were not represented. It could affect the broader applicability of the findings.

The static Instagram-style posts used as experimental stimuli were carefully designed to mimic authentic content. However, they missed the dynamic and interactive features of real life social media. In natural settings, users engage with content already being affected by factors like algorithmic feed, scrolling behavior and content timing. These factors can significantly impact on engagement and trust. The ecological validity of the findings could be decreased by absence of these elements in controlled survey

Attention-check questions were included to ensure participant engagement. However, some responses may show only surface-level interaction with stimuli without deep cognitive engagement. It highlights the challenge of reproducing immersive nature in social media interactions in an experimental setting. (Reeves & Nass, 1996)

Future research could address these limitations by using more immersive methods, such as simulated social media platforms or interactive live feeds. Recruitment strategies could also be expanded beyond Prolific to include participants with more diverse demographics and behaviors. These changes would improve the ecological validity of the findings and better reflect real-world conditions in future studies.

6.2 Future Research Directions

While this study is based on proven theories such as Social Influence Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the ELM, the opportunity to expand the theoretical base to have a deeper understanding of influencer marketing strategies, still remains. Integrating supplementary theories, such as Parasocial Interaction Theory, could provide new insights. That enhance existing frameworks and shed light on the nuances of consumer-influencer relationships.

Parasocial Interaction Theory examines the one-sided emotional connections between influencers and audiences. So it can offer a valuable perspective on how influencers build trust and engagement. These parasocial relationships, which are built on consistent, authentic and relatable content can increase levels of the perceived independence and credibility of influencers (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Future researchers could explore how emotional connections influence the effectiveness of influencer endorsements. It is highly relevant in contexts where trust and authenticity is crucial, as presented in insights on the Norwegian food market in this study.

For instance, this study found that individual engagement behaviors, such as Instagram usage, were stronger predictors of trust and effectiveness than structural factors like partnership length. Parasocial Interaction Theory could help to explain this phenomenon by linking higher engagement levels to deeper emotional connection with influencers. That can result in outweighing superficial attributes of the campaign. This theoretical development aligns with findings that highlight the relational and psychological aspects of consumer perceptions in influencer marketing.

Furthermore, integrating Parasocial Interaction Theory could enable a deeper analysis of trust formation across different types of influencers and audiences (Reinikainen et al., 2020). For example, nano and micro influencers, often seen as more relatable and authentic. That could encourage stronger parasocial connections in comparison with macro-influencers. This differentiation may give meaningful insights about how influencer marketing strategies should be adopted based on audience size and influencer character

Future studies may also consider how Parasocial Interaction Theory intersects with the ELM. For instance, when parasocial relationships are weaker, peripheral-route processing may prevail, focusing on signals such as visual appeal or amount of followers.

Conversely, parasocial bonds may encourage central-route processing by increasing audience incentive to deeply evaluate influencer content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Understanding these connections could offer better insights into how different theoretical frameworks combine to shape consumer responses. Adding frameworks like Parasocial Interaction Theory could further strengthen the foundation of future research.

This would offer a more comprehensive perspective on the relational and emotional factors that stimulate trust and engagement in influencer marketing. So marketers would get actionable insights to design more effective and authentic campaigns.

6.2.1 New Variables and Metrics

As this study is focused on quantitative metrics such as engagement scores and trust ratings. Qualitative indicators should be included to gain a deeper understanding of consumer-influencer interactions. Metrics like meaningful comments and saved posts provide deeper insights about audience engagement, exceeding surface-level interactions such as likes or shares (Casaló, Flávian, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). These qualitative measures represent deeper emotional or cognitive engagement and serve as more accurate predictors of trust and effectiveness in influencer campaigns.

For example, meaningful comments, where followers provide feedback about the product, ask questions or share usage experience, can indicate deeper engagement and connection with the influencer. Similarly, saved posts show that audiences find the content valuable enough to revisit later. It signals about stronger impact of endorsement, than just a fleeting form of engagement. Adding these metrics to future research could help better understand the relationships in influencer marketing, focusing on individual engagement rather than structural factors.

Additionally, such areas as the long-term effects of influencer campaigns on consumer trust and loyalty require further exploration.

This study used a cross-sectional design to explore immediate perceptions of trust and effectiveness, while a longitudinal approach may present deeper findings about evolution of these perceptions over time (Peres et al., 2010). For example, regularly interacting with an influencer's content can help create trust and loyalty, especially when their endorsements align with their personal values. However, as noted before, over-commercialization or not meeting audience expectations can harm trust, highlighting how these connections can evolve over time.

Researchers would also benefit from a longitudinal framework by exploring the interaction between initial engagement behaviors and long-term outcomes, such as brand advocacy or purchase loyalty. For instance, followers who engage with content through meaningful comments on post saves may develop deeper relationships with influencers and in result with associated brands. These insights could enhance the conclusions of this study, providing a broader understanding of how influencer marketing strategies impact consumer behavior over time. Additionally, future research could use mixed-method approaches, integrating behavioral data from social media analytics with qualitative insights gathered through interviews or focus groups to better define and measure these variables.

Combining data sources would strengthen the validity and depth of insights, providing a more detailed understanding of consumer-influencer dynamics. Also, such methods could test whether qualitative metrics and longitudinal effects differ across various platforms, cultural background, platforms and influencer types

Exploring how people engage with influencers and studying over a long time can help us see how influencer campaigns can build lasting trust and loyalty. This can give useful ideas for research and help make better plans for influencer marketing in the future.

6.2.2 Cross-Cultural and Platform Comparisons

Based on the insights from this study, future research should explore how cultural contexts and platform-specific dynamics influence engagement and trust in influencer marketing. A deeper examination of collectivist and individualist cultures may uncover variations in consumer-influencer interactions (Hofstede, 2001). For example, focus on group-oriented benefits in collectivist cultures and independence in individualist ones.

Similarly, understanding of different social media platforms with unique engagement mechanisms, like TikTok or Snapchat, could broaden the usability of these insights by underlining how platform characteristics form consumer perceptions (Zhao & Wagner, 2024).

Future studies could adopt a cross-cultural, multi-platform approach to analyze if engagement metrics hold similar significance across different contexts (Chu & Kim 2011). To further increase understanding and generalizability, an examination of how cultural norms and platforms dynamics affect the effectiveness of perceived independence is needed. It could provide actionable insights for influencers and brands for adaptation in diverse digital and cultural landscape.

This study underlines the key role of perceived independence and engagement in building trust and increasing effectiveness in influencer marketing. These findings are consistent with the growing importance of sustainability and authenticity as core consumer values. Influencer by integrating sustainable practices into their content could build stronger connections with followers by reinforcing their perceived independence. It gives opportunity to explore how sustainability-focused endorsements strengthen trust and increase long-term loyalty.

The main challenge is to balance authenticity with promotional goals. Over-commercialization or perceived insincerity increases risk to undermine trust, so it is crucial for influencers to integrate sustainability narratives genuinely. Future research could explore how the frequency, transparency, and context of such endorsements affect consumer perceptions across different cultural and digital contexts (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017).

From a methodological standpoint, mixed methods approaches could capture the complexities of sustainability and authenticity in influencer marketing. Combining behavioral data with qualitative insights from interviews or focus groups would deepen understanding of how sustainability narratives shape trust and engagement. By addressing these dynamics, future research could advance both theoretical foundations and practical applications in this evolving field.

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