

Looking at Influencer Marketing in the Post-COVID Era

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Abstract

Influencer marketing has been a significant marketing strategy, especially during COVID-19. However, there has been a limited amount of research examining its shift in the post-COVID context, especially over different social media platforms. This study addresses this gap in research by analyzing consumer perceptions and reactions and how they have changed before, during, and after the pandemic. Survey data was compared to analyze influencer marketing effectiveness, defined as the ability of influencer content to influence consumer perceptions and purchase intentions, through a variation of different consumer groups. Using a comparison of survey data from multiple time periods, ANOVA tests were used to analyze the differences pre- and post-COVID. The results indicate that influencer marketing has remained effective; however, it has become less trustworthy since the pandemic. There were also emerging platform differences. For instance, TikTok users communicate a stronger content appeal and perceived effectiveness of influencer marketing, while Instagram users place a greater significance on an influencer's credibility. There were no significant variations found across age or gender. The results conclude that as influencer marketing continues to influence purchase intention, its effectiveness is increasingly shaped by the use of different platforms and the shifts in consumer behavior.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Consumer behavior, COVID-19, Marketing strategy

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the marketing industry experienced a change. While life was drastically moved online, brands started to shift their marketing tactics towards social media influencers in comparison to the use of celebrities and traditional marketing styles. Influencers, defined as those with smaller but highly engaged audiences, started to raise questions about consumer behavior and brand success. COVID-19 accelerated the use of influencer marketing, with brands prioritizing authenticity and personal connection in comparison to celebrity endorsements.

Even before the pandemic began, influencer marketing was gaining popularity. In 2017, 84% of marketers were planning to run influencer campaigns (Agrawal, 2017). Once the pandemic hit, brands were forced to adapt. Stores started to lose profits, and marketing budgets were reduced by two-thirds. However, 60% of companies maintained or increased their budget on influencer marketing (Smith, 2025).

In order to explore this shift, influencer marketing trends were analyzed over the time periods of before, during, and after COVID-19. For the “before” period, articles from 2018 were analyzed. A survey was conducted to gather data for the present. Present-day data was collected from July 20 to July 23, 2025. For the purposes of this study, “post-COVID” is defined as the period of time after the pandemic beginning in mid-2022. The aim is to understand changes in user perception and to see if these changes are related to social media platforms or the usage of influencer content. Additionally, there has been little attention given to comparing different types of groups that aren't based on demographics. These results will be significant because it is common to look at age or gender but not so much on platform differences, adding new insights to the shape of influencer marketing. Based on the goals of this study, the

following questions were used to guide this investigation:

1. How has consumer perception of influencer marketing effectiveness changed before, during, and after COVID-19?
2. How do consumers view the perceived effectiveness, content appeal, and credibility of influencers on different platforms?
3. How do follower status and demographics of consumers relate to their perceptions of influencer marketing and its effectiveness and trust?

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is influencer marketing, and why is it effective?

Influencer marketing is a type of marketing where individuals, known as social media influencers, get offers from brands to promote their services (Guptaa, 2021; Bakker, 2018). These influencers have spent previous time building a reputation for themselves within a certain niche. Their reputation consists of a certain amount of credibility and trust with their followers. Because consumers feel more of a personal connection, they are more susceptible to influencers' opinions (Guptaa, 2021; Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). The images that influencers create of themselves make them and their recommendations look more personal, genuine, and persuasive. Influencer marketing has become increasingly effective, specifically shaping the image of brands and increasing consumers' purchase decisions, making it more effective compared to traditional marketing tactics such as television advertising, celebrity endorsements, and print advertisements (Mason et al., 2021; Ichelle et al., 2021; Guptaa, 2021).

2.2 Evolution of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing started in the early 2000s, where brands collaborated with celebrities to influence a wide audience through media, television, and blogs (Bakker, 2018). As social media started advancing, the number of content creators started to increase. These platforms allowed those with a lesser following to become persuasive figures, leading to a more effective and significant influence in comparison to using celebrities (Dubbelink & Herrando, 2021).

This shift accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic; as users started to spend more time on social media, brands had to turn to digital platforms in order to stay in business (TenHulzen, 2021; Ichelle et al., 2021; Guptaa, 2021). During lockdown, online consumption rocketed as more users started spending more time online. This led to a spike in social media usage. This was also a factor of how smaller influencers started to become significant figures in the marketing world (Dubbelink & Herrando, 2021). As traditional marketing strategies started to become less effective, brands dove into the realm of influencers to maintain business in a more flexible way (TenHulzen, 2021). This popular way of marketing has proven to be a trend that will likely pass, but as a successful business strategy in today's world (Makropoulos, 2020).

2.3 Influencer marketing and its impact on consumer behaviour and their decision-making process

Influencers are users who create content on things they are passionate about. Influencer marketing relies on these individuals who have already created a sense of trust within their followers to present a brand. Consumers turn to these influencers and take in product recommendations/advice and brand discoveries (Guptaa, 2021). This is due to the parasocial relationships that are formed between influencers and consumers. These types of relationships consist of a one-sided connection where their followers grasp a personal connection despite just looking at a screen (Chen et al., 2024).

In order for these relationships to work, trust plays a large role in this dynamic. When an influencer comes across as authentic and genuine, their content comes across as more relatable and trustworthy (Bakker, 2018). These attributes allowed content to impact consumers' intentions and decisions (Dubbelink & Herrando, 2021). One study found that while weighing the value of brand endorsements, 39% of consumers rely on influencers' expertise (Wiley, 2019). This

suggests that an influencer's credibility, often perceived as expertise, increases the likelihood that a consumer will act on a recommendation. Expertise aligns with a convincing presence, making consumers more likely to trust and follow their opinions (Guptaa, 2021). Not only does influencer marketing bring in a more personal effect, but it also brings flexibility through its delivery. Influencers have the power to reach different audiences based on how they create their content (Dubbelink & Herrando, 2021). Due to this freedom, their content comes across as more personal and increases engagement. This further drives consumers' decision-making. Ultimately, influencer marketing is a powerful tool shaping consumer opinions in ways that traditional marketing cannot.

2.4 Impact of Influencer marketing on company sales

Influencers can shape a brand's image, build a brand's trust, and improve conversion rates (Mason et al., 2021; TenHulzen, 2021). Conversion rate refers to the number of users who take a desired action of making a purchase. For example, one digital agency reported a 165% increase in monthly sales since the beginning of the pandemic. This was nearly double its annual revenue since 2020 (Ward, 2021). Influencers not only drove sales but also enhanced the brand's ability to reach audience engagement and drove them to make purchases. These results highlight one of the key benefits within the influencer marketing realm. Looking at global data, influencers have helped the marketing economy grow from \$2 billion all the way to \$13.8 billion (Roach, 2023). Since the pandemic forced brands to become reliant on digital engagement, influencers have become essential figures in today's world. These findings suggest that influencer marketing directly has an impact on not only a brand's performance but also the broader digital global marketing economy. While existing literature highlights influencer marketing and its rise to fame, it does not cover a comparative analysis across different time periods of COVID-19. COVID-19 is expected to make a difference because user behavior is likely to have shifted during and after pandemic lockdowns. Additionally, differences across social media platforms and influencer followers and non-followers may influence the effectiveness of this type of marketing. This gap will be addressed by diving into the shifts in influencer marketing effectiveness before, during, and after the pandemic. This will be done using survey data to explore changes throughout these three time periods. Furthermore, existing literature also does not include statistical analyses, for example, ANOVA tests. Through these tests, different variables are compared to each other, signaling significant relationships throughout. Instead of conducting an analysis through grouping consumers, other variables are tracked. These insights reveal an in-depth understanding of how influencer marketing affects consumers around the world.

3. Methods

This paper consists of research conducted through a convergent mixed-methods approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously through one survey. They were then analyzed together. Quantitative responses were used to identify patterns in consumer actions. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were analyzed to interpret the quantitative patterns. The integration of these two data types occurred during the interpretation stage.

Survey participants were recruited using convenience sampling through online distribution, including social media and personal networks. Participation was voluntary and collected anonymously through Google Forms. Because of this, the sample may present an overrepresentation of digitally active individuals due to self-selection bias. This limits generalizability because the findings may represent only a certain group and not the broader population.

For pre- and during-COVID data, previous studies (Guptaa, 2021; Bruns, 2018) were referenced. Present-day data were collected via a Google Forms survey from July 20 to July 23, 2025, with qualitative and quantitative questions mirroring the topics from prior research. Seventy-two anonymous, voluntary respondents from various backgrounds and ages participated.

Influencer marketing effectiveness is conceptualized in how consumers' perceptions of brands, purchase intentions, trust, and engagement levels change based on influencer content (Guptaa, 2021; Bruns, 2018). These categories were measured through a survey analyzing consumers' likelihood of purchasing, content appeal, and other related measures assessing trust and engagement.

Survey responses were compared to earlier studies. Results were also analyzed between two age groups: under 35 and over 35. This cutoff was selected because past research has concluded and indicated that social media engagement has notably declined after the mid-30s, reflecting differences in digital adoption, career, and life stages (Gottfried, 2024).

Quantitative responses were processed using averages and percentages and presented in difference-in-difference graphs. Qualitative responses were summarized through quotes and overall themes.

To further analyze the data, the survey results will be plugged into RStudio to clean and filter the data. From here, the utilities in R were used to sort through the most important relationships and pick out the patterns in different relationships between different factors. Through RStudio, ANOVA tests were run. ANOVA is a type of statistical test used to analyze differences between multiple groups. These tests are significant because they determine whether differences in data are by chance or if they have a significant relationship, indicating existing relationships between certain variables (Kenton, 2025).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive results

There were a total of 72 respondents. Participants consisted of 78% female, 21% male, and 1% nonbinary. Respondents consisted of all ages. However, the majority consisted of those under 18 and those older than 35. This mix provided diverse perspectives from the different age groups.

When asked about their social media usage, 55.6% of the respondents reported using social media several times in a day, 31.9% reported using social media daily, and 11.5% reported using social media a few times a week or infrequently. These results convey that almost 88% of respondents engage in social media at least once a day. This suggests a higher level of influencer marketing exposure, as frequent social media usage correlates with an increase in viewing of advertisements.

Respondents also chose the social media app they spend the most time on. The results show that Instagram is the most used social media platform (47.2%), followed by TikTok (26.4%). However, in a study before the pandemic, the most used social media platform was Facebook and in a study conducted during the pandemic, the most used social media platform was Twitter (Guptaa, 2021). This shift most suggests that there has been some sort of change in popularity throughout the time of COVID. This could be influenced by the rise of TikTok and Instagram.

Participants were then asked if and when they began to follow influencers on social media. 29.2% of the participants started before COVID, 25% of the participants started during COVID and 22.2% of the participants started after COVID, suggesting a continuous increase in the population following influencers.

Participants also had the choice to select all that applied to the niches that they follow. The most popular category was lifestyle (56%), followed by food (46%) and fashion (40%). Beauty, fitness, and travel are equally popular with 36% each. Lastly, gaming is the least popular (13%). Other categories, such as sports, tech, comedy, music, and finance, all make up around 5% of answers. Similarly, in 2018, the most popular niches consisted of lifestyle, fashion, and travel content, which is heavily represented through the current data. This similarity supports the idea that social media influencers thrive within specific niches. For instance, specialties such as lifestyle content are more popular than others. The pandemic may have accelerated the popularity of these niches as users started to spend more and more time at home.

In order to evaluate how consumers perceive the authenticity of influencers, participants rated on a 1-5 scale how much they identified with the given statement. The first statement is: I think that advertising messages do not affect the overall credibility of an influencer. The average score is 2.72 in this study compared to 3.18 before COVID (Bruns, 2018). The second statement is: I trust influencers who have brand sponsorships. The average score is 2.49 in this study compared to 3.32 before COVID (Bruns, 2018). The next statement is: I think the credibility of an influencer affects my decision to buy from a brand. The average score is 3.54 in this study compared to 3.37 before COVID (Bruns, 2018).

These numbers show a decline in trust towards influencers after COVID, suggesting that the pandemic has opened

consumers' eyes to how sponsored content plays a large role in how a user associates trust with influencers. On the other hand, there has been an increase in how the credibility of an influencer impacts one's decision to purchase. This shift suggests that consumers have placed a greater importance on the credibility of an influencer. This means that they feel that the influencer has to be a reliable source for them to think about purchasing.

These changes could be due to the oversaturation of influencer content. When COVID began, it forced many to stay inside. As more and more people started turning towards content creation, the business started to become more crowded, competitive, and less authentic.

In terms of consumers' intention to buy products branded through influencers, participants were asked how likely they are to buy a product marketed through influencers. The results show that the majority of participants show a low intention in making a purchase in comparison to the pre-COVID data, where the majority of participants had a high intention to buy (Bruns, 2018).

Participants were also asked how appealing influencer marketing is to them. The majority found influencer marketing content to have no appeal compared to the pre-COVID data, where the majority felt that content was inviting to watch (Bruns, 2018).

Table 1. Differences between pre- and post-COVID.

This study	Likelihood to purchase a promoted product			Influencer marketing content is appealing to me		
	High	Neutral	Low	Yes	Maybe	No
	26.4%	29.2%	44.4%	19.5%	31.9%	48.6%
Bruns' Study (pre-COVID)	50%	23%	27%	69%	N/A	31%

These results show a decline in influencers' persuasiveness, with the likelihood to purchase dropping from 50% to 26.4%, and in self-reported overall interest in influencers, dropping appealing levels from 69% to 19.5%. As the data declines, it may suggest that the credibility and engagement may have peaked during COVID. However, as the pandemic settled down, the appeal of influencers may have decreased due to overexposure and skepticism of content.

The study also asked directly how the participants feel about the extent to which influencer marketing has increased since COVID on a scale of 1-5. The average score is 4.33, suggesting that influencer marketing has become more and more used/known since the pandemic. This may be because of the shift to digital platforms since the pandemic. This shift accelerated social media usage, thus increasing influencer sponsorship.

In addition, influencer marketing is perceived to be more effective compared to traditional marketing styles, with an average score of 3.69. With this, the younger participants rated it slightly higher (3.81 for those under 35 years old compared to 3.62 for those over 35 years old). This reflects that younger consumers may be more familiar with social media and may trust it a little more compared to older consumers, but still have some skepticism.

For the open-ended question "How have your interactions or opinions about influencers changed since COVID-19?" The responses had a range of different responses.

To start, there were several participants who marked their view of influencer marketing as not having changed/moved since COVID. This could mean that before, during, and after the pandemic, influencer marketing had a constant presence throughout their time on social media, and their views of it had not changed.

Many participants commented on a decline in trust, expressing concerns about how sponsorships have shifted influencers to have a fake and inauthentic personality for personal gain. One participant notes, "they are only doing it for the money". Another notes that they "feel there are fewer genuine people online than before COVID." These responses align with the survey data above, as post-COVID, there seems to be a reduction in influencer trust, leading to less purchasing of products sponsored by influencers.

Some other participants note that their views have changed based on the authenticity of influences. For example, one participant responded saying, "The space is too crowded, so credibility is questionable," while another built off that idea, stating, "There are a lot more influencers now, especially ones that don't do anything special, different from COVID when they had certain aspects making them special." Because of how crowded the space has become, influencers' uniqueness, individuality, and authenticity have decreased.

A smaller group of respondents noted their perception changing based on their age and maturity throughout the

pandemic: “As I got older, I began to trust influencers less.” Another participant noted their shift as they wrote, “Not being able to be outside promoted people to be online, which could have increased the number of influencers and ads I see online.” A possible explanation for this could be that as one matures, one's view of social media can change. Their awareness may evolve, making them less susceptible to influencer marketing.

Despite the decline and distrust in influencers, there were still some positive and beneficial thoughts on influencer marketing. One participant stated that they “have become more positive about influencers who create content”. One participant spoke out about looking at things from the influencer's side: “I understand that it’s some people's way of making a living while making content. If we still want to see the content we love seeing, we have to understand that monetary benefit for the influencer is involved.” These irregularities reveal that influencer marketing still has some positive views. Whether it is about content appreciation or about empathy for the influencers themselves, these are critical perspectives on this topic.

4.2 ANOVA Tests

In order to examine whether responses differed by age, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted. Age groups (under 35 vs. over 35), follower status (followers vs. non-followers), and platforms (TikTok vs. Instagram) served as independent variables. Each survey outcome served as a dependent variable. Dependent variables consisted of perceived effectiveness, trust, likelihood to purchase, and content appeal. The two relationships that stood out the most were those between followers of influencers—“followers”—and those who do not—“non-followers” (Table 2), and the difference between TikTok and Instagram users (Table 3).

In these ANOVA tests, the F - value evaluates the variation within the samples. If the variation between the sample means is high relative to the variation within each of the samples, then the F-value will be large. The p - value, or probability value, is the probability of obtaining test results at least as extreme as the result actually observed, under the assumption that the null hypothesis is correct. A p-value of less than 0.05 is seen as statistically significant.

Followers vs Non-followers

As shown in Table 2, the ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference between followers vs non-followers for trust, $F(1,70) = 9.004$, $p = 0.004$. This indicates that the trust levels were much higher for those who follow influencers (2.65) compared to those who did not (1.94). The differences are statistically significant. Although the average score of 2.65 is low, the gap between those who follow influencers vs those who do not is large.

Table 2. Differences between influencer followers and non-followers.

	Trust	Likelihood to buy	Content appeal	Perceived effectiveness after COVID
Followers	2.65	2.84	2.71	3.85
Non-Followers	1.94	1.88	1.94	3.18
F value	9.004	10.43	6.514	8.146
P-value	0.004	0.002	0.013	0.006

The ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference between followers vs non-followers for content appeal, $F(1,70) = 6.514$, $p = 0.013$. Those who follow influencers found the content more appealing (2.71) than those who do not (1.94). This is noteworthy, as those who follow influencers follow those with content they enjoy watching.

The ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference between followers vs non-followers for likelihood to buy, $F(1,70) = 10.43$, $p = 0.002$. Those who follow influencers have a higher likelihood of purchasing (2.84) than those who do not follow regularly (1.88). This could partially be because of the relationship stated previously.

The ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference between followers vs non-followers for perceived effectiveness after COVID, $F(1,70) = 8.146$, $p = 0.006$. Those who follow influencers perceived a larger increase in the effectiveness of influencer marketing after COVID (3.85) than those who do not follow influencers (3.18). While both are above the neutral point, influencer followers strongly believed that influencer marketing had become more impactful after COVID.

TikTok vs Instagram users

As shown in Table 3, the ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference between TikTok vs Instagram users for content appeal, $F(1,70) = 4.67$, $p = 0.04$. Influencer marketing tends to be more appealing to TikTok users (3.00) compared to Instagram users (2.35).

Table 3. Differences between TikTok and Instagram users

	Content appeal	Influence of credibility on a purchase	Perceived effectiveness after COVID
TikTok users	3.00	2.95	4.00
Instagram users	2.35	3.88	3.50
F value	4.67	7.71	4.03
P-value	0.04	0.01	0.05

The ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference between TikTok vs Instagram users for the influence of credibility on a purchase, $F(1,70) = 7.71$, $p = 0.01$. Instagram users believe that the credibility of an influencer impacts their purchase decisions (3.88) more

than TikTok users (2.95).

The ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference between TikTok vs Instagram users for perceived effectiveness after COVID, $F(1,70) = 4.03$, $p = 0.05$. Influencer marketing is perceived to be more effective for TikTok users (4.00) compared to Instagram users (3.50).

5. Discussion and Implications

With regards to followers and non-followers, the results of this study show that those who follow influencers have either made a higher bond with said influencer or developed a sense of trust to create such a gap. On the other hand, those who do not follow influencers find more skepticism within and have lower trust rates. Followers also tend to find content more appealing. However, the average score was a 2.71. This could be due to users enjoying the real and authentic content of an influencer. However, when met with sponsorships and brand marketing, the appeal of the influencer decreases. Those who do not follow influencers find influencer marketing content unappealing. Those who follow influencers tend to have a higher level of trust, and content tends to be more appealing to them, leading these users to have a higher chance of making purchases. Fittingly, those who do not follow influencers may feel less of a personal connection and less of a level of trust, and finding content to be less intriguing can make them not feel the need to purchase.

With regards to TikTok and Instagram users, those who watch most of their content on TikTok find influencer marketing more entertaining and fun to watch. This could be because of the layout of the app, being able to swipe through videos at each user's pace. To add on, the algorithm on TikTok is highly personalized, showing videos of each user's interests. This could make users find content on TikTok more appealing. In contrast, Instagram's format can feel more promotional, especially if a user follows multiple brands. Instagram users believe that in order to make a purchase from a product marketed by an influencer, they have to believe that said influencer is credible. TikTok users seem to also agree with this statement, just not as much. This could be due to the fact that TikTok creators often create quick and relatable connections through their short videos, while Instagram creators create a more professional image for themselves, making them less relatable. As a result, this may lead users on TikTok to feel trust and credibility of an influencer more quickly, without even realizing it, thus leading to their rating. Both platforms seem to have a higher average, meaning that both of these users perceive influencer marketing as an effective marketing strategy.

Overall, influencer marketing was perceived to be more effective after COVID-19, indicating that the pandemic quickened the shift to social media marketing. However, trust concerns increased, and fewer people find influencer marketing appealing, signifying that users have become more skeptical of what they believe online. These developments seem contradictory, giving brands quite a challenge.

In terms of consumer heterogeneity, no significant relationships appeared when looking at any results and comparing them by the different age groups or genders. This suggests that influencer marketing views are made up not through demographics, but through whether one follows influencers and platform usage.

However, significant differences are found between social media platforms. While TikTok users find influencer content more engaging and appealing and more effective in comparison to traditional marketing, Instagram users place

more importance on an influencer's credibility before making a purchase. Indeed, Lou et al. (2022) found that while Instagram scored highest on coolness, TikTok scored high on play/fun, suggesting that each platform offers a distinct blend of experiences, even when users follow the same influencer (Lou et al., 2022). These results suggest that TikTok influencers should emphasize authentic, relatable, and fun content and stay on top of their page, making sure to have a mix of day-to-day content with their sponsored content. These factors can strengthen the relationship between influencers and their audience. On the other hand, Instagram influencers should prioritize building credibility and being honest by revealing their honest and genuine opinions. This will build their credibility. They should also be more selective with the brands they work with, which increases the likelihood of followers purchasing the products.

For marketers, keeping the audience in mind is the most beneficial. Brands should target their markets and select the best way to reach them strategically by evaluating the platform they use. Selecting influencers whose audiences align with a product does the same (Lim and Zhang, 2022), especially when focusing on certain categories where influencer marketing thrives, such as beauty, fashion, or tech. Since issues of trust and reliability remain, marketers should be very picky about who they select to brand their products/services. Marketers should look out for qualities such as transparency and authenticity to address this problem (Kim and Kim, 2021). Features like these are significant, as they can help make consumers more likely to engage with a brand.

6. Conclusion and future research

Influencer marketing has played a significant role in marketing strategies, especially during the pandemic. Factors such as age and gender were not the factors of any significant variations. Analysis of survey data resulted in uncovering specifics in platform differences. TikTok users found influencer content to be more appealing and thought of it as an effective strategy. Instagram users placed a greater importance on the credibility of an influencer when thinking about making a purchase.

For future research, it would be interesting to further investigate the different types of content and how users interact with each of those on different platforms. It would also be interesting to investigate the difference between more casual followers and more dedicated followers. Since it has already been proven that those who follow influencers have more trust, it would be interesting to know if that factor makes a difference.

6.1 Limitations

This study contains several limitations that should be considered while interpreting its findings. First, the sample size only consisted of 72 respondents, all found through convenience sampling. This may limit the amount of representation within the data. Because of how the study relied on self-reported survey responses, it is subject to a certain amount of bias. The comparison of survey results from the different time periods introduces possible methodological differences as earlier research may have used different samples or different data collection. As a result, findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative of the general population

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