Influencer Marketing and Consumer Purchase Decisions: Evidence from Young Bulgarian Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing is one of the most widely used forms of digital marketing communication, however consumer trust in sponsored recommendations is increasingly questioned. The study examines the influence of influencer marketing on the consumer purchase decision, focusing on the factors that shape trust in influencers, the decision stages at which influence is strongest and the risks consumers perceive. A descriptive quantitative design was applied: an online questionnaire of 17 closed questions, distributed via Instagram and university mailing lists, was completed by a sample of 127 social media users, aged 18–24 and analysed with descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distributions). The results show near-universal daily use of Instagram, TikTok and YouTube and frequent interaction with influencer content. Although 81.9% of respondents have bought on an influencer's recommendation at least once, trust in such recommendations is predominantly neutral and no respondent reported high trust. Trust rests on honesty, credible information, personal experience with the product and expertise, whereas follower count carries little weight. Purchases are motivated mainly by the influencer's shared experience and discount codes and most respondents research products independently before buying. Influence is strongest at the information-search and decision stages and weakest after purchase. Respondents broadly agree that influencer marketing can be manipulative and over-commercialised and all see a need for improvement, above all less excessive advertising and more realistic presentation of products. The study concludes that influencer marketing exerts a real but conditional influence on purchase behaviour and that its long-term effectiveness depends on authenticity, transparency and ethical standards rather than on reach. The findings offer practical guidance for brands and influencers and add empirical evidence from an under-researched Eastern European market. The findings describe respondents' reported perceptions and purchasing experiences rather than causal relationships.

Keywords: influencer marketing, consumer purchase decision, transparency, social media, research study

JEL Classification: M31, M37, D12

INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly evolving digital environment, social networks have become some of the most influential communication channels between organisations and consumers. Alongside traditional marketing instruments, influencer marketing, which uses the reach and credibility of popular personalities and content creators to promote products, services and brands, has found ever wider application. Brown and Hayes (2008) describe it as a contemporary form of digital marketing communication in which organisations partner with publicly visible individuals on social media to promote their offerings, while Campbell and Farrell (2020) emphasise that the influencer's value lies in the combination of audience reach, content production and an established relationship of trust with followers. Because of this trust, influencer marketing exerts a substantial effect on consumer attitudes, preferences and purchase decisions. At the same time, its growth raises concerns about transparency, authenticity and the possibility of manipulative influence (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021; Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi, & Thrassou, 2021).

The theoretical foundation of the phenomenon lies in the two-step flow of communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and in the psychology of persuasion. Cialdini's (1984) principles of social proof, authority and liking explain why consumers are inclined to accept recommendations from people they perceive as competent. Influencers are usually classified by audience size into mega (over one million followers), macro (100,000 to one million), micro (1,000 to 100,000) and nano influencers (fewer than 1,000), with trust and engagement generally rising as audience size falls (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Compared with traditional advertising, influencer communication is interactive and two-way, relies on recommendation and personal experience rather than direct advertising messages, allows precise segmentation and yields immediate feedback, but it also implies only partial brand control over content and a dependence on platform algorithms (Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022). Taken together, these perspectives can be integrated into a single explanatory chain that guides the present study. The two-step flow positions the influencer as an opinion leader who relays and filters commercial messages for a personal audience. Cialdini's principles explain why the relayed message is accepted and the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990) specifies the attributes through which this acceptance operates, namely the perceived trust, expertise and attractiveness of the source. Source credibility, in turn, generates consumer trust in the influencer, which has been shown to be the proximate antecedent of purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In this chain trust is not one factor among many but the mechanism that converts exposure to influencer content into action and it can be weakened at any point by perceived manipulation, hidden advertising or inauthenticity. The framework therefore leads to three expectations: a) credibility attributes rather than audience size will drive trust; b) influencer impact will be concentrated at the stages where opinion leadership is most useful, that is, when consumers become aware of a need and search for information and c) perceived risks will limit influence. These expectations are used in the discussion to interpret the empirical findings.

A growing body of empirical work has examined what makes influencer marketing effective. De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) found that the number of followers raises perceived popularity but does not guarantee effectiveness and that the fit between influencer and product matters more. Lou and Yuan (2019) showed that message value and source credibility, in particular trustworthiness, expertise and perceived authenticity, increase trust in the influencer and thereby purchase intention, with trust acting as the central mediator. Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) demonstrated that perceived opinion leadership on Instagram, driven by originality, uniqueness and expertise, strengthens followers' engagement and behavioural intentions. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) reported that young female Instagram users regard non-traditional celebrities as more credible and more relatable than traditional ones, and Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020) attributed the advantage of influencers over celebrities to perceived similarity, wantedness and identification. Authenticity has emerged as a decisive condition: Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard (2020) show that influencers who maintain passionate and transparent authenticity sustain follower trust, whereas excessive commercialisation erodes it. Research on disclosure shows that explicit labelling of sponsored posts increases advertising recognition and can reduce persuasion, yet it is also valued by consumers as a sign of honesty (Boerman, 2020; Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Taken together, these studies indicate that trust, authenticity and transparency, rather than reach, determine whether influencer communication translates into purchase behaviour (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020).

Despite this progress, several gaps remain. First, the literature has concentrated on the positive drivers of effectiveness, while the risks consumers associate with influencer marketing, such as manipulation, misleading advertising, impulse buying, unrealistic lifestyle portrayals and promotion of products influencers do not actually use, have received comparatively limited attention. Second, little is known about the stage of the purchase decision process at which influencer communication exerts the strongest effect. Kotler and Keller (2016) model this process as need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour, and influencers may plausibly act at each stage, but empirical evidence on their relative weight across stages is scarce. Third, most studies originate from Western European, North American or East Asian markets, and evidence from smaller Eastern European markets such as Bulgaria is limited, even though Bulgarian brands increasingly rely on local creators (Iliev, 2025; Mirazchiyska, 2021). Previous studies have overlooked three things. They have mainly measured purchase intention rather than actual purchase, so that the link between stated trust and real buying behaviour remains under-documented. Previous studies have also treated the purchase decision as a single outcome rather than as a sequence of stages at which influence may differ and they have rarely asked consumers themselves what is wrong with influencer marketing and how it

should change. The Bulgarian context offers distinctive insights for addressing these omissions. Bulgaria combines very high social media penetration among young people with an influencer economy that is still young, dominated by local micro- and macro-influencers and only recently subject to industry self-regulation and disclosure practices, while local brands increasingly rely on creators as a primary channel to young consumers (Iliev, 2025; Mirazchiyska, 2021).

The research problem addressed here is therefore the insufficient clarity about the degree to which influencer marketing influences the consumer purchase decision, combined with the lack of research into the social, ethical and consumer risks associated with its growing influence. The novelty of the study lies in combining, within a single consumer survey, the drivers of trust in influencers, the actual purchase behaviour that follows recommendations, the stage-specific influence across the decision process, and the consumers' own assessment of the shortcomings of influencer marketing and of the directions in which it should improve.

The aim of the study is to examine the influence of influencer marketing on the consumer purchase decision and to outline concrete directions for improving its effectiveness. To reach this aim, the study: 1) establishes the extent of consumer interaction with influencer content; 2) identifies the factors that form trust in influencers; 3) assesses the degree of influence of influencer marketing on purchase behaviour and on the individual stages of the decision process; 4) establishes the main shortcomings of influencer marketing from the consumer perspective; and 5) explores consumer expectations about its future development and the improvements it requires. The study is descriptive in nature: it documents respondents' reported perceptions and purchasing experiences and does not test causal relationships.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and variables

The study follows a descriptive quantitative design. Its purpose is to describe the state, characteristics and influence of influencer marketing on the consumer purchase decision rather than to test causal relationships. The object of the research is influencer marketing, the subject is its influence on the consumer purchase decision. Seven theoretical constructs were operationalised into empirical indicators (Table 1). The conceptual model assumes that the characteristics of influencer marketing (type of influencer, platform, content and communication style) affect the effectiveness of marketing influence through trust, authenticity, transparency and engagement. These factors shape consumer attitudes and perceptions, which in turn influence the purchase decision. In parallel, the model recognises negative factors, such as manipulation, hidden advertising, inauthenticity, excessive commercialisation and misleading public image, that may reduce trust and effectiveness. The implicit research expectations are that a) trust rather than audience size drives the acceptance of influencer recommendations; b) influencer marketing exerts its strongest effect at the pre-purchase stages of the decision process; and c) consumers are aware of its risks and expect greater transparency and authenticity.

Table 1: Operationalisation of the research constructs

Theoretical construct	Empirical indicators	Questionnaire items
Interaction with influencers	Frequency of interaction; type of influencer followed; degree of trust	Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8
Characteristics of influencer marketing	Frequency of social media use; preferred platforms; exposure to influencer advertising; engagement with content	Q3, Q4, Q6
Factors for effectiveness	Trust; authenticity; transparency; content quality; engagement; public image; real product use; perceived sincerity	Q9
Reasons for influence	Authority; sympathy and emotional connection; positive public image; personal experience with product; discounts and promo codes; attractiveness of content; desire to imitate	Q13

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Theoretical construct	Empirical indicators	Questionnaire items
Consumer behaviour in the purchase decision	Purchase following a recommendation; degree of influence on product choice; additional research before purchase; influence on each decision stage	Q10, Q11, Q12, Q15
Shortcomings for the consumer	Impulse purchases; manipulated content; misleading advertising; purchases without research; pressure and unrealistic expectations	Q14
Future tendencies	Expected influence in the next five years; directions for improvement	Q16, Q17

Source: Author's elaboration.

Population, sample and data collection

The target population comprises users of social networks who interact with content created by influencers or are exposed to such marketing communication. Data were collected by written survey through an online questionnaire created in Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed via the social network Instagram and through university student e-mail lists. A non-probability, self-selection (volunteer) sampling model was applied: respondents took part on their own initiative after the link was circulated. The final sample consists of 127 respondents. Because of the distribution channels, the sample is dominated by young, digitally active consumers, which is precisely the core target audience of influencer marketing, but it also limits generalisation to the wider population. The survey captures the consumer perspective only; the views of brands, agencies and influencers are outside its scope. Two limitations of this sampling approach are acknowledged. First, self-selection introduces a risk of selection bias, since people who follow influencers or hold strong views about them were more likely to respond; the high share of respondents who follow influencers (Table 3) is consistent with such bias. Second, the composition of the sample, predominantly female, aged 18–24 and recruited partly through university lists, means that the results characterise young, digitally active Bulgarian consumers and should not be generalised to the wider consumer population without further research. Because of these two points, the study could be discribed as exploratory – a first look that identifies patterns and raises hypotheses, rather than a study that delivers definitive, population-wide conclusions.

Research instrument

The instrument is a structured questionnaire of 17 closed questions, developed on the basis of the conceptual model and the operationalised indicators. Question formats include multiple-response, dichotomous questions, five-point Likert-type scales, five-point rating scales and matrix questions combining several statements with a common Likert scale. The questionnaire is organised in six groups: 1) demographic characteristics and social media use (Q1–Q3); 2) consumer interaction with influencers (Q4–Q7); 3) key factors shaping trust in influencers (Q8–Q9); 4) influence on the purchase decision (Q10–Q13); 5) shortcomings of influencer marketing (Q14–Q15) and 6) general attitudes and future tendencies (Q16–Q17). Multiple-response items are reported as the share of respondents selecting each option, so that percentages for these items sum to more than 100.

Data analysis

Responses were systematised and analysed using descriptive statistics: frequency analysis, percentage distributions, graphical presentation in tables and charts, and comparative reading of response patterns across items. For matrix items, the dominant response categories are reported. The results are interpreted in relation to the research aim and tasks in order to draw conclusions about the degree of influence of influencer marketing on the purchase decision, the level of consumer trust, the perceived risks, the importance of transparency and authenticity, and the prospects for improvement. The findings consequently describe what respondents report about their perceptions and purchasing experiences and do not establish causal relationships between trust, credibility or authenticity and purchase behaviour. Statements about "influence" in the following sections should be read in this sense. Cross-tabulation by gender, age or frequency of following were not undertaken because the small and unbalanced sample would not support reliable inference within subgroups.

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RESULTS

Profile of the respondents and social media use

The sample is strongly skewed towards women (86.6%) and towards the 18–24 age group (74.8%), followed by respondents aged 25–34 (19.7%); only a small minority are older than 34 (Table 2). Social media use is almost universal and intensive: 97.6% of respondents use social networks several times a day. Instagram is used by 96.1% of the sample, TikTok by 74.8% and YouTube by 61.4%, while Facebook retains a presence among 40.2%; X, WhatsApp and Reddit are marginal. The predominance of visually oriented platforms confirms their role as the primary channels through which influencer content and marketing messages reach this audience and creates favourable conditions for exposure to influencer marketing.

Table 2: Profile of the respondents and social media use

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	110	86.6
	Male	17	13.4
Age	Under 18	2	1.6
	18–24	95	74.8
	25–34	25	19.7
	35–44	4	3.1
	45–54	1	0.8
Frequency of social media use	Several times a day	124	97.6
	Once a day	1	0.8
	Several times a month	2	1.6
Platforms used most often (multiple response)	Instagram	122	96.1
	TikTok	95	74.8
	YouTube	78	61.4
	Facebook	51	40.2
	X (Twitter)	8	6.3
	WhatsApp / Reddit	1 each	0.8 each

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

Interaction with influencers

Influencers are a tangible part of the respondents' digital routine (Table 3). More than half (59.0%) follow or rather follow influencers, 22.0% are neutral and only 18.9% rather do not or do not follow them. Interaction with influencer content is frequent: 37.8% interact several times a day and a further 18.9% once a day, so that 56.7% are in daily contact with such content. The most followed categories are fashion and beauty (63.0%), lifestyle and everyday life (61.4%), food and cooking (47.2%), travel (45.7%) and sport and fitness (42.5%), whereas education (24.4%), entrepreneurship (18.1%) and technology and gaming (8.7%) attract far less interest. The audience therefore uses social networks primarily for entertainment and lifestyle content, which is also the domain in which influencer marketing is known to be most effective because personal recommendation weighs heavily in everyday consumption choices.

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Table 3: Following of and interaction with influencers

Item	Category	%
Degree of following influencers (Q5)	Strongly follow	24.4
	Rather follow	34.6
	Neither follow nor not	22.0
	Rather do not follow	12.6
	Strongly do not follow	6.3
Frequency of interaction with influencer content (Q6)	Several times a day	37.8
	Once a day	18.9
	Several times a week	16.5
	Once a week	11.0
	Several times a month	15.7
Types of influencers followed (Q7, multiple response)	Fashion and beauty	63.0
	Lifestyle and everyday life	61.4
	Food and cooking	47.2
	Travel and tourism	45.7
	Sport and fitness	42.5
	Education and personal development	24.4
	Entrepreneurship and professional development	18.1
	Technology and gaming	8.7

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

Trust in influencer recommendations and its drivers

Despite high exposure, trust in influencer recommendations is moderate and cautious (Table 4). Half of the respondents (50.4%) describe their trust as neither high nor low, 23.6% as rather low and 11.8% as low; only 14.2% report rather high trust and not a single respondent reports high trust. Consumers are thus far from accepting recommendations uncritically. Asked to rate the influence of individual factors on their trust, respondents assigned predominantly high or rather high influence to honesty, useful and credible information, personal experience with the advertised products, expertise in a specific field and a realistic way of life; authenticity, transparency in advertising, good reputation and positive demeanour were also rated as important. By contrast, a large number of followers received mainly neutral ratings and a markedly higher share of negative ratings than any other factor. Audience size is therefore not perceived as a sufficient basis for trust; the quality and credibility of communication matter more than popularity.

Table 4: Trust in influencer recommendations and factors shaping trust

Item	Category / factor	Result
Degree of trust in influencer recommendations (Q8)	High	0.0%
	Rather high	14.2%
	Neither high nor low	50.4%
	Rather low	23.6%
	Low	11.8%

Item	Category / factor	Result
Influence of factors on trust in the influencer (Q9, five-point scale)	Honesty	Predominantly high
	Useful and credible information	Predominantly high / rather high
	Personal experience with the products	Predominantly high / rather high
	Expertise in a specific field	Predominantly high / rather high
	Realistic way of life	Predominantly high / rather high
	Authenticity	Rather high / high
	Transparency in advertising	High / rather high
	Good reputation	High / rather high
	Positive demeanour	High / rather high
	Large number of followers	Predominantly neutral; highest share of low ratings

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

These findings closely mirror the mediating role of trust identified by Lou and Yuan (2019) and the weak link between follower count and effectiveness reported by De Veirman et al. (2017). They also echo Audrezet et al. (2020), who show that followers reward passionate and transparent authenticity. For practitioners, the result implies that selection of influencers should be governed by credibility, expertise and product fit rather than reach, and that brands working with large accounts gain little trust from scale alone.

Influence on purchase behaviour and on the decision process

Influencer marketing clearly converts interest into action: 81.9% of respondents have bought a product or service on an influencer's recommendation at least once, 48.8% several times and 3.9% many times, while 18.1% never have (Table 5). Yet consumers do not perceive influencers as decisive. On a five-point scale, the modal rating of influencer impact on product choice is 2 (39.4%), followed by 3 (34.6%); 15.7% report no influence at all and only 10.2% rate it 4 or 5. Moreover, 81.9% carry out additional research to a high (44.1%) or rather high (37.8%) degree before buying a product advertised by an influencer, and only 7.1% do little or no research. Influencers thus act mainly as a source of initial information and inspiration, with the final decision supported by independent verification and evaluation of alternatives. The apparent contradiction between high purchase incidence and low perceived influence is informative: consumers may underestimate persuasive effects that operate through trust and social proof, or they may regard a recommendation as one input among many in a largely rational process.

Table 5: Influence of influencer marketing on purchase behaviour

Item	Category	%
Purchase on an influencer's recommendation (Q10)	Never	18.1
	Once	29.1
	Several times	48.8
	Many times	3.9
Degree of influence on product choice, 1 = none, 5 = very strong (Q11)	1	15.7
	2	39.4
	3	34.6
	4	9.4
	5	0.8

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Item	Category	%
Additional research before buying an advertised product (Q12)	High	44.1
	Rather high	37.8
	Neither high nor low	11.0
	Rather low	5.5
	Low	1.6

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

The motives for buying a recommended product confirm the rational and benefit-oriented character of these decisions (Table 6). The strongest motivator is the positive personal experience shared by the influencer (55.9%), followed closely by discounts and promotional codes (52.0%) and trust in the influencer (43.3%). Positive public image (22.0%), authority (15.0%), visually attractive content (13.4%) and sympathy or emotional connection (11.0%) are far less frequently cited, and the desire to imitate the influencer is mentioned by only 3.1%. Practical value and real consumer experience, rather than aspiration or emotional attachment, drive purchases in this sample, although the prominence of trust shows that authentic relationships with the audience remain a key condition for effectiveness.

Table 6: Factors motivating the purchase of a product recommended by an influencer (Q13, multiple response)

Motivating factor	n	%
Positive personal experience shared by the influencer	71	55.9
Discounts and promotional codes	66	52.0
Trust in the influencer	55	43.3
Positive public image of the influencer	28	22.0
Authority of the influencer	19	15.0
Visually attractive content	17	13.4
Sympathy and emotional connection	14	11.0
Desire to imitate the influencer	4	3.1

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

Across the stages of the purchase decision process, the dominant assessment is a rather high degree of influence, indicating a moderate but perceptible effect (Table 7). Influence is strongest at the information-search and purchase-decision stages, where the largest shares of respondents report high or rather high influence; it is also substantial at need recognition, consistent with the capacity of influencer content to draw attention to products and create interest. At the evaluation of alternatives stage the share of neutral ratings rises, and influence is weakest in post-purchase behaviour, where neutral and low ratings prevail. The role of influencers is thus concentrated before and during the decision rather than after it. This pattern supports the theoretical expectation derived from Kotler and Keller (2016) and extends prior work by locating influencer impact at specific points of the process, which has practical implications: influencer campaigns are best designed to inform and to trigger decisions, whereas post-purchase loyalty requires other instruments. This pattern has a theoretical explanation. In the two-step flow, the opinion leader's role is to make the audience aware of something and to make information available. Influencers perform exactly these functions, which is why its impact is strongest at need recognition and information search. Independent search does not displace the influencer but builds on the recommendation – the high share of respondents who research products before buying (81.9%) suggests a "trust but verify" sequence in which the influencer initiates consideration and independent sources confirm it. At the purchase decision stage influence rises again because the influencer supplies tangible decision aids, discount

codes and demonstrations of use, which reduce perceived risk at the moment of choice. After purchase the influencer adds no new information, so influence reduces.

Table 7: Perceived influence of influencer marketing on the stages of the purchase decision process (Q15)

Stage of the decision process	Dominant assessment	Relative strength
Need recognition	Rather high / high	Substantial
Information search	High / rather high	Strongest
Evaluation of alternatives	Rather high, with a higher share of neutral ratings	Moderate
Purchase decision	High / rather high	Strongest
Post-purchase behaviour	Neutral, with a higher share of low ratings	Weakest

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

Perceived shortcomings and expectations for improvement

Respondents show a pronounced critical awareness of the downsides of influencer marketing (Table 8). For every statement on potential negative effects, agreement or rather agreement is the majority response. Agreement is strongest with the statement that influencer marketing can be manipulative, followed by the statements that it creates misleading advertising, that many influencers build a misleading or false public image and that excessive advertising reduces trust in the influencer. Respondents also largely agree that it provokes impulse purchases, that influencers advertise products they do not actually use, and that it forms unrealistic expectations and social pressure. This level of agreement, among an audience that is heavily exposed to and frequently purchases from influencer content, highlights the fragility of the trust relationship on which the instrument depends and corroborates concerns raised in the literature about the commercialisation of social media stars (Hudders et al., 2021).

Table 8: Agreement with statements on negative aspects of influencer marketing (Q14)

Statement	Dominant response	Second most frequent response
Influencer marketing can be manipulative	Agree (strongest agreement of all items)	Rather agree
Influencer marketing creates misleading advertising	Agree	Rather agree
Many influencers build a misleading or false public image	Agree	Rather agree
Excessive advertising reduces trust in the influencer	Agree	Rather agree
Influencer marketing provokes impulse purchases	Agree / rather agree	Neither agree nor disagree
Influencers advertise products they do not actually use	Agree / rather agree	Neither agree nor disagree
Influencer marketing forms unrealistic expectations and social pressure	Agree / rather agree	Neither agree nor disagree

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

Looking ahead, respondents expect influencer marketing to remain a stable but not dominant factor in their decisions (Table 9). Over the next five years, 44.9% expect its influence on their purchases to be neither high nor low, 24.4% expect high or rather high influence and 30.7% expect low or rather low influence. Expectations of improvement are unanimous: not one respondent selected the option that no substantial changes are needed. The most frequent demands are for less excessive advertising by influencers (60.6%) and more realistic

presentation of products and services (59.1%), followed by stricter regulation and control (49.6%), better selection of influencers by brands (44.9%), clearer labelling of paid content (43.3%), greater authenticity (43.3%) and more ethical content (32.3%).

Table 9: Expected future influence and proposed improvements

Item	Category	%
Expected influence on purchase decisions in the next five years (Q16)	High	4.7
	Rather high	19.7
	Neither high nor low	44.9
	Rather low	18.1
	Low	12.6
What should be improved in influencer marketing (Q17, multiple response)	Less excessive advertising by influencers	60.6
	More realistic presentation of products and services	59.1
	Stricter regulation and control	49.6
	Better selection of influencers by brands	44.9
	Clearer labelling of paid content	43.3
	Greater authenticity of influencers	43.3
	More ethical content	32.3
	No substantial changes needed	0.0

Source: Author's survey (n = 127).

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings answer the research problem in a nuanced way. Influencer marketing occupies a stable place in the digital environment of young Bulgarian consumers and demonstrably affects their purchase decisions, as the high incidence of recommendation-driven purchases shows. Its effectiveness, however, is conditional. Consumers approach recommendations with reserve, verify them independently and value honesty, credible information, real product experience and expertise far above audience size. This supports the first research expectation and aligns with the credibility-based models of Lou and Yuan (2019), the influencer–product fit argument of De Veirman et al. (2017) and the authenticity perspective of Audrezet et al. (2020). The second expectation is also supported: influence concentrates at information search and purchase decision, which positions influencers as information intermediaries and decision triggers in the sense of the two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) rather than as determinants of loyalty. Read through the integrated framework set out in the introduction, the pattern is coherent: credibility attributes (honesty, expertise, real experience) rather than audience size generate the trust that opinion leadership requires, and influence peaks precisely where an opinion leader is most useful. Given the descriptive design and the self-selected sample, however, these interpretations are offered as explanations consistent with the data rather than as tested causal claims.

The third expectation is confirmed emphatically. Respondents are aware of manipulation, misleading advertising, inauthentic endorsements, over-commercialisation and unrealistic lifestyle portrayals, and they unanimously call for improvement. Eight interrelated problems emerge from the data: insufficient trust in recommendations; perception of influencer marketing as a potentially manipulative instrument; misleading advertising messages; excessive commercialisation and over-advertising; doubts about the authenticity of recommendations; unclear labelling of paid content; the formation of unrealistic expectations about products and lifestyles; and insufficient transparency and ethics in the communication between influencers, brands and

consumers. The simultaneous presence of high purchase incidence and high critical awareness suggests that the relationship between consumers and influencers is pragmatic rather than deferential: recommendations are used, but not trusted blindly, and discounts and promo codes are nearly as persuasive as personal experience.

The most theoretically interesting finding is the coexistence of high purchase incidence (81.9% have bought at least once) with neutral or low trust (no respondent reports high trust). It raises the question of whether influencer marketing can stimulate purchase behaviour even in the absence of strong consumer trust. The data suggest that it can, but under specific conditions. First, trust is not a prerequisite when the risk of the purchase is low: the categories most followed are fashion, beauty, food and lifestyle, where products are inexpensive and easily evaluated, so that a moderately trusted cue is sufficient to prompt a trial. Second, tangible incentives substitute for trust: discount codes are almost as strong a motive as the influencer's shared experience and they lower the financial risk of acting on a recommendation one does not fully believe. Third, social proof operates partly independently of stated trust: in Cialdini's terms, seeing a product used and endorsed creates a behavioural pull that respondents may act on while remaining sceptical when asked directly. Fourth, the purchase is not made on trust in the influencer alone but on trust constructed through independent verification; the influencer triggers the search and other sources complete it, which is exactly the division of labour the two-step flow describes. The limits of this mechanism are equally visible: repeated purchasing is rare (3.9% many times), post-purchase influence is weakest and respondents expect influencer marketing to matter less, not more, in the coming years. Moderate trust thus does not prevent a first purchase, but it appears to cap the conversion of trial into loyalty. Influencer marketing without trust buys transactions, whereas influencer marketing with trust builds relationships, a distinction that future research should test directly with measures of repeat purchase and brand attachment.

Finally, the Bulgarian evidence contributes in two ways. It shows that the primacy of credibility over reach and the demand for transparency hold in a young and rapidly maturing influencer market, which indicates that these patterns are not artefacts of mature, heavily regulated advertising environments. And the unusually strong critical awareness of respondents, combined with their unanimous call for stricter rules, clearer labelling and better selection of influencers, points to an unmet demand for regulation and professional standards that is likely to characterise other Central and Eastern European markets at a similar stage of development.

Several practical directions follow. First, brands and influencers should promote authenticity and real consumer experience, favouring long-term partnerships in which the influencer demonstrably uses the product, and selecting influencers on credibility, expertise and fit rather than follower count. Second, the volume of sponsored content should be limited, since over-advertising is the most frequently cited problem and directly erodes trust. Third, paid content should be clearly and consistently labelled; the disclosure literature shows that transparency, although it increases advertising recognition, is read by consumers as honesty and supports long-term credibility (Boerman, 2020; Evans et al., 2017). Fourth, products, services and lifestyles should be presented realistically to avoid the gap between expectation and experience that undermines repeat purchase. Fifth, industry actors and regulators should develop and apply ethical standards for influencer communication, a demand voiced by half of the respondents in the form of stricter regulation and control.

The study has limitations that qualify these conclusions. The self-selected sample is small, predominantly female and aged 18–24, so the results characterise young, digitally active consumers rather than the general population. Self-reported attitudes may be affected by social desirability. The descriptive design does not test causal relationships, and only the consumer perspective is captured. The dynamic nature of social media also means that attitudes may shift over time. Future research should use probability samples across age groups, apply inferential and multivariate techniques to test the mediating role of trust and the stage-specific effects identified here, incorporate the perspectives of brands and influencers, and examine emerging formats such as virtual and AI-generated influencers, whose implications for trust and authenticity are still unclear. In particular, the descriptive and self-reported nature of the data means that the relationships between trust, credibility, authenticity and purchase described above are associations in respondents' accounts, not demonstrated causal effects; cross-tabulation and association tests on a larger and more balanced sample are needed to establish whether, and for whom, these relationships hold.

CONCLUSION

The study examines the influence of influencer marketing on the consumer purchase decision and outlines directions for improving its effectiveness. The findings show that influencer marketing is firmly embedded in the everyday digital life of young consumers and that it exerts a real influence on purchase behaviour, since the great majority of respondents have bought products or services on an influencer's recommendation. This influence is nevertheless moderate and conditional rather than decisive: trust in recommendations is neutral, consumers verify information before buying and influencers act above all as a source of information and inspiration whose impact concentrates at the information-search and purchase-decision stages and fades after purchase. Trust is built on honesty, credible and useful information, personal experience with the product, expertise and a realistic way of life, whereas audience size carries little weight and purchases are motivated mainly by shared experience and tangible benefits such as discounts. At the same time, consumers hold a clearly critical view of manipulation, misleading advertising, inauthentic endorsements, over-commercialisation and unrealistic lifestyle portrayals and they expect improvement, above all less excessive advertising, more realistic product presentation, clearer labelling of paid content, better selection of influencers and higher ethical standards. The study makes three distinct contributions. Theoretically, the study moves away from the image of the influencer as someone who simply talks and the consumer who simply listens. Instead it proposes a model in which trust sits at the centre, with credibility, the stages of the purchase decision and perceived risks pulling in different directions at the same time. This is the only way to explain what the data show: respondents routinely act on recommendations while remaining openly sceptical of them. Methodologically, it provides a validated research instrument that measures all four dimensions in a single survey, allowing future studies to replicate and extend the findings across markets and age groups. Empirically, it supplies evidence from Bulgaria, an Eastern European market that has been largely absent from the influencer marketing literature. The long-term effectiveness of influencer marketing will be decided not by audience size but by the ability to build and preserve trust through authenticity, transparent labelling of paid content, realistic presentation of products and responsible communication. Because the study is descriptive and based on a self-selected sample of young consumers, its findings describe reported perceptions and experiences rather than causal effects, and the central insight that purchases occur even where trust is only moderate should be treated as a hypothesis for further testing rather than as an established relationship.

Ethical Considerations

The study was based on an anonymous and voluntary online questionnaire completed by adult users of social networks. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research before taking part, no personal, sensitive or identifying data were collected and responses were used only in aggregated form for academic purposes.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The survey data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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