



From Persuasion to Purchase: Gen Z Engagement with Beauty Influencer Content on TikTok and Instagram

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Abstract: This thesis explores how beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram shape the consumer behavior of Generation Z women, with particular attention to their decision-making process, perceptions of credibility and experiences of persuasion. As social media platforms increasingly function as key platforms for marketing, especially in a visually driven sector like beauty, understanding how influencer content impacts users' purchasing journeys has become more important than ever. The theoretical background for the study consists of Buying Behavior, the Social Customer Journey, Content Marketing, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Source Credibility and the AIDA model, which all collectively support an in-depth understanding of how internal motivations, platform-specific dynamics, content strategies, and perceived authenticity influence consumer decisions from initial awareness to post-purchase evaluation. The empirical material is based on nine semi-structured interviews with Finnish Gen Z women aged 25–28, who actively engage with beauty content on TikTok and/or Instagram. A qualitative thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns in participants' experiences regarding their social media use, engagement with beauty influencer content, and beauty-related purchase behavior. The analysis is structured around three central research questions focusing on 1) the role of beauty influencer content across the purchasing journey, 2) the persuasive elements that make content effective in this target group, and 3) how credibility and authenticity of beauty influencers are perceived and evaluated. Findings reveal that beauty influencer content serves as a powerful source of inspiration and product discovery, especially on TikTok, which participants often associate with impulse-driven yet relatable content. Instagram, in contrast, was seen as more curated and less influential in driving spontaneous purchases. Persuasive features such as product reviews, visual demonstrations, and narrative authenticity played a central role in building trust and engagement. Participants also demonstrated critical awareness of influencer motives, sponsorship transparency, and issues of overconsumption, indicating a shift toward more socially reflective and sustainable beauty consumerism. This study can give insight to digital marketing and consumer studies by offering a small, but rich data of how these nine Gen Z women engage with influencer content not only as consumers but as socially embedded, reflective individuals. Practical implications suggest that marketers aiming to reach Gen Z audience should prioritize authenticity, trust-building and platform-specific content strategies. The findings in this thesis also raises ethical considerations around beauty standards and the normalization of excessive consumption in influencer culture.	
Key words: Beauty Influencer Marketing, Gen Z, Instagram, TikTok, Persuasion	

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Sammandrag: Denna avhandling undersöker hur skönhetsinfluencerinnehåll på TikTok och Instagram påverkar konsumtionsbeteendet hos kvinnor i Generation Z, med särskilt focus på beslutsprocess, uppfattningar om trovärdighet och erfarenheter av övertalning. I takt med att sociala medier blir allt viktigare kanaler för marknadsföring, särskilt inom en visuell bransch som skönhet, har det blivit viktigare än någonsin att förstå hur influencerinnehåll påverkar användares köpresa. Den teoretiska grunden för studien består av teorier om köpbeteende, den sociala kundresan, innehållsmarknadsföring, Modellen för sannolikhet till elaborering, d.v.s Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), källtrovärdighet samt AIDA-modellen. Tillsammans bidrar dessa till en djupare förståelse för hur interna drivkrafter, plattformsspecifika strukturer, innehållsstrategier och upplevd autenticitet påverkar konsumentens väg från första medvetenhet till efterköpsutvärdering. Det empiriska materialet bygger på nio semistrukturerade intervjuer med finländska kvinnor i Generation Z, i åldern 25–28, som regelbundet engagerar sig i skönhetsinnehåll på TikTok och/eller Instagram. En kvalitativ tematisk analys har använts för att identifiera mönster i deltagarnas erfarenheter av sociala medier, deras engagemang i influencerinnehåll och deras konsumtionsbeteende kopplat till skönhet. Analysen utgår från tre centrala forskningsfrågor som fokuserar på: 1) vilken roll skönhetsinfluencerinnehåll spelar längs köpresan, 2) vilka övertalande element som uppfattas som effektiva för denna målgrupp, samt 3) hur trovärdighet och autenticitet hos influencers uppfattas och bedöms. Resultaten visar att skönhetsinfluencerinnehåll fungerar som en stark källa till inspiration och produktupptäck, särskilt på TikTok, som deltagarna ofta förknippade med impulsdrivet i spontana köpbeslut. Övertalande inslag som produktrecensioner, visuella demonstrationer och berättande med personlig ton spelade en viktig roll för att bygga förtroende och engagemang. Deltagarna visade även prov på en kritisk medvetenhet kring influencerintentioner, transparens vid sponsring samt problematik kring överkonsumtion, något som tyder på en förskjutning mot ett mer reflekterat och hållbart skönhetskonsumtionsbeteende. Studien ger ett bidrag till forskning inom digital marknadsföring och konsumentbeteende genom att erbjuda ett litet men rikt material kring hur dessa nio kvinnor i Generation Z engagerar sig i influencerinnehåll, inte bara som konsumenter, utan som socialt medvetna och reflekterande individer. De praktiska implikationerna pekar på att marknadsförare som vill nå denna målgrupp bör prioritera autenticitet, förtroendeskapande och innehållsanpassning utifrån plattform. Studien väcker även etiska frågor kring skönhetsideal och normalisering av överkonsumtion inom influencerkulturen.	
Nyckelord: Skönhetsinfluencer-marknadsföring, Gen Z, Instagram, TikTok, övertalning	

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Problem discussion.....	2
1.2	Aim of the study.....	6
1.3	Delimitations of the study	7
1.4	Structure of the study	7
2	Theoretical Background	9
2.1	Buying behaviour.....	9
2.2	Social customer journey.....	11
2.3	Content marketing.....	12
2.4	Persuasive effects.....	15
2.5	Source credibility theory.....	16
2.6	AIDA model	18
2.7	Summary of theories.....	19
3	Methodology.....	23
3.1	Choice of Approach and Method	23
3.2	Data Collection Method	24
3.3	Sample	25
3.4	Research Instrument	26
3.5	Analysis method.....	26
3.6	Practical Implementation of the Study.....	27
3.7	Research Ethics and Data Management.....	28
3.8	Ethical considerations	28
4	Empirical findings	29
4.1	The impact of Beauty Influencer Content on the Consumer Journey (RQ1) ..	29
4.1.1	TikTok as the Primary Discovery and Search Platform	30
4.1.2	Repetition, Social Proof and Platform Influence	32
4.1.3	In-store Impulse Buying and Cross-channel activation.....	33
4.1.4	Broader influence of Beauty Influencer Content	35
4.2	Persuasive Elements of Beauty Influencer Content (RQ2)	37
4.2.1	Content format Preferences	38
4.2.2	Natural & Low-production Style	39
4.2.3	Authentic Tone & Balanced Reviews.....	40
4.2.4	Product use & Demonstration	40
4.3	Evaluating Source Credibility and Authenticity (RQ3)	41
4.3.1	Transparency in Sponsorships	42

4.3.2	Familiarity, Trust & Consistency	42
4.3.3	Platform Differences: TikTok vs. Instagram	43
4.4	Summary of the Key Findings	45
5	Discussion and analysis	47
5.1	Beauty Influencer Content and the Consumer Journey (RQ1)	47
5.2	Content Features and Persuasive Elements (RQ2)	49
5.3	Credibility and Authenticity in Beauty Influencer Content (RQ3).....	51
5.4	Conclusions.....	54
5.5	Reliability.....	56
6	Final remarks.....	58
6.1	Opportunities for future research.....	59
	REFERENCES	63

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview Guide	60
Appendix 2 Log of AI Usage During Thesis Process	62

TABLES

Table 1 RQ1 Themes	30
Table 2 RQ2 Themes	37
Table 3 RQ3 Themes	41

FIGURES

Figure 1 Thesis Structure	8
Figure 2 Decision Making Process	10
Figure 3 Social Customer Journey	11
Figure 4 Content Marketing	13
Figure 5 Value in Content Marketing.....	14
Figure 6 Elaboration Likelihood Model	16
Figure 7 Source Credibility Theory.....	17
Figure 8 AIDA model.....	18
Figure 9 Summary of Theories	20
Figure 10 Theories and Research Questions	20

1 INTRODUCTION

Before the rise of social media and influencers, consumers relied on traditional media, what they saw and heard on prints, television, and on the radio for product recommendations. Marketing strategies often employed celebrity endorsements, based on the logic that consumers would be more easily persuaded by someone they admired. The logic dates back decades, with iconic campaigns such as Coca-Cola and Santa Claus in 1932. (Aspire, 2024) Today, marketing is no longer only focused on transactions from the consumer to the firm, since brands are rather building relations with their consumers and other stakeholders according to Nakara et al. (2012). Social media has changed the way brands communicate with their consumers, since communication between consumers and brands is no longer a monologue, but rather a two-way communication. This way, the core for all marketing activities and the focus stays on the customer, making the consumer more involved than ever. (Nakara et al., 2012)

Social media refers to digital platforms where users generate, share, and interact with various forms of content, including images, videos, and text-based communication. It's not only a source of entertainment and information, but also a powerful tool for influence and persuasion. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Nurul et al. (2020), businesses can now reach their target audiences more easily and cost-efficiently than through face-to-face communication. This has amplified the role of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which refers to online reviews, opinions or recommendations shared via text, images or videos, (Akbari et al., 2022).

Now, in the digital era, brands rely on influencer marketing among other marketing practices. Harrigan et al. (2021) writes that social media influencers are people who have managed to gather a following on their own social media pages and influence their followers through the content they post. According to IAB Finland (2023) brands used 52.5 million euros on influencer marketing in Finland during 2022 and the worldwide amount used on influencer marketing was 19.8. billion euros (Denchena, 2023).

According to the Finnish Competition and Consumer protection authorities (Kilpailu-ja kuluttajavirasto) influencer marketing is defined as a collaboration between a company and the influencer, where the influencer receives financial compensation. The purpose of influencer marketing is to create awareness for the company among the followers that the influencer has already gathered. The collaboration is often published on the influencers' own channel to promote the sale of the company's products. Influencer

marketing has become significantly more common in recent years and is used on almost all social media channels. (Campbell & Farrel, 2020).

Platforms like TikTok and Instagram differ in how they support influencer communication. TikTok's algorithm offers high discoverability, while Instagram's visual branding tools support more curated aesthetical posts. In recent years, TikTok and Instagram have both claimed a spot as the two most influential social media platforms, each attracting millions of monthly users while shaping the digital marketing landscape. While both platforms focus on content sharing and interaction, the said platforms differ in user engagement, functionality, and even content creation strategies. (Richard, 2025)

Both apps are mobile first -applications, but the significant difference between TikTok and Instagram is TikTok's innovative algorithm as well as the content and audience of the two platforms. (Chu et al., 2022). TikTok is mainly a video-sharing platform while Instagram is mainly a photo-sharing platform according to Bishqemi & Crowley (2022). The engagement rates reported from the TikTok app can be as high as 18 %, which is significantly higher than Instagram, with only 3.86 % engagement rate (Cortés, 2022). According to Haenlein et al. (2020), a fundamental part of TikTok as a platform is its' authenticity, where the content is more authentic, relaxed and relatable compared to Instagram.

These platform-specific features, combined with the perceived authenticity, trustworthiness and persuasive style of beauty influencer content, help explain why influencer content is a growing driver in consumer behavior. Authenticity (Lee & Eastin, 2021) refers to the perceived realness or sincerity of influencer content, while trustworthiness according to Ding (2024) relates to how honest, consistent and unbiased an influencer is perceived to be. Persuasive content describes influencer communication that might shape attitudes and behaviors (Liu & Zheng, 2024).

1.1 Problem discussion

According to the Finnish Safety and Chemicals Agency Tukes, a cosmetic product is a substance or mixture intended to only be in contact with the external parts of the human body, such as skin, nails, or hair. The cosmetics chosen for this thesis are makeup and skin care products, to narrow down the study.

According to Liu (2023) promoting cosmetics on the TikTok app, mostly through beauty influencers, has a significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions. This theory is

backed by the study made by Voramontri & Klieb (2019), stating that consumers use social media as an important source of information in purchase decision-making and rely on peer recommendations on social media for trustworthy information. The study *“Influence of TikTok video advertisements on generations Z’s behavior and purchase intention”* written by Etrata et al. (2022) enhances the argument, since this study as well got the conclusions that TikTok videos does have impact on the purchase intention. The study focused on three advertisement dimensions on TikTok: emotional, entertainment, and informative content. The results from the study showed that all three dimensions have a positive influence on the respondent’s buying behavior but only the emotional dimension has an influence on the purchase intention. A study by Wdyanto & Agusti (2020) called *“Beauty influencer in the digital age: How does it influence purchase intention of generation Z?”* examines the expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, reputation, and persuasive capabilities of beauty influencers and how these dimensions influence the purchase intention of a particular beauty brand. The study was conducted as quantitative research through an electronic questionnaire that got 154 answers from women born between 1994 and 2001 that live in the capital of Indonesia. The outcome of the study was that it is valuable for brands to utilize influencers on TikTok and especially the attractiveness and persuasive capabilities dimensions played a big role in purchase intention.

In the study made by Kemec & Yuksel (2021) the findings showed that influencer credibility had a significantly positive effect on consumers purchase intentions and brand trust on Instagram. Similar results were gotten from a study made by Tamara et al. (2021) where they found out that influencers on Instagram have a positive influence on purchase intention. The study noted that promotions on Instagram done by influencers that included photos and videos have a positive impact also on the brands image. According to the quantitative study made by Zia et al. (2021) their conclusion, like the other studies, was that social media influencers on Instagram do not have a significant impact on purchase intention of cosmetic products, especially when the influencer is seen to have credibility and trustworthiness. The study found that the followers of the influencer are the most affected by influencer marketing in comparison to Instagram users who see the content as an ad.

TikTok has been transformed into an online beauty heaven, where makeup is fun and all about entertainment. This is illustrated by the hashtag #BeautyTok, dedicated for all things beauty, that brings together a community where imperfections, like acne, is

embraced and where the makeup community offers diverse beauty content. The hashtag #BeautyTok is used to discover new beauty products and trends, to connect with and learn from beauty experts and content creators, and to express creativity. #BeautyTok has become a significant part of the beauty industry, influencing purchasing decisions and shaping new trends. The #BeautyTok community on the TikTok platform is a way for brands to connect with an audience who already loves beauty and cosmetics. (TikTok, 2021) This way, the beauty-loving audience becomes a part of the brand through participating in conversations. There has not been a similar beauty community building on Instagram, which gives an advantage for influencers who post their content on TikTok in influencing consumers purchase intentions.

According to TikTok (2024), their social platform is shaping social media marketing through product discovery. In comparison to other social media platforms, TikTok is 1.7 times more likely to be the source for product discovery, users are 1.4 times more likely to research the product on the TikTok app and 1.4 times more likely to buy the product they've seen on the app. (TikTok, 2022)

Adweek's customer behavior survey done in 2021 demonstrated that 49 % of the TikTok app users have purchased a product they've seen on TikTok as an advertisement, reviewed or presented by another TikTok user (World Finance, 2022). TikTok's Discovery tool has become a search engine for Gen Z, and according to various articles, such as Forbes (Koetsier, 2024), Gen Z prefers to search for information on TikTok more than on for example, Google. The phrase "TikTok made me buy it" has become popular in recent years after Discovery Tools risen popularity. Gen Z uses the search engine for honest product reviews, how-to guides and local recommendations, for example for restaurants.

In conclusion, the studies presented all support the claim that beauty content on TikTok and Instagram have an influence on consumers purchasing decisions in cosmetic products, the question is how consumers feel that the influence differs on said platforms.

It is significant for brands and marketing professionals to know which channel they should utilize in their influencer marketing campaigns. Even though there is data about the comparison between Instagram and TikTok, how the impact of beauty content made by influencers differs on the channels and its translation to actual purchases is researched less. To examine this theme and get a broader understanding about the influence TikTok and Instagram influencer beauty content has on the buying behavior

regarding cosmetics and beauty products the study aims to answer these following research questions:

1. *How do Gen Z women describe the impact of TikTok and Instagram beauty influencer content in different stages of their purchasing journey?*
2. *What persuasive elements do Gen Z women associate with the effectiveness of beauty influencer content on TikTok versus Instagram?*
3. *How do Gen Z women evaluate source credibility and authenticity in influencer beauty content on TikTok and Instagram?*

With these three research questions, the study aims to explore how Gen Z women describe the impact and their experiences on the influence of beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram and how such content shapes their behavior throughout the decision-making process. The focus of the thesis is placed on understanding the emotions, experiences, feelings and perceptions that shape consumer behavior, particularly in relation to how persuasive strategies and perceptions of authenticity guide purchase decisions. The three research questions were selected to investigate how Gen Z women engage with beauty content on TikTok and Instagram, and how various aspects of the content contribute to shaping their decision-making processes.

The first research question “*How do Gen Z women describe the impact of TikTok and Instagram beauty influencer content in different stages of their purchasing journey?*”, seeks to uncover how beauty content on these platforms influences consumers from the moment of initial inspiration to the final purchase decision. Rather than directly comparing the platforms, this question allows for an exploration of how beauty influencer content aligns with the customer journey, from discovery to purchasing, and how users engage differently with the two platforms during these phases.

The second research question, “*What persuasive elements do Gen Z women associate with the effectiveness of beauty influencer content on TikTok versus Instagram?*”, aims to identify the key features that Gen Z consumers find compelling in influencer content. This includes exploring the role of content format, tone, relatability, interactivity, and visual presentation. The question encourages insight into how specific persuasive elements, such as storytelling, product demonstrations, trends, or user comments enhance the effectiveness of beauty content on one platform compared to the other.

The third research question, “*How do Gen Z women evaluate source credibility and authenticity in influencer beauty content on TikTok and Instagram?*”, addresses how consumers interpret trustworthiness and authenticity in influencer marketing, especially in the beauty field. This question aims to understand how Gen Z women react and feel when whether a beauty influencer is perceived as sincere or promotional, and how those evaluations influence their willingness to trust the recommendations shared on each platform.

Although there is a growing interest in social media’s impact on consumer behavior, especially on TikTok, a lot of the literature tends to focus on general effects or quantitative trends. However, only a few studies have taken a qualitative approach to explore how users themselves describe and interpret their interactions with beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram. This highlights a gap in the literature, particularly regarding personal experiences, emotional responses, and platform-specific dynamics, that this study seeks to address, leaving room for further research.

To gain an understanding and to explore these topics in depth, the study will be conducted utilizing the qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with Gen Z women as the primary data collection method. This approach allows for rich, detailed narratives that capture the personal meanings, values, and attitudes that participants associate with beauty content online. Through this lens, the study aims to uncover how influencer content resonates with users on each platform, and how it guides them from inspiration to purchase.

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to understand how Gen Z women perceive and engage with beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram. It examines how this beauty content influences their purchasing decisions at different stages of the purchasing journey, what persuasive elements they associate with effective beauty influencer content, and how they assess the credibility and authenticity of influencers on each platform. The goal is to provide a deeper understanding of how social media content shapes consumer attitudes and behavior within the beauty industry, in Gen Z consumers. The findings contribute to the field of social media marketing and offer insights for beauty professionals, brands, influencers and to whom understanding the digitally native generation in the cosmetic field may be valuable.

1.3 Delimitations of the study

The empirical part of the thesis is gathered by conducting nine interviews of people who use TikTok and Instagram regularly, focusing on gen Z women aged 25-28 living in the capital region of Finland, to scale down the study. Influencer marketing is governed by different rules depending on the country, and Finland does have particularly strict guidelines around advertising transparency. The Finnish influencer marketing law requires influencers to clearly label paid partnerships in the beginning of the caption and sometimes even in the content itself. (Kilpailu & Kuluttajavirasto, 2025). The strict influencer law in Finland differs significantly from other European countries, which is why only individuals living in Finland are chosen as target group for this thesis.

Generation Z is typically defined as individuals born between the years 1997-2012, who have grown up in a digital environment, where social media has had a role in their everyday life. Women in this age group are major consumers of beauty products, which makes them particularly relevant for exploring how influencer content affects their purchasing behaviors and perceptions of trust and authenticity. By narrowing down the scope to Gen Z women, this thesis can delve more deeply into the nuances of these specific demographics platform use, values, decision-making patterns and their experiences and attitudes.

The individuals chosen for the interviews are women who already consider themselves as customers of the beauty and cosmetics products, such as make-up products, hair care and skincare. The reason this thesis focuses on beauty and cosmetic products is because they represent a category where influencer marketing plays a particularly big role in shaping consumer perceptions and behavior. Beauty products are personal and often tied to self-expression, which makes them well-suited for promotion through social media channels, like TikTok and Instagram.

1.4 Structure of the study

The paper follows a structured approach, beginning with an introduction presenting the main topic of the thesis and its relevance, followed by a problem discussion and introducing established research questions, delimitations, and ethical considerations. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, where previous literature and key theories relevant to this thesis are presented. This is followed by the methodology chapter, where the qualitative research design, including data collection through semi-structured interviews and the thematic analysis approach, is justified and explained. The

empirical part of the thesis presents the findings, which are analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework and research questions. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion, conclusions, and suggestions for future research. This thesis can be divided into two parts: the theoretical part and the empirical part (figure 1), which together provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.



Figure 1 **Thesis structure**

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework outlines the key theories that support the aim of this thesis, which is to explore how beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram shapes Gen Z women's purchasing behavior, from the initial inspiration to final purchase. The framework begins with buying behavior theory to analyze the internal and external factors influencing consumer decisions. The social customer journey model is then introduced to highlight the role of social media in guiding modern consumers.

To understand the persuasive role of influencer beauty content, Content Marketing Theory is used to frame influencers as strategic, value-driven communicators. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) explains how audiences process influencer content either peripherally or centrally, informing the analysis of content features. Source Credibility Theory, including trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, gives an understanding of how consumers see authenticity and credibility across TikTok and Instagram. Finally, the AIDA model supports the understanding of how influencer content moves users from attention to action, especially in high-engagement formats like tutorials or reviews.

Together, these theories offer a well-rounded foundation for analyzing how beauty influencer content shapes consumer behavior on TikTok and Instagram, and how platform-specific characteristics may influence that process.

2.1 Buying behaviour

According to Khan (2006), buying behavior, also referred to as consumer behavior, refers to how, where, when, why and how much consumer buys. The buying behavior in both online shopping and in stores is often driven by both external and internal factors. The internal factors are, for example, motivation, personality traits, brand loyalty, the consumers' self-image, religion, and social and cultural background. The external factors can be, for example, marketing messages, family influence, technology, and economic trends. Other factors affecting buying behavior are, for example, age, attitudes, values, income level, the person's various communities and place of residence.

Solomon et al. (2013) explain that attitudes and values are important factors that define people's consumption habits and their behavior. The values guide a person's choices, actions and thinking, which are often strongly connected to people's attitudes. Values are an important part of consumption, especially today, when people buy from companies

that they feel like they share the same ethical and moral values with. These values can be, for example, how ecological the company is, if they are vegan or if the products have good ingredients that come from an ethical laboratory. Values often remain regardless of attitudes may change. Attitudes are learned process of judgement that are formed from knowledge, personal experiences and emotions.



Figure 2 **Decision-making process**

The events that take place before a product is purchased are referred to as the consumer decision-making process, seen in Figure 2. according to Solomon et al. (2013). The process consists of five different stages that are the recognition of a need, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision and post purchase behavior. The process begins when a person experiences a need for a particular product. The need can be triggered by running out of a product you've been using, a referral from a friend, or by something a person has seen on social media. In the second stage of the process, the consumer seeks information about the product they sparked a need for and might compare it to other competing products. In the third stage, the purchase decision is made based on the factors of the brand image, price of the product, and even possible discounts or campaigns. In the last part of the consumer decision-making process, the consumer evaluates and adapts the product in use. (Solomon et al., 2013). The evaluation stage is highly critical, especially when the evaluation is performed by someone with a high following on social media, such as a social media influencer. The influencer can then proceed to recommend or not recommend the said product to their subscribers. Depending on the influencer's authority and trustworthiness, this can affect the perception of the product or service in the eyes of the influencer's followers. (Harrigan et al., 2021).

Influencer marketing is a powerful way to affect the purchase decision in a positive way. According to Campbell & Farell (2020), influencers affect especially the stage of evaluation and information searching, since consumers often look for recommendations and reviews online. With the help of social media marketing, in particular influencer

marketing, brands can keep their products on the top of the consumers' minds. According to Jimenez-Castillo and Sanches-Fernandez (2020), social media content has a direct impact on consumers purchasing behavior, especially while online shopping. A number of consumers make a large portion of their purchase decisions based on the information they hear from influencers they follow. Influencer collaborations have been found to be more effective than the company's own communication.

Consumer buying behavior is influenced by both rational decision-making and social and emotional factors. In recent years, the increasing use of digital platforms and social media has reshaped how consumers find, evaluate, and purchase products. (Choudhary et al., 2025) Among younger customer, particularly generation Z, buying behavior is deeply imbedded in online social environments, where peer recommendations, influencer content and algorithmically curated feeds serve as a key source for product discovery, information and inspiration (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). For beauty products, which are often visual and experience-based, social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram play an especially central role in (Ki et al. 2020)

2.2 Social customer journey

The Social Customer Journey is a framework for understanding how customers interact with brands and products through social media and other online channels. It is a broader concept than the traditional customer journey, which focuses on interactions with a company's website and marketing materials. The social customer journey recognizes the increasingly important role of social media in shaping consumer behavior and decision-making. (Hamilton, 2020).



Figure 3 Social Customer Journey

The four key stages in the social customer journey are awareness, consideration, decision-making, and loyalty. The first stage, awareness, refers to when customers become aware of a product or brand through social media content, for example influencer marketing. The second stage, consideration, happens when consumers do their research on products, compare their options and when they might seek opinions or

experiences from others through their own social network. The third stage is when the consumer makes the decision to purchase the product, which has often been influenced by reviews and content they have seen on social media. After the purchase, is the fourth and final stage, post-purchase, where the consumer might share their own experiences and opinions about the brand or product on social media, which can lead to influencing other consumers and contribute to brand loyalty. These four stages may not follow each other in linear fashion, and they are not linked to every single purchase transaction. (Okmeydan et al., 2023)

The concept of the social customer journey emphasizes that consumers today move fluidly between content consumption, search behavior, peer interaction and purchase decision-making, which are all often influenced by social cues rather than formal brand communications (Kotler et al., 2017). Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram are not only spaces for product discovery, but also spaces for evaluation, validation, and where consumers observe how others use and discuss products. (Shareef et al., 2017) The social customer journey is highly relevant for this thesis since it informs the study's first research question, which explores how beauty influencer content is integrated into Gen Z women's social customer journeys across the two main platforms, TikTok and Instagram.

2.3 Content marketing

According to Forrest (2019) Content marketing has evolved as a theory-informed and strategic approach to brand communication, especially when talking about social media. It represents an approach to communication in which brands aim to provide meaningful, engaging, and relevant material for the social media audience as a way of establishing long-term relationships with consumers. Rather than focusing on direct promotion or short-term transactions, content marketing seeks to offer ongoing value through various forms of media, aiming to build trust and to nurture consumer loyalty over time, as seen in Figure 4. (Bubphapant & Brandão, 2023)

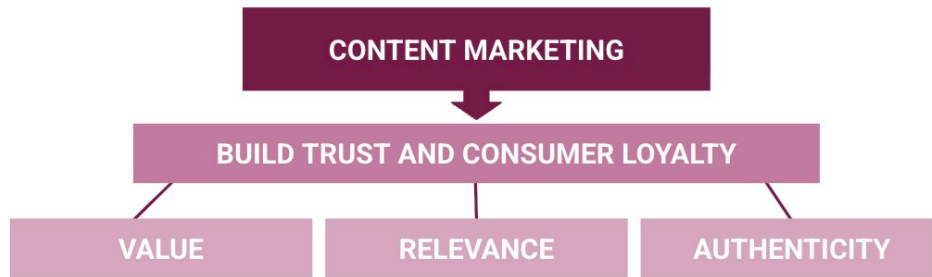


Figure 4 **Content marketing**

The fundamental idea behind Content Marketing is to create content that resonates with the needs, interests, and lifestyle of a specific audience. This content can take many forms, such as videos, blog posts, tutorials, user reviews, and influencer collaborations and is often designed to support consumers at different stages of their decision-making journey. (Al Rahman, 2024). What sets Content Marketing apart from more traditional forms of advertising is its focus on creating value, rather than persuading through interruption, and it engages audiences through relevance and authenticity (Forrest, 2019).

Researchers have described Content Marketing as a structured and deliberate communication process. It involves not only the production of content but also strategic decisions around planning, distribution, and audience targeting. From an academic perspective, this process includes identifying a target group, understanding their informational and emotional needs, creating content that addresses those needs, and delivering it across platforms where the audience is most active. This theory aligns closely with models of relationship marketing, where the goal is not merely to prompt a single purchase, but to build sustained engagement over time. (Bubphapant & Brandão 2023).

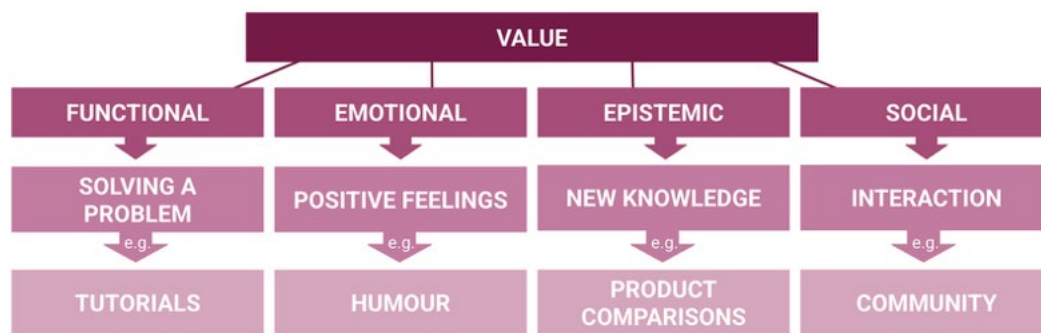


Figure 5 Value in Content Marketing

As seen in Figure 5, in Content Marketing, creating value for the viewer is central. This value can be categorized in various ways. For instance, content may deliver functional value by helping consumers solve a problem, like tutorials, emotional value by evoking positive feelings for example through humor, epistemic value through new knowledge, such as product comparisons, or social value by enabling interaction and community participation. These types of value contribute to a consumer's overall experience with a brand or product, often increasing their likelihood of returning, recommending, or engaging further with the brand. (Rahman, 2024).

Social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, have become dominant channels for content marketing due to their ability to facilitate both wide reach and deep engagement. Influencers play a vital role in delivering content marketing in these spaces. By integrating brand messages into everyday narratives, tutorials, or lifestyle content, influencers act as intermediaries who can create trust and relatability, qualities that are essential for effective content marketing. On TikTok, content is often fast paced, visually engaging, and designed to feel spontaneous, while Instagram typically emphasizes visual aesthetics, personal branding, and curated storytelling. These different affordances impact how content is consumed and how effective it may be in driving consumer interest or purchases. (Karniawati, 2019)

Models such as the Content Marketing Matrix further support the strategic dimension of content marketing. This framework categorizes content according to its primary function (emotional vs. rational appeal) and where it fits in with the customer journey, such as creating awareness or supporting a purchase decision. For example, a product demonstration might inform a buying decision, whereas a humorous video might generate interest or social engagement earlier in the consumer journey. (Rahman, 2024).

In conclusion, Content Marketing Theory offers an essential lens through which to understand the role of social media content in shaping consumer behavior. It highlights the importance of delivering consistent, audience-centered material that supports engagement and trust over time. In this thesis, which explores how beauty influencers on TikTok and Instagram affect consumer purchasing decisions, content marketing serves as a core framework. It explains not only the strategies behind influencer content but also why and how different formats, tones, and platforms may influence consumer motivations and actions in distinct ways.

Influencer marketing represents a powerful form of content marketing, as social media influencers publish content that has both a personal feeling and is embedded in everyday social contexts (De Veriman et al. 2017).

2.4 Persuasive effects

The theory of persuasive effects can help explain how persuasive communication, such as influencer endorsements on social media, shapes consumer attitudes and possible purchase decisions. Previous research on how social media platforms influence purchase behavior has been considered persuasive at the core of how effective social media content is. Persuasive effects refer to the action where the marketing approach convinces the consumer to buy the products (Herr et al. 1991).

Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo, the two persons behind developing the Elaboration Likelihood Model in 1980, suggest that there are two main routes through which persuasive messages are processed by. The two routes are called the central route and the peripheral route. The central route happens when an individual carefully considers the persuasive messages by actively engaging with the content and is motivated to evaluate the arguments and evidence in detail. The central route often leads to stronger attitudes, since the individual has had the motivation to process the information more thoughtfully. This route is more likely to be used when the individual is somehow involved or interested in the topic.

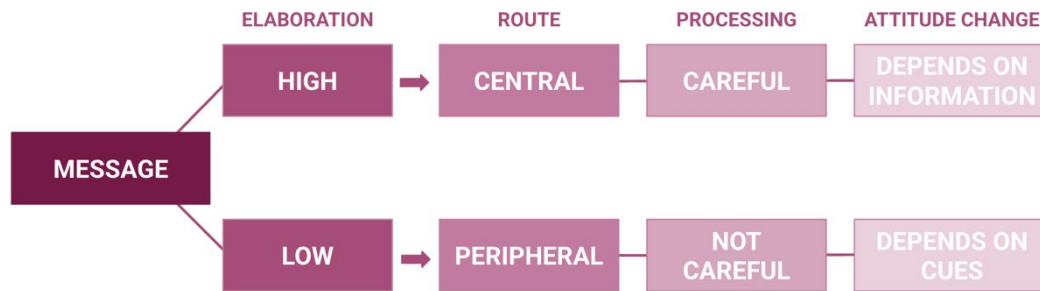


Figure 6 **Elaboration Likelihood Model**

In figure 6, the Elaboration Likelihood Model is visually explained. When the elaboration of the message is high, the route is central, and when it's low the route is peripheral. In the central route, the processing is more careful than in the peripheral route. The peripheral route is used when the individual has a lack of motivation to process the information as detailed as in the central route. In the peripheral route, the individual often focuses on attractiveness, credibility, and other superficial aspects of the content rather than focusing on the information given.

The effectiveness of content marketing depends highly on its persuasive qualities, consumers process persuasive messages by careful consideration of the content (central route) or by relying on surface cues, like attractiveness or familiarity (peripheral route). In the context of beauty influencers and their content, factors such as having visible product use and platform credibility can shape which route is activated (Jin et al. 2024).

2.5 Source credibility theory

Source Credibility Theory is a crucial framework in understanding individuals' information processing and persuasion. It is used in communication and persuasion studies to examine how individuals perceive trustworthiness and expertise of a particular source and how it influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors. (Dominic et al., 2025). The theory is based on the fact that highly credible sources are more persuasive than sources with less credibility. Credibility can be divided into three dimensions, which are expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.

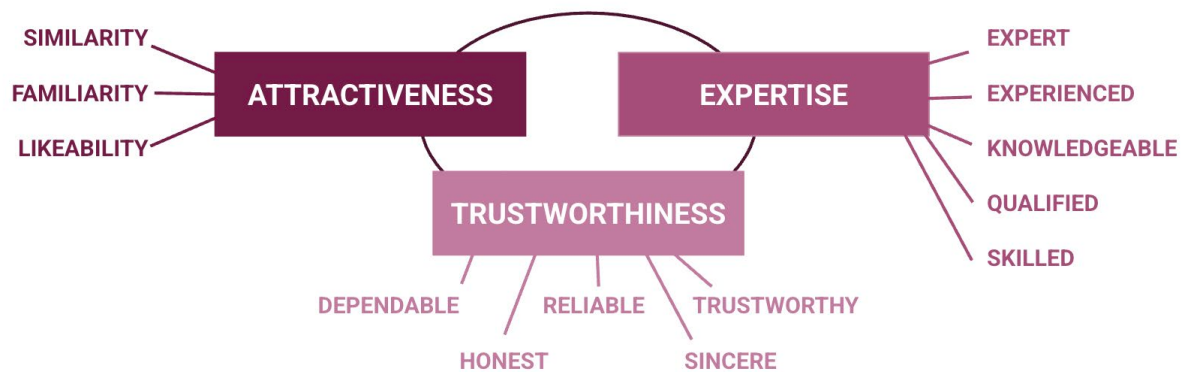


Figure 7 Source credibility theory (Serban, 2010).

In figure 7, the three dimensions are divided and the different descriptions of the effects on sources are shown visually. Expertise refers to perceived knowledge or competence of the source in regards of the subject. According to Eisend (2006), humans are more likely to be persuaded when the source demonstrates expertise. Trustworthiness is used to describe honesty and integrity of the source, and individuals often evaluate if the source is persuading them or giving them unbiased information. Attractiveness is an optional dimension, but many marketing and media studies argue that likeability and attractiveness might influence credibility of the source. This dimension, where likeability has a meaning, has been seen to be relevant particularly in advertising, celebrity endorsements, and among social media influencers. (Djafarova, 2017).

Source Credibility Theory has expanded with the rise of digital media, since the credibility of influencers, social media personalities and other online sources are now a major study focus. Online reviews, user-generated content (UGC), and algorithms contribute to how individuals access various dimensions of credibility on social media and other digital environments. (Westerman et al., 2014). Studies show that individuals on social media sometimes struggle to differentiate between factual expertise and perceived expertise, when influencers are utilizing persuasive presentation techniques. (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013) Research of trustworthiness in the digital era has shown that individuals perceive peer-generated content, for example reviews or influencer testimonials, more trustworthy than brands own advertisement. (Westerman et al. 2014) Wiedemann and von Mettenheim (2020) argue that attractiveness is often linked to aesthetically pleasing content, likeable personal branding, and relationships with followers on social media.

On social media Source Credibility Theory is more individualized rather than tied to institutions. Influencers, bloggers and everyday social media users can be perceived as

credible sources as an institution, or even more so. The shift from factual credibility has sometimes led to challenges in identifying misinformation. (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). Social media influencers can build credibility through a direct relationship with their followers, which creates a sense of trust, familiarity and likeability, unlike traditional celebrities. An influencer can shape their credibility through posting content consistently and engaging with their own audience. (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

2.6 AIDA model

The marketing communication framework AIDA outlines the four stages which the consumer goes through when interacting with advertisement or marketing messages. The AIDA acronym stands for attention, interest, desire and action and was developed by E. St. Elmo Lewis in 1898. (Hassan et al., 2015). Since the late 19th century, the AIDA model has served as a fundamental tool for marketers when inventing communication strategies. The acronym stands for the four phases that the customer goes through in the purchasing process. (Smith, 2024).

Previous studies indicate that those businesses that utilize the AIDA model, might be able to enhance conversion rates and consumer engagement (Kotler & Keller, 2016). According to Belch & Belch (2021) integrating the AIDA-model with modern digital marketing strategies, such as social media and influencer marketing, can improve the marketing strategies effectiveness.

Figure 8 **AIDA-model**



The four stages of the AIDA model are presented in Figure 8. The first stage of the AIDA model is the hardest part. Capturing the attention of the consumer can be tricky, especially on social media where there is a lot of competition for the consumer's focus. Content needs to be eye-catching, intriguing, or unique to make the audience stop and

concentrate on the content and the message. The first stage is when the consumer becomes aware of the product or service provided.

Once the attention has been grabbed it is time to make it interesting. The next goal is to build interest in the content, by providing information that resonates with the audience's desires or needs. The second step is when the consumer becomes interested in learning more about the product or service and how it could fit in with the consumer's lifestyle. The third step, desire, is all about creating a strong emotional connection with the audience through highlighting the benefits of the product or service. The goal is to make the audience feel like they need a product or service. In the third stage the consumer develops a favorable disposition towards the product or service. The final stage, action, encourages the audience to purchase the product, click on a specific link or sign up for a newsletter. This is when the consumer forms a purchase intention and decision. (Smith, 2024).

2.7 Summary of theories

TikTok and Instagram, two highly visual and interactive platforms, have created spaces for influencer marketing and content-driven persuasion. This thesis studies how beauty influencers impact consumer decision-making differently on TikTok versus Instagram, examining the process from initial inspiration to the final purchase with a particular focus on how the respondents perceive trust, authenticity and persuasive elements in relation to beauty products. To support this study, a wide range of theoretical frameworks related to consumer psychology, persuasion and digital media was introduced: Buying Behavior, the Social Customer Journey, Content Marketing, Persuasion Theory, Source Credibility Theory and the AIDA model. These theories provide the basis for the study's qualitative methodology, its interview guide, and the thematic structure of the empirical analysis. (Figure 9).

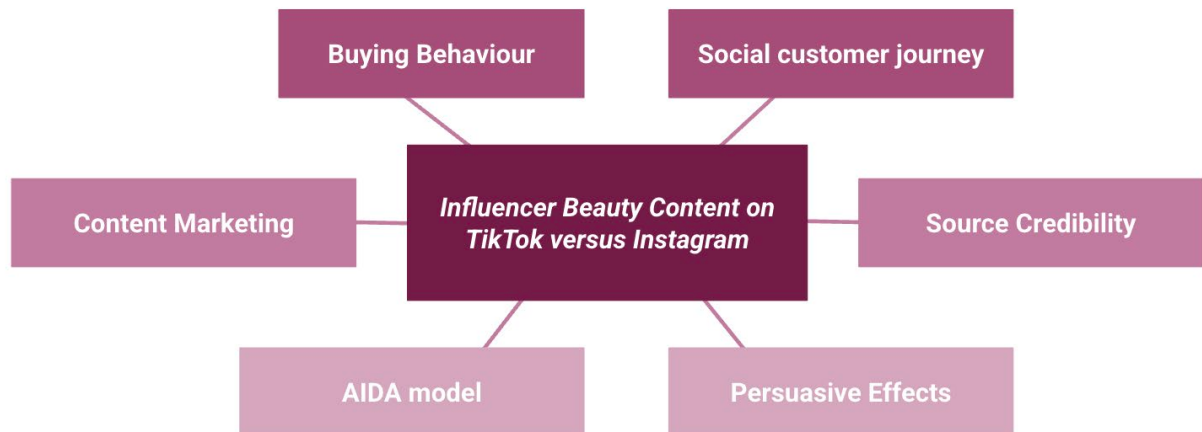


Figure 9 Summary of theories

Consumer decision making process offers a foundational model outlining the stages from recognizing a need to post-purchase evaluation, which is central when analyzing how social media influences content influences consumer choices. The social customer journey expands on this by integrating community-influenced nature of digital engagement, making it relevant in assessing how Gen Z women interact with influencers and their beauty content. The AIDA model contributes to the thesis by explaining the communication process into four stages, attention, interest, desire and action. This aligns how influencer content is designed to capture consumer attention and at the end convert it into purchase behavior. The Elaboration Likelihood Model and Source Credibility theory explains how the persuasive effect of influencer content varies based on consumer motivation, trust, expertise and attractiveness.

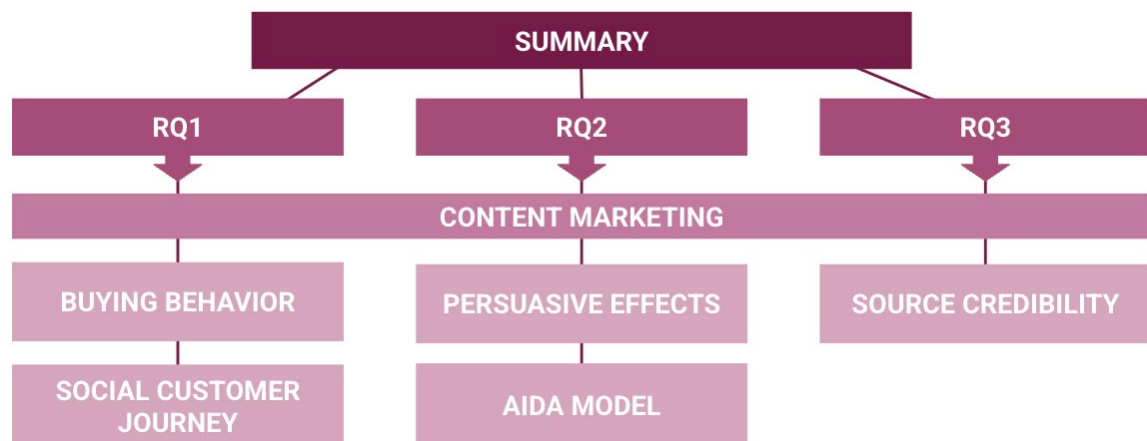


Figure 10 Theories and research questions

As seen in figure 10, the theory of Content Marketing affects all three research questions. The theories of Buying Behavior and the Social Customer Journey are central for answering the first research question, which examines how Gen Z women describe the influence of influencer content across different stages of the purchasing process. Traditional models of buying behavior emphasize a series of cognitive steps, problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions, and post-purchase behavior. However, the social customer journey builds on this by accounting for the non-linear, interactive nature of digital environments. On platforms like TikTok and Instagram, users are often exposed to products through discovery-based content, such as viral videos or trending posts, rather than through active search. These theories highlight the importance of contextual, real-time engagement, which justifies the use of qualitative interviews.

The second research question focuses on the persuasive effects that make beauty content effective on TikTok and Instagram, and how it might differ. For this purpose, theories from content marketing, the AIDA model, and broader persuasion literature are useful. Content marketing theory stresses that value-driven, audience-relevant content can build trust and drive behavior. The AIDA model, which is an acronym for attention, interest, desire and action, offers a clear framework for how marketing messages are designed to move the consumer through various stages. In combination, these theories suggest that influencer content works by attracting viewers' attention, maintaining their interest through entertaining or informative content, creating desire by showcasing product benefits, and encouraging action through reviews, links, or discount codes.

The third research question addresses how Gen Z women assess credibility and authenticity in influencer content. Here, Source Credibility Theory is central. This theory breaks credibility into three components: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. These elements help explain why some influencers are perceived as more reliable or relatable than others. In the context of beauty content, authenticity may also involve how "real" an influencer appears, whether they disclose sponsorships, use filters, or share personal stories. This theory provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing how viewers interpret such cues on different platforms, especially when content is sponsored.

Because perceptions of credibility and authenticity are often subtle, emotionally grounded, and dependent on context, they are best explored through qualitative methods. A quantitative approach might measure how much participants trust influencers, but it would miss the rich explanations behind their judgments, such as

personal experiences of being misled, or the value they place on credibility and authenticity.

The theoretical framework not only supports the empirical goals of the study but also guides the research design. The choice of interviews and interview questions are aligned with the theoretical emphasis on lived experience, personal judgment, and emotional response. The interview questions are directly shaped by the concepts within each theory, and the themes used to analyze the data, such as attention, trust, or authenticity, are rooted in the framework's core ideas.

3 METHODOLOGY

The upcoming section outlines the study's methodological foundation, including the choice of approach and method, data collection method, sample, research instrument, analysis methods, practical implementation of the study as well as research ethics, data management. This research adopts a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews as the primary tool to gain deeper insight into the topic.

3.1 Choice of Approach and Method

There are generally two main types of research approaches: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research focuses on identifying relationships between variables, often involving numerical data that is analyzed through statistical methods (Saunders et. al. 2016). In contrast to this, qualitative research, the approach for this thesis, relies on non-numerical data collection and interpretation. It is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena and understanding the emotions of individuals and how they perceive and make sense of their experiences (Adams et. al. 2014).

In qualitative research, the theoretical framework plays a crucial role in guiding the interpretation of empirical findings, ensuring that the conclusions are both grounded and contextually relevant (Adams et al., 2014). Qualitative research is closely tied to an interpretivist philosophical stance, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings people assign to their experiences. Researchers, therefore, aim to interpret these subjective perspectives rather than measure them in objective terms (Saunders et al., 2016). This perspective also aligns well with an abductive research approach, which moves between theory and data to generate insights and explanations, a method considered particularly suitable for qualitative approach (Saunders et al., 2016).

Given the exploratory nature of this thesis and its focus on understanding the experiences, perceptions and meanings, a qualitative research approach was chosen. This decision was made to gain deep, contextual insights into how Gen Z women perceive beauty influencer content, and how this content influences their consumer journey, perceptions of credibility and authenticity and overall practices and own experiences regarding the theme of the study. To achieve this, semi-structured qualitative interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection.

Choosing a qualitative design was also motivated by the nature of this study's research problem. Since the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of consumer behavior and how individuals engage with social media and influencer beauty content, a quantitative method would not have captured the depth required. Qualitative research enables access to participants' inner motivations, emotional responses, and thought processes and insights that are essential for answering the research questions. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were selected to allow participants to express themselves freely while still focusing on specific areas relevant to the study.

The inductive research approach is a methodical orientation that looks for patterns, categories and themes from the data itself, rather than being affected by pre-existing theories or hypotheses. In inductive research, the aim is to get a conceptual understanding, moving from specific detailed observations to broader generalizations. The inductive approach contrasts with deductive approaches, where you usually start with theory and try to test it against the data. (Thomas, 2003) The inductive approach was chosen, since its particularly well-suited for exploratory studies where the research topic is an emerging social phenomenon, such as in platform-driven beauty consumption on TikTok and Instagram.

3.2 Data Collection Method

Data for this study was gathered through nine semi-structured individual interviews, conducted between 26th May and 4th June. Four of the nine interviews were held online via video calls to accommodate participants' preferences while five of the interviews were held face to face. The interview questions were informed by the three research questions outlined in section 1.3 of this thesis, with a primary focus on open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews are considered non-standardized, offering flexibility in comparison to structured formats, which leaves room for a deeper exploration of the themes. Unlike fixed-question surveys, this approach allows the interviewer to adapt questions according to the conversation and the individual participants' responses. (Saunders et al. 2016) The open-ended nature of the questions facilitates rich, qualitative data, detailed discussions and allows participants to elaborate on their thoughts, experiences, and values, insights that are often difficult to capture through quantitative tools like questionnaires. (Myers, 2013). A full version of the interview guide is provided in Appendix 1.

The interviews were divided into four sections, with the first section focusing on the background of the participants, while the three remaining sections focused on questions based on the study's research questions: the discovery and purchase journey, persuasive content features, and evaluations of credibility and authenticity. The interviews were finished with two extra open-ended questions, that gave a chance for the participants to raise thoughts about the topic, that had not already been discussed in the earlier stages of the interview. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and how their data will be handled securely and according to Hanken's guidelines. All participants were assured of anonymity, and informed consent was obtained for audio recording the interviews and ensuring ethical standards were maintained throughout the data collection process.

3.3 Sample

This study employs purposive sampling, a commonly used method in qualitative research when conducting interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2019). This approach involves the researcher's informed selection of participants based on their relevance to the research aims and their ability to provide meaningful insights into the study's central questions. Purposive sampling is typically associated with smaller sample sizes, and as such, the findings are not intended to be statistically representative of a broader population (Saunders et al., 2016).

Within purposive sampling, a homogeneous sampling strategy was selected for this study. This strategy targets participants who share specific characteristics, allowing for a more focused and in-depth exploration of shared experiences or behaviors. It is particularly well suited for identifying key themes and patterns within a clearly defined group and is often used in research seeking to understand user values or behaviors. (Saunders et al., 2016; Adams et al. 2014).

Following this strategy, the inclusion criteria for participation were individuals who use TikTok and Instagram daily and actively consume cosmetic products from at least one of the following categories: skincare, makeup, hair care/styling, or fragrance. All selected participants identify as women and reside in the capital region of Finland, aligning with the study's geographic focus. In total, nine women aged between 25 and 28 participated in the study. The sample included diversity in backgrounds of the interviewees in terms of educational level,

profession, and social media use intensity. Although small in number, this sample provided deep, nuanced perspectives and allowed for the identification of strong cross-participant patterns, which is appropriate for qualitative thematic analysis. In order to protect the anonymity of the interview participants, the interviewees are referenced with participant codes R1 to R9.

3.4 Research Instrument

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed specifically for this study. The guide was informed by the theoretical framework, particularly concepts of buying behavior, the social customer journey, content marketing, persuasive effects, source credibility theory and the AIDA model as well as the three research questions presented in section 1.3.

The guide included open-ended questions covering the areas about the participants social media use habits, experiences of discovering beauty products through the two focus channels TikTok and Instagram, how they use social media as part of the consumer journey, perceptions of persuasive content elements, evaluations of influencer credibility and authenticity, reflections on trust and comparisons between TikTok and Instagram as beauty content platforms. The interview guide served as a flexible framework for the interview, and it was adapted to each interviewee based on the flow of each conversation.

3.5 Analysis method

Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research for interpreting collected data. Its core aim is to identify recurring themes or patterns within interview responses by systematically organizing and reviewing the content (Bryman & Bell, 2019). This process involves coding, which refers to the classification of data into meaningful categories based on commonalities in the responses. It is important to note that coding in this context does not involve computer programming but instead refers to a structured approach for grouping related ideas and observations. (Gibbs, 2007).

For this study, all interview material will be transcribed and analyzed using a thematic framework. The pre-designed interview guide serves as an initial reference point for recognizing consistent topics across participants, although the actual analysis will be conducted inductively allowing themes to emerge organically from the data.

To analyze the data from the interviews and systematically addressing the study's three research questions, the thesis has employed thematic analysis as outlined by Naeem

(2023). This approach was selected for its flexibility and suitability for exploring participants own experiences and perceptions, while allowing both explicit and underlying themes to emerge from the interview data.

In this thesis, the thematic analysis was conducted in an inductive manner, rather than coding the data to fit pre-existing theories which allowed the themes to emerge organically from the participants descriptions of their own experiences with beauty influencer content. While the analysis was informed by the overall research questions and theoretical framework, it remained grounded in the data. The analysis looked for repeated patterns in participants' own words, and themes were refined through iterative engagement with the transcripts.

3.6 Practical Implementation of the Study

All stages of the study were carried out by the author, from design and requirement of interviewees through data collection and transcription to analysis and writing. The data for the study was collected by semi-structured interviews held face to face or via online video calls during the period of 26th May and 4th June. The informants were preliminary contacted through a message in the beginning of May, to ask about their interest and willingness to participate in interviews for this thesis.

Prior to the main data collection phase, which was held in late May 2025 and early June 2025, the interview guide underwent a pilot test to refine the clarity and relevance of the questions, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and research questions. The pilot test was done utilizing individuals from the same target group, Gen Z women living in the capital region of Finland, but with a profession within social media marketing. The interview guide was chosen to be piloted with social media professionals to gain insight and opinions from individuals working in the field, to make the guide as strong as possible.

Once the interview guide was good to use, the preliminary contacted informants were booked for a time slot for the interview. All informants were sent a consent form and a data protection form prior to the interviews, as well as a short description of the topic and purpose of the study. Each interview followed the semi-structured interview guide seen in Appendix 1, ensuring coverage of key topics related to the research questions while still allowing participants to talk freely and raise important topics to them. The interviews lasted between 40 and 65 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for the analysis. The language of the interviews was

primary Finnish, with a few switches to English, especially when participants were referring to platform terminology. Two of the interviews were held in English.

3.7 Research Ethics and Data Management

Participants were provided with clear information about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of the interviews, the possibility to stop the interview or skip any question they would like and informed about the data use prior to participation. The participants also gave informed consent prior to and at the interview about being recorded and how the data would be handled. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by having participant identities anonymized and pseudonyms used in the presentation of findings. All audio recordings, transcripts and analysis files were stored securely on password protected devices accessible only to the author. Participants were informed about how the data will be archived for a maximum of six months after handing in the thesis.

3.8 Ethical considerations

The study will prioritize ethical considerations throughout the qualitative research process. The findings will be presented in a non-biased way, presenting both negative and positive aspects of the content on TikTok and Instagram published by beauty influencers and its impact on cosmetics purchase decisions.

In the process of structuring and ideating this thesis, AI-tools such as CoPilot were used as a form of academic support to assist with language refinement, and structural coherence. This AI-tool were utilized under the author's full control and served only to enhance the writing process and the structure of the thesis, not to generate or replace any original analysis, critical reflection, or any theoretical insights. CoPilot was also used to help with the translations of the Finnish interview transcripts. All AI used for this thesis can be found in the Appendix 2 "Log of AI usage during thesis process".

The use of AI was carefully considered to align with Hanken School of Economics ethical research practices and academic integrity. At no stage were any personal, sensitive, or confidential details shared with any AI tools. All AI-supported ideas and content were critically reviewed, edited, and integrated by the author to ensure that it reflects independent thought and scholarly standards, such as the translations of transcripts.

4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings, based on a thematic analysis of the nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Gen Z women. The analysis revealed several consistent patterns across participants, exploring their experiences with beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram and how it influences their consumer journey, the perceptions of persuasive content, and evaluations of credibility and authenticity. The interviews and the analysis revealed highly consistent patterns across participants, offering insight into the evolving role of social media platforms in shaping beauty-related purchasing behavior. The empirical findings chapter is structured around this study's three research questions, with each section presenting the most relevant themes emerging from the data.

The themes presented in this findings chapter were developed through a thematic analysis of the interview data. After the transcription of all interviews, a coding process was utilized to identify segments of the data that were relevant to the thesis three research questions. The codes showed recurring patterns in how participants described their experiences, attitudes and behaviors related to beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram. Already during the later stages of the data collection process, some thematic patterns started to take shape, since certain ideas and thoughts from the participants emerged repeatedly across the interviews. This repetition in the interviews helped guide the development of the final themes, which were then refined through reading the transcriptions several times and highlighting similar answers from the participants.

An AI tool (CoPilot) was used to assist in formulating concise and descriptive names for the key themes and headings in the empirical findings chapter. All thematic analysis, interpretation of data and insights were conducted independently by the author, and the AI tool was solely used as a writing aid to enhance the headings as well as in translating the Finnish interview transcripts to English.

4.1 The impact of Beauty Influencer Content on the Consumer Journey (RQ1)

This section presents findings related to the first research question, which explored how Gen Z women describe the impact of beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram throughout their consumer journey. The themes identified reflect how participants

interact with beauty influencer content at various stages of the social customer journey, from initial discovery and evaluation to purchase and post-purchase behaviors.

A notable pattern across all interviews was that beauty influencer content is not experienced as a separate activity, but rather as part of participants' everyday social media behavior. The continuous algorithm-driven exposure on TikTok means that product awareness is often incidental, since participants reported that even without searching, they encounter beauty content regularly, which gradually shapes their perceptions and interest in beauty products. In contrast, Instagram was rarely described as a primary platform for discovery but occasionally used for brand validation or complementary checking after initial exposure on TikTok. Across both platforms, participants showed that platform dynamics and content formats strongly shape how beauty influencer content becomes integrated into their everyday life and consumer decision-making.

The following sections present the key themes that emerged, supported by quotes from the participants. Table 1 presents the main themes and sub-themes that were identified for the first research question.

Table 1 RQ1 Themes

Themes	Sub-themes
TikTok as the Primary Discovery Tool	Passive algorithmic discovery Active search behavior
Repetition & Platform Influence & Virality	Organic vs. Paid virality Peer validation mechanisms
In-Store Impulse Buying	Shelf recognition effect Emotional triggers

4.1.1 TikTok as the Primary Discovery and Search Platform

When asked about where the participants usually discover new beauty products, a central finding from the interviews was that all participants described TikTok as their primary platform for discovering new beauty products, with many noting that they no longer use Instagram or traditional search engines, such as Google, for product

discovery. Several of the participants noted that they had discovered beauty products on TikTok that they might not otherwise have considered purchasing.

R3: "I search things on TikTok instead of Google. There I can really see how a product is used. You can actually see if the product works or not and how it looks like on real people. It's so much better and gives so much more than just reading a review and seeing a picture of the product."

Several participants highlighted the role of TikTok's algorithm in surfacing relevant content based on their interests and past interactions on the platform. This type of algorithm-driven passive discovery was reported across the participants and contributed to the continuous exposure to beauty content that shaped participants' awareness and interest in beauty products. R8 noted that even though they would not be actively searching for a specific product, they might still come across it on TikTok while scrolling the For You -page. They explained that seeing a product that everyone loves on TikTok does get stuck in their head and might lead to a purchase. R8 was not alone with this thought, since several of the participants noted similar feelings, of finding products on TikTok accidentally, which after seeing many people use and love the product, led to a purchase.

When moving from the awareness stage to the evaluation stage, participants deliberately used the TikTok search function to gather more information about a specific beauty product or beauty brands. Several participants noted that they search experiences and test-videos on TikTok if they get interested in a specific product. This was due to the fear of making bad choices or purchases, and seeing other people using the product brought peace to the participants before spending their money.

R1: "I always search on TikTok and watch multiple reviews and usage videos to see what all kinds of different people say. It's like I build an impression based on what I see on TikTok, not just one video but several videos, to see if people are really being honest."

In contrast to TikTok, participants rejected Instagram as a useful platform for both discovery and evaluation. Several participants expressed that Instagram felt overly curated, filled with mainly advertisement and polished posts from influencers, which discouraged them from following influencers on that said platform. In contrast, they viewed TikTok as providing more genuine and relatable opinions.

R6: "Instagram is just ads and curated vibes these days, I don't go there for real product experiences. It feels like brands are controlling more there and it's all about aesthetics rather than honesty. I don't go to Instagram for real product experiences, if I want to see

how the product works, I go to TikTok.”

Even if TikTok was mentioned to be the dominant platform they discover new products from by all participants, a few participants mentioned that they occasionally encountered interesting beauty products through Instagram Stories. The Stories are perceived as somewhat more authentic and trustworthy posts than regular Instagram feed posts. Some participants noted that Instagram Stories sometimes provided product tips, especially when shared by the participants own friends or influencers they had been following for a longer time. The Instagram Stories were perceived as more authentic and relatable than highly polished feed posts.

R4: “If I discover a beauty product on Instagram it is usually through the Stories from a lifestyle influencer I already follow and trust. I don’t really go to Instagram to search for beauty stuff, but if it comes up in Stories casually, I might get interested “

In addition to Instagram Stories, respondent 1 also highlighted the use of Instagram, when wanting to know more about the brand, the product itself and what the brand promises the product will do. They mentioned that while Instagram was not their primary source for discovering new beauty products, they still used to visit brands official Instagram pages to verify product information and promises about the beauty products. They explained that the brand pages felt like a portfolio, from which you can learn more about the brand and their values.

4.1.2 Repetition, Social Proof and Platform Influence

When discussing what makes beauty content on TikTok persuasive, participants emphasized the power of repetition and social proof on TikTok, with seeing multiple different beauty influencers recommending the same product increased both interest and perceived credibility for the product. Several participants described how repeated exposure on TikTok, especially from multiple, different creators increased their curiosity and interest, as continuous exposure of a specific beauty product made them feel like it might be worth trying.

R8: “If I see a lot of good feedback, then I feel like I can trust it. Especially if it’s not just from one big influencer, but from normal people too. When it’s lots of different people saying the same thing, I do start to think that it must be good.”

However, the interviews revealed that participants were mostly affected by organic repetition versus sponsored campaigns producing identical content of the same beauty brand or product. Participants wanted to also wait a while to see if the hype of the product stays, or if influencers post about it because it is popular at the moment. Some participants noted that when they saw many creators posting about the same beauty product in a short period of time, it often felt overly coordinated, which, for the participants, feel like a paid campaign or mass gifting by brands. This phenomenon was often described as reduced trust in the authenticity of the recommendations.

R6: “When the same product keeps coming up on my TikTok feed, I can’t help but start wondering if it really is good and that she should try it. But then again, I also think that is it actually good or just a trend, like is everyone just posting about it because it’s popular right now? So, I usually wait for a while before buying to see if people are still talking about it later.”

Even though participants underlined the importance of repetition on TikTok, they also demonstrated a high level of social media literacy and awareness to TikTok’s algorithm. Participants were fully conscious that TikTok could amplify certain trends artificially and expressed critical evaluation of content that appeared overly similar and commercially driven. R2 emphasized their ability to recognize inauthentic or overly forced content, explaining that growing up with social media had made them good at detecting when influencers are motivated by financial gain or when trends feel too artificially promoted. They highlighted the importance of transparency, noting that lack of honesty would ruin the trust among Gen Z audiences, with a direct quote *“You cannot fool Gen Z”*.

4.1.3 In-store Impulse Buying and Cross-channel activation

When participants were asked about how beauty content on social media influences their offline shopping behaviors, a particularly interesting finding was the extent to which TikTok exposure shaped the offline, in-store impulse purchases. Participants across the sample described how repeated exposure to beauty products on TikTok made them make in-store impulse purchases. Often, the participants did not plan to buy the specific product or anything from the product category, but many of them responded spontaneously when encountering the product in a physical store. Many participants described how frequent exposure to a beauty product on TikTok created a sense of familiarity that increased their likelihood of purchasing it impulsively when they encountered it in a physical store. This recognition was often triggered a desire to try the

product, even if the participants had not planned to buy it. Additionally, some participants noted that seeing a product on a store shelf would make them visit TikTok and look for reviews on their phones before making the decision on in-store purchase.

R9: “I think it happens to me quite a lot that I just pick the beauty product up because I recognize it from TikTok. Like, I’ll be in a store, not even thinking about buying that product but when I see it and have seen it on TikTok many times I might buy it. Especially in Normal, that store is a death trap for my wallet.”

R5: “I’ll see a video on TikTok about a product, and even if I weren’t like looking for that specific category of a beauty product, I might still go to Sokos and check it out. And I’m not saying that I leave my home to do this, but when I’m just walking home from work or just walking in the city, I might just go to a makeup store extempore.”

While seeing the same product often increased product awareness, participants displayed critical evaluation towards overly hyped beauty products, also known as viral products. Many of the participants noted that they might react negatively if something is super viral but might buy it later when the hype has calmed down. Several participants described feeling skeptical when a beauty product got sudden virality on social media, interpreting such virality as a potential sign of coordinated marketing rather than authentic enthusiasm. The participants often chose to delay purchasing until the initial hype had calmed down. Waiting allowed the participants to make more genuine and considered decisions, free from the pressure of overconsumption.

R7: “The beauty product could have gone viral months before, like ages ago, but I would still remember all the good feedback and once the hype is already over, I could buy it impulsively. And I kind of like it when it’s not everywhere anymore, then I feel like I’m buying it because I want to and not because everyone says I should.”

R5: “Sometimes it feels like a trend is too forced, and that puts me off. Like, when you can tell everyone is just doing it because they got the same PR package or because it’s a paid collaboration. It’s not real for me.”

In addition to direct exposure through the participants own TikTok feeds, participants also described how viral beauty trends circulated through peer conversations, word-of-mouth, further increasing TikTok's impact. In some cases, participants reported being influenced to purchase a product that they had not actually seen themselves but trusted a recommendation from friends who had encountered a specific product on the platform.

R8: “When I was in Sephora in Stockholm, my friend was hyping up this one face cream that she had seen a lot of content on TikTok, so funny how I hadn’t even seen the product on TikTok I still bought it because of TikTok.”

4.1.4 *Broader influence of Beauty Influencer Content*

When asked in the final stage of the semi-structured interviews about how beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram had shaped the participants attitudes or behavior related to beauty products, all participants offered rich and reflective insights. A consistent theme was that TikTok, in particular, had fundamentally altered how participants discover, evaluate and purchase beauty products. Many noted that prior to using TikTok, their beauty consumption patterns were more reliant on familiar products, personal recommendations from friends and family, or traditional advertising in magazines or even television. Participants reflected on how social media, particularly TikTok, had broadened their beauty consumption habits by encouraging exploration beyond mainstream brands and increasing their awareness of specific product ingredients. They described becoming more experimental with beauty products due to beauty content on social media, noting that they now consider options they would not have considered before engaging with beauty content on TikTok and Instagram.

R3: “Before TikTok, I would just buy the same things I always used or what my friends used. Like, I didn’t really go looking for new beauty products. Maybe sometimes I’d see something in a magazine or Instagram, but not very often. Now with TikTok, it’s different because things just come up all the time. Even products I didn’t know existed. And it’s fun, it makes me want to try more things and I feel like I pay more attention to beauty products because of TikTok”

For some participants, the social dimension of beauty content consumption had also evolved using TikTok, with conversations, shared experiences, and curiosity among friends. Rather than beauty products being a lonely activity, encountering beauty content on TikTok started conversations with friends, leading to a mutual discovery and co-influenced purchase decisions. Participants highlighted how beauty product discussions with friends had become a more frequent and interactive since using TikTok, with many sharing videos about beauty product with each other, and discovering that they sometimes had independently purchased the same beauty products. This experience was noted to have risen after the use of TikTok, in contrast to traditional advertising, such as TV commercials.

R8: One thing I’d say is that TikTok makes beauty so much more social to me. I’ll talk to my friends about products we’ve both seen on TikTok, or they’ll send me videos, and I’ll do the same. So, it’s not just me as a consumer, it about shared experiences.

R1: Sometimes my friends will mention a beauty product and I realize that I’ve seen it on TikTok too, or then they’ll send me a video about it and we both get interested. It becomes an activity when shopping, so it’s kind of a community if I can say so.”

Many participants shared how beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram helps them be more informed as consumers, particularly in understanding what to buy, what fits their needs and their skin, and overall, in making more suitable decisions.

R4: “It’s made me more informed, I now know what works for my skin, so I don’t just randomly grab something from the store. You can’t always rely on what the brand says, so it’s good to watch some TikTok’s about the products.”

In response to the final open-ended question about how TikTok or Instagram has shaped the participants' attitudes or behaviors, several participants expressed critical emotions on overconsumption. While platforms, particularly TikTok, were seen as powerful sources for discovering new beauty products and getting inspiration, they were also described as encouraging towards impulsive overconsumption. Participants expressed concerns about the pressure to buy more than they need, driven by the constant stream of beauty content on TikTok, describing how videos often made products seem irresistibly exciting and created a fear of missing out if they didn’t try them out. Some noted that repeated exposure to “haul” videos and “must-have” products created a sense of need, which they recognized as unsustainable and sought to balance it through more conscious purchasing decisions. Other described feeling overwhelmed by the volume of trends and new beauty product launches, acknowledging that the environment sometimes led them to buy unnecessary items.

R6: “One thing I’ve noticed is that TikTok wants to make you buy more than what you actually need. Sometimes I catch myself thinking I’ll need a new foundation or mascara just because I saw it on TikTok, even though I already have plenty. So, I’m trying to be more aware of that.”

R5: “I feel like the biggest attitude change with TikTok has been that it makes me buy more than I normally would. Before, I would just buy what I needed, but after watching TikTok, I’ve definitely bought some extra stuff”

The worry of overconsumption was not only limited to the participants' personal behaviors but extended toward the broader social media environment. Several participants expressed discomfort not only with their own impulsive purchases, but with the excessive consumption they have observed among other social media users, especially in younger audiences. There was a clear view that beauty influencer content on TikTok contributed to creating unrealistic standards and unsustainable beauty routines.

R6: “It’s not just me buying too much, but like, you see 14-year-olds on TikTok doing a 20-step skincare routine with all kinds of ingredients. It’s insane. I didn’t even wash my face properly at that age, and now they have five different serums, it’s kind of scary.”

R7: “Some influencers show these shelves full of foundations, like 30 different bottles. It’s too much. No one needs that much makeup, and it sets a strange example for people who are just getting into beauty.”

These reflections indicate that for some participants influencer culture not only affects their own consumer habits but raises ethical concerns about its broader impact, especially in promoting unsustainable behaviors and influencing young people.

4.2 Persuasive Elements of Beauty Influencer Content (RQ2)

This section addresses the second research question, which explores what persuasive elements Gen Z women associate with effective beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram. The themes identified reflect how participants perceive and respond to different content styles, tones and formats and how these elements shape their engagement with beauty influencer content.

A notable pattern across all interviews was that participants paid attention to the style, tone and format of beauty influencer content. When discussing what makes the said content persuasive, participants consistently highlighted a preference for authentic, relatable and demonstrative content, while expressing a clear rejection towards overly polished and produced content. Importantly, the participants had a strong awareness of how the production style and tone of the content signaled authenticity. Across both TikTok and Instagram, participants showed that there are content cues that shape whether they find the influencers' beauty content persuasive or credible.

Table 2 presents the main themes and sub-themes that were identified for the second research question.

Table 2 RQ 2 themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Natural and low-production style	Casual, everyday aesthetics Rejection of overly polished content
Authentic tone and balanced reviews	Honest, relatable reviews Inclusion of both positive and negative aspects
Product use and demonstrations	Real-life product integration Before and after demonstrations Process-based content

4.2.1 Content format Preferences

When discussing the type of beauty influencer content that participants found the most engaging or persuasive, they often reflected not only on authenticity but also on the importance of the content format. Participants constantly preferred short-form videos, particularly those with talking, voice overs, text-overlays over static images or overly curated posts. TikTok videos such as Get Ready With me (GRWM), honest reviews and skincare and makeup routines were highlighted as the most valuable for their relatability and realism.

R3: “On TikTok, I like when there’s text on the screen or when they talk while showing how the product is used, I like moving content more than still. Videos where you can actually see the texture and the results, that you can’t get from pictures.”

R6: “On Instagram it’s often like a pretty flat lay product image with a long caption, but I don’t really read long captions. TikTok makes it easier to get what you need to know, when you see it actually in action. Even if the video is fast, it shows so much more.

Several participants also noted the usefulness of voiceovers and on-screen text for enhancing understanding, especially when these elements were used to narrate experiences or walk through product routines or product names.

R9: I like when videos have a voiceover while doing their routine or applying the product. It feels more structured to get both the visual and verbal explanation. If there’s no text or voice, I sometimes miss what's important. I feel like content needs to be easy to follow.

R1: “I sometimes watch videos without sound if I’m in a bus or late at night, so if the video doesn’t have any text or key points on the screen, I won’t watch it because I’d just miss all important stuff.”

Videos were strongly favored over static images, particularly to their ability to demonstrate product application in real time and provide visual evidence about the product's performance. Participants emphasized their preference for video content over static images, explaining that Instagram’s heavily edited photos and professional lighting often lacked the realness, of how a beauty product truly appeared on skin, making it difficult to assess the texture or bendability. Participants valued beauty content such as Get Ready With Me (GRWM) videos for their real-time demonstrations, noting that elements such as on-screen text and voiceovers made the content feel more personal, informative and it enhanced trust and engagement.

R4: “I don’t trust Instagram product photos. They’re edited, the lighting is too professional, and the skin is probably blurred. You can’t tell how the product really looks. In a video, without filters I can see the texture, how it blends and if it looks patchy. I always want to see the products in movements, not just as perfect pictures.”

R8: “I love GRWM videos because they’re more than just showing the packaging, it’s kind of like you’re with them in the moment. And I like it when creators add little text or explain with a voiceover what they’re doing, it feels more personal and helpful.”

4.2.2 Natural & Low-production Style

When asking participants about their preferences regarding the visual style and feeling of beauty influencer content, they constantly expressed strong preference for natural, low-production video content over highly stylized or professionalized influencer posts. The key driver of persuasive impact was realness and perceived alignment with everyday life. The participants expressed a preference for casual, home-filmed videos where beauty influencers demonstrated products in use. Seeing applications, such as foundation being applied directly on the face, felt more authentic and trustworthy than just showcasing the beauty product in its packaging.

R2: “I like it when the video is filmed casually and not over-produced with big ring lights and filters. If it looks too perfect, it looks way too perfect which feels fake. If someone is just in their normal space, talking about the product honestly, it’s much more believable.”

R1: “If it feels like it’s a part of their own, real makeup routine and not just something they do for money, that’s when I start to trust what they say. I love when they show the product in an actual, longer routine and not just by itself”

This preference was not only about aesthetics but reflected a deeper desire for transparency and rejection of too constructed and commercial content. For participants, more natural and relatable production styles served as important cues for trust, helping them to see what a genuine personal recommendation is.

R4: “Too styled and too much editing kills my interest. When there is a too perfect lightning or quality, filters being used or too many transitions, it doesn’t feel genuine. I prefer when it’s more natural, like in their own room and normal light from mother nature.”

4.2.3 Authentic Tone & Balanced Reviews

When discussing what kind of tone and reviewing style they found the most trustworthy, participants valued a relatable, authentic tone and balanced product reviews. Content that acknowledged both strengths and limitations of a beauty product was perceived as more trustworthy and persuasive.

R9: “I like it when they say that all products don’t suit everyone. When the influencer is honest that the product might not be suitable for their skin or work for them, it makes me trust them more. It feels more real than just saying that the product is perfect for everyone.”

R7: “If everything is just over-hyped praise for the beauty product, it gets kind of annoying. I like it when they also mention what didn’t work for them or what wasn’t perfect.”

4.2.4 Product use & Demonstration

When asked about what makes influencer content convincing in terms of product performance, the most consistently cited persuasive element was visible product demonstration. The participants wanted to see products integrated into real-life routines, producing observable results in more than just one lightning.

R7: “I want to see it being used in everyday life, not just a first impression, you can’t always trust a first impression, it might be staged or just made look good for the video. If they can showcase the product in their everyday routine, like how it works overtime.”

R3: “There has to be some kind of proof, like before and after that shows what the product actually does. Otherwise, it’s just talk, anyone can say that any product is good. If I see results or at least some kind of real testing, I might believe it more.”

Several participants also noted that routine use signals greater authenticity and personal endorsement as opposed to a staged product placement. The trust for an influencer

increased when they saw them using a beauty product over a longer time period, in their other makeup- or skincare videos instead of just in one sponsored post.

R4: “Well I follow a lot of influencers, so I feel like I know already their routines and such. I want to see a product in that specific routine that I have gotten familiar with, to see if the influencer really is into it and if it fits how they normally use products.”

The emphasis on evidence-based persuasion reflects Gen Z’s demand for verifiability, a response to the increasing amount of sponsored content, and algorithmic curation. Participants did not take influence claims at face value, since many of them required demonstratable evidence to validate marketing messages. Many participants required demonstratable evidence to validate the message from the influencer and to differentiate genuine product recommendations from paid promotions.

4.3 Evaluating Source Credibility and Authenticity (RQ3)

This section presents the findings related to the third research question, which explored how Gen Z women evaluate the credibility and authenticity of beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram. The themes identified reflect the factors participants consider when assessing trustworthiness, including content cues, influencer behavior and platform-specific dynamics.

A notable pattern across all interviews was that participants employed a critical approach when evaluating the credibility and authenticity of beauty influencer content. Factors such as transparency of sponsorships, long-term familiarity with the influencer and consistency of values, and content style were consistently cited as important for trusting the beauty influencer. Moreover, participants demonstrated clear platform literacy, maintaining specific expectations for TikTok and Instagram in terms of authenticity and paid ads. Across the sample, trust in beauty influencer content was shown to be content-specific and shaped by both individual influencer behavior as well as broader platform norms.

Table 3 presents the main themes and sub-themes that were identified for the third research question.

Table 3 RQ3 themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Transparency in sponsorships	Open disclosure of paid partnerships Selective and value-consistent paid partnerships
Familiarity, trust and consistency	Long-term familiarity with beauty influencer Parasocial connection to the beauty influencer Consistent content style and personal values
Differences between the two platforms	TikTok perceived as authentic Instagram perceived as curated and for friends Different content trustworthiness

4.3.1 Transparency in Sponsorships

When discussing how participants evaluate the credibility of sponsored content, a foundational expectation was transparent disclosure of sponsorships. Participants universally rejected undisclosed advertising as a serious violation of trust. However, transparency alone was not sufficient to guarantee trust, since participants also valued selective partnerships. Beauty influencers who only worked with brands that suited their social media persona, style, and values were seen as more credible.

R4: “I really hate when influencers try to hide that its paid or they have received the beauty products as gifts. It feels dishonest, but luckily the laws in Finland are pretty strict for influencers, so I haven’t actually been fooled too many times, or what I know of.”

R3: “It’s okay if it’s a paid partnership, it just has to be clear. If it’s an ad it doesn’t mean that I wouldn’t trust the pros and cons, but if they try to hide it, it feels suspicious.”

The expectation for honest disclosure was shared across all participants. Many commented that they were specifically critical of influencers that appeared to present sponsored content as if it were a personal, unpaid recommendation. Many participants highlighted their understanding of why influencers publish sponsored content, and all participants had positive encounters and feelings towards sponsored posts, it just had to be clearly labeled as paid.

4.3.2 Familiarity, Trust & Consistency

When asked about the factors that contribute to trusting a beauty influencer, across the interviews, participants described familiarity with an influencer as an important factor

in trusting their beauty content. Many also noted that the development of parasocial relationships played a significant role in trust formation. Familiarity helped participants judge if an influencer's recommendations felt genuine or motivated by money.

R3: "If you can relate to the influencer, you trust them more. If they have the same kind of skin or style in makeup or how they do their hair, or if they talk in a way that feels natural for me, it makes me subconsciously trust them more."

Long-term consistency of content and values further enhanced credibility. Influencers who maintained a coherent personal style and did not constantly shift their personal branding were perceived as more authentic. In contrast, those beauty influencers who appear to "sell out themselves" or chase trends, were viewed carefully.

R6: "I actually trust influencers I've followed for a long time, and I think I can notice if they suddenly change and start promoting random stuff that doesn't fit their personality or their previous content, I kind of lose trust. But if they stay the same, I often do believe their recommendations."

R2: Even if I wouldn't follow the influencer but I just happen to see their content a lot, like on TikTok, I think I do already know what they're like and if they suddenly start promoting like Temu or similar stuff, I would lose trust right away."

Across the responses from participants, familiarity and observed consistency over a long time emerged as key signals of credibility. Participants described becoming more skeptical of influencers who changed their behavior or personality suddenly or per paid collaboration or started to promote a wide range of unrelated products.

4.3.3 Platform Differences: TikTok vs. Instagram

When discussing how the participants perceive content on TikTok versus Instagram, they displayed a clear and consistent platform-specific expectation in credibility and authenticity to beauty influencer content. TikTok was generally viewed as a more authentic platform for beauty content, due to its emphasis on spontaneity and less-polished aesthetics and the algorithms' ability to surface diverse content from both influencers and everyday users.

R4: "Instagram feels more curated, which comes off as beauty influencers making more effort for the content which makes it a bit more trustworthy. Like if it's someone I've followed for a long time and they post a very informative post or retailed caption, then sometimes I trust that more than a random TikTok. But there's layers to it. If the Instagram post is too polished, it loses trust. "

However, this was not the most popular view in the sample. Several other participants

viewed Instagram's polished aesthetics as less authentic and more like traditional advertising. R3 noted that Instagram has more ads and curated vibes these days, and they don't go there for real product experiences. For them, it feels like brands are controlling it more than creators.

Even if many participants felt that beauty influencer content on Instagram seems to be more polished and therefore less authentic, some of them highlighted Instagram Stories, to be a place where they find new beauty products that feel authentically presented.

R5: "If I discover a beauty product on Instagram it's usually through the Instagram Stories, probably from a lifestyle influencer I already follow and trust. I don't really go to Instagram to search for beauty stuff, but if it comes up in Stories casually, I might get interested."

All participants explained that they use Instagram more for keeping in touch with friends and their lives, instead of trying to find new beauty products or get inspired. For that purpose, they open up TikTok.

R6: "Instagram is mostly where I see what my friends are doing or follow people I know in real life. I don't really use it for influencers or beauty stuff anymore."

R7: "It's more of a social app for me, to keep in touch with my friends. TikTok is where I get inspired or learn about new products, but on Instagram I check on people I already know."

Even though most of the participants highlighted TikTok as the dominant tool for product discovery, authentic and real feeling, they didn't have any concrete explanation to why Instagram felt fake to them. Several participants noted that the beauty content they see and engage with, comes through TikTok and if they get interested in a specific beauty product, they search it up on TikTok.

In terms of platform use, participants described clear patterns. Instagram was primarily used to keep in touch with friends and follow their personal lives, rather than to seek beauty content or product inspiration. In contrast, TikTok was regarded as the primary platform for beauty discovery and evaluation.

4.4 Summary of the Key Findings

The findings in this study provide new insight into how Gen Z women engage with beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram and how this content shapes their consumer behavior and trust evaluations. Three key patterns emerge from the data

In relation to RQ1, participants described TikTok as the dominant platform shaping their beauty consumer journeys. TikTok served both as a discovery engine through algorithmic exposure as well as a search tool for evaluating beauty products and brands. Participants constantly reported that Instagram was no longer a primary source of product discovery.

Repetition and social proof on TikTok strongly influenced interest, with frequent exposure to a product increasing its perceived trustworthiness. Participants also described how TikTok-driven awareness translated into offline behavior, triggering in-store impulse purchases. However, they approached viral trends with caution, often delaying purchases to see whether a beauty product really lived up to the hype.

In relation to RQ2, participants valued persuasive content elements that signaled authenticity and transparency from the beauty influencer. A natural, low-production style and relatable tone were consistently preferred over highly stylized, produced or commercial content. Balanced reviews, where influencers discussed both strengths and weaknesses of products, were perceived as more trustworthy and persuasive. Visible product demonstration, particularly in real-life context, was a key factor in increasing interest and purchase intention. TikTok's format and culture were seen as better suited to this type of authentic content than Instagram.

In relation to RQ3, participants evaluated source credibility through a combination of content cues, platform expectations, and relationship factors. Transparent disclosure of sponsorships was essential, and influencers who partnered selectively with congruent brands were seen as more credible. Familiarity and consistency in an influencer's content and values enhanced trust, with long-term parasocial relationships playing an important role. Participants also demonstrated a high level of platform literacy, recognizing that TikTok generally felt more authentic and peer-driven, while Instagram was perceived to be more curated and commercialized, and therefore less trustworthy for beauty content. Instagram was seen more as a social media channel for seeing content from friends, rather than exploring influencers and beauty products.

Overall, the findings reveal that Gen Z women are highly active, thoughtful, selective and critical consumers of beauty influencer content. The participants do not passively accept all messages but actively choose which content to trust, based on their own experiences for authenticity, honesty, and relevance to themselves.

5 DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The findings reveal that the Gen Z women of this study are highly media-literate consumers of beauty influencer content on both TikTok and Instagram. Their engagement with influencer content is both active and critical, shaped by a nuanced understanding of the platform dynamics, norms, content cues, and trustworthiness signals. The study demonstrates that beauty influencer content is deeply embedded in their everyday social media use, influencing not only online engagement but also offline purchasing behaviors. The following sections discuss these findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework, highlighting how they can contribute to a deeper understanding of Gen Z women and their feelings towards influencer marketing on TikTok and Instagram.

5.1 Beauty Influencer Content and the Consumer Journey (RQ1)

The findings offer an understanding of how the Gen Z women of this study interact with beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram across various stages of the consumer journey. The findings highlight a deep integration of beauty influencer content into their everyday digital routines, especially on TikTok. There, the beauty product discovery is not an intentional or separate act but rather embedded in the algorithmic flow of the women's social media consumption. This finding is consistent with Solomon et al.'s (2013) model of Consumer Buying Behavior, where purchasing decisions were found to be influenced by a combination of internal motivations, such as curiosity, identity expression, external triggers and peer validation. Peer validations in this case are the influencer recommendations and social proof that the participants of this study encounter daily on social media channels.

A central pattern that emerged across interviews was that product discovery and inspiration are now deeply integrated into the participants everyday social media use. Participants of the interviews consistently described encountering beauty products passively, particularly on TikTok, where the algorithm pushes engaging and visually compelling content to users regardless of prior search behavior. This taps into the first phase of the AIDA model, "attention" (Hassan, et al., 2015) and reflects how TikTok content fosters product awareness and grabs the attention of the participants. TikTok emerged as the dominant platform for both the previously mentioned passive discovery as well as active information search, with several of the participants noting that they now use TikTok to search information, instead of Google. This might suggest, that TikTok has become a new search engine for Gen Z women, at least among the interview participants

This finding does align with the article published in Forbes by Koetsier (2024), where it was noted that 62 % of 18- to 24-year-olds use TikTok for search. Instagram's search tool was put into a secondary role by the participants, who often associated Instagram content with curated aesthetics, brand-led content and occasional product validation.

The findings also reinforce the role of Content Marketing in creating perceived value across different stages of the consumer journey. Participants expressed strong preferences for content formats that delivered demonstratable value, such as reviews, tutorials or side-by-side comparisons. These formats offer what Rahman (2024) terms "epistemic value", helping consumers feel more informed and confident in their purchase decisions. Such content supports the information search and evaluation stages outlined in both Solomon et al.'s (2013) Decision Making Model and the Social Customer Journey. As Bubphapant and Brandao (2023) argue, value-driven content fosters engagement and trust, which appeared especially important for the Gen Z participants in this study, who are highly sensitive to perceived authenticity and transparency.

The impact of TikTok on the purchase decision itself was particularly notable. Repetition of certain products across multiple beauty influencers and their channels created a sense of legitimacy, prompting some participants to act, especially when encountering the product in-store and remembering the videos they have seen about it. This illustrates how digital exposure can influence offline impulse purchases, often triggered by emotional responses and prior mental connection to the product. These findings directly mirror the "desire" and "action" stages of the AIDA model and shows how TikTok blurs the boundaries between online influence and in-real-life consumer behavior.

Importantly, participants showed high levels of media literacy and platform-specific expectations. They were aware of TikTok's tendency to amplify trends and expressed critical engagement with viral content. Many participants indicated that they would delay purchases until a product's popularity had calmed down or persisted longer than the initial hype, to ensure a good purchase. This reflective behavior talks about how Gen Z consumers navigate influencer content with both curiosity and skepticism. This aligns with the expanded view of the Consumer Journey proposed by Harrigan et al. (2021), where the evaluation stage is no longer a moment, but an iterative process shaped by ongoing exposure, peer conversations and trust-building.

The findings also highlight how the post-purchase phase of the consumer journey has become more socialized. Several participants shared how they discuss beauty products

with friends offline and online, after discovering or purchasing them through beauty influencer content. This supports Shareef et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of the social customer journey, where loyalty and post-purchase behaviors, such as recommending products or sharing reviews, are part of a continuous social feedback circle.

Finally, participants' reflections revealed how beauty influencer content has shifted long-term attitudes and behaviors toward beauty consumption. Compared to pre-TikTok habits, participants reported being more adventurous, informed and brand aware. Influencer content has replaced traditional advertising and peer recommendations as the primary source of products discovery and evaluation. This shift reflects a broader evolution in persuasion and trust in digital environments, supporting the relevance of integrated models like the AIDA framework and Content Marketing Theory in understanding consumer journeys.

In conclusion, beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram play a critical role in shaping the participants' consumer behavior across all stages of the buying process. TikTok's algorithmic design and content formats have particularly lifted its influence, embedding product awareness into everyday scrolling habits and making transitions from inspiration to purchase. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that participants do not passively accept all marketing messages but rather critically evaluate the content based on value, trust and social cues, illustrating the growing complexity of the modern consumer journey.

5.2 Content Features and Persuasive Elements (RQ2)

The findings related to research questions 2, illustrate that Gen Z women, who participated in this study, respond to persuasive features in beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram. While visual aesthetics and platform-specific features play a role, the persuasiveness of such content was primarily linked to perceived authenticity, relatability and the ability to provide relevant, engaging and practical information for the participants. This supports the foundational premise of Content Marketing Theory, which emphasizes the delivery of audience-centered, value driven content aimed at building long-term engagement instead of promoting immediate transactions (Forrest, 2019; Rahman, 2024).

A defining insight from the interviews is that the Gen Z participants are particularly drawn to beauty content that feels personal and real. This sense of authenticity often stems from informal and neutral presentation styles, unscripted talk, visible trial and

error of beauty products and candid product evaluations. This reflects what Bubphapant and Brandao (2023) describe as epistemic and emotional value in content marketing, which means knowledge that helps the viewer make informed decisions and emotional connection through the influencer's honesty and vulnerability. Participants expressed a strong dislike to overproduced or overly commercialized content, especially on Instagram, which many participants viewed as "too curated" or "too scripted". In contrast, TikTok's spontaneous, unfiltered aesthetic was more often linked to perceived trustworthiness and engagement.

These perceptions map onto the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1980), which explains how persuasion can occur through two cognitive routes: central and peripheral. Participants who engaged deeply with content of certain products, such as watching multiple reviews and evaluation how a product looked on different skin types, demonstrated central route processing, requiring a more effortful cognition. This was particularly evident in the participants use of TikTok as a search engine to gather reviews and comparisons before making purchase decisions. In these cases, persuasion depended on the quality of arguments in the content, such as visual demonstration or ingredient transparency, rather than superficial cues.

However, peripheral cues also played a role in shaping attitudes. Participants described being engaged by influencers' tone, humor, likability and storytelling abilities, even when not actively seeking information. These elements, captured withing Source Credibility Theory, include the influencers' perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Eisend, 2006; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Influencers who were relatable and transparent, disclosed sponsorships, and shared personal experiences were often seen as more trustworthy and therefore more persuasive. In contrast, influencers who posted repetitive sponsorships or lacked personal engagement were often met with skepticism among the nine participants.

Several participants described how certain content formats, such as "Get Ready With me" (GRWM) videos, tutorials and transformation content, captured their attention and sparked interest through visual and emotionally engaging storytelling. These formats often capture the participants attention, spark interest through visual engagement, and often led to feelings of a need or want by highlighting transformative benefits and in some cases even encouraged action, such as a product search or a store visit. This pattern of engagement that the participants highlighted, aligns with the persuasive stages outlined in the AIDA model. (Hassan, et al., 2015). The role of repetition, particularly

when multiple beauty influencers promoted the same product during the same time, was found to increase credibility and inspiration to purchase among participants. Yet the participants were also quick to identify when repetition crossed the line into perceived inauthenticity, such as when campaign appeared highly coordinated.

Another dimension of persuasion found in the interview data was the format and design of content. Participants highlighted that short-form videos with on-screen text, product close-ups and embedded commentary were found to be especially persuasive, as they provided clear information without requiring too much effort from the viewer. While Instagram carousels and long captions were sometimes appreciated for providing additional context to the content, they were seen to be less effective than TikTok videos at sparking the participant's interest. This confirms Rahman's (2024) observation that platform-specific affordances significantly shape content effectiveness in content marketing.

The findings also suggest that persuasion is not purely about the specific product, but rather the experience of the content. Participants often emphasized narrative formats, humorous, vulnerability or relatable routines, such as skincare for sensitive skin or budget friendly shopping hauls, as more engaging and memorable than straightforward promotions. The influencers who were most persuasive were those who felt like friends and whose beauty routines and challenges reflected the participants own.

In summary, persuasive beauty influencer content for the Gen Z women in this study are not defined by aesthetic perfection or celebrity appeal, but by relatability, transparency and contextual relevance. The effectiveness of such content relies on its ability to deliver emotional, functional and epistemic value, often through platform-specific formats like TikTok reviews, relatable routines and repeat exposure across diverse influencers. When these elements align, they engage these nine participants through both central and peripheral routes of persuasion, ultimately shaping their preferences, perceptions and purchasing decisions. These findings validate the applicability of the ELM, Content Marketing Theory, Source Credibility Theory and the AIDA model.

5.3 Credibility and Authenticity in Beauty Influencer Content (RQ3)

The third and final research question explored how Gen Z women evaluate credibility and authenticity in beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram. The findings reveal that perceptions of trustworthiness and authenticity are central to how participants perceive and respond to beauty influencer content. These interpretations

are shaped by how the participants actively evaluate the content they see on social media, considering factors like platform norms, content style, influencer behavior and the overall context in which the content is delivered. The findings are in line with Source Credibility Theory and are further supported by Content Marketing Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which together help explain why some content and certain influencers come across as more trustworthy and relatable than others.

At the core of Source Credibility Theory is the proposition that persuasive communication depends on the perceived expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness of the message source (Eisend, 2006; Serban, 2010). Participants in this study consistently evaluated influencers along these three dimensions. However, for the Gen Z participants, these factors are heavily filtered through platform culture. For example, trustworthiness was most closely associated with transparency, particularly around sponsorships, product gifting and telling the honest opinion about products. Participants expressed scepticism toward influencers who failed to disclose paid partnerships or whose content felt overly rehearsed or identical to other influencers. As one participant noted, seeing *“ten videos in a row about the same serum”* triggered suspicion that the content was part of a coordinated marketing campaign, or a product hype, which reduced credibility.

In contrast, influencers who were open about being sponsored, or who shared some reviews with also their negative thoughts, even of gifted products, were described as more honest and therefore more trustworthy. Being transparent reinforces trust and some participants even stated that disclosing a sponsorship while still providing balanced opinions of the beauty product, increased their willingness to trust the content and the beauty influencer. These findings support prior research that suggest peer-generated content and perceived authenticity often carry more persuasive weight than brand-produced advertising (Westerman et al. 2014).

In the expertise dimension of Source Credibility Theory, participants valued lived experience and visible evidence instead of formal credentials. For example, an influencer who showed how a product performed on their own skin, or who compared several products based on personal trials was seen more credible among the participants. When asked an additional question during the interviews about the expertise of an influencer, such as professional expertise from hairdressers, dermatologists or licensed makeup artists, none of the participants found this kind of professional expertise to increase their trust in the influencer. Credibility in this case was rooted in the content that enabled

critical evaluation, such as detailed tutorials or ingredient explanations, rather than in the influencer's status or popularity. This perception aligns with the central route of the ELM, in which consumers process information more carefully when they are motivated to understand how a product might meet their individual needs (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The role of attractiveness, as outlined in the Source Credibility Theory, was acknowledged by participants, but didn't seem as important. While aesthetic appeal contributed to first impressions or platform reach, it was rarely the deciding factor in establishing credibility. In some cases, overly polished appearances reduced authenticity. This was particularly noted on Instagram, where high production values and curated aesthetics were perceived by several participants as masking true intentions. Participants frequently contrasted this with TikTok's low production value, spontaneous aesthetic, which they associated with more authentic self-presentation and content delivery. These attitudes reflect broader shifts in digital culture, where relatability often trumps idealization in trust and community engagement (Abidin, 2021).

An additional pattern emerging from the interviews was that authenticity is not solely individual but contextual. That is, participants evaluated authenticity considering the platform (TikTok vs. Instagram), the content format, and the influencer's narrative consistency over time. For example, an influencer who had historically given unsponsored reviews or had built a following through casual, relatable content was seen as more trustworthy, even when they later published a brand collaboration. Authenticity, in this context, was perceived as a long-term personal brand attribute, not a one-time performance. Participants also pointed out that influencers who engaged with followers, responded to comments, or included personal stories and experiences in their posts were more likely to be perceived as real or honest.

Another important insight from the interviews relates to platform differences. TikTok was repeatedly described as a space where credibility is built through rawness and repetition. Seeing multiple independent creators recommending the same product across different videos built a sense of organic trust, particularly when the reviews differed or offered the influencers own perspectives. This form of distributed credibility, in which trust emerges from collective voices of a peer community, further complicated the traditional top-down model of persuasion found in celebrity endorsement literature. Instagram, on the other hand was often viewed as more influenced by brand control and

algorithmic suppression of non-commercial content, leading participants to be more cautious in accepting claims at face value.

From the perspective of Content Marketing Theory, the findings suggest that building trust with these Gen Z consumers depend on offering value through content, especially content that is informative and emotionally engaging. Participants found beauty influencer content more credible when it provided useful tips, entertainment, or felt personally relatable, rather than simply promoting a beauty product. Participants reported trusting influencers who showed how they actually use the products in their everyday lives, in their daily routines, showed real word use cases, have honest opinions and acknowledged both strengths and weaknesses. These practices reflect the key ideas in the Content Marketing Theory, which highlights the importance of building trust over time through consistent, transparent and relevant communication. (Rahman, 2024).

In sum, these nine Gen Z women tend to be thoughtful and sometimes critical when judging the credibility and authenticity of beauty influencer and their content. Their judgements are shaped not only by the influencer's behavior and content style but also by the platform they are using, how consistent the influencer has been over time and whether the content is in line with their own values and beliefs. While Source Credibility Theory helps explain some of these judgements, the findings show that on social media, credibility is shaped in a more interactive, flexible and context-dependent way. For marketers and beauty influencers, this underlines the need of being consistently transparent, relatable and genuinely engaged with their audience to build long-term influence and trust.

5.4 Conclusions

This thesis set out to explore how beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram shapes the purchasing behavior of Gen Z women, with specific attention to the consumer journey, persuasive content features and evaluations of credibility and authenticity. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, the study examined nine Gen Z women aged 25–28, in how they engage with, interpret and act upon influencer content across these two dominant social media platforms. By grounding the analysis in established theories, such as Buying Behavior Theory, the Social Customer Journey, Content Marketing Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Source Credibility Theory and the AIDA model, the study was able to draw meaningful connections between theoretical concepts and lived user experiences.

The findings from this study reveal that beauty influencer content is deeply embedded in these Gen Z women's everyday digital routines. Instead of actively seeking out influencer content or treating it as something transactional, participants came across posts and videos naturally while scrolling through their social media feeds. This was especially true on TikTok, where the algorithm plays a major role in what users see. Many participants described discovering products by chance, through repeated exposure to short-form videos rather than by intentionally looking for them. This pattern challenges linear models of decision making and supports the idea from the Social Customer Journey, that modern consumer behavior is often social and spontaneous.

In contrast, Instagram was perceived as less relevant for discovery and more suited to brand validation or follow-up checking after initial exposure on TikTok. Participants repeatedly expressed that Instagram's highly curated visual style and algorithmic structure reduced the perceived authenticity of influencer content. In both platforms, however, it became evident that the form and context of the content mattered as much as the message itself, demonstrating the relevance of the Elaboration Likelihood Model and AIDA in explaining how attention, interest, desire and action are generated through different routes and formats.

One of the main conclusions of this study is that persuasive influence in beauty influencer content is not just about direct product endorsements or promotional language. Instead, it depends on how well the content meets the users' expectations for relevance, relatability, and authenticity. Participants found beauty influencer posts most convincing when the content offered some kind of value to the viewer, whether it was helpful information, emotional connection, entertaining or social. Tutorials, reviews and transformation videos were especially persuasive for the participants, especially when the influencer shared personal stories, talked informatively about the ingredients or showed the beauty product in actual use. This kind of content is offering both meaningful information and engaging storytelling, something that aligns with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which explains how people process messages both thoughtfully and through impulsive choices.

Repetition also stood out as an important persuasive factor. Participants said that they were influenced not just by one influencers recommendation, but by seeing the same product mentioned by several influencers in different context. This repeated exposure of a beauty product made the product feel more trustworthy and worth trying. This pattern

of consistent repeated messaging across platforms and influencers, reflects ideas from the Content Marketing Theory.

A third major conclusion is that credibility and authenticity play a crucial role in how participants respond to influencer content. These qualities were not viewed as fixed traits of the influencer but as something built and earned over time. Participants said they were more likely to trust influencers who were open about sponsorships, shared honest opinions and showed that they genuinely used the products they recommended. Being responsive to followers and discussing with them also helped build trust in the participants eyes. While these findings support the Source Credibility Theory, they also highlight how expectations have shifted, at least among the participants in this study, who are highly familiar with social media. For these participants, authenticity didn't mean the post wasn't sponsored, it meant that the influencer stayed consistent with their usual tone and content, showed honest judgement and felt emotionally genuine.

Finally, the interviews revealed broader concerns about overconsumption and unrealistic beauty standards, particularly among younger audiences. While participants acknowledged and appreciated the inspiration and practical tips that beauty influencers content can offer, many participants were also aware of the downsides. The downsides the participants highlighted were feelings about pressure to buy more than needed or to live up to idealized beauty standards. Some described how their behavior had changed over time, moving from impulse purchases driven by TikTok to a more thoughtful and selective way to buy beauty products. This suggests a growing critical awareness in how the participants engage with beauty content on social media.

In conclusion, beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram shapes the nine Gen Z participants buying behavior in many ways. It introduces them to new beauty products, helps them compare choices, creates excitement around beauty routines, and have made them more informed about ingredients, products and brands. The influence comes not only from repetition, but from how authentic and relatable the content feels, something that is especially important to the participants who are open to influence, but at the same time increasingly thoughtful about who and what they trust.

5.5 Reliability

This chapter discusses the reliability of the study, referring to the consistency, transparency and replicability of the study process and outcomes. In qualitative research, reliability involves assessing whether the research process is well-documented and stable

enough that another researcher could reasonably follow the same steps and arrive at similar findings. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018)

The study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews, a method that is well-suited for exploring in-depth experiences and meanings of the subject. While the chosen approach allows rich and flexible data collection, it also introduces potential variability due to the interpretive nature of qualitative style (Bryman & Bell, 2019).

Thematic analysis was carried out systemically, and the coding process was closely tied to both the research questions of the study and recurring patterns in the data and interviews. Additionally, the inclusion of direct participant quotes supports the reliability by providing transparency between own interpretation and the data itself (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). This allows the reader to assess the connection between findings and the conclusions independently.

However, the sample was limited to a relatively small group of Gen Z women, which may have constrained the diversity of perspectives. Including participants from a broader age range or different cultural backgrounds could have enriched the data and offered even more comparative insights. Additionally, although the interviews allowed for rich data and flexible discussions, some participants needed more explanations and examples for to understand some of the interview questions. The interview-guide was piloted with Gen Z representatives that work with social media marketing, which might have made the interview-guide easily understandable for marketing professionals, instead of everyday people, which were the target group in this study.

6 FINAL REMARKS

This thesis has sought to deepen the understanding of how beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram shapes Gen Z women's consumer behavior, with a focus on authenticity, trustworthiness and persuasive strategies throughout the consumer decision-making journey. The purpose was exploring how social media platforms influence consumer choices not just at the moment of purchase, but throughout a broader journey of discovery, evaluation, and post-purchase reflection.

By exploring this theme through a qualitative approach, this study has shown how authenticity, credibility and content style interact with platform-specific features to shape both attitudes and purchasing behavior of the participants. One of the most interesting findings was the participants' strong preference for TikTok in the discovery and evaluation stages of the consumer journey. While the participant engaged critically with influencer content, they were still emotionally affected by repeated exposure and endorsements, both from beauty influencers and friends. In contrast, Instagram was often described as more polished and curated, and therefore less persuasive. An unexpected, yet important insight, that was not expected in the beginning of the thesis process, was that the tension participants expressed between inspiration and overconsumption.

Overall, the findings highlight the complexity of digital consumer behavior in social media environment. For the Gen Z participants, beauty content is not only advertising and promotional but part of their everyday life and conversations with friends. Influencer marketing, that feels transparent and relatable can be both inspiring and helpful when the participants are making purchasing decisions. What influenced the participants was not only the message from the beauty influencer, but how it was delivered, which platform it appeared on, and whether it aligned with the participants personal values and expectations.

Taken together, these findings offer a better understanding of how beauty influencer content shapes everyday purchasing behavior and decision-making among Gen Z participants, who participated in this study. The study adds to existing research on influencer marketing and digital consumer habits, while also offering practical insights for marketers and beauty influencers. As younger consumers increase their good judgement, the long-term success of influencer marketing will depend less on visibility or reach and more on credibility, value creation and ethical transparency.

6.1 Opportunities for future research

While this thesis offers valuable insights into beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram and the fast-evolving digital landscape of social media, it also opens the door for further academic exploration. First, future studies could expand the demographic scope to include other consumer segments, such as men, non-binary individuals and older age groups, to examine whether platform and influencer influence differ across identities and generations. Additionally, longer research could provide deeper understanding of how consumer attitudes toward influencers evolve over time, particularly in relation to changes in platform algorithms, advertising transparency or broader cultural shifts. A comparative cross-cultural study could also give rich insights as social norms, since beauty standards and platform usage can vary significantly between countries. Moreover, future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys or social media analytics, to strengthen generalizability and validate emerging themes. Lastly, there is room to further investigate the psychological or emotional impact of being continuously exposure to beauty content, such as effects on self-esteem, overconsumption, consumption guilt or even digital fatigue.

APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

Purpose: To explore and understand how beauty influencer content on TikTok and Instagram shapes Gen Z women's purchasing behavior, perceptions of trust, and evaluations of authenticity, across the consumer decision-making process.

Confidentiality and Data Handling: To ensure participant confidentiality and comply with Hanken's data management guidelines, all personal data collected during the interviews are handled securely and anonymized during transcription. Identifying details such as names or social media handles were omitted or replaced with pseudonyms. The audio recordings are stored on password-protected devices and will be permanently deleted no later than one year after the thesis has been approved, in accordance with institutional and GDPR requirements.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any point, without giving a reason.

Warm up questions:

Can you tell me a bit about yourself, and how beauty products and social media play a role in your life?

- Do you follow beauty influencers or engage with beauty content regularly?

How often do you use TikTok and Instagram, and what kinds of content do you usually interact with on each?

Can you describe the types of beauty content you most often engage with on TikTok? And on Instagram?

Section A: Discovery and Purchase Journey

RQ1: “How do Gen Z women describe the impact of TikTok and Instagram beauty influencer content in different stages of their purchasing journey?”

1. What usually draws your attention to a beauty product for the first time?
- Do you find that happens more often on TikTok or Instagram? Why?
2. Can you walk me through the last time you discovered and bought a beauty product that you first saw on TikTok or Instagram? What happened, step by step?

3. What usually draws your attention to a beauty product for the first time?
- Do you find that happens more often on TikTok or Instagram? Why?
4. When you're really close to buying a beauty product, what kind of influencer content helps you decide for sure? Is it the same on both platforms?
5. Have you ever been influenced to buy something without actively planning to, almost subconsciously? What type of content led to that?
6. If you had to choose one platform that influences you more to actually buy, which one would it be, and why?

Section B: Persuasive Content Features

RQ2: "What persuasive elements do Gen Z women associate with the effectiveness of beauty influencer content on TikTok versus Instagram?"

7. What type of content (e.g., tutorials, reviews, trends, transformations) do you find most convincing, and does it differ on TikTok and Instagram? Why?
- Is it about how the product is shown, the editing style, or who is using it?
8. When a video or post 'goes viral,' do you think that affects your perception of how trustworthy or good the product is? Why do you think that is?
9. Do you notice a difference in how influencers promote products on TikTok vs Instagram? What stands out to you?
10. What qualities in a beauty video or post by an influencer make you stop scrolling and pay attention? Why?
11. Do short-form TikToks or longer Instagram posts feel more convincing to you, and why?

Section C: Credibility and Authenticity

RQ3: "How do Gen Z women evaluate source credibility and authenticity in influencer beauty content on TikTok and Instagram?"

12. How do you feel when you see that a beauty post is sponsored? Does that change how much you trust the influencer or the product? Why or why not?
13. What makes an influencer feel authentic or relatable to you? Are there any cues that make you trust them more?
14. Do you feel like one platform makes it easier for influencers to be authentic than the other? Why?
15. Do engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) influence your perception of a product's quality or effectiveness? Why?
 - Do these metrics influence your perception of the influencer's credibility?
16. Can you remember a time when you trusted an influencer's opinion and it turned out well (or poorly)?
 - What made you trust them in the first place?
17. In your experience, is it easier to trust influencers on TikTok or Instagram? Why?

Closing questions:

18. Do you think beauty influencers have changed the way you shop for or think about beauty products?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to share that could help me better understand how influencer beauty content on TikTok or Instagram affects you as a consumer?

APPENDIX 2 LOG OF AI USAGE DURING THESIS PROCESS

This appendix provides a transparent record of how AI tools were used throughout the research and writing process of this thesis. The primary AI tool utilized was Copilot. All AI usage in this thesis align with Hanken School of Economics ethical research practices and academic integrity.

Purpose	Description of use	AI tool used
Research questions	Brainstormed ways to formulate research questions to make them qualitative, instead of quantitative.	Copilot (2025) copilot.microsoft.com
Relevant academic theories	Used AI to find relevant academic theories for the topic of this thesis.	
References	Asked suggestions for sources, academic articles and studies relevant for this thesis.	
Thesis title	Used for help in formulating a more relevant heading for this thesis.	
Translations	Translated the Finnish interview transcriptions to English.	
Headings for Thematic Analysis	Brainstormed catchy headings for the Findings chapter, about the themes found from interviews.	
Reference list	Compared a self-made list of in-text references to the reference list to find missing references.	

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