

# IMPACT OF INFLUENCERS ON A CONSUMER DECISION TO PURCHASE

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## Annotation

*The paper analyzes the impact of influencers on consumer behavior. The research aim – to investigate whether influencers impact consumers' purchasing decisions. The research problem – the impact of influencers on consumer purchasing decision to buy Coca-Cola products. The object of the research – consumer behavior (on the Internet). The quantitative research method used for the research – online questionnaire survey. 330 respondents were interviewed. The conceptual aspect of online consumer behavior was analyzed. The research was limited to analyzing the impact of influencers as one of today's most effective promotional tools on consumer purchasing decisions. Consumers are found to be interested in influencers' promoted Coca-Cola products, but influencers only initiate the consumer's purchasing decision, and the company is recommended to use complex promotional tools for its final goals' realization.*

**Key words:** marketing, promotional tool, influencers, consumer behavior.

## Introduction

**Relevance of the topic** Today's consumers are increasingly relying on social networks to make decisions about purchasing certain products as compared to traditional promotional tools. There could not be denied one of the most obvious benefits of reaching out a broader consumer audience through traditional promotion however it is just one-way communication that does not create consumer loyalty and does not generate the necessary communication process – an essential benefit of social network marketing. In terms of popularity, social media advertising is the cheapest form of advertising available today. Keeping in mind that consumers are increasingly exploring social networks, it is useful for businesses to choose the appropriate promotional format to reach the widest possible audience of consumers. The most intriguing tool for marketing on social networks today is marketing utilizing influencers' opinion. Not only do influencers communicate with potential customers, but they also influence their needs. Company-driven influencers marketing helps to share positive messages about their brand products on social networks. This process is observed to cause *snowballs* effect when the influencers reach a large number of consumers-followers with their posts, and the latter continue to share some information with their followers. In this way, the message posted by the company becomes widely visible. Therefore, it is important to find out the benefits to businesses of influencers and how strongly it influences consumers' decision to purchase a product.

**Research problems.** In the national context, research is largely limited to the study of consumer behavior in the online space: the application of consumer models to online marketing (Juščius, Viskantaitė, 2010); determined trends of internet marketing and their effectiveness evaluation criteria (Juščius, Baranskaitė, 2015); identified the influence of internet marketing tools on sales of retail merchandise (Liesionis et al., 2016). However, there is a lack of research to substantiate the impact of influencers on consumer behavior in a national context. Foreign scholars have experience in this field: opinion leadership was researched in a computerized environment (Lyons, Henderson, 2005), marketing of social media influencers (Harmeling et al., 2017; Isosuo, 2016; Woods, 2016), characteristics of fashion influencers (Zietek, 2016) ); the rise of social media influencer marketing on lifestyle branding (Glucksman, 2017), *Instagram* influencers' advertising (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017), how influencers' marketing influences purchase intentions (Johansen, Guldvik, 2017).

**Research problem.** What is the impact of influencers on consumers' buying decision to purchase *Coca-Cola* products?

**The object of the research.** Consumer behavior (on the Internet).

**The research aim.** To explore the impact of influencers on consumer purchasing decisions.

### The tasks of the research:

1. To conceptualize consumer's behavior - on the Internet.
2. To analyze the tools of e-marketing promotion.
3. Investigate the impact of influencers on *Coca-Cola* products to consumers.

### Research methodology

*Research methods.* In order to scientifically substantiate the research problem, the analysis, synthesis and generalization of scientific literature sources was performed; empirical research was conducted based on quantitative research methods – online survey (testing), statistical analysis, graphic data processing. Data analysis was based on the methodology of Kardelis (2017). In the case of this research, the respondents answered the research questions online, expressed their knowledge of the experience and submitted them for the processing of the research results.

*Rationale and procedures of the research.* In order to more accurately determine the impact of influencers on consumer's behavior and the factors that influence a consumer's purchasing decision, the survey was conducted on social media online by submitting an electronic survey form to the survey participants. Respondents – *Coca-Cola* product consumers potentially impacted by influencers. Survey was posted online and on one of the authors' social networks *Facebook* time line in May 11 - 19, 2019.

*The research instrument.* The survey questionnaire was structured around the following logical sequence: questions of a general nature (forming the profile of the respondents), questions revealing the impact of influencers as the special promotional tool on consumers.

*The research sample.* The generic population was calculated on the basis of one major *Coca-Cola Lithuania* influencers' case. Based on the last *Coca-Cola* product's promotional post on *Instargam* by Orijus Gasanovas likes of this post reached 1890 in May 10, 2019. The survey sample was calculated from a sample size calculator provided by *apklausos.lt* with a probability of 95 percent, a margin of error of 5 percent, and a population of 1,890 people. It was estimated that 319 people would be eligible for the survey and 330 were interviewed, so the results of the study are valid.

*The research ethics.* The ethics of the research include the commonly accepted items (sample size, sample selection, data collection, generalization, etc.) that led to consideration of alternatives to the whole research process, anticipating its strengths and weaknesses, and selecting the most appropriate research course. The research followed the ethical principles of study: protection, secrecy (anonymity and confidentiality), benevolence, universality, significance, respect for personal dignity, justice, and the right to receive accurate information. Respondents were utilized for the research based on the principle of voluntarism implied by the ethics of empirical social research (Bell et al., 2018).

### Specifics of the consumer behavior on the Internet

Business goals are easier to be achieved by defining consumer expectations. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2018), companies that take a closer look at consumer behavior, needs, and hobbies gain an advantage in the competitive battle. Consumer behavior is integral to finding, purchasing, consuming, and forming opinion for products that meet individual needs. Comparing traditional consumers that make conservative purchasing decisions to electronic consumers, the latter are much more open to change and more inclined to try new opportunities (Belinger, Calin, 2011).

Juščius and Viskantaitė (2010) present one of the most intricate models of decision making on the Internet. This process includes, delivery, purchase stage, environment characteristics, and perceived risk factors (Figure 1).

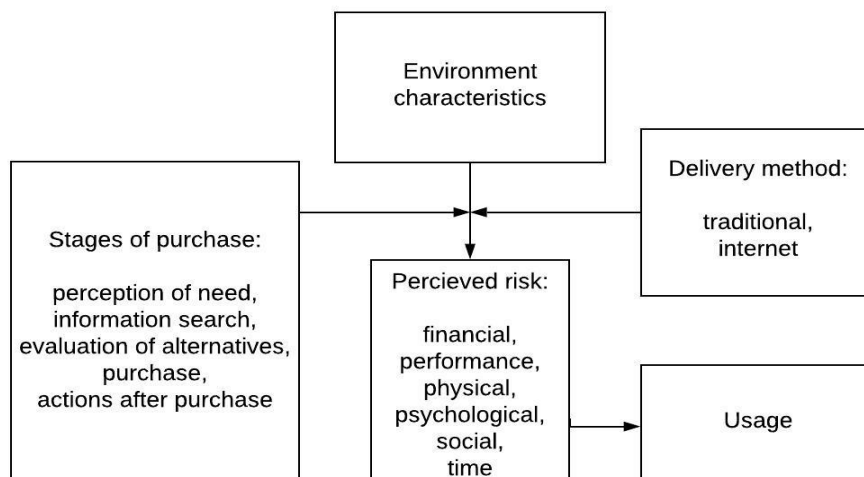


Fig. 1. The model of decision making on the Internet (Juščius, Viskantaitė, 2010)

The above presented environment characteristics of decision-making process on the Internet (internal and external factors of consumer's behavior) stages of purchase making decisions and product delivery, influences consumer's perceived risk, which initiates consumers behavior.

### **Electronic marketing promotional tool**

Sponsorship is an element of the marketing mix that informs the consumer about the product itself. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2018), promotion is a communicative part of marketing that includes four main ways of reaching out a contact audience: advertising, public relations, personal selling, and sales promotion.

In the twenty-first century, information and communication has gained a particular significance. Internet has made it possible for companies to stay competitive by providing their customers convenient, quick and cheaper way to shop (Juščius, Baranskaitė, 2015). According to Bakanauskas (2012), the popularity of this form of marketing was determined by being interactive and being able to communicate directly with people from all over the world. Juščius and Baranskaitė (2015) distinguish electronic marketing and invasive marketing, as well as social network marketing and blogs as one of the most effective means of promoting sales.

E-mail marketing is widely used in segments of business to business (B2B) and business to consumer (B2C) (Glucksman, 2017).

Invasive marketing in form of pop-ups is used when advertising that a product to the person visiting a site. This type of marketing generates higher-than-average click rates, even though majority of clicks are accidental (Juščius, Baranskaitė, 2015).

Social network marketing is treated as innovative electronic tool that emerged in the last decade. Studies have shown that social network marketing is around 20-30 % more effective than other forms of online advertising, and as many as 83 % consumers trust the recommendations of real people (Černikovaitė, 2018). According to Jezukevičiūtė and Davidavičienė (2014), social networks is an expression of communication in virtual space, which makes it easy for a consumer to read and share information. According to statistics, the most active users use social networks daily and follow at least one influencer on *Instagram* (87 %), on *Youtube* (65 %) and on *Facebook* (58 %) (Černikovaitė, 2018). Active users – are those who use social networks and get involved in various discussions and communicate among themselves.

Blogging is the type of electronic marketing that allows sharing relevant and useful content with potential customers. In this way, companies are able to develop two-way communication, to create their own expert image and strengthen loyal relations (Lesionis et al. 2016). The blog is an Internet site similar to diary where bloggers create content in the text and form the consumers' opinion using photos and videos.

The following features of the types of e-marketing discussed above are: e-mail marketing is free but associated with spam, considering EU Opt out legal model, e-mail cannot be sent without the recipient's consent, and the sender's server address may be blocked in the future by anti-virus software; invasive marketing – intrusive and risky; blogs build customer loyalty and initiate informal communication with the customer; social network marketing – effective, free and allowing consumers to control content (Juščius, Baranskaitė, 2015). It is undisputed that influencers create a connection between consumers and brands: improve brand image (94 %), improve brand awareness (92 %), reach new consumers (88%), improve sales (77 %), and manage a reputation (68 %) (Černikovaitė, 2018).

Thus, these tools enable companies to reach consumers with different expectations for the product. However, in order to stay as close as possible to the consumer, one has to choose not one e-marketing tool, but a combination of several.

### **Influencer as a promotional tool**

Influencers as marketing mix promotional component, are based on the belief that certain persons can effectively persuade consumers to make a purchase. Instead of allocating funds to other, more conventional, promotional activities, companies are use influencers to save on the one hand, and on the other to focus on gaining new market share (Woods, 2016).

*Influencer* concept originated from Elihu Katz, a US and Israeli scholar sociologist theory of two communication stream stages which claims, that most people choose their position based on the opinion of the influencer. Anyone who creates quality content attractively writes and takes photos to inspire others in the social space which influences consumer opinion and purchasing decisions can become an influencer (Černikovaitė, 2018).

Influencers began after emergence of social networks on the Internet, when traditional information means (newspapers and magazines) lost their popularity (Brown, Hayes, 2008; Byrne et al., 2017). Initially, companies were focused on traditional journalism, because

journalists could express their opinion in the press, which helped to form consumers opinions (Lyons, Henderson, 2005). Influencers always were an economically effective tool for companies with small budgets to reach the general public (Byrne et al. 2017).

Today influencers are seen as the type of e-marketing that helps companies find individuals who can influence consumer needs the most and capable of conveying messages sent by products to a wide range of consumers (Byrne et al., 2017). Zietek (2016) describes influencers as leaders who influence the judgment and perception of others, helping to build brand awareness and increase sales of products.

The essential functions of an influencer are: communication with the followers, product recommendations, including advertising in messages, information dissemination, opinion formation and information sharing (Abidin, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017). However, the key factor behind the current popularity of contemporary influencers is Para social relationship. It can be regarded as a personal relationship between an influencer and a follower. The followers of this artificial relationship are more likely to believe in opinion of influencer (Abidin, 2016), because the special relationship gives the illusion of live communication. Sometimes followers discovering some similarities with an influencer and begin to identify with him or her. According to Abidin (2016), micro-stars, known as the influencers create communicative intimacy by sharing their everyday experiences (Fig. 3). Influencer differs from the real star by the fact that an influencer is more a public person, thus making him or her more accessible to the ordinary consumer since various life details are shared on the Internet.

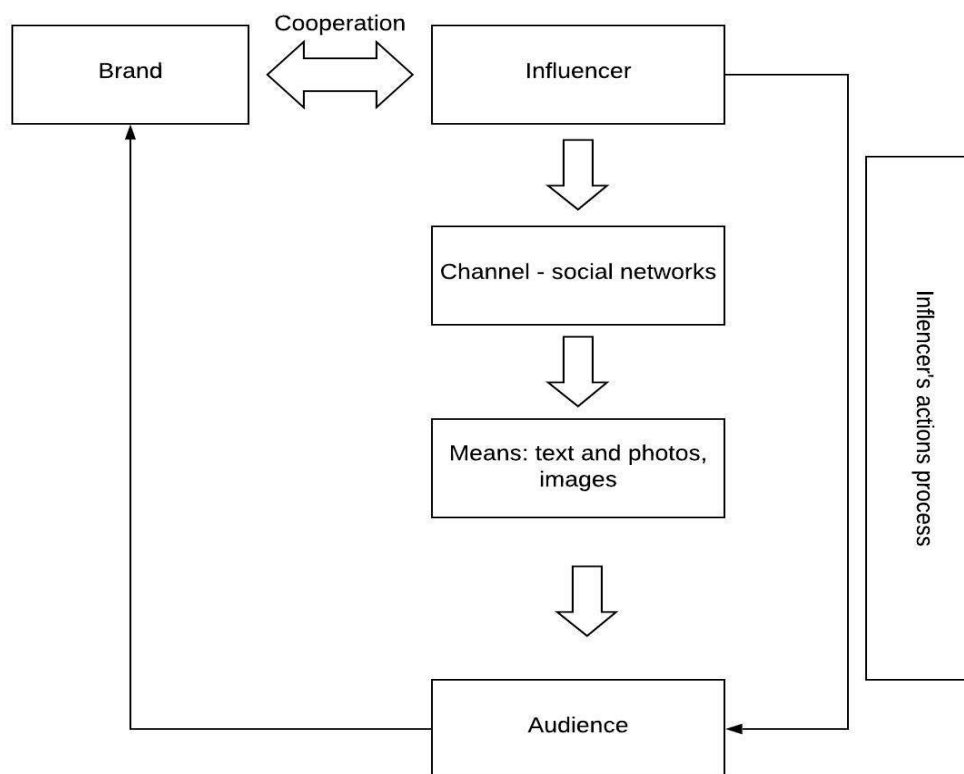


Fig. 2. Process of influencers impact (based on Abidin, 2016; Byrne et al. 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017)

Figure 3 shows that an influencer increases brand awareness in the social space. Comments and shares of such post will be visible to all followers of the influencer on the social space. In this way, the information of the brand is spread to a broad audience. For example, a survey conducted by *Nielsen* 2015 on trust of advertising, showed that 66 % of consumers trust the opinions of others on the Internet, thus placing influencers' marketing as the third most reliable advertising format. In an effort to control the flow of messages, companies have begun giving detailed instructions to influencers on the use of hashtags, the timing of posts, and even certain words to be used in their posts. Occasionally, influencers use the same texts to promote different products. Sometimes influencers promote a product without even trying it, thus abusing the trust of followers. Businesses use influencers show consumers that influencers use those products themselves. This means that brands need to be extremely careful in their choice of influencers.

### The research results

In order to determine how influencers impact purchasing decision of *Coca-Cola* products 330 respondents were interviewed, of which 61 % women 39 % men. Respondents were divided into three groups according to age: 16 - 23 yrs., 24 - 29 yrs. and 30 - 39 yrs. The majority of respondents in the first age group were interviewed - 55.5 %, while in other groups - 42.4 %. The third age group was represented by a small group 7 % of respondents. It responds to the realities of social space users. The research instrument was placed on *Facebook* social space, whose users age represents the first two age groups of the survey respondents discussed above.

The identified social status of the respondents (students, employees, pupils) says a lot about the behavior of specific users and the factors that influence it. Analysis of data revealed that, despite the social status of respondents, advertising by influencers initiates decision to purchase, although respondents are self-reliant before making that decision.

It was found that the most popular social network among respondents also validating previous research results is *Instagram*, followed by *Facebook* and *YouTube*. It is these social networks where influencers work in. *Instagram* is more popular among the youngest respondents (16-23 yr. old, students and pupils) who participated in the survey. *Facebook* social networkers tend to be chosen by 24-29 yr. old respondents, mostly students or / and employees.

Accounts followed by users have a significant impact on the entire process of influencing their behavior. Influencers, who are followed by respondents, if they are not relatives or friends, are likely to be individuals who are not afraid to present their thoughts and suggestions in public, and are likely to inspire respondents with their work and speeches. The research found that 16 - 23-year-old group members tend to follow influencers, friends, acquaintances and stars, while respondents of 24 - 29 age group, usually follow influencers first and friend, acquaintances and brands second. The oldest respondents (aged 30-39 yr.) noted that they follow friends and acquaintances first, and stars second). Therefore, it can be stated that 16 - 23 yr. and 24 - 29 yr. age representatives are more likely to be interested in the content that influencers post on social networks, while the oldest 30 - 39 yr. old are not interested on influencers' posts or those posts do not reach them.

Because today's user can access any content he or she is interested in, regardless of where the influencer is based, the aim was to identify whether Lithuanian or foreign influencers promoting *Coca-Cola* products were more actively followed. It was found that 65.5 % of respondents follow the influencers of Lithuania. There are two possible assumptions for this indicator: the content of the national influencers is up to world standards or respondents have limited foreign language knowledge.

By the way, it was identified that from 1 to 3 and from 4 to 6 influencers are followed only by 9 % while from 7 to 8 - 38% and 9 or more - even 44% respondents, representing the youngest age group (16-23 yr.). There is a slight difference in the number of influencers according to the gender: women tend to follow 9 and more influencers, while men tend to follow 7 to 8 influencers. Meanwhile, the oldest respondents (30-39 yr.) indicated that only 1 to 3 influencers are followed regardless of the gender.

In order to determine the basis on which respondents follow one or another number of influencers, it was found that the majority of respondents (84.6 %) an important factor is influencers recommendations and their broadcasted content. Observation of another person is also an important phenomenon, which undoubtedly shapes the behavior of the user when he or she identifies with the influencer, assuming that if he or she behaves in the same way as his or her influencer, he or she will be similar person. 84.2 % of respondents believe in this transformation. Both factors are crucial for women regardless of age, while men are interested in following the influencers lives, reading the content and agreeing /disagreeing with their thoughts and ideas, but for the latter recommendations of influencers are not relevant.

What concerns influencers advertising *Coca-Cola* products in the social space, it was identified that 97 % of respondents directly perceived some influencers content as *Coca-Cola* products promotion. The remaining 3 % of respondents are likely simply did not understand the promotional action taken at some point, as it is common for influencers to present products indirectly e.g. *Coca-Cola* product may be placed in the corner of a photo uploaded by the influencer.

The product promoted by the influencer seemed undoubtedly more attractive to 39.7 % of respondents while for 47.9 % of respondents it was significant for decision making. The representatives of the most matured group of respondents (30-39 yr.), who probably have a well-formed opinion based on personal experience with regard to the products they are interested in, completely did not agree with this.

Analysis of the survey data showed that influencers' advertising impacted purchasing decision only for 38.5 % of respondents. On the other hand, a big part of them (25 %), represented by 30-39 yr. old age group notes that this has only partially helped with the decision to purchase the product. Thus, it can't be said that influencers have a definitive and continuing influence on consumer decisions.

As most survey participants agree, in absolute or in principle, that influencers promoted products are more attractive, though it has been found that this does not necessarily initiate a consumer decision to buy the product, and it was relevant to find out whether respondents were essentially seeking for product reviews. It was found that 67.3 % of respondents do not really do that. No significant changes were found neither according to age or nor according to gender.

In order to find out whether respondents are not disturbed by frequent product promotions on influencers accounts followers were asked whether or not because of this they decide to unfollow influencers. This was not confirmed by 58,2 % of followers. According to the obtained data, the most annoyed by ads were 16-23-year-old and 30 - 39-year-old respondents. It is likely that the first group of respondents constantly want to try something new, while those over 30 years have their own purchasing habits and tend to have personal opinions based on internal factors of consumer behavior.

Because influencers represent different niches (e.g. Beata Nicolson – cooking, Andrius Tapinas – economics, Rūta Meilutytė – swimming, Orijus Gasanovas – travel experiences), they all use different strategies for consumer impact. One of the most popular strategies is frequent testimonials and reviews, although more disrupting is advertising. However, the research found that the latter on influencers accounts partly (39.7 %) or wholly (41.8 %) builds trust among respondents. According to gender and age 16 – 23 yr. olds trust advertising by influencers the most regardless of the sex, while in 24 - 29 yr. old group women trust influencers advertising the most. It once gains reaffirm that 30-39 yr. olds trust influencers advertising the least. It therefore can be undeniably claimed that trust of influencers depends on age and environment in which the respondent resides. The younger the age, the more likely the respondent trusts the advertising of influencers.

Y and Z generations expressed confidence in influencers has shown that influencers form a right public opinion (51.5 %). It is surprising that even when the influencer is paid for advertising (in Lithuania, influencers with less than 30,000 followers on one platform sometimes work in exchange for products and services or receive 50-150 Eur per post; influencers with 30.000–80.000 followers on average earn between 200 Eur and 500 Eur per post, while those with over 80,000 followers can earn 500 Eur - 1,200 Eur per post, so it's likely that such promotion is not always honest, and 39.4 % respondents doubt the credibility of advertised product. It is interesting to note that potentially dishonest product advertising would be most disappointing for 16-23-year-old age group respondents. This is explained by the fact that their decision to buy the product is strongly impacted by influencers. Meanwhile the fact the influencers are paid for their recommendations do not worry respondents in the 30s and 39s because, in particular, members of this group do not trust influencers.

Because different social networks allow different type of content to be posted, there was decided to find out what form of content respondents find most appealing and eye-catching. Analysis of research data showed that the most effective advertising formats are the following: videos (89 %) and photos with descriptions (53 %) posted on *Instagram*, *Facebook* and *YouTube*. According to age range 16 - 23 yr. old respondents indicated that photos with descriptions, videos and catching captions were the most effective forms for them, while 24 - 29 yr. old respondents said that photos with descriptions, videos and long texts are more effective for them. However, 30 - 39 yr. old respondents indicated that long texts, photos with descriptions and videos were the most effective forms for them. From the answers of the survey it can be concluded that influencers impact consumers in the right way, followers notice influencers ads, which leads to the fact that regardless of the form of advertising the influencer chooses, influencers' promotion still will be noticed.

Considering the impact of influencers on consumer purchasing decisions based on the research findings discussed above, it was researched how that would work in the case of *Coca-Cola* products. It was found that influencers would initiate consumer decision either to buy or at least search and possibly then to buy *Coca-Cola* products for 49 % of respondents and that would have at least a minimal impact on purchasing decision, but respondents before buying *Coca-Cola* products tend to find out about the products themselves. Analyzing the data according to age and sex of respondents, it was observed that 16-23 yr. old women respondents do not generally agree that influencers recommendations influence them to buy *Coca-Cola* products, but claim that that had influence for purchasing decisions for the people in their family and friends. Most categorical and skeptical of influencers' impact on buying *Coca-Cola* products remain for 30-39 yr. old age group, while this group does not deny the fact that

they see the impact of influencers regarding making purchasing decisions to buy and consume *Coca-Cola* products for their immediate family and friends.

### Conclusions

After analyzing the scientific literature on consumer behavior on the Internet, it can be emphasized that consumer behavior is a behavior related to many its modeling factors, while the consumer is looking for products to meet his or her needs. The concept of online consumer behavior combines information search, product selection, consumption, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a purchased item and many other factors.

All means of the e-marketing sponsorship complex are important, but this research is limited to influencers. It is increasingly being used as a tool for a promotional mix. Influencers have become a modern-day phenomenon as individuals can influence the general public using only just social networks and their possibilities. This process is based on the theory that certain persons can persuade a consumer to make a purchasing decision. The main goal of influencers is to increase sales of promoted products. Typically, influencers' impact on brand is determined by two key parameters - *like's* and comments. Each influencers' direct impact on sales is measured by giving their promotional product a unique discount code.

*Coca-Cola* consumer behavior research has shown that products promoted by influencers become more attractive and product ads are more effective. Consumers are more likely to follow national influencers and they like the content they create. Also, users have emphasized two of the most effective forms of advertising by influencers, which are photos with descriptions and videos. It does not seem to be important for users that influencers are paid for product recommendations.

According to the results of the research, in order to find out the unquestionable impact of influencers on product sales for a particular company, it would be appropriate to apply this tool of promotion for a longer period (it has been proven that short-term campaigns do not bring much benefit) or to consider integrating other marketing tools seeking effectiveness of promotional goals. It should be noted that influencers usually represent different niches and companies should select only those that are most influential to consumers in regards of the business and bear in mind that this is a cost-saving tool.

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