

Key Drivers of Consumer Interest
and
Success Factors in Live-Streaming Influencers with Large Followings

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

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ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval from AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC) was granted on 6 November 2024, for a period of three years until 6 November 2027. The ethics application number is 24/309.

ABSTRACT

Live-streaming has become a dominant force in reshaping online consumer behaviour in today's rapidly evolving digital economy. Platforms like TikTok provide fertile ground for influencers to build large followings and drive real-time commerce. This study investigates why certain live-streaming influencers—particularly those with millions of followers—succeed in capturing and sustaining consumer interest, and which key traits contribute to their commercial and social success. The central focus is on understanding the dynamic interplay between consumer psychology, influencer attributes, and the mechanisms of sustained engagement in the context of live-streaming.

While prior studies have examined the extensive impact of social media influencers (SMIs), few have investigated the underlying psychological reasons behind long-term follower behaviour. This study addresses three key gaps in the research: (1) the lack of consumer-centred investigations into why certain influencers attract more sustained attention; (2) the need to explore how real-time interactivity in live-streaming creates a participatory environment in which consumers actively shape their experiences; and (3) the insufficient understanding of how deeper emotional and cognitive gratifications, such as emotional connection or knowledge acquisition, drive long-term follower loyalty. By addressing these areas, this study enhances our understanding of what truly constitutes success for live-streaming influencers with large fan bases.

The main research question guiding this study is: What are the key factors that drive consumer interest in live-streaming influencers with large followings? This is supported by three sub-questions: What are the reasons behind the popularity and success of influencers with millions of followers? What consumer preferences do these influencers satisfy? What specific traits differentiate them in a saturated digital market?

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 participants who have either purchased or have not purchased items from live streams, but who were attracted as fans from the live broadcasts of influencers with millions of followers. Thematic analysis was employed to examine how various stimuli—ranging from influencer impression and content strategies to emotional expression and product presentation—shape consumer perceptions and behaviours. The S-O-R

(Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework provided a guiding structure to trace the transformation of viewers into long-term followers, offering insight into the internal gratification processes that mediate external influencer effects.

The findings reveal that successful influencers possess engaging content and promotional strategies and have personal traits that influence consumers' emotions, such as being brave, healing and knowledgeable. Viewers are attracted to influencers who satisfy their inherent emotional and intellectual needs, such as providing comforting content or practical product insights. These gratifications foster trust and establish long-term and stable relationships between the influencer and their follower. The shift towards more rational consumer behaviour in the live-streaming space was an unexpected yet critical insight. Consumers are no longer driven solely by impulse or price incentives; instead, they increasingly value whether influencer content aligns with their emotional states and cognitive needs. Positive energy has also become a pivotal factor in establishing sustainable engagement.

This study contributes to both academic and practical discussions by demonstrating that consumer interest is cultivated through a deeper psychological process, rather than being solely captured through external appeal. The findings offer actionable insights for marketers, influencers, and platforms aiming to foster lasting engagement and brand loyalty in the competitive landscape of live-streaming commerce.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and context

Live-streaming has rapidly evolved into a dominant force within the digital communications landscape, merging real-time interactivity with multimedia content to deliver immersive user experiences. Live-streaming has become an integral and often indispensable part of digital marketing strategies, offering businesses the ability to deliver real-time product information, engage interactively with consumers, and foster a sense of immediacy that traditional e-commerce platforms often lack (Fu et al., 2024). Initially associated with gaming and social interaction, live-streaming platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Live, and TikTok Live have rapidly expanded into commerce, education, and entertainment. (Luo et al., 2021). Notably, the real-time accessibility, algorithmic visibility, and interactive features of live-streaming, such as chat, polling, and gifting, have captivated audiences by fostering a sense of immediacy and personal connection. These characteristics distinguish live-streaming from traditional pre-recorded content, providing influencers with unique tools to establish presence, build trust, and influence behaviours (Cai & Wohn, 2017).

Amid this shift, social media influencers have emerged as key players, leveraging live-streaming platforms to cultivate personal brands and connect with audiences in authentic, immediate ways. These individuals function as influential intermediaries between brands and consumers, especially on platforms such as TikTok, where short-form video and real-time interaction converge to amplify their reach and impact (Chen & Yang, 2023). The growing convergence of entertainment, marketing, and retail within live-streaming ecosystems underscores the importance of understanding how macro-influencers attain and maintain their status. As digital audiences become more fragmented and discerning, brands are increasingly reliant on these high-profile figures to reach targeted consumer segments, foster trust through parasocial relationships, and translate engagement into measurable commercial outcomes (Hao & Chen, 2025; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

According to Custom Market Insights (CMI), the live-streaming market size was estimated to be \$38.87 billion in 2022 and is expected to grow to approximately \$256.56 billion by 2032 (CMI, 2025). Alongside the rise of

the medium has come the rise of live-streaming influencers, individuals who strategically use their on-screen personas, real-time interaction, and product endorsement capabilities to build large followings and encourage consumer engagement. For instance, during China's 2019 Singles' Day shopping festival, live-streamed sales reached \$3 billion, an astonishing figure. A live-streaming influencer, Viya Huang, has helped Kim Kardashian West attract 13 million viewers to her Tmall website, resulting in her KKW perfume stock selling out in just a few minutes (Bu et al., 2019). This is the reason why businesses are looking for well-known internet celebrities to help promote their brands. Influencers with large followings have become pivotal players in digital commerce, adeptly combining entertainment with authenticity to attract and retain consumer attention. As platforms increasingly integrate commercial functionalities, such as in-stream purchasing options, live chat, and promotional incentives, these influencers act as intermediaries, facilitating interactions between brands and consumers. Their ability to incorporate persuasive product demonstrations within relatable personal narratives has transformed traditional advertising into socially immersive experiences. Recent research highlights the importance of trust in influencers and emotional connection in influencing consumer purchase intentions within live-streaming environments (Chen & Yang, 2023). This evolution positions live-streaming influencers as dynamic agents of social commerce, not merely content creators.

For several reasons, understanding the drivers behind consumer interest in these influencers is paramount. According to data, the value of influencer marketing worldwide was \$10 billion in 2020. However, given the continuous growth in the number of social platform users in recent years, it is estimated that the value of global influencer marketing will exceed \$24 billion in 2024 (Ross, 2025). Those who can strategically capture and sustain viewer attention through charismatic delivery, informative content, or emotional resonance enjoy significant advantages in brand partnerships and monetisation (Chen & Yang, 2023). Influencer marketing has become a core part of digital marketing campaigns. However, the consumer attention in a hyper-competitive digital environment is both volatile and fleeting. Therefore, identifying the psychological and contextual factors that underpin sustained viewer interest is essential for both academic exploration and guiding the strategic initiatives by marketers and influencers seeking long-term impact.

Furthermore, viewer engagement has demonstrably impacted influencer success metrics. These engagement signals determine platform visibility and monetisation potential. There is a heightened emphasis on sustainable engagement, especially with macro-level influencers, who are defined as having a large number of followers. Influencers who adeptly address viewer motivations can more effectively convert attention into action, creating a symbiotic relationship between followers and influencers. This can include viewing, following, sharing, or making purchases. Understanding what influences viewer behaviour allows influencers and brands to refine content more precisely by structuring programming around storytelling, authenticity, educational value, or social interaction, depending on platform and audience demographics (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In addition, it can reveal which influencer content and behaviours can continuously attract attention and generate significant engagement, thereby providing a reference for live-streaming platform marketers.

Research seeks to elucidate the psychological mechanisms behind macro-influencer success within live-streaming environments by investigating the factors that underpin consumer interest, including external influencers' content strategies, personality traits and consumers' inherent needs. Exploring viewer journeys from perception to internal gratification and response based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model addresses a timely challenge in the evolving landscape of influencer-led commerce and digital communication.

1.2 Relevance of the topic

From a practical and commercial perspective, understanding macro-influencer consumer followership is increasingly critical. As influencer-driven marketing strategies become integral to brand communication and consumer outreach, businesses must discern which influencers hold broad appeal and why certain personalities can convert fleeting interest into sustained commercial engagement. Research has shown that influencer marketing offers brands access to loyal and engaged audiences and a cost-effective alternative to traditional advertising, with return-on-investment rates often exceeding those of mainstream campaigns (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Furthermore, platforms are optimising their algorithms to prioritise influencer content, encouraging brands to align their promotional strategies with these content creators. This growing dependence underscores the dual role of influencers as content creators and commercial agents. It is a phenomenon that

warrants deeper academic exploration into how digital trust, authenticity, and relational capital are cultivated in real time (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). As a result, by virtue of their large audiences and broad visibility, macro-influencers serve as powerful vehicles for product promotion and brand alignment. However, their effectiveness hinges on their ability to build lasting psychological bonds with their followers. Investigating the drivers of these bonds provides businesses with actionable insights for influencer selection, campaign design, and customer relationship management.

Previous research suggests that influencers typically build consumer relationships through one-directional content delivery, a process that can prolong decision-making and increase the likelihood of consumer disengagement (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In contrast, live-streaming environments facilitate real-time, two-way interaction, enabling influencers to establish relational connections more rapidly and enhance audience engagement. This interactive format enables consumers to clarify their needs and evaluate products more effectively, thereby strengthening the overall decision-making process.

Building on this distinction, the present research contributes to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of digital consumer behaviour by extending the application of the S–O–R model into live-streaming contexts. It challenges earlier conceptions that cast consumers as passive media recipients, instead positioning them as active participants within dynamic, real-time marketing exchanges. Moreover, it advances influencer marketing theory by uncovering the deeper psychological gratifications that govern consumer decision-making—moving beyond superficial explanations centred solely on celebrity appeal or entertainment value. By foregrounding followers’ lived experiences and cognitive–emotional responses, this study provides a conceptual foundation for future inquiries into digital influence and the psychology of live-streaming commerce. Ultimately, it bridges the gap between marketing theory and evolving digital practice, providing a framework through which the mechanisms of influencer success can be more precisely understood and strategically leveraged.

1.3 Problem statement

The exponential growth of live-streaming commerce has fundamentally reshaped digital marketing and consumer engagement models. Live-streaming influencers who combine personal charisma with product promotion to engage audiences in real time are central to this transformation. These macro-influencers are powerful intermediaries, bridging brands and consumers while shaping purchasing decisions through emotional connection and interactive content. However, despite the growing commercial influence of such figures, there remains a notable gap in academic literature concerning the specific psychological and behavioural mechanisms that drive consumer interest in this live-streaming context. Current research often focuses on the external influencer behaviour and content that broadly impacts user engagement. It often fails to distinguish between external stimuli that capture viewers' attention in the live-streaming ecosystem and the unique mechanisms that convert viewers into followers based on their intrinsic needs.

This oversight presents a significant theoretical problem. Existing studies miss key insights into the sustainable mechanisms of influencer success by failing to interrogate the nuanced internal drivers that guide consumer engagement with live-streaming influencers. In an era marked by content saturation and digital fatigue, not all influencers with visibility succeed; instead, only those who can align their content and persona with the evolving psychological needs of their audiences gain long-term traction. The absence of research into this alignment process—particularly in live-streaming environments where immediacy and interactivity are critical—limits our understanding of what differentiates successful influencers from their less effective counterparts.

From a practical standpoint, this research holds substantial implications for industry professionals. Brands increasingly depend on influencers to raise awareness, build emotional resonance, and drive direct sales. However, without a robust understanding of the deeper consumer motivations that fuel influencer loyalty and purchasing behaviour, industry practitioners risk misallocating resources, overestimating superficial metrics, and underestimating the value of internal consumer gratification. In a hyper-competitive influencer economy, especially on platforms such as TikTok where live content drives rapid trends and fleeting attention, identifying what fosters enduring consumer-influencer relationships becomes essential for long-term brand and influencer success. Influencers who understand what drives long-term consumer interest can create content that is more

likely to retain viewers, increase conversion rates, and secure better brand collaborations. Similarly, marketers can use these insights to select and train influencers who connect with consumers on both an external and internal level, thus enhancing influencer partnerships' Return on investment (ROI). As the influencer economy becomes increasingly competitive and saturated, understanding what differentiates successful live-streaming influencers, particularly those with large followers, has become essential for sustaining influence and commercial viability (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). This study seeks to contribute a theoretically grounded and empirically informed understanding of the key consumer-centric factors driving large-following live-streaming influencers' success.

1.4 Objectives of the study

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the underlying mechanisms that drive consumer interest and determine the success of live-streaming influencers with large social media followings. Specifically, this study seeks to identify and analyse the critical stimuli that capture initial viewer attention. It aims to explore the mechanism that drive consumer in following Macro live-streaming influencers, such as trust, purchasing, and long-term loyalty, contributing to influencer success. Applying the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, this research provides a holistic view of how external influencer characteristics (stimuli) translate into internal viewer gratifications (organism) to result in measurable behavioural outcomes (response).

This study addresses the lack of an integrated understanding of how influencer characteristics, content strategies, and consumer psychological responses interact to produce follower growth and purchasing behaviour. Adopting a structured theoretical framework, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, we explore how external stimuli translate into internal gratifications and ultimately into follower loyalty or purchase intentions (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Without such research, our ability to formulate predictive insights or design optimised influencer strategies that are both scalable and psychologically resonant is restricted. Furthermore, existing scholarship tends to overlook how viewers evolve from passive observers to active followers and consumers through a process of emotional engagement and trust-building, particularly in high-stimulus environments like live-streaming (Hao & Chen, 2024).

Additionally, the study aims to reveal which attributes of influencers, ranging from the quality and interactivity of their content to their personality traits and professional image, are most instrumental in attracting and retaining audiences. It also aims to determine how these features contribute to the broader success of influencers in a highly competitive digital marketplace. Through in-depth interviews with active social media users, the research intends to map the sequential psychological processes by which consumers transition from passive viewers to engaged followers and ultimately to loyal customers who make purchases and long-term following.

To support this overarching goal, the study pursues several secondary objectives. First, it aims to explore the diverse needs of different consumers and how they develop their followership with influencer content. Classifying these needs within the S-O-R framework will enable the study to offer insights into how influencers can strategically cater to diverse audience segments and enhance their appeal.

Therefore, this research seeks to examine the connection between consumer engagement behaviour, including commenting, purchasing, and sustained viewership and the influencers' commercial and reputational success metrics. While follower count remains a superficial indicator of popularity, deeper metrics such as trust, emotional connection, and purchase conversion offer more comprehensive insight into influencer effectiveness. Clarifying these dynamics will help to explain why some influencers can sustain long-term influence and commercial viability, while others fail to convert attention into loyalty.

Ultimately, this study aims to bridge the gap between consumer psychology and influencer marketing by providing empirical insights into the interactive processes that underlie the successful influencer-audience relationships. The findings are expected to provide best practice guidance for influencer marketing strategies, platform design considerations, and content development methods in live-streaming e-commerce.

1.5 Research question

The core of this study lies a fundamental inquiry into the nature of relationships between consumers and influencers in the live-streaming economy: What are the key factors that drive consumer interest in live-streaming influencers with large followings? This question focuses on a critical need to examine the underlying mechanisms that explain why some live-streaming influencers are successful in attracting and retaining massive audiences, while others struggle to gain traction in a highly competitive and fast-evolving digital marketplace. In particular, it acknowledges that the appeal of macro-influencers, those with a large number of followers, may not be based solely on the quality of their content, but rather on a complex interplay of content strategies, personal image, personal characteristics, and consumer psychology.

To answer this primary question, the research employs the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, which is commonly used in consumer behaviour research. Within this framework, influencer attributes and behaviours are conceptualised as external stimuli (S); the cognitive and emotional reactions of viewers are represent the organism (O); and the resulting outcomes are treated as consumer responses (R). This process-oriented approach allows the study to map how consumers perceive, internalise, and act upon influencer characteristics over time, shedding light on the transformation from passive viewer to active follower and, ultimately, loyal customer.

To support and deepen this investigation, three interrelated sub-questions guide the structure of the research:

1. Why live-streaming influencers with millions of followers are more successful?
2. Why are consumers more interested in these types of influencers?
3. What specific attributes contribute to the success of influencers with millions of followers on social media livestream platforms?

These research questions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the mechanisms that enable certain live-streaming influencers to attract huge and devoted followings. Notably, these questions lead to research that has found that consumer interest is not a static metric but a dynamic process. This process is influenced by the sense of gratification brought about by the constant stream of influencers and the emotional

resonance they evoke. The answers to these questions are academically and practically significant for influencers, marketers, and brands, with valuable insights into navigating the increasingly complex landscape of social commerce. Grounding the study in lived consumer experiences and analysing the transformation from viewer to follower through the S-O-R lens, the research advances a deeper, more nuanced understanding of digital influence, one that moves beyond metrics and towards meaningful, sustained engagement.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In an increasingly digitalised consumer landscape, live-streaming influencers have emerged as transformative figures in marketing, particularly on platforms that combine entertainment with commerce. This chapter critically reviews existing scholarship on the impact of social media influencers (SMIs), consumer psychology, and live-stream commerce, situating the current study within a broader academic and theoretical context. This chapter explores the psychological mechanisms through which influencers shape consumer perceptions and behaviours by examining these processes from two macroscopic perspectives: internal drivers and external factors. Specifically, it addresses key constructs such as motivation, authenticity, identity congruence, trust, emotional contagion, and parasocial interaction. The chapter also uses the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework to examine how consumers respond to influencer stimuli in real-time, interactive environments. The overarching goal is to identify the factors that constitute influencer success and the processes by which viewers transition into followers and loyal consumers. Moreover, the chapter highlights significant gaps in the literature, particularly the need to shift from an influencer-centred perspective to a consumer-centred one. It calls for a deeper, process-oriented exploration of consumer-influencer engagement in live-streaming settings.

2.2 Internal Drivers

This section examines the internal psychological drivers that underpin consumer engagement and behavioural responses within live-streaming environments. Anchored in the Organism component of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, it focuses on how consumers cognitively interpret and emotionally respond to influencer-generated stimuli. Specifically, the section synthesises existing literature on consumer motivation, perceived personality and credibility, identity congruence, parasocial attachment, emotional contagion, and trust formation. Together, these internal processes shape how audiences experience live-streaming content, develop engagement, and translate psychological responses into behavioural outcomes such as continued viewing, purchasing, and long-term loyalty. By foregrounding these internal mechanisms, the section establishes a foundation for understanding how consumer-driven psychological processes mediate influencer effectiveness and explain variation in audience responses across different contexts.

2.3 Influence impact and consumer psychology

In the case of live-commerce, social media influencers with large followings, in terms of their role in influencing the interest and conduct of consumers, are an area of significant theoretical and pragmatic interest. The psychological processes behind such influences are complex and multidimensional, encompassing the intersection of persuasion theory, motivation research, emotional bonds, and trust development. Researchers have long demonstrated that the interplay between consumer psychology and digital influencer strategies is dynamic and firmly rooted in both hedonic and utilitarian motives (Childers et al., 2001; Alhabash & Ma, 2017). As live-streaming maximises immediacy, emotional engagement, and interpersonal resonance, it becomes ever more critical to understand the nuances of this psychological impact.

2.3.1 Motivation and platform use

A comprehension of consumer motivation forms the basis of the description of the success of influencers on live-streaming websites in terms of winning and holding the attention of users. Early work posited the two-fold model of hedonic and utilitarian motivation in online consumption, according to which affective pleasure, such as entertainment and fun, and task-related benefits, such as information search and efficiency, jointly influence consumer behaviour (Childers et al., 2001). While this distinction remains highly relevant, its broad categorisation may be too simplistic to account for the variety of motivations of newer, experience-laden platforms like live-streaming. This model was extended by mapping hedonic and utilitarian motivations onto specific social media platforms (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Their work suggests that Instagram and Snapchat are primarily hedonic, used for entertainment, identity-building, and interpersonal communication, whereas Facebook and Twitter serve more functional or informational needs. The implication is clear: influencers who leverage entertainment and emotional storytelling on hedonic-dominant platforms will more effectively connect with followers. However, one limitation of Alhabash and Ma's research is its reliance on self-reported platform use that may not be as indicative of deeper psychological engagement patterns.

Live-streaming platforms introduce a third motivational layer above this binary divide. A study of Twitch users identified social connection, affective investment, and communal membership as core motivations—

dimensions untouched in earlier motivational frameworks (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). They find that audiences are not merely passive receivers of content but active co-participants in shared moments. This observation constitutes a fundamental shift from private content consumption to collective, co-present experience, highlighting the intrinsically social nature of live-streaming commerce. Influencers are not simply entertainers or informants but facilitators of instantaneous, affectively charged interaction. Although Hilvert-Bruce et al. enrich the motivational literature by virtue of their engagement with community dynamics, their study is delimited by its precise focus on Twitch, which raises questions of applicability to larger commercial spaces. However, these findings are highly aligned with a model encompassing entertainment value, informativeness, and source credibility as central to consumer trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Collectively, these studies suggest that successful influencers must strategically satisfy multiple motivational layers, such as entertainment, utility, and social belonging.

In synthesising these models, it is evident that the influencer's role in live-streaming environments is far greater than mere content creation. Rather, they are at the intersection of emotional fulfillment, task completion, and community formation. This more expansive motivational model positions influencers as adaptive agents who create content not merely to inform or entertain but to anchor meaningful social experiences and, in doing so, increase engagement and consumer loyalty.

2.3.2 Personality and influencer credibility

Initial studies found that perceived influencer credibility was comprised of leadership-like personal traits, including being verbal, intelligent, poised, and driven (Freberg et al., 2011). Freberg et al. used the California Q-sort method to place the influencers as third-party recommenders, whose authority is perceived based on professional traits that are commonly linked to corporate leadership. Nevertheless, this view, although fundamental, provides an incomplete answer to the question of influence, especially in the new environment of online retailing, where interpersonal resonance and emotional connection are becoming more central. More current research moves beyond the static personality dimensions to relational and performative dimensions of credibility. Credibility on image-based platforms like Instagram is directly associated with the capacity of an influencer to deliver original and unique content that is psychologically congruent with the interests and values of the followers (Casaló et al., 2018). According to their results, originality does not only drive user

engagement but also leads to product endorsement, particularly when the followers feel a genuine relationship between the personal style of the influencer and their own identity. Unlike Freberg et al., whose attention is on long-term personality dimensions, Casaló et al. offer performative and content-based ones, arguing that influencers gain credibility by being different in a way that resonates with followers' interests.

Further developing this change, a triadic model of authenticity, attractiveness, and expertise should be identified as mutually supportive attributes that contribute to the effectiveness of influencers (Jin et al., 2019). These qualities are what the consumers perceive over time and they combine to build trust and purchase intentions. Unlike Freberg et al.'s static trait-based view, Jin et al. emphasise the evolving and consumer-mediated nature of credibility. Nevertheless, the fact that they use perceived attributes without longitudinal validation restricts the explanatory power of the model to the long-term influence that requires sustained development of trust.

Generally, these studies demonstrate that influencer credibility is not a stable quality, but a dynamic construct that is influenced by audience alignment, content performance, and relational authenticity, which are all critical variables that are of great relevance in live-streaming contexts where real-time interaction supports psychological engagement and commercial performance.

Drawing comparisons between these studies, it is evident that influencer credibility is not a fixed attribute but rather a dynamic and evolving property shaped by personality revelation, content originality, and perceived value alignment with followers. While Freberg et al. provide a foundation framework of influencer personality, Casaló et al. and Jin et al. emphasise credibility's performative and relational dimensions. Together, these findings suggest that successful influencers must cultivate a multifaceted persona that is not only authoritative, accessible, and distinctive but also consistent over time, in order to sustain psychological engagement and ensure long-term commercial viability.

2.3.3 Identity Congruence and Authenticity

In the context of live-streaming influencers, authenticity is no longer a marketing cliché but a psychologically grounded concept that plays a central role in establishing trust and emotional connection. At this core is identity congruence, or the perceived harmony between a follower's identity and that of the influencer. This congruence shapes how audiences relate to influencers and, in turn, how they respond to marketing messages. A compelling theoretical model of symbolic value suggests that the intersection of identity, values, and aspirations between the influencer and follower drives persuasion more powerfully than functional product benefits (Kim & Kim, 2021). In this model, authenticity stems from symbolic mirroring, where followers see their ideal selves reflected in the influencer, which appeals to their needs for self-verification and social belonging.

This reframing marks a shift from transactional persuasion, based on product attributes or expertise, toward relational identification, where trust is formed through perceived personal alignment. However, their contribution remains conceptual, and their model lacks empirical validation across diverse cultures or demographic groups, raising concerns about generalisability (Kim & Kim, 2021). To address this, an empirical counterpoint examines how young women perceive the authenticity of non-traditional celebrities such as bloggers and YouTubers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This qualitative study finds that influencers who display behind-the-scenes content, use informal language, and portray aspirational yet attainable lifestyles are seen as more authentic and relatable than traditional celebrities. These influencers foster a sense of parasocial intimacy, an imagined closeness between follower and influencer. Parasocial intimacy is intensified in live-streaming contexts where real-time interaction enhances perceived proximity (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

A key distinction emerges between the two models. One approaches authenticity as a function of internal psychological alignment, while the other treats it as a performance shaped by the audience's perception (Kim & Kim, 2021; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This contrast highlights a theoretical tension, suggesting authenticity is either inherent (based on congruence) or constructed (based on relatability). The reality is likely somewhere in between. Authenticity in live-streaming is co-created as it emerges through the interaction between an influencer's self-presentation and an audience's interpretation. Influencers must constantly balance strategic persona construction with spontaneous, real-time responsiveness.

In live-streaming environments, this dynamic is especially pronounced. The improvisational nature of live content means that influencers must continuously navigate the tension between maintaining a coherent brand persona and responding authentically in the moment. As suggested, successful influencers are those who align symbolic identities not only with aspirational values but also with their audience's evolving social identities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In doing so, they do more than sell products—they offer identity affirmation, fostering loyalty through emotional resonance and mutual recognition.

2.3.4 Parasocial Relationships and Emotional Contagion

In the case of live-streaming influencers, parasocial relations, that is, a perceived face-to-face relationship between fan and influencer, become a significant psychological process in shaping consumer behaviour (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Such one-way yet emotionally intimate relationships create feelings of closeness and relational involvement among followers with immediate effects on brand trust, interaction, and ultimately purchasing behaviour. The theory of emotional contagion grounds such a phenomenon, postulating that individuals unconsciously capture the other's emotional displays (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). The process quickens in live-streaming sites where influencer effect is experienced in real-time. Emotional mimicry and synchrony are the tools to maximise affective resonance and commitment.

While emotional contagion theory offers the emotional processes of this relationship, a more formal model is offered in the guise of dual identification (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2017). They suggest that both broadcaster identification, the feeling of congruence with the influencer's personality, and group identification, communal viewing with a virtual public, contribute to extended engagement. This expansion adds a large social element to what was previously more of an individualistic theory of emotional attachment. Importantly, their work keeps parasocial intimacy and communal shared experience constant, suggesting that live-streaming's appeal is not simply on a one-to-one person-to-person basis but also with an element of shared emotional identification. One limitation is that the data they draw from is basically entertainment environments; therefore, there will need to be additional research into specifically commercial settings.

The relational aspect of parasocial relationships is further supported by introducing perceived fairness as a moderator (Yuan & Lou, 2020). For them, emotional connections work best when influencers are seen as fair in their promotional efforts, a critical piece of information that bridges emotional engagement and ethical branding. This is empirically confirmed by research that determines strong parasocial relationships and influencer credibility strongly influence purchase intention across platforms like Instagram and YouTube (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Together, these studies affirm that parasocial interaction is an intentional psychological resource, not merely an unforeseen byproduct of influencer celebrity.

This confluence of emotional mimicry, perceived fairness, and identification has encouraged a generation of models that more accurately reflect influencer effectiveness more holistically. As important as emotional contagion theory has stated that roots continue to be, more contemporary models like the Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) model, symbolic congruence theory, and dual identification map the complex paths emotional connection, identity congruity, and confidence converge (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021; Hu et al., 2017). These models suggest that relational and affective processes are not subsidiary but an integral part of the psychological mechanism of influencer commerce, particularly of live-streaming, where presence, visibility, and interactivity converge to heighten affective persuasion.

2.3.5 Trust and Behavioural Outcomes

In live-streaming commerce, trust plays a central role in shaping consumer decision-making due to the immediacy and visibility of influencer and audience interactions. Unlike traditional marketing settings, trust in this context is influenced not only by perceived expertise but also by emotional expression, symbolic identity alignment, and sustained engagement over time. These factors create a dynamic and relational environment in which the influencer's authenticity becomes just as critical as the factual content they share (De Veirman et al., 2017). As viewers increasingly value transparency and realness, trust emerges through the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of live-streamed content.

Studies in live-streaming settings demonstrate that openness and immediacy promote more substantial consumer confidence. Features such as real-time feedback, spontaneous dialogue, and unscripted moments enhance relatability, strengthening emotional bonds and increasing purchase intentions (Wongkitrungrueng &

Assarut, 2020). However, findings drawn from specific cultural contexts, such as Southeast Asian live commerce, highlight the importance of broader cross-cultural validation to ensure these dynamics are consistent globally. Without more exhaustive testing, generalising such trust-building mechanisms across diverse markets remains a limitation. To better understand the components of trust, models such as the Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) framework break it into measurable dimensions, including informativeness, entertainment value, and source credibility. These dimensions, especially trustworthiness, attractiveness, and perceived similarity, position influencers as socially relevant figures rather than just content providers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, while analytically robust, such models may oversimplify trust as a linear precursor to behavioural outcomes, neglecting live-streamed environments' unpredictable and emotionally charged nature.

Long-term credibility and consistency in communication also significantly influence trust development. Rather than relying on isolated content features, trust is cultivated through sustained relational engagement over time. This continuity supports deeper behavioural outcomes such as brand loyalty, repeat engagement, and advocacy (Belanche et al., 2021). Consistent and value-aligned messaging creates a sense of reliability and familiarity, strengthening emotional attachment. Consequently, influencers who maintain regular interaction and deliver coherent narratives are more likely to establish lasting trust with their audience. Contextual elements further moderate the trust-building process. For instance, the credibility of the brand with which an influencer is affiliated can enhance or hinder audience trust. When influencer messaging aligns with well-established brand identities, consumers are more inclined to perceive the endorsement as authentic and persuasive (Boateng & Okoe, 2015). However, studies relying on narrow demographic samples raise questions about the applicability of these findings in dynamic live-streaming spaces, where spontaneity and emotional intensity often reshape traditional endorsement effects.

Thus, the trust in live-streaming influencer marketing is a multi-dimensional and situational construct. It develops due to the interaction between content credibility, emotional transparency, symbolic alignment, and contextual congruence. Those navigating these dynamics can turn passive audiences into active consumers, proving that trust is not a fixed quality but a two-way and dynamic relationship based on continued interaction.

2.4 Consumer mentality in live-streaming and consumer psychology

The convergence of e-commerce and digital entertainment has catalysed a global surge in live-streaming, creating a novel ecosystem for consumer interaction, marketing, and impulsive purchasing. At its core is the complex relationship between consumer psyche and interactivity across platforms, moderated by influencer roles in live-streaming. As viewers are presented with real-time content, their psychological states, namely, the flow experience and behaviourally driven intentions drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, condition their reactivity to advertisement cues (Ajzen, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2022; MT & Octavia, 2021).

2.4.1 Social motivations and community belonging

Social motivations are central to live-streaming engagement because viewers are likely to seek emotional support, attention, escapism, and affiliation through interactive activities. Instant social presence and participatory dynamics transform passive viewers into active community members, reinforcing a sense of belonging through gratification (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). These communal interactions align with Flow Theory, where immersion is facilitated by shared attention, immediate feedback, and emotional resonance. This sense of belonging directly interacts with the components of the Flow Theory (Kim & Kim, 2022). When viewers perceive shared goals and receive real-time validation through likes, shout-outs, or chat recognition, they are more likely to enter a flow state to become deeply immersed, emotionally synchronised, and less self-conscious. The social environment thus acts as a stimulus within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, triggering internal states such as flow and emotional arousal, which translate into behavioural outcomes like following, purchasing, and recommending (Kim et al., 2020). The visibility of viewer actions such as likes, comments, or virtual gifting, enhanced by streamer acknowledgement, fosters a psychologically immersive environment that reduces self-awareness and heightens emotional involvement. Such engagement frequently leads to parasocial relationships, where one-sided emotional bonds form between the viewer and influencer (Kim & Kim, 2022). This illusion of intimacy, while comforting, can intensify consumer loyalty and behavioural compliance. Such bonds may also compromise critical thinking, especially when emotional alignment is mistaken for trustworthiness (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020). This blurring of personal connection and commercial persuasion creates a powerful, yet ethically complex, dynamic.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour offers a complementary lens to explain how emotional engagement translates into behavioural intention (Kim & Kim, 2022). Community participation strengthens positive attitudes toward the stream and its content, establishes subjective norms through visible peer behaviour, and reinforces perceived behavioural control by normalising purchases. When viewers observe others engaging and buying in real-time, they become more confident and willing to do the same (Hou et al., 2020). The authors also caution that this kind of interaction is fragile; poor moderation, confusing messages, or abusive conversations can break the social illusion, derailing the psychological mechanisms that sustain attention and trust. Therefore, a supportive, stable environment is important to keep engagement and turn intention into action.

In addition, peer engagement and fear of missing out (FOMO) have considerable effects on emotional arousal and impulsive behaviour. FOMO heightens emotional urgency, motivating fast decision-making to avoid social exclusion (Don et al., 2023). Emotional support within the community is far from symbolic; it furnishes a psychological anchor that provides the viewer with feelings of security, worth, and direction in consumption. Fan group structures often magnify this dynamic, which facilitates mutual support and shared identity. Such dynamics increase trust and loyalty, intensifying planned and impulsive behavioural responses (Pek et al., 2024). However, this shared attraction is not always consistent. Audience motivations are highly diverse, with some viewers looking for utilitarian benefits like product knowledge rather than emotional attraction (Xin et al., 2024). Additionally, trust problems within communities due to toxicity, poor moderation, or influencer controversies can break down flow and erode loyalty. Thus, as powerful as emotional belonging is, it is also context-dependent and potentially volatile.

2.4.2 Emotional contagion and influencer impact

In the live-streaming business, emotional contagion is the cause of affecting the consumer mindset. Defined as unconscious mimicking and internalisation of the emotional state of an individual, emotional contagion is particularly potent in virtual environments (Hatfield et al., 1993). This effect transfer is amplified via real-time discourse and visual cues such as facial expressions, intonations, emojis, and tropes habitually used by streamers to express excitement, urgency, or intimacy (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020). Live-streaming brings the co-experiential state where off-the-cuff declarations of feelings, whether contentment with a quality product

or irritation at a competing firm, facilitate the psychological synchrony between streamer and watcher. This emotional attachment is consistent with Flow Theory, which posits that immersion happens when individuals fully engage in an activity (MT & Octavia, 2021). Emotional alignment increases the intensity of flow, thereby reducing self-awareness and critical scrutiny, and heightening responsiveness to product cues (Liu et al., 2022). Emotional contagion, therefore, is not only a trigger for flow but a mechanism that sustains it.

From the standpoint of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, emotional contagion contributes to all three antecedents of intention (Ajzen, 1991). First, it fosters positive attitudes toward the product by emotionally framing it in a favourable light. Second, it reinforces subjective norms, such as emotionally charged group reactions, such as chatroom excitement, and normalises purchasing behaviours. Third, it enhances perceived behavioural control, as affective clarity gives viewers the confidence to act quickly. Influencer charisma and emotional expressiveness directly correlate with increased impulse purchases (Li et al., 2024). However, the rhetorical power of emotional contagion is in urgent need of scrutiny. While it can increase viewer engagement and perceived authenticity, it also allows strategic manipulation. Influencers who use storytelling and self-disclosure to appear authentic are more likely to overcome consumer scepticism and trigger emotional consistency effectively (Jiang et al., 2022). This raises a critical issue regarding the authenticity of emotional resonance, suggesting that it might be strategically instrumentalised to trigger consumer conversion.

Emotional contagion creates heuristic thinking, and the viewers are predisposed to mental shortcuts, such as trusting because of likability rather than credibility (Xin et al., 2024). This could lead to emotional saturation or post-purchase regret. This is especially so if the product fails to meet the heightened emotional expectations cultivated in the stream (Yang et al., 2024). Emotional contagion is both a commercial motivator and a psychological boost. It can facilitate flow and behavioural intention, but can weaken the line between authentic engagement and emotional exploitation. With live-streaming emerging further, forthcoming research must address the ethical boundaries of emotional influence, particularly as it pertains to vulnerable consumer groups and the long-term consequences of emotionally driven impulse buying.

2.4.3 Interactivity, immediacy, and viewer empowerment

Interactivity is the most defining and revolutionary feature of live-streaming commerce. Unlike traditional digital shopping, live-streams allow real-time interaction through means such as live chat, polls, on-screen comments, and direct viewer-streamer engagement. These affordances establish a co-creative relationship, which allows viewers to feel heard, seen, and included in shaping the content. Interactivity, guidance, and visibility cause greater emotional engagement and reduced decision fatigue through information simplification and increased clarity (Wu et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

The Flow Theory outlines how interactivity facilitates psychological immersion (MT & Octavia, 2021). An interactive feedback loop whereby the streamer responds to chat or interacts directly with specific viewers. The loop boosts perceived agency and personal significance. As a result of the immediate feedback and emotional validation that the viewer obtains, they are more likely to engage and remain in a state of reduced cognitive load and enhanced emotional arousal. Extended immersion promotes greater time spent watching and an increased likelihood of impulse purchasing (Liu et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the Theory of Planned Behaviour provides a complementary framework to describe how interactivity influences intention (Ajzen, 1991). It increases perceived behavioural control, as the interface design, such as one-click purchasing and streamer responsiveness, reduces complexity and ambiguity. Subjective norms are also reinforced when people see others participating or buying in real-time, as it produces social compliance. Live viewers will more likely imitate buying behaviour if streamer responsiveness reflects mutual social approval (Hou et al., 2020).

However, the effects of interactivity are not necessarily positive. As interactivity builds engagement, it can lead to heuristic processing, in which consumers employ affective or peripheral cues, such as scarcity offers or influencer urgency, rather than deliberate thought (Xin et al., 2023). Such cues simulate urgency and scarcity, causing persuasive pressure to overwhelm deliberative decision-making. Interactive elements such as ranking processes, digital badges, and timers serve as support tools for feelings, widening the viewer's concept of self-prestige and triggering impulse purchase (Zhang et al., 2023). Critically, this duplicity of being interactive brings with it moral scrutiny. As it yields engagement and happiness, it might also control intellectual shortcuts, particularly among vulnerable or younger groups. Technical malfunctions, such as delayed responses or automated scripts, will also disrupt the feedback loop, reducing flow and trust.

2.4.4 Surprise, novelty, hedonic value, and rational balance

Unpredictability and entertainment are core to the appeal of live-streaming commerce. Blending novelty, wit, emotional storytelling, and surprise product reveals not only grabs one's attention but also generates much hedonic value, the affective pleasure derived from the activity of shopping per se. Wu et al. argue that hedonic shopping value moderates between flow experience and consumers' purchase intention—the more pleasurable the stream, the stronger the connection between psychological engagement and consumer buying habits (Wu et al., 2024). Don et al. reveal that entertainment-related elements such as contests or surprises can generate massive emotional engagement and improve satisfaction from shopping (Don et al., 2023).

According to Flow Theory, participation is optimal when content strikes a delicate balance between predictability and novelty (MT & Octavia, 2021). Too much predictability leads to disengagement, while too much complexity overwhelms viewers. Live streams that achieve this balance by alternating between structured presentations and surprising, emotionally charged side roads engage viewers and maximise psychological flow. This immersed state lessens cognitive resistance and boosts emotional responsiveness, increasing vulnerability to persuasive signals (Liu et al., 2022). The Theory of Planned Behaviour further adds to the explanation by revealing the impact hedonic value has on behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991). As consumers relate shopping with enjoyment, attitudes towards the product and stream are positive. Social responses such as chatroom ecstasy and digital gifting reinforce subjective norms, while reduced social media technology elements such as product-link embedding or click-to-buy reinforce perceived behavioural control. Zhou et al. argue that the visual appeal of product showings and the affective elation of influencer presentations reduce customer uncertainty, enhancing trust and purchase intention (Zhou et al., 2021).

However, emotional immersion is not universally relevant to all audiences. There are audiences, especially in such genres as electronics, beauty, or educational programming, that watch mainly for informational value. Jiang et al. note that while emotional stimuli dominate most livestream experiences, rational evaluation in clear demonstration, expert tutorial, and perceived expertise is always significant for cognitively driven consumers (Jiang et al., 2024). This would mean that consumer attitude is a continuum rather than a dichotomy; affective and rational involvement coexist and may shift depending on environment and content type. Lo et al. also caution against overuse of entertainment tactics, as over-novelty may lead to viewer fatigue or cynicism and

subsequent loss of credibility and brand trust (Lo et al., 2022). This critique underscores the need for balance in content, not merely maximising hedonic appeal but balancing entertainment with truth and informational relevance.

2.4.5 Impulse buying and the interplay of psychological factors

Impulsive live-streaming impulse buying is an outcome of synergistic interaction involving mental triggers of emotional stimulation, sense of urgency, social validation, and intuitive decision. The passion, appeal, and emotive connection associated with streamer personality significantly enhance the chances of immediate purchases (Li et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2022). These emotional cues are often intensified by limited-time offers, countdown timers, and peer activity in chat, all creating a perceived sense of scarcity and urgency. According to Flow Theory, when consumers are deeply immersed in entertaining and emotionally stimulating content, their self-awareness diminishes and cognitive defences weaken, making them more vulnerable to persuasive cues (MT & Octavia, 2021). This immersive state encourages heuristic processing, bypassing critical deliberation in favour of quick, emotionally satisfying decisions (Xin et al., 2023). From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, impulse buying becomes contextually rational. Emotional gratification enhances positive attitudes, visible peer participation shapes subjective norms, and user-friendly purchasing features such as one-click buying strengthen perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). This blend of affective and rational factors legitimises spontaneous behaviour within the platform's structure. However, heightened psychological engagement may lead to post-purchase dissonance or regret if consumer expectations are unmet (Yang et al., 2024). This underscores the importance of ethical influencer strategies, including emotional authenticity, transparent product representation, and a balanced approach to persuasion, to mitigate potential consumer backlash and preserve long-term trust.

2.5 External Factors

This section focuses on the external drivers of consumer engagement in live-streaming commerce by examining influencer-related characteristics and strategic practices that function as stimuli within the Stimulus component of the S–O–R framework. Based on, the social and situational factors such as social presence, peer participation, and platform affordances. It synthesises literature on influencer authenticity and credibility, engagement and community-building strategies, content quality and platform appropriateness, and product–

influencer congruence. (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Audrezet et al., 2020; Jin & Phua, 2014). Prior research demonstrates that visible audience interaction and real-time social engagement enhance consumers' trust, enjoyment, and normative pressure, thereby strengthening both purchase intention and continued viewing behaviour (Li et al., 2025). Similarly, platform affordances—including interactivity and information visibility—reduce cognitive friction and facilitate immersive experiences, which in turn increase consumer engagement and purchase propensity in live-commerce environments (Wang et al., 2024). Collectively, these external factors structure the live-streaming context, shape audience perceptions and social norms, and activate consumers' cognitive and emotional processing, ultimately influencing behavioural outcomes such as purchasing decisions and long-term loyalty.

2.6 Characteristics of successful social media influencers

In the rapidly evolving digital economy, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as pivotal actors in shaping consumer perceptions, driving purchase intentions, and redefining marketing strategies. With the growing integration of live-streaming platforms, the characteristics defining a successful influencer have become more nuanced and demanding. A growing body of literature has sought to identify what characterises successful influencers, while recent studies explore how live-streaming intensifies these influencer-consumer dynamics. This review critically evaluates the defining attributes of effective SMIs—authenticity, engagement, and content quality—while also interpreting the comparative advantages of live-streaming over other digital formats. It draws from both traditional influencer literature and live-streaming commerce research to uncover the mechanisms that foster trust, loyalty, and consumer action.

2.6.1 Authenticity and credibility

To begin with, authenticity has consistently been positioned as a cornerstone of influencer effectiveness. Authenticity has been highlighted as a cornerstone of influencer trust-building, with scholars arguing that audiences increasingly seek content that feels “real” rather than overtly promotional (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021). Empirical validation of perceived authenticity further reinforces this claim, showing that influencers perceived as authentic foster stronger parasocial relationships. Their scale development work provides a validated framework, yet its applicability across platforms and cultures remains underexplored (Lee

& Eastin, 2021). Building on this, researchers have emphasised how overt commercialisation threatens influencer credibility, especially when brand endorsements overshadow personal narratives (Hudders et al., 2021). This observation aligns with arguments that authenticity is not inherent but strategically managed. A qualitative analysis of influencers illustrates that authenticity is performed through deliberate self-disclosure and value alignment. The authors further introduce a critical nuance, arguing that authenticity is not merely about being "real" but the congruence between one's values and behaviours across platforms (Audrezet et al., 2020). They assert that authenticity is constructed through deliberate self-presentation, complicating the notion that authenticity is simply natural or organic.

While authenticity has been conceptualised as a subjective experience, other scholars grasp it as strategic performance, particularly under the compulsion of commerce (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Audrezet et al., 2020). That variation matters. The same view is offered by Abidin, who refers to this as "visibility labour" — the idea that influencers must work to be authentic and aesthetically appealing to remain credible (Abidin, 2016). That is, while audiences will respond positively to perceived authenticity, influencers must always negotiate a balance between marketability and relatability. That applies to what he argues, as influencers engage in repetitive emotional and aesthetic labour to appear authentic and navigate brand demands. That performative authenticity obscures the assumption that trust emerges from unadulterated content but instead illustrates how staged transparency can be both powerful and morally nuanced. This calls into question the presumption that authenticity is natural, suggesting instead that it is a staged performance.

Essentially, these perspectives suggest that successful influencers must balance the edge of a paradox. Namely, being genuine while simultaneously engaging in strategic self-presentation. This double act requires influencers to present their material in a way that satisfies their audience's desire for relatability and credibility, and yet must possess a level of strategic brand consonance or endorsements. Failure to manage this balance can result in audience scepticism, particularly among Gen Z consumers, who are highly adept at detecting inauthenticity (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Ultimately, influencers who can successfully merge these two elements will likely experience greater long-term engagement and loyalty from their followers.

2.6.2 Engagement and community building

Engagement and community building are essential to influencer success, especially within the dynamic context of live-streaming platforms, rather than being limited to basic interactions such as likes, shares, or comments. Engagement in this environment signifies a deeper, bidirectional process that enhances trust and emotional investment. For instance, visible interactions increase credibility and message effectiveness (Lee & Eastin, 2021). However, their quantitative study collapses engagement into a single proxy for trust, overlooking the nuanced ways it functions across different content genres. In contrast, engagement becomes most effective within broader relationship-building strategies (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Tactics such as personalised shoutouts and live Q&As foster stronger loyalty and help influencers become not only content creators but also socially relatable figures, reinforcing long-term emotional connection.

The real-time affordances of live-streaming platforms further intensify this interactive relationship. Unlike traditional formats that rely on delayed audience feedback, live-streaming enables influencers to respond instantly, enhancing the sense of shared experience between viewer and influencer. This synchronous interaction is described as "co-experiential trust," where the immediacy of communication closes the gap between the influencer and their followers (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Real-time responses sustain user attention by creating immersive "flow" states, a psychological experience in which viewers become deeply engaged and less self-aware (Chen & Lin, 2018). The live format transforms passive viewing into active participation, strengthening the bond between the audience and the influencer while fostering a sense of belonging. However, this form of engagement has risks, as spontaneous content can easily shift into unfiltered or inconsistent messaging if not appropriately managed.

In light of these challenges, live-streaming also demands higher performance management. Technical glitches, low-quality audio or video, or lapses in emotional tone can damage an influencer's credibility (Hou et al., 2020). Consequently, influencers must skillfully manage spontaneity while maintaining coherence, consistency, and professionalism throughout their live sessions. The ability to improvise while aligning with the audience's expectations becomes a strategic skill. This raises the performance threshold compared to traditional content production, where editing and scripting are possible. Therefore, live-streaming requires

influencers to foster authentic connections and master real-time presentation and crisis navigation to maintain engagement and trust.

Furthermore, live-streaming enhances engagement by leveraging psychological mechanisms such as emotional contagion and perceived intimacy. Emotional positivity during live sessions increases consumer participation and motivates monetary behaviours like tipping (Lin, Yao, & Chen, 2021). Similarly, technological features such as live chat, embedded product links, and viewer mentions create emotional and transactional feedback loops that reinforce the viewer's sense of involvement (Sun et al., 2019). Higher levels of customer engagement during live sessions directly correlate with stronger purchase intentions and long-term follower loyalty (Zheng et al., 2022). These findings confirm that live-streaming serves as a promotional tool and an emotionally immersive ecosystem that merges entertainment, social connection, and commercial activity in real time.

Despite these benefits, the success of live-streaming engagement also relies heavily on platform infrastructure. Using the rapid *guanxi* framework, the importance of e-service quality, including stable connectivity, responsive interfaces, and secure transaction mechanisms, is highlighted (Zhang et al., 2021). Such features are not peripheral but foundational to sustaining trust and ensuring smooth interactions. Without reliable technology, engagement's emotional and relational aspects can quickly unravel, leading to user dissatisfaction or disengagement. Thus, platform design is not merely a backdrop for engagement but an active component that enables or hinders live-streaming content's relational and commercial potential.

2.6.3 Content quality and platform appropriateness

High-quality, visually appealing, and thematically consistent content is another cornerstone of influencer success. Professional content creation distinguishes professional influencers from amateur content creators (Hudders et al., 2021). This argument is complemented by the potential of good-looking content to trigger impulse buying, particularly among Gen Z consumers (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Sensory appeal, here, has substantial economic implications, driving consumer purchase behaviour towards impulse buying. However, over-professionalism can trigger scepticism, especially when audiences believe content is overly polished or fake (Jin & Phua, 2014). This emphasises the necessity of creating context-sensitive content. Influencers must

modulate production quality to fit audience expectations and platform norms, finding a balance between professionalism and authenticity. For live-streaming, the quality of content does not come from how it is polished but from how interactive and immersive it is. Customers value spontaneity and authenticity more than edited quality (Xu, Wu, & Li, 2020). As per their study, perceived "liveness" of content, i.e., witnessing unedited and unscripted moments, plays a significant role in consumer trust and purchasing intent. Contrary to static websites, here, edited photos typically reign supreme. The concept of immersion implies that live commerce becomes a "digital showroom" wherein consumers can engage with merchandise in real time (Shiu et al., 2023). Such interactivity blurs the lines of entertainment and shopping to create a hair-raising and individualised consumer experience. Consequently, the emphasis on raw, real-time engagement drives content quality within the live-streaming environment, providing a unique and effective alternative to conventional influencer marketing.

Equally vital is the consistency between the influencer's image and the products being endorsed. Product-influencer congruence is essential to the message's credibility, particularly when the product and the influencer's image are congruent (Belanche et al., 2021). This is validated by the multiple inference model, which shows that consistency and transparency, such as overt sponsorship declaration, affect consumers' responses favourably (Kim & Kim, 2021). Transparency can have conflicting effects, however. While it can build trust, it can also remind the audience of the commercial motive behind the message and lose its effectiveness. It is a timely commentary on how influencers approach disclosing commercial purpose and its effect on audience trust and engagement. Live-streaming further complicates influencer-product congruence dynamics, allowing influencers to demonstrate product usage in real-time, interact with consumer questions, and issue special promotions. This real-time interaction creates a seamless identity, product, and performance combination. Live interaction dissolves consumer scepticism through a window for real-time checking on the product, increasing the feeling of congruence (Guo et al., 2021). This approach allows the influencer to show their expertise and love for the product, establishing more of a trust element with the audience. However, this also assumes that audiences trust the expertise of the influencer and not necessarily their popularity, which will not always be the case. Influencers' apparent expertise is one of the most important components of trust construction, particularly within high-risk areas like live-streaming, where dangers in selling merchandise are far greater (Freberg et al., 2011).

Generally, the effectiveness of influencer marketing hinges on content quality, platform appropriateness, and influencer-product congruence. While traditional influencer content is based on professional production and visual appeal, live-streaming redefines content quality based on interactivity and live engagement. Successful influencers must walk a fine line between authenticity and professionalism, particularly in live situations where live feedback and transparency are crucial dimensions of trust building. Moreover, product syncing with an influencer's already established persona and open communication is essential to maintain credibility and foster consumer trust. In the fluid live-streaming environment, these factors create a deeply engaging, interactive, and ultimately more credible form of influencer marketing.

2.6.4 Critical reflections and emerging tensions

While most literature emphasises authenticity, engagement, and interactivity as key to success, there are also contradictions and tensions that remain. Firstly, there is tension between the audience's call for authenticity and the performativity of influencer work. Influencers are staging "visibility labour" which, whilst appearing authentic, is highly choreographed (Abidin, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2020). Second, while live-streaming increases transparency and interactivity, it also carries risks. Mistakes are visible, and performance fatigue is a real problem. Additionally, influencer marketing and live commerce are increasingly intertwined but subject to distinct logic. Traditional influencer content is static, measured, and brand-centred, while live sessions are fluid, spontaneous, and human-centred. The question becomes whether influencers must master both modes to remain competitive. Live platform success is not necessarily about brand appropriateness and visuality but also emotional and improvisational competence (Chen & Lin, 2018). Cultural and platform matters come into play as well. While most studies focus on Chinese platforms such as Taobao Live or TikTok, Western counterparts such as Instagram Live and YouTube Live could differ in audience expectation and monetisation strategies. Scholars caution against the usual presumption of comparable consumer behaviour across cultures and call for more comparative research to explain such contextual variations (Hou et al., 2020).

Briefly, the characteristics that facilitate successful social media influencers, including authenticity, engagement, quality content, and product congruence, are amplified and made more complex by live-streaming.

Real-time interaction creates stronger emotional bonds, enhances trust, and raises purchase intentions, but is accompanied by new skill demands and risk management. As influencer marketing is turning into live commerce ecosystems, future studies must investigate how performance, platform design, and consumer psychology intersect. Only by critically examining these dynamics can scholars and practitioners better understand how influencers maintain impact in the era of digital immediacy.

2.7 Research gap

Despite the detailed research on the nature and strategies of social media influencers (SMIs), significant theoretical gaps remain in understanding consumer interactions with them, particularly in real-time environments like live-streaming. The existing literature is largely influencer-oriented and employs a fixed or superficial perspective on consumer behaviour. Three basic limitations are mentioned in this section: the overemphasis on the nature of influencers, the lack of knowledge of how the processes of consumer engagement in real-time work, and the insufficient exploration of psychological mechanisms underlying it. The paper is devoted to the dynamic role of emotional, cognitive factors in engagement and loyalty, shifting to the consumer-centered, process-oriented model.

2.7.1 Limitations of existing literature on influencer characteristics and strategy

Over the past decade, extensive literature has explored the characteristics of social media influencers (SMIs), with scholars focusing on personality traits, strategic content design, and modes of digital engagement. These studies have also highlighted the effects of factors such as motivation, trust, entertainment value, and psychological influence on consumer engagement and persuasion. Early work identified public perceptions of influencers as ambitious, articulate, and poised, comparable to corporate leaders (Freberg et al., 2011). Later models extended this view by mapping out how perceived trustworthiness, source credibility, entertainment value, and informativeness contribute to consumer engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, most of these studies foreground the influencer as the primary subject of analysis, while the consumer is often positioned as a passive recipient of influence. In this sense, much of the academic conversation has failed to account for the

consumer's subjectivity, internal processing, and agentive role in co-constructing the meaning of influence, especially in live and interactive contexts.

Furthermore, prior research tends to focus on pre-recorded or static influencer content, such as Instagram photos, YouTube reviews, or blog endorsements, where time is nonlinear and engagement is asynchronous. In contrast, live-streaming environments introduce distinct dynamics including temporal immediacy, direct audience interaction, and a sense of co-presence, altering how influence is experienced. The lack of dedicated analysis on live-streaming thus represents a significant gap in the current scholarship. Even though researchers recognise the significance of transparency and responsiveness in live-streaming in the development of trust, they fail to examine how consumer internal states change over time in response to these stimuli and how such change is translated into long-term loyalty (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). A study on the authenticity and attractiveness of influencers is practical; however, once more, it presupposes that these qualities directly and automatically affect consumer trust and intention to buy (Jin et al., 2019). The process of how consumers cognitively and emotionally react to the external stimuli and how this reaction is transformed into a long-term attraction is what is under-theorised.

Although constructs like trust, parasocial relationships, and gratification have been mentioned, they are usually considered to have fixed or immediate effects instead of gradual and mediated experiences. For example, the theory of emotional contagion is applied to explain how consumers unconsciously mimic the moods of influencers (Hatfield et al., 1993). However, it fails to consider that consumers may actively seek certain emotional gratification, such as comfort, hope, or empowerment, in the live-streaming context. Similarly, broadcaster and group identification have been highlighted as the factors that influence further viewing (Hu et al., 2017). Nevertheless, they do not discuss the multilayered internal processes through which the identification is constructed and developed. Thus, while the individual concepts of influencer traits and consumer motivations have been well mapped, the integrative, dynamic, and real-time psychological mechanisms remain underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing a process-oriented approach that shifts the analytical lens from the influencer to the consumer. Rather than asking what influencers do to attract viewers, this study examines how viewers subjectively interpret, respond to, and internalise influencer content in real time, ultimately shaping their loyalty and behavioural outcomes. It highlights how influencer success is not merely a function of charisma or branding, but rather a co-creation rooted in emotional, cognitive, and symbolic alignment between influencers and viewers. This more nuanced perspective enables a better understanding of why some influencers foster loyal, engaged communities while others fail to convert attention into sustained interaction.

2.7.2 Inadequate exploration of consumer engagement in real-time live-streaming environments

The second major gap lies in the lack of research focusing on how consumers experience engagement within the temporally bound and highly interactive environment of live-streaming. Most existing research treats engagement as a fixed state, measured by metrics such as likes, shares, or purchase intentions. However, live-streaming introduces a dynamic feedback loop between consumer and influencer that is distinctly different from traditional forms of social media. In real-time contexts, consumers are not just spectators; they are co-participants who shape the narrative through chat, emojis, polls, and reactions. This co-presence creates a new form of immediacy and affective intensity that cannot be described in terms of the static influence models.

Although certain studies have already started acknowledging these differences, including one study that associated interactivity with continued purchase intent, the psychological implications have not been theorised yet (Hou et al., 2020). For example, real-time interaction can increase positive emotions such as excitement, comfort, or trust, but it can also result in more critical judgments, suspicion, or cognitive overload. The emotional pressure of being always available, the need to receive individual attention, and the demand for authenticity create a complicated emotional landscape of the live-streaming environment among the consumers. The existing literature lacks a unified structure to describe these stimuli's influence on the long-term internal states.

Moreover, the available literature rarely distinguishes between consumer interest in the short-term and behavioural consequences in the long term, such as brand loyalty, repeat viewing, or community membership.

Even in the case of trust, it is usually conceptualised as an outcome of perceived credibility or attractiveness, and little attention is paid to the process of trust formation and maintenance over repeated interactions (Jin et al., 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Live-streaming commerce needs several exposures to determine the authenticity, consistency, and value congruence of the influencer by consumers. The testimonies of the participants in this research indicate that trust is a process that develops over time, starting with the visual or verbal signals and progressing to emotional and cognitive satisfactions.

Equally important is the oversight of how live-streaming allows consumers to make real-time decisions about loyalty. Viewers may decide within minutes whether to stay or leave a stream, follow or unfollow an influencer, or purchase or skip the live-streaming or a product. These decisions are often based on a combination of emotional resonance, cognitive clarity, and elements that are in constant flux during the broadcast. However, few studies explore how the live nature of content accelerates or complicates these decision-making processes. One study addresses the symbolic congruence and identity alignment but fails to consider how this congruence can be negotiated dynamically during a live session that is constantly changing (Kim & Kim, 2021). The absence of research that captures this fluidity leaves a theoretical blind spot in understanding how influencers' stimuli influence long-term loyalty decisions.

This study adds a more descriptive image of what engagement is in live-streaming situations by focusing on the temporal, emotional, and cognitive aspects of real-time consumer interaction. It captures the process of exposure to emotional reaction, to trust development and behavioural conversion. It reconsiders consumer engagement as a recursive, feedback-based process rather than a linear result of various levels of stimuli and internal response. This knowledge is particularly important in the modern digital economy, where live-streaming marketing by influencers becomes increasingly popular, and more brands are beginning to collaborate with live-streaming influencers.

2.7.3 Lack of psychological depth in understanding consumer–influencer relationships

Lastly, the third research gap is the shallow coverage of consumer psychology in existing literature on influencer marketing. Most research has been done on what appeals to consumers, e.g. giveaways, product

discounts or celebrity appeal, but not on why they do so at a psychological level. It is concerned with observable behaviours and not the inner pleasures and incentives that cause them. As an illustration, Gen Z users engage in impulsive purchases due to the visually attractive content, which fails to address the emotional or identity-related factors that drive the behaviour (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). On the same note, the models of parasocial relationships tend to explain one-sided emotional connections but fail to consider that consumers might be engaging in influencer content deliberately to manage mood, validate identity, or meet psychological needs such as comfort and empowerment.

Furthermore, recent studies have only begun to explore the roles of emotional and knowledge-based gratification in digital engagement. However, they often address these motivations in isolation rather than acknowledging their interdependent nature (Lin, Yao, & Chen, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). This siloed perspective underrepresents the psychological reality of digital consumers, whose motivations are often multifaceted and fluid. This dimension, overlooked in the literature, is the re-evaluation of social interaction as the primary driver of gratification. While community engagement remains a factor, existing research tends to overstate its significance at the expense of recognising the growing importance of self-centred, individualised psychological gratifications. These deeper, personalised motivations reflect an evolved form of media consumption that is both self-aware and reflexive.

Thus, the literature still lacks a robust theoretical framework to describe how internal psychological states mediate the stimulus-response process in influencer marketing. Although constructs like trust, parasocial relationships, and gratification are present, they are often treated as static or outcome-based variables rather than dynamic, evolving experiences. Without a more nuanced understanding of how consumers internally process influencer content, models of digital influence remain skewed toward one-way persuasion and fail to account for the increasingly sophisticated and discerning behaviours of modern digital audiences. Not only does such a viewpoint limit academic inquiry, but it also risks providing marketers and influencers with reductive strategies that overlook their audience's emotional and cognitive complexities. Highlighting this gap calls for a reframed perspective that recognises consumers as emotionally and cognitively active agents whose followership is governed by deeper, reflexive considerations rather than superficial appeal.

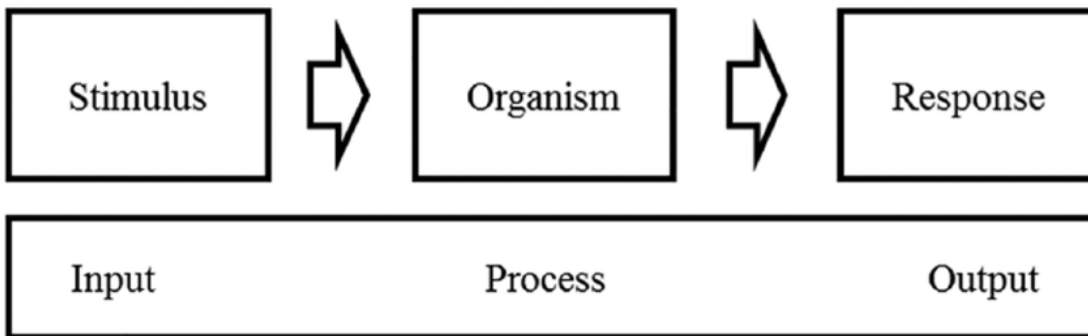
2.8 Theoretical Foundation

The current study uses the Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) model to explain how live-streaming social media influencers (SMIs) attract and maintain consumer attention (As shown in Figure 1). The S-O-R model was first introduced in environmental psychology (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). However, it has since been used extensively in digital marketing and consumer behaviour studies because it can be used to explain the influence of external stimuli on internal psychological processes and eventually result in behavioural outcomes. This model allows a systematic examination of the role of real-time influencer content in triggering consumer perception, influencing emotional and cognitive involvement, and leading to measurable outcomes in the form of trust build, purchase, or long-term follower acquisition in the context of live-streaming commerce. This model is suitable because it combines affective and cognitive processes into one theoretical framework, which is especially important in high-engagement platforms such as TikTok Live, Instagram Live, and Twitch.

The S-O-R model is essentially made up of three stages. Stimulus, which is the inputs to the environment; organism, which is the internal evaluations and emotional or cognitive reactions by the consumer; and response, which is the final behaviours of the consumer. This process is especially relevant in influencer marketing. As an example, the impression of the influencer, their tone, the way the product is presented, and interactivity are stimuli. These signals influence the organism-viewers by evoking emotions like trust, interest, or curiosity, or cognitive activities like assessing the usefulness or credibility of the product. Lastly, these internal reactions lead to behavioural consequences like long-term following the influencer, buying a product, or becoming a repeat viewer. This development is shown in Figure 1 below:

FIGURE 1

STIMULUS–ORGANISM–RESPONSE (S-O-R) MODEL



Note. Copyright 2020 by Kim et al.

The stimulus phase includes all the visible and interactive things that SMIs show to their audiences. These are content strategies, content quality, physical appearance, rhythm, and language styles. According to the aesthetic appeal and the quality of production are visual cues that greatly affect the initial interest of consumers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Nevertheless, when it comes to live-streaming, these fixed characteristics are supplemented with dynamic ones such as responsiveness and spontaneity, which enhance the potency of the stimuli and make it more immersive. Guo et al. also state that real-time visibility and interactivity directly contribute to the emotional intensity, which enhances the original attraction to the influencer. These external stimuli do not operate in a vacuum but are multilayered stimuli that trigger more profound psychological processing in the viewer (Guo et al., 2021).

Moving into the organism stage, the internal state of the consumer takes center stage. This encompasses emotional responses like pleasure, sympathy, and confidence, and cognitive activities like evaluation, comparison, and education. Live streamers who express positive emotions like happiness have a higher chance of causing emotional contagion, which leads to viewer interaction and monetary donations (Lin, Yao, and Chen, 2021). On the same note, emotional satisfactions, such as comfort, relaxation, and reducing the stress from real life, are also frequently cited by viewers and are a decisive factor in whether consumers will revisit or refer a live-stream. In addition to emotion, knowledge satisfaction is also essential. Therefore, consumers

are more likely to make a purchase when they consider product explanations to be clear and helpful (Hou et al., 2020). In this way, this is an affective and cognitive stage. The process of trust formation, which has been commonly considered as a fixed perception, should be viewed here as a cumulative effect of emotional resonance and informational reliability (Jin et al., 2019). The process of internal alignment of consumer values and influencer identity, or symbolic starts and becomes established at this stage of organism congruence (Kim & Kim, 2021).

The response phase is where actions are observable, ranging from the short-term, to liking or commenting, to long-term subscriptions, repeat purchases, and brand advocacy. Interestingly, these behaviours are not mere automatic outcomes of exposure to stimuli, but a result of processed and frequently repeated internal gratifications. Yuan and Lou emphasise the moderating role of fairness and authenticity in this behavioural response; consumers are more inclined to engage when they feel emotionally attached and view the influencer as genuine. This opinion is confirmed by Belanche et al., who demonstrate that credible influencers who have an emotional connection with their followers in the long term create greater behavioural loyalty (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Belanche et al., 2021). Such reactions, which appear to be spontaneous in certain instances (e.g., impulse purchases), are usually based on recurrent, gratified emotional and cognitive needs. Therefore, the S-O-R model describes the course of influence and highlights the cumulative process of constructing enduring action, which is a significant difference in strategic marketing.

The flexibility and the ability to apply to digital contexts are one of the strengths of the S-O-R model. This model has been applied to explain user behaviour in social media and e-commerce, including Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok. For example, the S-O-R model was applied to examine the reaction of Twitch viewers to the social presence, emotional expression, and real-time interaction of streamers (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). They discovered that the emotionally satisfied viewers had higher chances of becoming loyal subscribers or donors. In the same way, the model was used in the context of live commerce and demonstrated that real-time interaction creates trust, which consequently results in higher purchase intention (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). All these studies prove that the logic of S-O-R is especially powerful in high-interaction settings, which is why it is perfectly applicable to live-streaming settings where consumers continuously interpret and respond to stimuli.

The model is also consistent with the current theoretical changes in marketing to consumer-centric and process-based models. S-O-R is open to feedback, subjectivity, and changing consumer roles. It acknowledges that contemporary consumers are not passive but are strategic and emotionally conscious players in the market. Gen Z consumers, for instance, can consume influencer content and still use rational filters before buying, assessing the influencer's authenticity, expertise, and emotional tone (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). By doing so, the S-O-R model provides a more realistic picture of modern digital interaction, providing subtle details about the marketing process and consumer behaviour.

In conclusion, the S-O-R model is a powerful and flexible theoretical framework for considering consumer interactions with live-streaming influencers. It enables the consumer journey to be broken down systematically, beginning with exposure, emotional and cognitive processing and finally action. This model provides both theoretical and practical knowledge as it maps how external cues affect internal states and the subsequent behavioural outcomes. The message is clear to both marketers and influencers. In this case, the effectiveness of live-streaming commerce cannot be narrowed down to aesthetics and the quality of the product, but to the ability to evoke meaningful psychological experiences that can be translated into long-term, loyal behaviours. This model can be extended in future research to include feedback loops, identity variables, or platform-specific mechanics, but its fundamental power is in its ability to trace the invisible yet powerful connection between perception and participation in the digital age.

2.9 Chapter summary

This literature review reveals that the psychological processes underlying consumer engagement with live-streaming influencers are multifaceted and highly dynamic. The initial sections outlined how hedonic, utilitarian, and social motivations influence consumer behaviour across digital platforms, particularly in live-stream commerce, where immediacy and emotional interaction are paramount. The study showed that influencer personality traits such as authenticity, emotional intelligence, and originality significantly affect trust formation and perceived credibility, ultimately influencing purchase intentions. Subsequent discussions underscored the importance of identity congruence and authenticity. Influencers are not simply content creators

but symbolic actors whose perceived alignment with audience values determines their relational credibility and engagement, rather than simply content creators. Parasocial relationships, emotional contagion, and perceived fairness were identified as key mechanisms in building emotional intimacy and fostering behavioural responses such as loyalty and purchases. Trust was identified as a critical outcome of repeated, emotionally resonant interactions. The studies reviewed demonstrated that trust is not merely an outcome of source credibility but rather a cumulative process involving affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. Attributes such as transparency, consistency, and emotional responsiveness contribute to trust-building and long-term consumer loyalty.

Finally, the review revealed three significant gaps: (1) an overemphasis on influencers rather than the consumer's subjective and evolving experiences; (2) inadequate exploration of real-time consumer engagement processes; and (3) insufficient psychological depth in understanding consumer motivations, gratifications, and decision-making mechanisms. The S-O-R model was proposed to address these gaps, offering a robust framework for investigating how external influencer stimuli interact with internal consumer states to shape long-term behavioural outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach undertaken to explore the success factors that contribute to the prominence of live-streaming influencers with large followings. Given the socially constructed, emotionally driven, and highly contextual nature of consumer engagement in live-streaming environments, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate. This approach enables a deep investigation into participants' subjective and psychological experiences, content attractiveness and motivations—dimensions often overlooked in quantitatively driven research models. The interactions between influencers and their audiences during live broadcasts demand a method that captures real-time emotional responses, trust-building behaviours, and consumer decision-making processes. This study uses in-depth interviews to gather rich, descriptive data that helps to analyse factors that influence consumers' decisions to follow and support the influencer. These interviews aim to uncover how participants interpret influencer characteristics such as authenticity, interactivity, and credibility, and how these elements affect their viewing behaviour, engagement levels, and purchasing intentions.

Underpinned by a post-positivist philosophical framework, the methodology recognises that while there may be observable patterns, our understanding of consumer behaviour is inherently shaped by context, interpretation, and perception. This perspective allows for a flexible yet structured exploration of human behaviour, acknowledging the role of researcher subjectivity while striving for credible and transferable insights. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the collected data following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. This analytical approach supports the identification and interpretation of patterns across the data without being tied to a rigid theoretical structure. By applying the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, the study systematically examines how external stimuli (influencer attributes) trigger internal cognitive and emotional reactions (organism), which then lead to observable outcomes such as continued following or live-stream purchasing behaviour (response).

This chapter details the research design, participant selection, ethical considerations, data collection procedures, and analytical strategies that were implemented to address the study's overarching research questions and sub-questions.

3.2 Methodology

Given the multifaceted and socially constructed nature of consumer engagement with live-streaming influencers, a qualitative research approach is particularly appropriate for examining the success factors contributing to influencers' large followings. Qualitative methods, distinguished by their adaptive and exploratory nature, enable researchers to uncover emerging patterns, complex meanings, and previously overlooked dimensions of consumer behaviour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In recent years, live broadcasting has experienced a significant rise in popularity, offering audiences real-time viewing experiences and opportunities for interactive communication and social engagement with streamers and fellow viewers (Hu et al., 2017). Within live-streaming environments, consumer attitudes and behaviours are continuously shaped by evolving social interactions, affective responses, and culturally situated interpretations. A qualitative approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of how audiences perceive, attribute meaning to, and emotionally resonate with influencers' personalities, communication styles, and engagement strategies. By capturing these nuanced experiences, qualitative research reveals insights that often remain concealed within more rigid, quantitatively driven frameworks, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying psychological and social mechanisms that drive consumer loyalty and active participation in live-streaming spaces (Tisdell et al., 025).

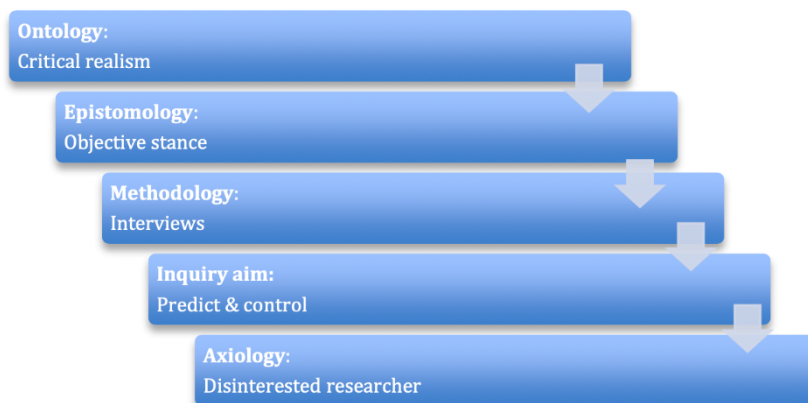
Moreover, qualitative research empowers participants by providing a platform for their voices to be heard, leading to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of their motivations, behaviours, and emotional experiences. Previous studies suggest that quantitative approaches often reduce complex human experiences to measurable variables, thereby limiting the ability to capture the depth of emotional processes underpinning consumer behaviours (Kazdin, 1998). By contrast, a qualitative perspective facilitates a more intuitive grasp of the affective and cognitive mechanisms driving consumer loyalty, trust, and sustained engagement in live-streaming contexts. Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative methodology to generate culturally resonant

and theoretically meaningful insights into consumer–influencer dynamics, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of success factors within the live-streaming industry.

Following a critical review of methodological strategies in consumer behaviour research, this study adopts a post-positivist philosophical paradigm to guide its qualitative inquiry. The post-positivist perspective acknowledges that while an objective reality may exist, our understanding of it is inevitably shaped by contextual, perceptual, and interpretative limitations. As such, knowledge is considered provisional and open to refinement through empirical investigation and critical reflection (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Within this framework, qualitative interviews are carried out to discover the underlying mechanisms and contextual drivers of consumer engagement with live-streaming influencers. This approach facilitates a structured yet adaptable examination of participants' subjective experiences, beliefs, and motivations, while recognising the influence of researcher interpretation and participant bias. (see Figure 2.0 for a theme analysis steps used in this study).

Figure 2

Post-positivist philosophical paradigm



Note. Copyright 1994 by Guba & Lincoln .

Applying thematic analysis enables the researcher to capture nuanced consumer perceptions and behaviours. The analysis offers rich, detailed accounts of how individuals experience and interpret live-streaming

interactions. By systematically coding and categorising interview content, it is possible to develop salient themes that elucidate participants' views on the characteristics of influencers, their communication strategies and the trust-building behaviours that resonate most during live-streaming sessions. Moreover, thematic analysis supports the generation of both theoretical contributions and practical implications by highlighting underlying emotional and cognitive processes that might remain obscured through other analytical methods (Joffe & Yardley, 2003). Thus, this method makes sure that the factors shaping consumer–influencer dynamics within live-streaming contexts are explored thoroughly and insightfully.

3.2.1 Research design

The primary goal of this study is to explore how consumers engage with influencers who have large followings, with particular attention to the emotional and cognitive factors that drive their interest and participation. In-depth probing techniques will be utilised to identify both explicit and underlying factors contributing to influencer success, including consumers' perceptions of authenticity, relatability, and personal appeal. As participants may sometimes offer socially desirable responses—especially when discussing emotional connections—probing will help elicit deeper insights. Interviews are expected to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes, depending on each participant's willingness to share and the complexity of their responses. The interview questions will address a range of topics, including perceptions of authenticity, emotional attachment, and the social and cultural influences that shape engagement with live-streaming content. The data collected will provide insights into the factors that contribute to the success of influencers with large followings and help identify the underlying drivers of consumer trust and loyalty in live-streaming environments (Fournier, 1998).

Before the interview process begins, participants will receive an information sheet introducing the interview three days prior to their scheduled session. This document will not reveal the full purpose of the study, but will help participants feel prepared and comfortable. Allowing respondents to express their ideas openly supports a deeper understanding of follower perspectives.

This study's primary research question is:

“What are the key factors that drive success for live-streaming influencers with large followings?”

To address this overarching inquiry, three sub-questions have been developed. First, the study examines why influencers with millions of followers tend to achieve greater success than those with smaller audiences. Second, it examines the reasons why consumers exhibit heightened interest in influencers with substantial followings. Third, it aims to identify the specific attributes and characteristics that contribute to influencers' sustained success on live-streaming platforms. These sub-questions guide the structure of the qualitative data collection and inform the development of 14 in-depth interview questions. These questions explore participants' perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioural motivations, ultimately facilitating a nuanced understanding of consumer–influencer dynamics in the rapidly evolving live-streaming environment.

3.2.2 Data collection

To investigate the key drivers of success factors of live-streaming influencers with large followings, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted. The qualitative approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of the participants' perceptions, behaviours and emotional responses, which was consistent with the interpretive nature of the research. As the focus was on subjective consumer experiences and psychological engagement during live-streaming sessions, quantitative methods were intentionally excluded as they are not well-suited to capturing nuanced individual narratives and motivations.

All interviews were conducted in English, as the selected participants were fluent and comfortable conversing in the language. Recruitment notices were posted on Instagram, enabling interested individuals to contact the researcher and attend an in-person interview at AUT. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, depending on the depth of participants' responses. Prior to commencing, informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, and permission was granted to audio record the sessions to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. The interview guide was semi-structured to enable a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to pursue emerging themes. The conversation began with general rapport-building questions, such as which influencers the participants currently follow and how they came across these influencers. Participants were also encouraged to specify the categories of live-streaming influencers they typically follow, such as beauty or fashion influencers, and the types of products they frequently purchase

during live streams. These approaches helped to create a relaxed environment, encouraging participants to openly reflect on their experiences and motivations. As the interview progressed, the questions became more specific, such as influencer engagement, content preferences, purchasing behaviour during live-streams, and personal interpretations of influencer characteristics. Rather than directly asking participants what makes an influencer “successful,” the questions were designed to elicit implicit indicators of success, such as sustained interest, emotional engagement, and consumer action (e.g., purchases or content sharing). This indirect approach minimised the risk of socially desirable responses and enabled a deeper understanding of the psychological triggers and interpersonal dynamics that influence follower behaviour. Sample questions included, “What factors influence your decision to continue following and watching this influencer?” and “Can you describe specific aspects of the influencer’s content that influence your engagement?” These were complemented by prompts encouraging participants to elaborate on what they found appealing or authentic about influencers, and how those attributes influenced their ongoing loyalty or purchasing behaviour.

In line with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, the interview questions were designed to explore how external stimuli—such as personality of influencers, quality of their content, communication style, and their live-streaming interactions on the internal cognitive and emotional states (the "organism") of consumers, including trust, admiration, and perceived authenticity. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how these stimuli shaped their psychological responses and, ultimately, their behavioural outcomes, such as continued viewership or long-term following during live-streaming sessions. This framework enabled a deeper examination of how specific influencer characteristics serve as stimuli that trigger internal evaluations and lead to observable consumer actions.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim (Table 1). Transcription was conducted by the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data and to support iterative reflection throughout the analysis phase. This immersive process enabled the identification of recurrent patterns and subtle emotional cues embedded in the narratives to be identified, which were essential for capturing the interpersonal dynamics that define the influencer-follower relationship within live-streaming contexts. The data collection process was designed to capture not only surface-level preferences but also to explore deeper consumer rationales, associations, and emotional responses to influencer behaviours. These insights formed the basis for identifying the

characteristics and strategies that contribute to an influencer's perceived success and influence in the highly competitive world of TikTok live-streaming.

Table 1*Profile of the Participants*

Participants	Gender F/M	Age	Education	Which type of influencer do you follow more? Which Platform?	Which sector will you watch live broadcasts?	How long you have been follow the influencer ?
Participant 1	F	32	Bachelor	Make up Tik Tok	Make up	A few year
Participant 2	F	26	Bachelor	Daily life sharing Tik Tok	Food, Make up	2 years
Participant 3	F	26	Master	Daily life sharing, Cooking Tik Tok	Food, Make up	2 years
Participant 4	F	36	Bachelor	Pet Tik Tok	Pet supplies, Food, Make up	2 years
Participant 5	F	25	Bachelor	Pet Tik Tok	Pet supplies, Make up	3 years
Participant 6	F	30	Bachelor	Travel sharing Tik Tok	Food, Make up, Daily necessities	A long time ago
Participant 7	F	36	Bachelor	Make up Tik Tok	Make up	2 years
Participant 8	F	24	Master	Daily life sharing, Cooking Tik Tok	Food, Make up, Clothing	2 years
Participant 9	F	24	Bachelor	Daily life sharing, Pet Tik Tok	Pet supplies	2 years
Participant 10	F	25	Master	Make up Tik Tok	Make up	2-3 years
Participant 11	F	30	Master	Fashion BiliBili	Fashion	Many years ago
Participant 12	F	34	Bachelor	Make up Tik Tok	Make up	1 year
Participant 13	F	27	Master	Daily life sharing Tik Tok	Daily necessities	7 years
Participant 14	M	28	PHD	Fashion Tik Tok	Fashion, Daily necessities	A several years.
Participant 15	F	21	Bachelor	Make up Tik Tok	Make up, Jewelry	Started following the influencer right after she started
Participant 16	F	22	Bachelor	Daily life sharing Tik Tok	Daily necessities, Food	1 year
Participant 17	F	40	Master	Daily life sharing Tik Tok	Daily necessities	3 years
Participant 18	F	35	Master	Make up Tik Tok	Make up	1 year
Participant 19	F	25	Bachelor	Pet Tik Tok	Pet supplies	2 years
Participant 20	M	24	Master	Fitness YouTube	Fitness supplies	3 years

Note. Data collected by author on the 20th of April 2025.

3.3 Selecting informants

To address the research aim of identifying key drivers of consumer interest and the success factors behind live-streaming influencers with large followings. A total of 20 participants were selected based on inclusion criteria developed to ensure the relevance and richness of their perspectives (Table 2). Based on grounded theory principles, data collection in this study continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer yielded new conceptual insights, properties, or relationships relevant to the emerging analytical categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Accordingly, sample size was determined by the conceptual richness, redundancy, and stability of themes, rather than by numerical considerations alone. Analysis indicated that saturation was reached after interviewing 20 participants, as core categories related to consumer engagement, emotional response, trust formation, and behavioural intention were fully developed and internally coherent, with subsequent interviews generating no substantively new themes. This sample size was therefore sufficient to capture the depth and variation of participant experiences required for rigorous qualitative analysis.

In this study eligible participants were individuals aged between 18 and 50 who had regularly watched influencer-led live broadcasts on their mobile phones. Accordingly, Instagram was selected as the recruitment platform, as individuals who actively use their mobile devices to engage with live-streaming content were deemed most likely to encounter and respond to the recruitment posts. Crucially, participants did not need to have made a purchase through live-streaming to be included; rather, they were required to have been drawn to and engaged with influencers' live content, whether or not they ultimately converted into buyers. This distinction enabled the study to explore a full range of motivations and interest triggers beyond consumer behaviour.

The sample was deliberately inclusive of individuals from diverse gender identities, ethnic backgrounds, and language groups, reflecting the heterogeneous user base of live-streaming platforms. All participants signed a formal consent agreement before participating in the interviews, affirming their understanding of the study's purpose and their voluntary participation.

Participants who had never used live broadcasting or who were not viewers or fans of influencers with millions of followers were excluded, as their experiences would not align with the study’s core research focus. Similarly, individuals who declined to sign the consent agreement were not considered for inclusion. Participants were recruited through the researcher’s personal and academic networks, as well as outreach in relevant online spaces where live-streaming content is frequently discussed. This approach provided efficient access to information-rich cases, facilitating the exploration of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses toward influencer characteristics within live broadcasts. This purposive strategy and clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that the selected participants offered credible, diverse, and in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 2

Selecting informants table

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<p>Participants who have purchased or have not purchased anything in live-streaming, but were attracted as fans from the live broadcasts of influencers with millions of followers</p> <p>Around 18-50 years old</p> <p>Watch live broadcast on mobile phone</p> <p>Participants of different gender, ethnicity and language they speak can participate in this research survey</p> <p>Participants who signed a consent agreement to participate in the interview</p>	<p>Participants who have never used live broadcasting, and are not fans of influencers with millions of followers</p> <p>Participants who did not sign a consent agreement to participate in the interview</p>

Note. Data design by author on the 27th of November 2025.

3.4 Ethical issues

This research strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants throughout the data collection process. Before participating, all individuals were provided with a detailed Participant Information Sheet outlining the purpose of the study, their voluntary involvement, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to protect their confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before interviews commenced. To maintain participant anonymity and for confidentiality reasons, participants were not identified by name. Instead, they were referred to as Participant 1 through Participant 20 in the transcripts and throughout the research report. No personal identifying information was collected or reported. It was deemed that this anonymisation process was sufficient to protect participant identity while maintaining a consistent structure for data analysis.

Participants were informed that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes and that the audio recordings would be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Upon request, participants were given the option to review their transcripts, ensuring the accuracy of their representations and providing an opportunity for clarification or withdrawal of any content. This offered participants an additional layer of control over their involvement (Taylor et al., 2015). Participants were also assured that they could decline to answer any questions they found sensitive or intrusive, and that there would be no consequences for withdrawing from the study at any point. The interview process was designed to be respectful, non-coercive, and sensitive to participants' comfort levels, particularly when discussing thoughts, emotions, or behaviours influenced by live-streaming content.

By adhering to the strict ethical standards in line with AUTEK requirements and qualitative research best practices, the study aimed to create a trusting and secure environment that encouraged honest and reflective participation while safeguarding the integrity of the research process.

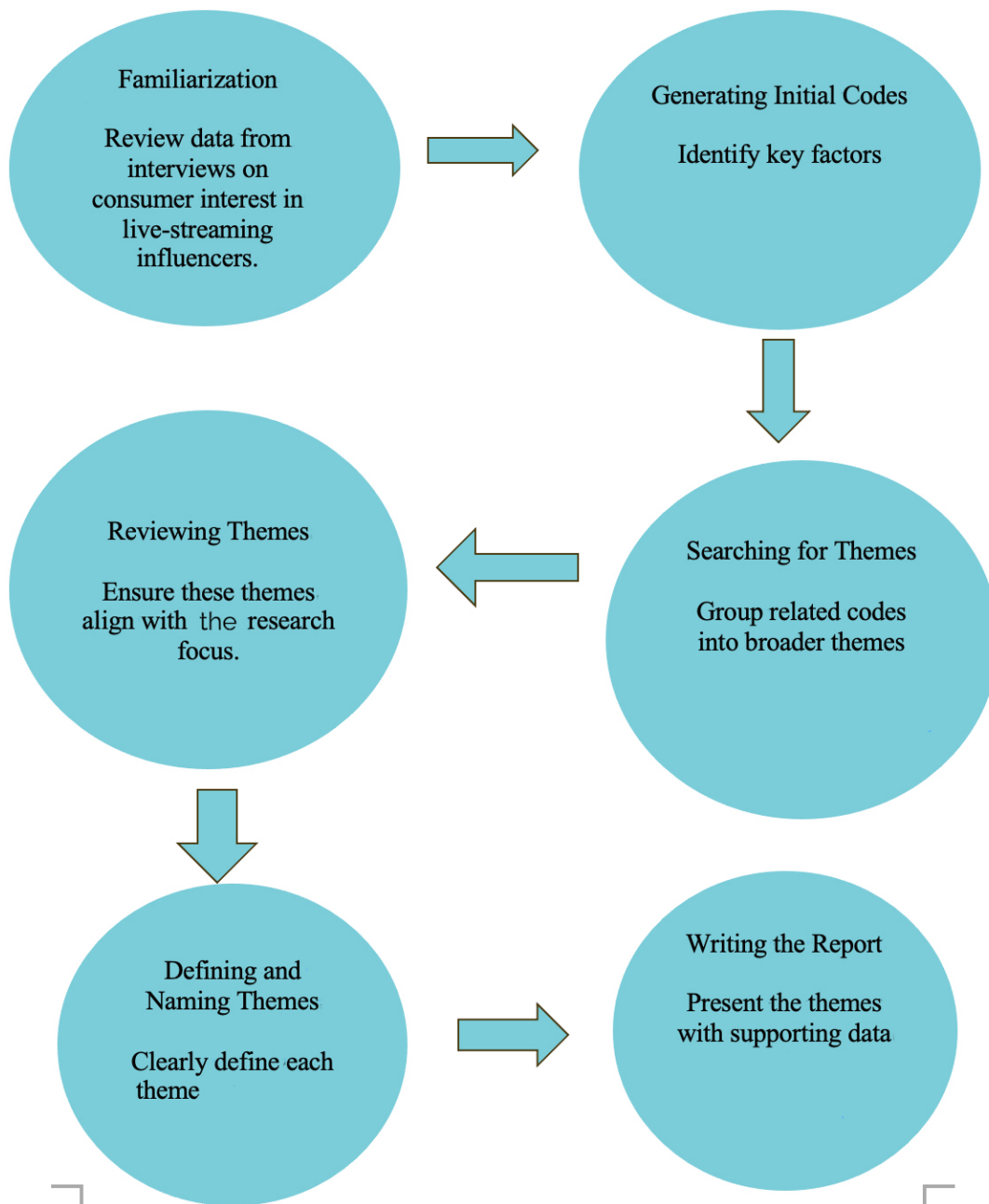
3.5 Data analytical process

Given the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on understanding nuanced consumer perceptions, thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data collected from 20 semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis offers flexibility in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data without the need to align with a specific theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was particularly well-suited for exploring how followers engage with live-streaming influencers and which specific characteristics drive their continued interest and purchasing behaviour.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) widely adopted six-phase process (See the Figure 3 below). This structured, yet flexible method is increasingly recommended for consumer research involving digital media and social influence (Nowell et al., 2017; Guest et al., 2012).

FIGURE 3

Six-phase process of data analysis



Note. Process design by author on the 6th of November 2024.

Phase One: Familiarization with the Data

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure a faithful representation of participants' narratives. The researcher read through each transcript multiple times, manually noting key phrases, emotions, and thoughts that were relevant to influencer appeal, consumer trust, and engagement. This immersion was

essential for developing a deep understanding of participants' perspectives and formed the basis for later coding (Guest et al., 2012).

Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes

Initial open coding was carried out using an inductive approach, whereby codes were developed directly from the data rather than relying on pre-established categories. The codes focused on participants' evaluations of influencers' authenticity, interactivity, entertainment value, follower size, and promotional strategies. During this stage, NVivo software was used to organize and structure the data, although the analytic decisions remained researcher-driven to maintain interpretive depth (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016).

Phase Three: Searching for Themes

The codes were grouped into broader categories based on shared meanings or contextual relationships. Visual methods, such as thematic maps and conceptual clusters, were used to support the categorisation of related codes into candidate themes. This process helped identify overarching drivers of consumer engagement, such as perceived credibility, emotional resonance, and social validation—concepts that emerged strongly across multiple interviews.

Phase Four: Reviewing Themes

In this phase, themes were reviewed and refined in relation to both the coded data and the entire dataset. This process ensured internal coherence and distinction between themes. Some initial themes were merged or discarded to ensure conceptual clarity. For example, the themes of “entertainment value” and “real-time interaction” were found to overlap and were combined into a broader theme of interactive engagement, aligning with prior research on social presence in live-streaming (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Furthermore, throughout the review process, the researchers ensured that the collected data were sufficiently comprehensive and that no additional themes emerged, thereby supporting the robustness of subsequent analyses.

Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was then clearly defined and named to reflect its conceptual core. This involved revisiting the data to extract illustrative quotes and refining the narrative of each theme. Themes such as authenticity, relatability, influencer expertise, and peer-influenced decision-making were finalised, encapsulating the primary psychological and behavioural drivers behind consumer interest in live-streamers with large followings.

Phase Six: Producing the Report

The final step involved integrating the thematic findings with relevant theoretical insights and contextual discussion. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework guided the interpretation of how influencer traits (stimuli) affected consumers' emotional/cognitive evaluations (organism), which in turn shaped behavioural responses such as engagement or purchasing. This helped articulate how influencer behaviours (e.g., transparency, content quality, credibility) triggered psychological mechanisms (e.g., trust, attention, and the desire for affiliation), leading to consumer actions (e.g., long-term following, buying products during live streams).

In line with qualitative research methods, no a priori codes or quantitative frequency counts were employed, since the objective was to develop theory from scratch (Flick, 2018). Comparative analysis was conducted throughout, with constant reference to earlier transcripts, ensuring depth, rigour and saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding and theme development process was meticulously recorded to ensure transparency and credibility.

3.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology employed to investigate the key drivers of consumer interest and the success factors behind live-streaming influencers with large followings. A qualitative research

design was chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perceptions within the context of live-streaming. Adopting a post-positivist paradigm, the study acknowledges the importance of both contextual interpretation and the pursuit of credible, transferable findings. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, enabling participants to express their thoughts and feelings about influencer characteristics and their engagement behaviours in a flexible yet focused manner. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and insight into the target phenomenon. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and participant anonymity, were strictly observed throughout the research process. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach. This method facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and meaningful themes within the data. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model served as the guiding theoretical framework, helping to structure and interpret the way in which influencer stimuli affect consumer responses through emotional and cognitive processing.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This study aims to explore the key drivers of consumer interest and success factors in live-streaming influencers with large followings. Specifically, the research examines the mechanisms and the process that explain why consumers are drawn to high-profile live-streaming influencers and how this engagement evolves into long-term followings and purchasing behaviour. Guided by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, the study analyses how various external stimuli influence internal gratifications and ultimately elicit observable responses from followers. Adopting a post-positivist philosophical paradigm, the study employs semi-structured interviews with 20 participants to guide its qualitative inquiry. The research reveals the nuanced dynamics underlying the transition from passive viewer to loyal follower and active consumer.

This chapter presents the key findings, which are structured around three core themes derived from thematic analysis and aligned with the S-O-R model. The first section explores how consumers perceive stimuli in the context of live-streaming, where influencer attributes such as the quality of content, interactivity, pricing, and credibility shape the initial consumer engagement. At the same time, this section of the study analysed what specific elements influencers possess that attract viewers' attention and prevent them from being lost among the multitude of influencers. The second theme, organism generated from perceived stimulus, delves into the internal states: emotional, cognitive, social, and benefit-based gratifications, that influence the viewer's decision to deepen their involvement with the influencer. The third theme, response from followers on influencers, examines the behavioural outcomes that emerge from sustained exposure and gratification, including trust-building, repeated purchasing, and long-term followership.

This chapter addresses the research questions by demonstrating how influencers cultivate sustained consumer interest through the coding from NVivo and interpretation of participant narratives. It also identifies specific success attributes ranging from professionalism and emotional authenticity to product quality and price advantage that contribute to influencer growth. Together, these themes offer a thorough understanding of the

mechanisms through which influencers with large followings attract, retain, and convert viewers, thereby illuminating the psychological underpinnings of influencer success in the live-streaming economy.

4.2 Main Findings

As outlined, themes were identified and categorised according to how well they aligned with the study's central research questions: 1) Why are live-streaming influencers with millions of followers more successful? 2) Why are consumers more interested in these types of influencers? And, 3) What specific attributes contribute to the success of influencers on social media live-stream platforms? The findings reveal that influencer success is not merely a result of follower count, but is fundamentally driven by a combination of strategic content delivery, authentic persona construction, and a highly interactive live environment. These influencers effectively cultivate trust and sustained interest by offering emotionally engaging content, transparent communication, and seamless entertainment and product knowledge integration. Viewers are drawn to these figures, thus generating different elements of gratification and encouraging them to pay further attention to the influencer's content. These dynamics collectively illustrate how particular stimulus elements—ranging from content quality to influencer credibility—contribute to the organismic gratifications experienced by viewers, ultimately driving responses such as long-term following and purchase behaviour. The analysis of these mechanisms is embedded in discussing the subsequent emergent themes.

4.3 The process of S-O-R

In a society where live-streaming and influencer marketing are becoming increasingly popular, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model serves as a valuable theoretical framework to explain how influencers attract, engage, and convert followers into loyal followers (As shown in Table 3 for data collected).

TABLE 3*The process of S-O-R*

Stimulus	Organism	Response
1. Content quality	1. Emotional gratification	1. Building trust
2. Content strategy	2. Knowledge gratification	2. Long- term following
3. Influencer impression	3. Social gratification	3. Purchase
4. Interaction	4. Benefit gratification	
5. Product price		
6. Product quality		
7. The convenience of live shopping provided by influencers		

Note. Data collected by author on the 30th of May 2025.

The first component of the model, Stimulus, refers to external environmental factors that trigger cognitive and emotional processing within viewers. According to the collected data, seven key stimuli can be identified in the live-streaming environment: content quality, content strategy, influencer impression, interaction, product price, product quality, and the convenience of live shopping provided by influencers. These elements collectively form the initial points of contact between influencers and their potential followers. High-quality content in terms of both visuals and themes grabs attention, while well-crafted strategies such as publishing content and managing the rhythm of the live broadcast room maintain viewers' interests. The impression of influencers, including the authenticity and credibility perceived by viewers, as well as the image, profile and personality of influencers, all affect the initial impression and the likelihood of engagement. Real-time interaction fosters a sense of immediacy and intimacy, distinguishing live-streaming from other content formats. Meanwhile, tangible aspects such as product pricing and quality address consumer rationality, and the overall convenience of live shopping provided by influencers integrates entertainment with transaction,

reducing the time wasted in the purchasing process. These stimuli serve not only to attract and condition the audience for deeper involvement, setting the stage for psychological engagement.

The second phase, Organism, represents the internal responses triggered by the aforementioned stimuli. These internal states—cognitive, emotional, and motivational—play a mediating role in the external environment and the final behavioural responses of the followers. This study identified four main forms of gratification that are central to this internal processing as reported by the followers who participated in the study: emotional gratification, knowledge gratification, social gratification and benefit gratification. Emotional gratification emerges when viewers feel entertained, experience positive emotions, or are emotionally connected to the influencer, contributing to a satisfying and memorable experience. Knowledge gratification occurs when influencers provide informative content, such as product explanations or beauty tutorials, thereby fulfilling their audience's desire to learn and to improve themselves. Social gratification is derived from the community-oriented aspect of live-streaming, where followers participate in live chats, engage with influencers, and experience a sense of belonging. Finally, benefit gratification refers to material incentives such as discounts, exclusive offers, or limited-time deals, which directly reward the audience for their engagement. These four types of gratification reflect both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, enabling a robust internalisation of value. They enhance viewer satisfaction and increase the likelihood of repeated engagement, deeper loyalty, and eventual behavioural outcomes.

The final component, response, encompasses the observable behaviours resulting from the stimuli induced by the organismic states. In the live-streaming context, these responses are typically categorised as building trust, long-term following, and purchase behaviour. Trust is arguably the most fundamental outcome, as it underpins the entire influencer-follower relationship. When viewers consistently derive emotional and informational value from an influencer, their perception of the influencer's credibility and reliability increases. This sense of trust encourages followers to remain engaged and to rely on the influencer's recommendations. Long-term attention is the continued development of trust. Not only will viewers come back to watch future content released by the influencer, but they will also become a fixed part of their fan community, watching their live broadcasts and interacting with them over a long period of time. This sustained engagement is crucial for influencers aiming to build a stable and expansive fan base. The most tangible behavioural response is

purchasing behaviour, where followers act on the influencer's recommendations and buy promoted products. This step represents the successful conversion of attention and emotional investment into commercial value. As such, the response phase closes the loop of the S-O-R model, reinforcing the influencer's popularity and market influence through measurable consumer actions.

4.4 Consumer perceived Stimuli in the livestreaming context

In the context of live-streaming commerce, stimuli are the external cues that initiate user engagement and trigger cognitive and emotional responses in consumers. The data collected shows in Table 4 through thematic analysis reveals that the stimuli influencing viewer interest in influencers with large followings fall into several interrelated categories: content quality, content strategy, influencer impression, interactivity, product-related features, and the convenience of live shopping. Together, these factors contribute to the creation of a persuasive, immersive digital environment that captures and retains audience attention.

Table 4

Consumer perceived stimuli in the livestreaming context

Theme	Code	Sub Code
Consumer perceived stimuli in the livestreaming context	Content: 1. Content quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of content • Entertainment • Interest • Positive energy • Level of video content
	2. Content strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buying point • Content publishing • Language usage understandable • Rhythm • Target audience • Update frequency • Collaboration with celebrities • Product information
	Influencer impression: 1. Influencer profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity • Consistent • Credibility • Similarities
	2. Influencer image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No negative information • Fame • Personal style • Professional • Transparent
	3. Personality of the influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honesty • Emotional intelligence • Real
	Live interaction continuous: 1. Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction in the live broadcast room • Proactive
	Product: 1. Product price 2. Product quality	
	Convenience shopping environment 1. The convenience of live shopping provided by influencers	

Note. Data collected by author on the 30th of May 2025.

The influencer's content remains a core factor in determining the initial appeal of a live-streaming influencer. Subcodes such as content diversity, entertainment value, interestingness, and positive energy reveal that audiences are drawn towards creators who offer varied and emotionally engaging material. High production value and a polished aesthetic, categorised under the level of video content, contribute to viewers' perceptions of professionalism and reliability. This audiovisual appeal draws attention and sets expectations for consistent performance and content delivery, which is vital in fostering habitual viewing behaviour.

Content strategy encompasses dynamic aspects of the live-streaming experience, including dynamic content. This includes how content is structured, delivered, and adapted in real time to meet consumer expectations. For example, understandable language usage refers to the clarity and accessibility of speech and terminology influencers use during live broadcasts. Viewers tend to respond more positively to influencers who avoid jargon, articulate their points clearly, and adapt their speech to connect with their target demographic. The rhythm of a live session, its pacing, transitions between segments, and the temporal balance between promotional content and interpersonal interaction were also found to be critical. A well-paced session maintains viewer attention, avoids cognitive overload, and highlights products strategically without making the session feel overly commercial. Furthermore, product information plays a crucial role in shaping consumer decision-making. Influencers who provide detailed, relevant, and trustworthy descriptions of the items they promote are more likely to be perceived as credible. This involves demonstrating product features, contextualising their use, and aligning them with the audience's needs, not just naming them. Including buying points, real-time updates, and responsive answers to queries during the broadcast reflects a highly strategic content flow that facilitates both informational and emotional gratification.

The second thematic component of the stimulus domain is the overall impression of the influencer, divided into profile, image, and personality. The influencer profile category particularly emphasises the importance of authenticity, credibility, and consistency. Audiences show a marked preference for influencers whose behaviours align with their portrayed identity across multiple sessions and platforms. In terms of influencer image, attributes such as lack of negative information, professionalism, transparency, and fame influence perceived legitimacy. These markers signal reputational stability, which in turn enhances the perceived trustworthiness of both the influencer and the products they endorse. The influencer personality, demonstrated

through traits such as honesty, emotional intelligence, and realness, further enhances interpersonal connection. These attributes promote the formation of parasocial relationships, which function as a psychological mechanism for viewers to increase their trust in the influencer.

Another significant stimulus involves the continuous interaction between influencers and their viewers. This includes direct responses to user comments and proactive behaviours such as calling out usernames, helping viewers better understand the product, and answering viewer questions in real time. Proactivity in the live broadcast room reflects an influencer's attentiveness, thereby enhancing perceived value and deepening consumer engagement.

Finally, transactional interest is influenced by product-related stimuli, including product price and product quality. The attractiveness of the stream is amplified by affordable, reliable products, especially real-time discounts. Moreover, the convenience of live shopping enables viewers to gain information more efficiently from influencers, facilitates a clearer understanding of product features, and assists in discerning unnecessary items, thereby optimising their decision-making process and conserving valuable time. This ease of purchase environment is a functional stimulus that complements the emotional and cognitive engagement fostered by the influencer's presentation.

Under this thematic analysis, the study clearly identified the key attributes of influencers that attracted viewers to become followers and how these characteristics contributed to the success of influencers with millions of followers on social media live-streaming platforms. The findings revealed that high-quality and strategically delivered content formed the foundation of influencer effectiveness. Influencers who offered clear, engaging, and informative presentations—accompanied by frequent updates and consistently positive energy—were more likely to capture and sustain viewer attention. Moreover, as the research progressed, more participants emphasised the importance of positive energy within influencer content, particularly in the context of societal pressures and digital fatigue.

An influencer's ability to maintain an energetic and well-paced streaming rhythm, coupled with the use of persuasive yet relatable language, ensured continued audience engagement throughout each session. Those who communicated authentically, often through storytelling or the sharing of personal experiences, significantly enhanced their perceived credibility and emotional resonance. Professionalism and high emotional intelligence further amplified their influence, as consumers increasingly valued influencers who demonstrated both subject-matter expertise and the ability to empathise with diverse audience needs.

Finally, interactivity—manifested through real-time viewer engagement such as responding to comments or addressing individual queries—fostered a sense of engagement. These combined attributes enabled influencers to amass large followings and cultivate emotional bonds, and ultimately convert passive viewers into loyal followers and active consumers.

4.4.1 Content quality

The quality of content emerged as a central theme. This is the first step in letting the viewer know the influencer and attracting the viewer's initial interest. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of high production value and consistency in video content as key determinants of their engagement with a live-streaming influencer.

“I think the video content is what attracts me the most... I will pay more attention to whether the quality of the video content can influence me... the quality of their videos...Although interestingness accounts for half, the quality of the video content is also very important.” (Participant 11)

Participant 11 noted the pivotal role content quality plays in initial viewer attraction. This response suggests that while engaging content may pique initial interest, the perceived quality, reflected in elements such as editing, clarity, structure, and professionalism, determines sustained attention. Viewers seek more than just entertainment; they expect a standard of excellence in content, content production and professionalism from

influencers.

“Another thing is that his video content maintains consistent quality...It does not mean that your content is sometimes good and sometimes bad. I think influencers should have the ability to maintain the quality of their own video content, so that your followers can feel that you are publishing content with your heart, rather than just posting some content for the sake of views.” (Participant 18)

Participant 18 further reinforced this view, emphasising the importance of consistently delivering high-quality content over time. This commentary reveals viewer's deeper expectation of emotional investment and sincerity from influencers. It is not just about producing high-quality content occasionally, but demonstrating a consistent, intentional approach to content creation that respects the audience's time and attention.

From the participants' description of content quality, it is clear that viewers can sense the influencer's attention to detail and their professionalism from the quality of the content. These qualities significantly affect the ability of influencers to develop and retain loyal audiences. When content appears inconsistent or hastily produced, followers may interpret it as a lack of commitment, potentially damaging the influencer's brand reputation. Conversely, consistently high-quality content signals reliability and care, strengthening the emotional bond with followers and the influencer's perceived authority in their domain. In essence, content quality operates not only as a visual and technical stimulus but also as a symbolic representation of the influencer's values and work ethic. As reflected in the participants' narratives, this sustained standard of content excellence enables influencers to differentiate themselves in an oversaturated digital landscape and build enduring relationships with their audience that lead to viral growth and commercial success.

4.4.1.1 Interest

Interest emerged as a crucial factor influencing initial viewer engagement and sustained attention towards live-streaming influencers. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the appeal and entertainment value of content serve as primary motivators for following an influencer, particularly in the highly competitive digital environment where attention spans are limited.

“First, the content of her videos about fashion makes me feel very interesting, which attracts me to learn more and continue to follow them.” (Participant 11)

Participant 11 highlighted the immediate allure of engaging content, particularly within niche areas such as fashion. This response illustrates that interest acts as the gateway to exploring more content. When a video is perceived as interesting, it encourages more than casual viewing. It also triggers a desire for continued interaction, fostering a sense of attachment and loyalty to the influencer. The viewer is not merely consuming content passively but is drawn into a process of exploration and learning, catalysed by the initial interest.

“Interesting features can satisfy entertainment needs, make people relax and willing to share. And we can watch in our spare time to relieve our stress...Interestingness determines whether the audience will stop to watch...Interesting content can quickly grab the audience's attention.” (Participant 12)

Participant 12 offered a broader perspective, positioning interestingness as integral to emotional gratification and social sharing. This narrative highlights the multifunctional role of interesting content—not only does it serve entertainment and relaxation purposes and influences the likelihood of content being shared within one’s social networks. People are willing to share the interesting content they see in their influencers' videos with people around them, which attracts more potential followers for the influencer. In this sense, interestingness functions both as a personal motivator and a social amplifier, increasing the influencer’s reach through word-of-mouth or peer recommendation.

In the context of influencer success, interestingness acts as a critical stimulus in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, capturing attention immediately and encouraging deeper cognitive and emotional engagement. Influencers who consistently produce interesting content are more likely to create memorable experiences, increasing the likelihood that viewers will transition from passive observers to active followers. Furthermore, interesting content is more likely to be memorable and engaging over time. When the viewing

experience is enjoyable and emotionally resonant, followers are more inclined to return for future sessions and to engage with additional content, contributing directly to the influencer's sustained visibility and follower growth. Influencers can more effectively convert casual viewers into dedicated followers by creating content that captures attention, fulfils entertainment needs, and encourages social interaction, thereby reinforcing their success in the live-streaming ecosystem.

4.4.1.2 Positive energy

The influencer who projects positive energy is a key psychological driver behind consumers' sustained interest in live-streaming influencers. Participants expressed a clear preference for influencers who project optimism, resilience, and self-empowerment—qualities that emotionally uplift audiences and foster a deeper sense of connection.

“She achieved success through her own efforts...Even after the divorce, she did not complain about herself but continued to work hard...She also often mentions in her live broadcast room and daily video content that "sisters must rely on yourself and must be beautiful.” (Participant 7)

Participant 7 emphasised the motivational influence of one such influencer, describing how deeply her personal narrative of perseverance resonated. This response suggests that viewers are not only drawn to the content itself, but to the values and attitudes embodied by the influencer. In this case, messages of self-reliance, self-care, and emotional strength are perceived as affirming and empowering, particularly given the prevalence of superficial or negative messaging in the digital environment. Such narratives serve a dual purpose, entertaining while encouraging self-development, which helps foster emotional attachment and admiration among viewers.

“For example, the internet celebrity I discussed with you, she can show her past to everyone, and bring some very positive things to everyone...she is a very motivated internet celebrity. She has been constantly learning and studying. And while she is constantly learning and growing, she will also share some of her achievements with everyone...”(Participant 10)

Similarly, Participant 10 highlighted how influencers who openly share their personal growth and accomplishments can serve as role models to their audience. Participant 10 explained that having an influencer with positive energy is important because she was influenced by the positive energy of the influencer she followed. Viewers admire influencers who model resilience and ambition, but also appreciate those who actively share their learning processes and progress. In doing so, influencers are positioned not simply as content creators, but as inspirational figures whose presence enriches their audience's emotional and aspirational lives.

In summary, positive energy is a background trait and a key aspect of effective influencer content production. It distinguishes successful influencers from others by creating an emotionally safe and motivational digital space. As contemporary audiences increasingly seek content that enhances their emotional well-being, influencers who embody and consistently transmit positive energy are likelier to cultivate loyal followings and sustained engagement. By sharing messages of empowerment, perseverance, and growth, these influencers attract viewers who are looking for entertainment and emotional uplift, which makes positive energy a key determinant of their widespread appeal and follower retention.

4.4.2 Content strategy

In the contemporary social media landscape, where an overwhelming volume of content competes for viewers' attention, having a coherent and deliberate content strategy has emerged as a critical factor influencing an influencer's success. The participants' description underscores the idea that content strategy is not merely about volume or virality, but about intentional planning, thematic consistency, and ethical consideration in content creation.

“The first is their focus, they focus on the same content. Nowadays, many Internet celebrities will make any video just to gain attention, but they actually have no professional knowledge and are just performing to attract consumers' attention. However, the few people I follow have been making videos in their own field from beginning to end, and have not made other content for profit...It's all about

the content. If the planning is done well, it will definitely attract the attention of fans and make them stand out from other similar influencers.” (Participant 11)

Participant 11 expressed a clear preference for influencers who maintain thematic focus and authenticity over time, suggesting that consistency signals credibility and professionalism. This view reinforces that viewers are not easily swayed by opportunistic content production; instead, they value consistency, subject-matter expertise, and a sustained commitment to a particular thematic area. Influencers who produce consistent content from beginning to end will earn trust from their audience and establish themselves as professionals in their field, leading to their subsequent follow-up. A well-defined content strategy becomes a form of brand positioning, which can give viewers a clearer understanding of what kind of influencer this is. To distinguish influencers from competitors who rely on transient trends and sensationalism.

*“The most popular accounts never torture pets for the sake of shooting videos, but turn the real growth stories of pets into TV series, such as recording the process of dogs from being naughty to growing up.”
(Participant 19)*

Participant 19 added another dimension to the strategic dimension of content planning, noting that ethical storytelling and narrative structure can enhance emotional engagement and foster long-term viewer loyalty. This comment underscores a growing expectation among audiences for influencers to create content that is entertaining, authentic, emotionally resonant, and ethically sound. Rather than relying on shock value or exploitative tactics, successful influencers employ thoughtful planning and narrative continuity to build emotional connections with viewers over time.

In summary, a well-executed content strategy is not merely a technical or logistical element; it plays a central role in shaping viewer perception, emotional resonance, and ultimately, loyalty. Within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, content strategy is a deliberate stimulus that activates a viewer’s cognitive evaluation and emotional response. Strategic planning in content creation, whether through thematic

focus, serialised storytelling, or value-based messaging, guides the viewer's interpretation of the influencer's identity and intent. According to the participants, influencers who curate content with clear themes, ethical considerations, and thematic consistency are more likely to establish a distinctive and sustainable presence on competitive live-streaming platforms.

4.4.2.1 Language usage understandable

In the context of live-streaming commerce, language functions as a pivotal strategic tool that directly influences audience comprehension and purchasing intention. The way influencers communicate, specifically their clarity, accessibility, and choice of vocabulary, can significantly affect whether viewers understand product features, trust the influencer's expertise, and ultimately engage with both the content and the promoted items.

“She will explain it very clearly, and help fans find the right products better... When introducing products, she usually uses easy-to-understand language, that is, she does not use professional terms that fans cannot understand.” (Participant 15)

Participant 15 emphasised the importance of linguistic clarity in enhancing the consumer's ability to make informed decisions. This highlights a key component of effective influencer communication: the ability to bridge the knowledge gap between complex product information and the general viewer's understanding. This means using popular language to explain professional terms so the audience can easily understand the product. For example, influencers can explain the effects that the chemical ingredients contained in skincare products have on human skin, helping the audience to understand which ingredients are bad for the skin. Influencers who avoid jargon and use everyday language facilitate product comprehension and reduce cognitive friction, which can lead to disengagement or scepticism and result in the loss of followers.

“Pay attention to whether the anchor can introduce a product clearly. Only then can I understand more about the product...If he can't explain it clearly, I will doubt the credibility of the product and the

anchor's professionalism and understanding of the product. If it doesn't meet my standards, I will not buy or plan to buy the products he introduces...If it is clear, I will know whether the product can meet my needs and thus generate the desire to buy.” (Participant 18)

Similarly, Participant 18 reinforced this idea by linking language use to perceived credibility and purchase motivation. This response illustrates how language serves a functional role in communication and operates as a marker of trustworthiness and competence. If an influencer is unable to explain product features clearly, this can result in a diminished perception of both the influencer and the product. Conversely, clear and purposeful language fosters trust in the product, encourages emotional engagement, and increases the likelihood of conversion from viewers becoming buyers.

In summary, language is far more than a vehicle for product information it is a strategic tool that mediates audience trust, comprehension, and decision-making. From the perspective of the S-O-R model, the influencer’s linguistic choices act as a stimulus that shapes the viewer’s cognitive and affective processing. When language is clear, relatable, and informative, it fosters an internal state of interest and emotional resonance in viewers, which is then translated into a response to heightened engagement, loyalty, or purchase behaviour. Influencers who intentionally tailor their language to be audience-centric and engaging are more likely to succeed in both building rapport with their viewers and gaining more followers. As evidenced in participant narratives, linguistic effectiveness is a defining attribute of successful live-streaming influencers with large and loyal followings.

4.4.2.2 Rhythm

The pacing and structural rhythm of a live-streaming session have emerged as critical determinants of viewer engagement and retention. Unlike pre-recorded content, where users can pause or fast-forward, the real-time nature of live broadcasting means that influencers must pay close attention to how they manage transitions, sequence product introductions, and balance promotional segments with engaging commentary. Viewers are more likely to disengage if the rhythm is mismanaged by moving too quickly, being disorganised, or being excessively commercial.

“However, if his progress is good and you can keep watching it, just like a TV series, if the rhythm is too slow, you may not be able to watch it...If the rhythm is tight, you can keep watching it...Excellent Internet celebrities will control the progress of the overall process instead of constantly promoting a product... the rhythm of his or her speech.” (Participant 6)

As Participant 6 noted, this reflects how viewers perceive rhythm not merely as a stylistic element, but as a functional component that determines whether a live session is enjoyable, accessible, and worth continued attention. An optimal rhythm sustains interest by structuring content in a way that feels dynamic, without becoming overwhelming or purely transactional.

“I don’t think that every live broadcast of hers is like other internet celebrities who put up a bunch of links before introducing the products at the beginning of the live broadcast...for Da Zhuang, she will first carefully introduce the content of today’s live broadcast, and then the ingredients of the product, the skin type that it is suitable for...Then, for some beauty products or accessories, she will usually try them herself and then post the links.” (Participant 15)

Participant 15 provided a concrete example of how rhythm can be used to facilitate trust and engagement in the purchasing process. This structured sequence, which begins with contextual information, followed by experiential demonstration, and concludes with purchase options, demonstrates how rhythm contributes to viewer comfort and perceived professionalism and credibility. Viewers value a format that builds a coherent narrative around each product without rushing towards monetisation. This sense of rhythm helps potential consumers to understand the product itself better, and can also help them judge the influencer's understanding and professionalism regarding the product. For instance, if they are a beauty influencer, they should understand the ingredients of each beauty product and who it is suitable for. This will help influencers grasp the rhythm of explaining the product and matching it with purchase links to attract viewers to consume.

From an S-O-R perspective, rhythm functions as a nuanced stimulus that affects viewers' (the organism) emotional and cognitive states, leading to outcomes such as prolonged viewing, increased trust, and eventual response behaviours like following or purchasing. A live broadcast room with a steady rhythm can encourage viewers to stay and watch, and help them to understand and purchase the product that suits them. When influencers can generate a high number of views, social media platforms will also promote their live broadcasts on users' homepages. This gives influencers access to a wider audience. It can be said that this is a win-win situation for everyone involved. Controlling the rhythm is not merely an aesthetic choice but a core strategic asset that distinguishes successful influencers in the competitive live-streaming ecosystem.

4.4.2.3 Update frequency

Consistent and timely content output is another critical strategic factor influencing an influencer's ability to retain audience interest and sustain long-term engagement. In the highly dynamic landscape of social media, attention is fleeting, and audiences often gravitate toward creators who maintain a regular presence. As such, content update frequency becomes not just a metric of productivity, but a signal of reliability, professionalism, and commitment.

"It is her stable content quality and update speed...You must have a stable output...First of all, stable output is the foundation. Today's social media attention attaches great importance to continuous content updates. If the update is interrupted for too long, the audience's attention to her will decline."
(Participant 14)

Participant 14 emphasised the importance of stable output. This observation underscores how update frequency is foundational to visibility. Most live-streaming and short video platform algorithms reward consistency, and followers are more likely to lose interest or disengage when influencers do not maintain regular contact. Therefore, sporadic content production threatens not only logistical efficiency but also long-term follower retention and audience trust. Moreover, regular updates reinforce the perception that the influencer is actively engaged in their content domain and is invested in providing ongoing value. Conversely, if an influencer does not update for a long time, the viewer's attention will be attracted by other influencers who update frequently,

resulting in a loss of potential followers. This is why some influencers have a small fan base and continuously lose followers.

Maintaining an update frequency is not simply about meeting the algorithmic requirements of a social media platform; it is about encouraging regular engagement and reinforcing the influence of an individual on their followers. In today's society, there are endless influencers. If an influencer disappears from people's feeds for too long, they will soon be forgotten or even replaced by others. As participant insights suggest, consistency in posting times is critical to sustained influencer success.

4.4.3 Influencer impression

In today's oversaturated digital landscape, where countless content creators are competing for attention, an influencer's personal image and perceived moral stance—collectively termed their 'impression' play a decisive role in maintaining audience trust and fostering follower growth. They generate subsequent behavioural responses only when viewers form a favourable first impression of influencers. A well-crafted, ethically grounded impression enhances an influencer's credibility and strengthens their long-term relevance.

“And the most important point is that internet celebrities cannot make money for the sake of making money. If they value profit too much, negative news will appear sooner or later. You know what I mean. For example, selling fake products to deceive consumers.” (Participant 12)

As Participant 12 stated, this perspective highlights a prevalent concern among viewers: the commodification of trust. Influencers who overly prioritise commercial gain at the expense of integrity risk damaging their reputations and alienating their audiences. The mention of “selling fake products” exemplifies how financial motivations can erode public trust, ultimately leading to reputational fallout and disengagement.

From an S-O-R framework, the influencer's ethical impression acts as an ongoing stimulus that shapes viewers' emotional trust and cognitive evaluations of the influencer, driving subsequent response behaviours such as product purchases, engagement with content, and advocacy. A positive influencer impression characterised by ethical behaviour functions as a symbolic assurance that the creator values their audience beyond mere transactional interactions. In this context, the influencer becomes not just a marketer but a relatable figure whose values align with those of their community. This alignment significantly contributes to audience loyalty and continued support, which will also attract more potential followers. As such, cultivating a trustworthy and community-oriented impression is not an optional personal enhancement but a core determinant of influencer sustainability and success.

4.4.3.1 Authenticity

In an era where commercial motives increasingly blur the line between genuine content and sponsored promotion, authenticity has emerged as one of the most influential factors in assessing influencer credibility. Today's audiences are highly attuned to signs of insincerity and quickly disengage from influencers whose content seems insincere or driven by opportunism.

“It was her recommendation that made me feel that it was not a perfunctory recommendation, but made me feel its practicality...the authenticity of her recommendation content was also a point that attracted me...I think it's the content of her videos and the authenticity of her content.” (Participant 10)

Participant 10 captured this sentiment by emphasising the emotional impact of sincere content. This highlights that authenticity is about truthfulness and emotional resonance—whether the influencer's communication feels genuine and personally motivated, rather than purely commercial.

“In today's society, there are many Internet celebrities on many different media platforms. But many of the Internet celebrities I followed before made videos to meet the needs of the current population. It can be understood that the videos they make are to make profits or attract attention to increase their

own popularity. But over time, I feel that their videos have no real content. The authenticity makes me feel very uncomfortable, so I no longer follow these types of Internet celebrities...The content of her videos makes me feel very real because she also shows that she uses the products she recommends and sells in her daily videos...is that it can really let me get to know an internet celebrity better...authenticity builds long-term trust.” (Participant 12)

Participant 12 reinforced this theme, stating that authenticity is positioned as the foundation for relational trust. Viewers are more likely to engage with and remain loyal to influencers who appear to use and believe in the products they endorse. As social media scams become more prevalent, audiences are becoming increasingly adept at identifying scams in influencer videos. They can distinguish between genuine promotions and fake commercial endorsements. Once audiences identify fake promotions, they tend to reduce their engagement with influencers. Moreover, inauthentic behaviour, whether through scripted promotions or misleading representations, can swiftly erode credibility and damage follower relationships.

Authenticity is not just a personal trait but a strategic imperative that builds trust with the audience and leads to commercial success. As participant feedback reveals, today's discerning viewers actively follow influencers whose content reflects sincerity rather than purely profit-driven motives. Influencers who cultivate authenticity through consistent, value-driven communication build lasting relationships with their audience that can withstand the evolving digital landscape. In an era where audiences can instantly detect insincerity, authenticity is the non-negotiable currency of influence, determining both immediate engagement and long-term career viability.

4.4.3.2 Credibility

In the digital ecosystem of influencer marketing and live-streaming commerce, credibility is a key attribute in fostering consumer trust, influencing purchase decisions, and maintaining long-term audience engagement. Credibility in this context encompasses honesty, product reliability, and the influencer's perceived integrity and sense of accountability.

“It should be credibility... he gave consumers a lot of compensation. He did not cover up in the video, and explained the whole story. In this way, it is very reassuring for consumers...their responsibilities for selling things, and their own integrity.” (Participant 4)

Participant 4’s comment illustrates how transparent communication and ethical responsibility enhance perceived credibility. This response underscores the significance of transparency, particularly when issues arise. The act of openly addressing mistakes and taking responsibility serves to strengthen consumer confidence and reinforces the influencer’s image as trustworthy and principled. This behaviour can serve as an example for influencers. When problems arise, public figures should have the courage to take responsibility and admit their mistakes in order to project a positive image to their followers. They should not choose to avoid the issue when problems arise. Nowadays, people are becoming increasingly discerning about choosing which influencers to follow, given the fierce competition among them. If an influencer has a problem, their followers may choose to follow someone else instead.

“Well, the things he recommended in the videos were all things he actually used, so I felt that they were quite reliable and trustworthy, so I bought them...Well, if there is fraud, no matter how popular she is, no matter how many fans she has, they will slowly lose.” (Participant 13)

Similarly, Participant 13 emphasised the importance of authenticity in product usage and the consequences of deception. This statement highlights how aligning an influencer’s actions with their content, particularly by actually using the recommended products, significantly influences consumer behaviour. Therefore, credibility not only increases the likelihood of consumers making a purchase but also enhances the reputation of influencers, thus increasing their number of followers.

In today’s influencer economy, credibility is a cornerstone of sustained success. Interview data revealed that viewers are more likely to trust influencers who clearly communicate product experiences, take responsibility when issues arise, and avoid deceptive practices. Once an influencer is associated with dishonest behaviour,

such as promoting low-quality or misleading products, audience trust quickly deteriorates, regardless of their follower count. In a saturated market where consumers are increasingly sceptical, credibility serves as a vital filter through which audiences assess whether an influencer is worth their attention and money. In this sense, credibility is not merely an abstract value but a tangible metric of trustworthiness that directly impacts influencer sustainability and success.

4.4.3.3 Personal style

As the influencer market becomes increasingly saturated, personal style emerges as a distinguishing attribute that enables influencers to stand out and cultivate loyal audiences. Personal style refers to content visuals, digital image or aesthetic presentation, communicative tone, narrative perspective, and the values embedded in the influencer's digital persona.

“I think the style is different from other online celebrities in the lifestyle category. She has a distinct personal style. In addition to humor, her own style and the style of the short videos she makes are all different...I think it's her education level.... her uniqueness and difference...The creation of this persona on the Internet.” (Participant 17)

Participant 17 clearly articulated how uniqueness contributes to audience appeal. This comment reflects how audiences are drawn to influencers who present a cohesive and differentiated identity, something more than trend-following or formulaic content. The notion of a carefully constructed yet authentic digital persona is essential in generating emotional connection and long-term engagement.

“Through the content he shot and the dog's enjoyment, I feel that he is an Internet celebrity who treats pets well and will not force dogs to do things to earn views.” (Participant 19)

Similarly, Participant 19 highlighted how personal style is also reflected in values and ethical conduct. This statement suggests that personal style includes behavioural consistency and moral sensibilities. An influencer's approach to content creation, even in subtle actions, conveys who they are and what they represent, which in turn resonates with specific audience values.

With the proliferation of social media content, cultivating a distinct personal style is essential for influencers seeking to stand out. Participants in the survey demonstrated that today's influencers do not need to flaunt their wealth in their online personas. Instead, they can attract viewers' attention simply by maintaining a unique personal style. For instance, interviewees noted appreciation for influencers who showed creativity in storytelling or reflected authenticity in how they treated subjects such as pets or lifestyle routines. In an era of social media growth, those with an identifiable style are more likely to leave a lasting impression and foster emotional resonance with followers. A recognisable personal style differentiates influencers from competitors and enhances loyalty by helping viewers feel a stronger connection to the individual behind the screen.

4.4.3.4 Professional

Professionalism is a critical determinant of success for influencers operating within competitive digital environments. The data gathered from participants underscores that followers are highly attuned to an influencer's level of expertise, particularly when promoting or reviewing products. Participants in this study consistently linked professionalism with an influencer's ability to convey product information clearly, accurately, and with a depth of understanding.

“Her clear and logical thinking when introducing products...In particular, herself has a certain understanding of the materials used in this kind of beauty products. She will tell me in detail what chemical ingredients are added to beauty products and what are unhealthy...Her professionalism also makes me feel that she is very reliable, so these prompted me to go to her live broadcast room to shop.”
(Participant 12)

Participant 12 emphasised the importance of clear, logical communication as well as specialised knowledge, particularly in technical areas such as product ingredients. As mentioned, an influencer's ability to explain chemical ingredients in beauty products and their effects was considered not only informative but also as a sign of reliability. This type of detailed explanation reflects more than surface-level promotion; it demonstrates domain-specific knowledge and reassures followers, motivating them to make purchases. Moreover, presenting industry expertise in an accessible and easy-to-understand manner can demonstrate professionalism and help influencers establish a trustworthy image, thereby fostering trust between the influencer and their followers.

“If you want to be an internet celebrity in a certain field, you still have to show your professionalism or advantages in this industry...professional quality determines how far you can go. For example, in the same fashion content, some people simply transfer information, while truly successful Internet celebrities will conduct in-depth research and then combine their own experience. This kind of professionalism will make the audience feel "different from others" and willing to pay attention for a long time.” (Participant 14)

Participant 14 further emphasised that professional influencers differentiate themselves by engaging in in-depth research and incorporating personal experiences into their shared content. Rather than simply recycling existing information, these influencers add interpretive value, which enhances their perceived expertise and fosters sustained audience engagement. Those who rely solely on surface-level or repurposed content were perceived as lacking authenticity and depth. This suggests that followers are interested not only in the products being introduced but are also influenced by the manner and depth with which the content is presented.

Professionalism is not only evaluated by the depth of product knowledge but also by how influencers communicate their expertise through logical structure, clarity of expression, and educational value. This enables influencers to stand out in crowded content spaces, especially in specialised niches such as beauty, fitness, or fashion. Ultimately, followers are more likely to remain loyal to influencers who consistently

demonstrate expertise and a commitment to learning, as this signals both authenticity and added value beyond mere entertainment.

4.4.3.5 Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is another indispensable attribute for influencers seeking to foster meaningful and sustained relationships with their audiences. Participant interviews reveal that followers are highly perceptive of an influencer's ability to empathise, understand their needs and respond to their emotions and psychological needs.

“Maybe it’s emotional intelligence that wins. It’s very important to be able to understand the needs of your fan group and be able to think from their perspective...Many of the rest are people with high emotional intelligence and the ability to think from other people’s perspectives. After all, many people watch videos to seek emotional value...For example, Tao Heihei, who has been very popular recently, succeeded because he can really put himself in the shoes of a woman when playing female games, and he has a strong sense of self-awareness.” (Participant 9)

Participant 9 described EI as a key reason why some influencers stand out, citing Tao Heihei’s success because of his capacity to view content from his audience’s perspective and engage with empathy, sensitivity, and self-awareness. From her opinion, EI is the ability to understand and reflect the fan base's perspective, highlighting how successful influencers often tap into their followers’ emotional worlds rather than relying solely on content aesthetics or trends. This capacity to emotionally connect transforms the influencer-follower dynamic from transactional to relational. Make viewers feel cherished, thereby turning them into loyal fans of the influencer.

“She is very sensitive to the market and can sense what people want to see...I think a successful Internet celebrity not only needs the ability to make videos, but also needs to sense the content that her fans want to see.” (Participant 17)

Moreover, emotionally intelligent influencers excel at interpreting audience sentiment and adapting their strategies accordingly. Participant 17 highlighted that successful creators have a kind of market sensitivity—an ability to detect shifts in audience interest and emotional tone and adjust their content to sustain attention and emotional engagement. Rather than imposing their own perceptions of value, these influencers co-create meaning with their followers, cultivating a stronger and more responsive fan base. At the same time, influencers align their messaging and tone with the evolving expectations of their followers.

Data collection informs the development of emotional intelligence content. It guides influencers to create material that is not only visually appealing but also emotionally meaningful, helping them to stand out in a crowded digital space. Rather than projecting assumptions onto their audience, emotionally intelligent influencers engage in a responsive, two-way relationship, adjusting their content strategy based on feedback, sentiment, and emerging desires. This fosters trust, relatability, and ultimately loyalty among followers.

4.4.4 Interaction

In the contemporary social media landscape, interaction between influencers and their followers has become a critical factor in building and sustaining online success. With the saturation of content increasing across platforms, mere exposure is insufficient; it is the quality of interaction that distinguishes successful influencers from the rest. By fostering meaningful dialogue and emotional connection, influencers can create a loyal follower base that actively engages with their content rather than passively consuming it. This ultimately allows them to thrive in a competitive digital environment.

Genuine, consistent, and responsive interaction fosters a sense of closeness and community between influencers and their audiences. When influencers actively engage with followers by replying to comments, acknowledging feedback, and creating content that reflects their interests, they demonstrate attentiveness and respect. This two-way communication builds trust and strengthens the emotional connection between influencer and follower, encouraging long-term loyalty.

4.4.4.1 Interaction in the live broadcast room

Interaction within the live broadcast room was identified as a key factor influencing audience engagement and purchasing intent. Participants emphasised that their willingness to remain in a livestream and engage with its content depended on how interactive and audience-oriented the influencer was. Specifically, informants associated interactive features—such as responding to live questions and offering participation-based incentives—with feelings of inclusion, relevance, and trust.

“I will pay attention to whether there are any extra benefits if I participate. For example, when I interact with your live broadcast room, such as liking or commenting, will there be some extra discounts for me... On the other hand, if there is any information I want to know but the anchor didn't say it, I might ask in the comment section.” (Participant 14)

Participant 14 emphasised the motivational power of tangible incentives, such as discounts or gifts, to encourage audience participation. This suggests that strategic interaction enhances viewer satisfaction and stimulates active involvement, thereby amplifying the broadcast's popularity and commercial effectiveness. Interaction was also viewed as a means of clarifying product information and reducing uncertainty during the purchasing process. The live Q&A element of the broadcast created a more dynamic and personalised environment, encouraging more informed consumer decision-making.

“Her live broadcast room is not a very professional one. There are not so many advertisements. She basically answers fans' questions and shares recent food.” (Participant 16)

Participants expressed discomfort with overly commercialised livestreams that lacked organic interaction. When a livestream felt more like a polished advertisement than an authentic social encounter, viewers reported feeling disconnected and often exited the session early. Participant 16's transcript reflects this aversion to excessive promotional content. Instead, viewers gravitate towards sessions where the influencer appears relatable, responsive, and spontaneous. Audiences prefer a broadcast environment that feels authentic and

reciprocal—where their questions are answered, their presence is acknowledged, and their contributions are valued. This type of interaction fosters intimacy and a sense of community, increasing the likelihood of ongoing engagement and gaining followers. Therefore, when executed with sincerity and responsiveness, live interaction serves as both a functional and emotional bridge between the influencer and the audience.

The data reveals that interactive, conversational livestreams are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy. Not only do these formats improve the viewing experience, but they also build stronger influencer-follower relationships that are essential for sustained engagement. In contrast, overly commercial or impersonal broadcasts tend to alienate viewers.

4.4.4.2 Proactive

Proactivity in communication is a defining trait of successful influencers. This behaviour extends beyond scheduled livestreams to ongoing digital interactions such as comments, direct messages, and community spaces like fan groups. Influencers who consistently reached out to their followers, responded to messages, and created casual spaces for dialogue were perceived as more approachable and emotionally available, thereby fostering greater audience loyalty and intimacy.

“Very interactive and good at communicating with fans.” (Participant 1)

Participant 1 noted that proactive influencers are distinguished from those who only interact when it benefits their sales agenda. The former group was more likely to earn long-term trust, because their engagement was perceived as more sincere and consistent across platforms. Thus, being proactive in interacting with fans serves as a strategic tool for audience retention and as a marker of emotional intelligence and interpersonal competence. In an increasingly saturated digital landscape, it is this quality that enables influencers to stand out and build sustainable relationships with their audience.

“Being friendly can bring the followers closer to them, such as regular interaction, so that the followers think they are friendly and are more willing to follow them.” (Participant 5)

Participant 5 shares views similar to those of Participant 1. This sense of reciprocal communication was crucial in reducing the perceived distance between influencer and follower. Viewers interpret friendly and positive engagement, especially when it appears spontaneous and unprompted, the viewer will interpret as a sign of authenticity and emotional investment.

“Because she is very active in interacting with fans...She also often responds to fans on various platforms and helps them...And in her fan group, it is very casual, you can post whatever you want, just like chatting with friends.” (Participant 15)

Taking a proactive approach can help to break down the perceived barriers between influencers and their followers, creating a more inclusive and emotionally resonant fan environment. As mentioned by Participant 15, being proactive not only enhances an influencer's relatability and reinforces their presence on social media platforms. It signals attentiveness and emotional availability, making followers feel acknowledged and valued. This perception of accessibility and sincerity is crucial for building loyalty and fostering long-term engagement. In summary, proactive behaviour by influencers is a powerful way to cultivate trust, strengthen community ties, and distinguish themselves in an increasingly crowded digital marketplace.

The results show that proactive engagement is a key strategy for loyalty and achieving long-term audience attachment and sustainable influence.

4.4.5 Product price

In the highly competitive landscape of livestream e-commerce, product pricing has emerged as a critical determinant of consumer attention and engagement. Participants consistently emphasised that attractive pricing,

especially when paired with real-time discounts and exclusive offers, is one of the most decisive factors in prompting purchases during a livestream. Since the pandemic, online shopping has become more normalised, and consumers have become more adept at comparing prices across platforms and influencers. This has led to a greater focus on perceived value and cost-effectiveness.

“What discounts these new products have” (Participant 4)

“The first point is mainly the price” (Participant 7)

“The prices and discounts in the live broadcast room.” (Participant 8)

These responses reflect an underlying logic of price-performance among viewers. Consumers often enter livestreams not just for entertainment, but to identify deals that offer better value for money than other options on the market. As such, influencers who can leverage price incentives, flash sales, limited-time discounts, and bundle deals gain a strategic advantage by tapping into this consumer behaviour.

The ability to offer an exclusive price also establishes the credibility and purchasing power of the influencer, positioning them as someone with privileged access to better deals. This perceived benefit increases viewer trust and makes followers more inclined to stay engaged and return for future broadcasts. Consequently, influencers who consistently offer competitive prices are more likely to develop a loyal customer base that sees their livestreams as both content and a reliable shopping channel. This enables influencers to gain more followers.

4.4.6 Product quality

While initial attention is drawn by pricing, product quality was identified as the more enduring factor influencing long-term loyalty and sustained follower growth. Participants highlighted that product quality is closely tied to an influencer’s word-of-mouth (w-o-m) reputation. In an oversaturated market where trust can

be eroded rapidly by inferior or misrepresented products, quality assurance is seen as a defining characteristic of a responsible and credible influencer.

“The products he chooses are more advantageous...and the fact that it cooperates directly with the brand guarantees their quality.” (Participant 1)

“This influencer gives people the impression that she knows a lot about pets, so she is more reliable when choosing products.” (Participant 5)

“The quality of the goods is the most important thing. If you sell inferior products as good ones or make false claims, you will not be able to go far in the end.” (Participant 7)

According to the above participant records, influencers perceived as having domain expertise, such as skincare knowledge or an understanding of pet needs, are more likely to be trusted in their product recommendations. This professional credibility increases viewers' confidence that the promoted products will meet or exceed expectations. This reduces post-purchase dissonance and increases the likelihood of repeat purchases.

Moreover, endorsing quality goods often sparks positive word-of-mouth marketing, as consumers willingly share favourable experiences in livestream chats and social media posts. This enhances the influencer's social proof and further enhances their legitimacy in the eyes of potential followers. Therefore, prioritising quality consistency does not merely protect the influencer's image; it becomes a key mechanism for growth, differentiation, and long-term commercial success.

4.4.7 The convenience of live shopping provided by influencers

As livestream commerce continues to evolve into a dominant mode of online retail, convenience has emerged as a vital factor in consumers' willingness to engage with influencer-led shopping experiences. Participants emphasised that successful influencers do more than showcase products. They also streamline the decision-

making process for viewers by offering immediate, curated, and informative content. This efficiency, in terms of both time and cognitive effort, enhances the overall appeal of live shopping.

“Which saves me a lot of time to find the right products for me.” (Participant 15)

“If it is clear, I will know whether the product can meet my needs and thus generate the desire to buy...This allows me to buy fewer unnecessary products...When he is live-streaming, I can follow him and learn his skills immediately.” (Participant 18)

These results highlight a shift in consumer expectations: viewers now demand more than just a presentation of products; they seek clarity, usefulness, and actionable insights in real-time. Influencers who present product details in a structured, transparent, and engaging way empower their audiences to make more informed and confident purchasing decisions, reducing the likelihood of post-purchase regret.

The educational component of live shopping also adds to its convenience. As Participant 18 noted, the added value of learning specific product applications or usage tips directly from influencers in real time is something that static e-commerce platforms lack. The immediacy and accessibility of this product expertise elevates the influencer’s perceived authority and fosters a sense of personalized service within a mass audience context.

In this sense, influencers act not merely as sales agents, but as curators and facilitators of efficient consumption. Their ability to save time, reduce decision fatigue, and entertain places successful influencers at a strategic intersection of commerce and content. Those who effectively integrate convenience into their live broadcasts are more likely to maintain high viewer retention and conversion rates and build long-term follower loyalty. This makes convenience not just a benefit, but a crucial differentiator in an increasingly competitive digital marketplace.

4.5 Organism generated from perceived stimulus of initial followership

In line with the S-O-R model, external stimuli, such as influencers' content, personality, and interactive behaviours, serve as the initial trigger. However, it is the internal cognitive and emotional processing of the organism that mediates the eventual consumer response, such as following, engaging with or purchasing from the influencer. The "Organism" stage represents the internal gratifications that emerge in viewers interacting with the perceived stimulus. These gratifications can be emotional, knowledge-based or socially beneficial, and they collectively shape how viewers interpret, internalise, and respond to the influencer's presence (As shown in Table 5 for the codes of organism generated from perceived stimulus).

Table 5*Organism generated from perceived stimulus*

Theme	Code	Sub Code
Organism generated from perceived stimulus	1. Emotional gratification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affinity • Belonging • Brave • Comfortable • Enjoy • Entertaining • Friendly • Funny • Happy • Healing • Honesty • Hope • Humorous • Integrity • Interesting • Patience • Perseverance • Positive energy • Real • Relax • Reliable • Sincerity • Warmth
	2. Knowledge gratification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning inspiration • Professionalism • Gain useful information
	3. Social gratification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction • Parasocial
	4. Benefit gratification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Niche • Price • Product quality

Note. Data collected by author on the 30th of May 2025.

This internal evolution from mere spectatorship to emotional and cognitive resonance forms the psychological basis for more profound engagement. As viewers perceive value, authenticity, or relatability in an influencer's content, they begin to develop trust, emotional attachment, and a sense of alignment with the influencer's values and style. These intrinsic gratifications are not passively absorbed but actively constructed through the viewer's psychological lens, reflecting their needs. Therefore, the transformation from viewer to follower is not simply a behavioural shift but a reflective process shaped by internal states catalysed by external cues. Recognising this dynamic provides a nuanced understanding of the key drivers of consumer interest and highlights how successful influencers cultivate deep, loyal followings through a blend of strategic stimuli and psychologically resonant engagement.

The finding of "Organism generated from perceived stimulus" provided critical insights into why consumers are more interested in influencers with large followings. This stage of the S-O-R framework revealed that emotional and knowledge gratifications were the dominant internal drivers transforming viewers into engaged followers. In addition, there is a small amount of social and interest gratification. Participants frequently described how influencers who offered healing, positive emotional energy, and practical knowledge established a sense of emotional and knowledge gratification that extended beyond transactional value. Unlike superficial stimuli, these intrinsic gratifications created meaningful connections between viewers and influencers, fostering next consumer behaviour of trust and long-term engagement. Consequently, consumers were drawn to influencers who could simultaneously entertain, educate, and emotionally resonate with them, thus satisfying deeper internal demand. Influencers' success stems not merely from external presentation, but from their ability to consistently fulfil these internal needs, thereby converting passive viewership into enduring followership.

4.5.1 Emotional gratification

In the context of live-streaming e-commerce, emotional gratification refers to the emotional responses generated by viewers through their interactions with influencers and the influence of influencer content. As revealed through thematic analysis, this gratification stems from a range of emotional cues, ranging from warmth and humour to happiness, a sense of belonging, relaxation, and hope. Influencers who display friendliness, honesty, and positive energy create an environment that is both comforting and entertaining,

which resonates deeply with viewers on a personal level. These emotional triggers reduce perceived commercial pressure and increase the authenticity of the experience, making it feel more like a social interaction than a transactional encounter.

Sub-codes such as happy, comfortable, friendly, real, and entertaining indicate that viewers are emotionally drawn to influencers who appear sincere and relatable. These emotions enhance trust, reduce scepticism, and create a pleasurable viewing experience, all of which are critical in guiding followers' eventual purchasing decisions. In essence, emotional gratification is the emotional glue that binds the viewer to the influencer, establishing the necessary psychological conditions for trust, repeated interaction, and conversion from passive viewer to active follower and consumer.

4.5.1.1 Brave

Participants described how influencers' courageous behaviour, whether in expressing controversial opinions, challenging norms, or addressing social issues, struck an emotional chord. Such acts of courage generate admiration and a strong emotional connection, fostering a sense of respect that goes beyond superficial attraction.

“He is more versatile, and I feel like he dares to shoot anything, and he is quite bold...He is very brave to stand up and express his own ideas, which attracts me...He is, at least, the kind of person who dares to express himself.” (Participant 2)

Bravery also offers viewers a sense of emotional catharsis. Participant 2 stated that the influencer “dares to shoot anything” and “express his own ideas,” suggesting that followers feel liberated by the influencer's freedom of expression. By observing such fearlessness, followers can experience emotional release vicariously, which strengthens their identification with the influencer and solidifies the decision to follow.

“As a woman, I can actually feel some of the gender issues in society. But I can't express my thoughts due to some reasons, but she bravely stood up...I admired her courage to speak out about social issues concerning women...So why I like Wei Xue, I think it is because Wei Xue, as a woman, dares to speak out about some social issues related to women.” (Participant 12)

For instance, some viewers reflected on how the influencer's boldness filled a personal void in their own ability to speak out. Participant 12 made this point, revealing how viewers emotionally internalise the bravery in influencers, feeling personally represented. This admiration becomes aspirational, prompting viewers to follow the content and the influencers' values.

The emotional gratification derived here is moral and personal: admiration, respect, and a sense of empowerment. Viewers interpreting these displays of bravery as authentic and inspiring enhance their psychological proximity to the influencer. Over time, this emotional connection matures into loyalty, as followers begin to see aspects of themselves or the person they aspire to be reflected in the influencer.

4.5.1.2 Healing

Content that promotes healing is associated with stress relief, emotional comfort, and a sense of peace. For viewers facing personal or professional stress, influencers who project a nurturing, calming presence offer more than entertainment; they provide an emotional anchor. This restorative value is often expressed in physical and psychological terms, such as reduced anxiety and feeling “cured” of emotional fatigue.

“The family atmosphere shown in her videos is my ideal feeling, so it heals my soul when watching...When you work overtime and collapse, you will unconsciously slow down your breathing when you see this kind of video, and feel that the stress is cured...I watch the family atmosphere shown by Ye Zhu De Peng You Quan, it warms and heals my heart...” (Participant 3)

Participant 3 described how watching family-oriented content created a “healing atmosphere.” This emotional language suggests that viewers are entertained, emotionally soothed, and psychologically supported. The influencer is associated with a sense of security, making their content a refuge from real-world stress.

“There is a sense of participation in raising electronic pets, which is really healing...people can feel the healing and happiness brought by pets through the Internet even if they don’t actually keep a pet.”
(Participant 13)

Participant 13 experienced emotional restoration through virtual activities, such as raising electronic pets. Even in the absence of real-world companionship, viewers could fulfil their emotional need for nurturing and connection by engaging with influencer content, thereby experiencing therapeutic gratification.

Consistent emotional comfort contributes to habitual engagement. Viewers return to the content for its healing properties and eventually come to depend on it as a part of their emotional regulation process. This reliance transforms passive watching into committed fandom. Importantly, the emotional bond forged through healing is subtle but powerful. It can create emotional stability, predictability, and attachment. Over time, viewers follow influencers not just for their content, they follow for the emotional sanctuary they provide. This establishes a deeper relationship between followers and influencers.

4.5.1.3 Happy

Emotionalisation is gradually entering the world of live-streaming e-commerce, and happiness has become a key source of satisfaction that influences audience engagement and ultimately drives fan conversion. Participant narratives suggest that influencers who project joy and authenticity in a particular way act as a form of emotional contagion. Unlike content that is designed to impress or educate, happiness-driven content offers authentic emotional connection, enabling viewers to immerse themselves in a shared sense of positivity and relaxation.

“So from my point of view, what the audience ultimately follows is not the perfect personality, but the “real person” who can make them happy.” (Participant 12)

As Participant 12 noted, sustained emotional gratification is generated by emotional authenticity rather than idealised perfection. Influencers who share daily routines or seemingly mundane experiences, such as cooking or raising pets, provide an emotionally rewarding environment that viewers can turn to for comfort and enjoyment. At the same time, this reveals an underlying emotional criterion in the follower decision-making process, genuine happiness that feels natural rather than manufactured.

“Although I can't cook, I am happy to watch her cook...Even if I don't participate, I will be happy to see what she posts...The most important thing is that they make me happy when I watch their videos.” (Participant 16)

For viewers like Participant 16, watching such content, even passively, will also produce consistent emotional uplift. For many viewers, influencers become emotional companions rather than aspirational idols. Internet celebrities, whether they are cooking, chatting, or simply sharing updates about their lives, have become a predictable source of mood enhancement, similar to listening to a favourite song or enjoying comfort food. The emotional gratification derived from consistent positivity can foster emotional dependency, whereby audiences begin to associate influencers with reliable happiness and emotional relief.

Over time, this cumulative emotional resonance leads viewers to develop attachment and habitual viewing patterns, ultimately prompting them to catalyse the transition from passive viewer to active follower.

4.5.1.4 Humorous

In the context of live-streaming engagement, humour functions as a powerful emotional stimulant, particularly in high-pressure social environments where audiences actively seek psychological relief. Data suggests that humorous content satisfies a deeply rooted emotional need for stress reduction and mood enhancement.

“A sense of humor is enough...it can make you feel better just by listening to it.” (Participant 7)

Participant 7 sums up the idea that humour can be a therapeutic tool, offering a momentary escape from routine stressors, regardless of when or where, but when everyone opens the live stream, they can be immersed in the influencer's humorous atmosphere. Furthermore, the gratification derived from humorous content in live-streaming is distinct in that it delivers immediate psychological reward, functioning as an antidote to daily stress. This emotional lightness helps viewers unwind, leading to influencers consistently delivering humorous content being perceived as valuable emotional companions in daily life.

*“His humorous video content makes me very interested in watching his videos...When I check my phone after get off work, I hope to see humorous and relaxing content that helps relieve stress and mood.”
(Participant 18)*

Participant 18 described how humour satisfies an emotional need to relax after a stressful day. Here, humour is not just positioned as a preference but as a psychological necessity, offering a brief yet meaningful escape. When this need is consistently fulfilled, the influencer becomes a trusted emotional resource, thus increasing perceived value and emotional dependence.

The results show that viewers are more inclined to follow and support a content creator consistently when they begin to associate them with feelings of relaxation, relief, and joy. Additionally, the humour must appear effortless and genuine; manufactured or forced humour may fail to trigger the same emotional response. When

successful, however, humorous influencers create an emotionally light-hearted environment that viewers actively seek out and return to. Therefore, humour is not just entertainment but becomes a critical emotional utility for followers.

4.5.1.5 Interesting

In the realm of live-streaming commerce, content that is perceived as “interesting” plays a pivotal role in capturing and sustaining viewer engagement. Informants consistently emphasised that their initial interaction with an influencer was often prompted by spontaneous curiosity triggered by novel content, which then evolved into prolonged interest and eventual emotional attachment.

“I clicked on their video content out of curiosity to watch them talk about the history of fashion brands or designers, which I found quite interesting...it is because their content is more interesting that it attracts me to continue to pay attention to their videos and subsequent updates.” (Participant 11)

“Why I will continue to follow her is that after watching her for so long, her content is still relatively new and interesting...The videos she produced are all relatively novel and interesting. From the content, you can feel that she is seriously managing her life. She is a very interesting person.” (Participant 13)

As Participant 11 shared the content, underscoring how external stimulation and originality of content function as early emotional hooks. However, the influencer’s sustained ability to innovate and maintain freshness transforms this fleeting interest into loyalty. As Participant 13 noted, the transition from viewer to follower depends on the influencer delivering engaging material and on the content being perceived as sincere and authentic. Content is interesting not only for its entertainment value but also for its emotional message, including curiosity, surprise, and respect for creativity, all of which make the follower feel emotionally rewarded.

Thus, the gratification of “interestingness” lies in more than momentary enjoyment, but in fostering a deeper connection by creating a sense of exploration and ongoing discovery. Followers are drawn not just to the

content, but to the person who consistently provides something new and keeps them interested, making an influencer who is, in their eyes, worth following.

4.5.1.6 Positive energy

The notion of “positive energy” emerged as a key emotional driver of long-term follower engagement, particularly within the high-pressure context of modern life. Participants clearly preferred influencers who exuded emotional warmth, optimism, and a sense of morality, often contrasting them with those who spread negativity.

“And her family atmosphere is very good, which is something I would yearn for...I mean the kind of positive energy that will not have negative emotions that affect the audience's thinking.” (Participant 3)

Participant 3 has shared that the emotional gratification stems not just from escapism, but from the restorative emotional experience that the influencers’ content providers. This positivity can become aspirational. Influencers who project optimism, kindness, and emotional stability fulfil a growing psychological need for emotional regulation and well-being.

“Although she is an Internet celebrity, I think it is very positive to be able to speak out about gender issues on the Internet, especially some of the problems faced by women, so that more people can hear the voices of women...the content of her videos is also very positive, which makes me feel that as a woman, she also has her own ability to express some ideas. I also enjoy watching her videos...I think she is very positive and allows me to feel this positive atmosphere.” (Participant 12)

Participant 12 has highlighted the emotional dependence that can develop through repeated exposure to uplifting content. Followers begin to internalise the values and energy of the influencer, viewing them not

merely as content creators, but as emotional role models. Furthermore, linking positivity to social responsibility, such as speaking out on gender issues, enhances the influencer's credibility and moral appeal. Consequently, the conversion from viewer to follower is emotionally charged. Positive energy is not only calming but identity-affirming; it reassures viewers of shared values and cultivates trust. Influencers who consistently project a positive emotional climate become embedded in the viewers' daily emotional landscape, resulting in lasting loyalty.

In today's high-pressure environment, the need for positive emotional reinforcement is particularly acute, making "positive energy" a highly valued form of emotional gratification. This type of gratification is also closely related to identity. When an influencer takes a positive stance on social issues or creates an emotionally safe online environment, followers interpret this as an indication of authenticity and ethical alignment. The emotional payoff here is twofold: the followers experience hope and reassurance, and are affirmed in their values through association. Over time, this positive effect reinforces trust and admiration, gradually deepening the emotional investment and prompting sustained engagement.

4.5.2 Knowledge gratification

Knowledge gratification refers to the cognitive satisfaction that viewers derive from acquiring new, relevant, or useful information through influencer content. Thematic analysis reveals that this form of gratification stems from the viewer's desire for personal growth, informed decision-making, and access to specialised knowledge that is not easily obtained through conventional channels. Influencers who demonstrate expertise in fashion history, product application, or lifestyle curation are perceived as a valuable resource of information rather than mere entertainers or sellers.

Sub-codes include learning inspiration and professionalism, which underscore viewers' appreciation for influencers who can provide meaningful content beyond superficial engagement. This informational depth not only fulfils cognitive curiosity but also enhances the viewer's self-perception as a discerning, well-informed individual. Doing so fosters a deeper connection to the influencer, as the knowledge shared is perceived as personally beneficial.

Crucially, knowledge gratification plays a pivotal role in building a long-term following and trust. When viewers repeatedly receive practical or enlightening information, they are more likely to view the influencer as a reliable authority, thereby reducing the perceived risk of accepting product recommendations. This epistemic trust accelerates the transformation from passive content consumer to active follower and, ultimately, buyer.

4.5.2.1 Learning inspiration

Through thematic analysis, we identified several knowledge-driven gratifications. Learning inspiration emerged as a prominent factor in motivating continued engagement with influencer content. Participants revealed that exposure to visually compelling and educational videos stimulated their curiosity and encouraged their creativity. This experiential learning not only offered entertainment and cultivated a sense of enrichment, but also established influencers as sources of both knowledge and inspiration.

“In my free time, I can watch beautiful designs and learn some knowledge...I think it not only makes me happy but also allows me to learn a lot of knowledge...There are two aspects. First, the content of her videos about fashion makes me feel very interesting, which attracts me to learn more and continue to follow them.” (Participant 11)

As Participant 11 observed, the combination of emotional enjoyment and cognitive stimulation positions influencers as more than just entertainers. Influencers become facilitators of informal learning. When viewers continue receiving meaningful learning or creative stimulation, they perceive the influencer as a reliable source of inspiration and insight. This ultimately cultivates long-term loyalty and consistent engagement.

“Because I also like to make these things by hand. It may give me some inspiration. So this type of creation attracts me and I keep paying attention to her content...The first is the practicality of the

content. As I mentioned earlier, she will have some creative videos, and I may learn from her ideas.”
(Participant 13)

Moreover, participants valued the creative nature of the content, which inspired them to experiment with their own ideas. Influencers offering practical, applicable insights rather than abstract or passive content encourage viewers to experiment with their creations, reinforcing a sense of personal agency and accomplishment. Participant 13 stated that the content's perceived practicality offered viewers actionable takeaways, reinforcing the influencer's perceived usefulness and deepening the cognitive engagement. Content that provides both aesthetic pleasure and educational value encourages repeat viewing and fosters a sense of personal growth.

As the results show, inspiration to learn has also emerged as a motivator behind repeated viewer engagement and eventual follower loyalty. Participants expressed that beyond entertainment, the most compelling influencers offer educational value through practical skills, creative ideas, or exposure to new topics. This perceived opportunity to learn generates both cognitive stimulation and gratification of the mind. The gratification derived from this type of learning is twofold: it provides a sense of personal growth and productivity and reinforces the influencer's perceived value as a long-term resource. Those who consistently spark curiosity and provide fresh perspectives are more likely to cultivate loyal audiences that view their content as both enjoyable and intellectually enriching.

4.5.2.2 Professionalism

Another core theme underlying knowledge gratification was professionalism, with viewers expressing a strong preference for influencers who exhibited credibility, expertise, and ethical integrity. This sense of professionalism was often demonstrated through visible domain expertise (e.g., physical fitness achievements, product knowledge, or industry-specific information), reassuring viewers of the content's authenticity and reliability. For many, this assurance created a sense of informational security, as professional influencers were seen as unlikely to mislead their audiences or endorse substandard products, enhancing their perceived authority.

“I think no matter what field you are in, you must be a professional influencer...I think if you are really professional, at least you will not choose some bad products, or look for some not-so-good brands.”
(Participant 2)

Professionalism also emerged as a key aspect of knowledge gratification, particularly among viewers who rely on influencer content for reliable recommendations or insights into specific domains. Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of credibility and expertise when deciding whether to continue following an influencer. Participant 2 stated that followers value moral responsibility and strong discernment, and recognise the importance of professionalism in building trust.

“His physical and performance in the gym are the most attractive. Since I am also a fitness person, I chose to follow him because I can see that he is very professional.” (Participant 20)

For followers, the influencer’s professional conduct and accomplishments provided tangible proof of their authority. According to Participant 20, the alignment between the influencer’s expertise and the viewer’s own interests creates a knowledge-based bond that reinforces authenticity and deepens viewer engagement. This perception of professionalism reduces scepticism and enhances the credibility of the influencer’s content. Once established, this trust becomes the foundation for a more committed relationship, transforming the viewer from a casual consumer of content into a loyal follower who actively seeks out and values the influencer’s perspective.

Crucially, trust is the gateway to deeper viewer commitment. Once viewers begin to rely on the influencer’s professional judgment and content to acquire knowledge or make decisions, they become engaged with the influencer in a sustained way. Thus, professionalism enhances the influencer’s image and becomes a central mechanism through which viewers are transformed into followers who value consistent, high-quality informational content.

4.5.2.3 Gain useful information

In live-streaming scenarios involving influencers and in their daily posts, there is sufficient content for followers to gain useful knowledge, which can encourage deeper engagement with the audience.

“It must be practical, offering useful knowledge and personal opinions, or it can bring me some sensory experiences that I don't have...If I travel in the future, I will definitely put his knowledge to use. What he teaches is very practical, and he has given me a lot of practical knowledge.” (Participant 6)

As Participant 6 described, this statement reflects the instrumental value viewers assign to influencer content and its ability to provide knowledge that can be applied directly to real-life situations. Encountering content that delivers meaningful, applicable insights repeatedly activates a strong form of knowledge gratification. As viewers perceive the influencer as a consistent and reliable source of practical value, their relationship with the content deepens. Over time, this functional relevance transforms casual viewing into habitual following. The influencer is no longer merely a creator but becomes an informal mentor or advisor in the viewer's digital ecosystem.

“I think it's very important that I can learn useful things from her videos. I will pay more attention to something that is practical things rather than nothing, which makes me think it's worth paying attention to...I think it's good to experience different perspectives on how to handle conflicts, and it gives me new insights. I think it's very helpful.” (Participant 17)

Similarly, Participant 17 explained that the sense of utility increases the content's perceived worth and instills a sense of ongoing benefit, encouraging sustained engagement. Appreciation of practical content appears to extend beyond mere entertainment, offering viewers cognitive enrichment and the chance to expand their horizons, whether through learning conflict resolution techniques, travel guidance, or general lifestyle improvements.

4.5.3 Social gratification

Social gratification refers to the interpersonal satisfaction and relational fulfilment viewers experience when they engage with influencers and online communities. This theme centres on the psychological need for social connection, recognition, and belonging, which is increasingly satisfying in virtual spaces through interactive, participatory content.

A thematic analysis reveals that viewers are not merely passive consumers of content but actively seek opportunities for interaction and parasocial engagement. Features such as real-time chat, Q&A sessions, and comment sections enable influencers to create a sense of reciprocal communication and relational intimacy. These interactions make viewers feel acknowledged, included, and socially validated, thereby enhancing their emotional investment in the influencer's content.

Sub-codes such as interaction and parasocial highlight how viewers experience a simulated sense of friendship or emotional closeness with influencers, despite there being no physical proximity. This perceived social bond reduces psychological distance and thereby contributes to stronger audience loyalty. Over time, these gratifications evolve into parasocial relationships, in which viewers feel a personal connection to an influencer's persona, values, and community.

Ultimately, social gratification sustains attention and engagement and plays a formative role in shaping viewer loyalty and fostering a sense of digital belonging. It demonstrates that the success of live-streaming influencers lies not just in what they share, but also how they connect with their audience.

4.5.3.1 Interaction

Rather than remaining passively receiving content, participants expressed a sense of social presence through features such as live chat, commenting and engaging directly with influencers. These moments of interaction were perceived as genuine social experiences that fulfilled relational needs, particularly in an increasingly digital and often isolating world.

“It feels like there is a kind of interaction...The interaction in the live broadcast room also makes me feel involved. It makes me feel that there are people online who care about me, and I won’t feel too lonely.” (Participant 16)

Nowadays, viewers often feel more included and emotionally connected when influencers engage with their audience during broadcasts. This form of mediated social contact provides participants with feelings of companionship, affirmation, and relevance. This is particularly beneficial for individuals with limited offline social interaction, due to factors such as busy work schedules, geographic isolation, or introverted tendencies. This interactive experience can act as a meaningful substitute for traditional socialisation.

The social gratification gained from these interactions prompted viewers to return repeatedly, eventually turning them from occasional watchers to loyal followers. Interaction served to increase visibility and engagement as well as cultivating a deeper psychological bond between the viewer and influencer.

4.5.3.2 Parasocial

Alongside real-time interaction, developing parasocial relationships, or feeling a sense of closeness to an influencer, despite there being no actual personal contact. Through repeated exposure to the influencer’s personality, routines, and values, viewers form a psychological connection that resembles friendship or mentorship. These parasocial bonds satisfy viewers’ innate desire for emotional intimacy and relational stability, especially in digital spaces where trust and authenticity are often lacking. As thematic analysis revealed, viewers often describe influencers using language associated with personal relationships: calling them “friends,” or viewing them as role models.

“These make me want to make an online friend. Although she doesn't know me, she has been teaching me knowledge, which makes me want to get close to her.” (Participant 5)

“In fact, there is no shortage of beautiful faces on the Internet, but it is really rare to find someone who can make you learn things with a smile and feel like you have made a friend...this builds a sense of community that allows everyone to participate.” (Participant 18)

This parasocial experience provides emotional stability and facilitates identity alignment, whereby the viewer begins to model or reflect on aspects of the influencer's lifestyle or worldview. This transition is a critical juncture in the transformation into a follower. Unlike the consumption of fleeting entertainment, parasocial bonds generate a deeper investment in the influencer's content and persona. In this way, parasocial relationships offer more than just social gratification; they are also pivotal mechanisms for acquiring and retaining followers in the influencer economy.

4.5.4 Benefit gratification

In today's live-streaming e-commerce environment, gratification of benefits refers to the tangible or utilitarian advantages that viewers perceive from following an influencer. These advantages include product quality assurance and cost-effective goods. Unlike emotional or social gratifications, which fulfil affective or interpersonal needs, benefit gratification is driven by rational evaluations of value, utility, and uniqueness.

Sub-codes such as price and product quality further underscore the instrumental motivations behind benefit gratification. Participants often emphasised their preference for influencers who recommend high-quality yet reasonably priced goods, thereby positioning these influencers as trusted advisors rather than mere promoters. The assurance of authenticity, durability, and good value fosters a perception of transactional fairness, which strengthens consumer confidence and reduces perceived risk in purchases.

This utilitarian gratification fosters a behavioural shift from casual viewer to committed follower. As consumers consistently have positive experiences, such as discovering a high-quality skincare brand or saving money on a high-quality product, they become reliant on the influencer for future consumption decisions. Ultimately, the gratification of benefits anchors the relationship between influencers and followers in perceived utility. This indicates that in the field of live-streaming e-commerce, emotional and benefit appeals coexist. Therefore, long-term fan retention is closely related to whether influencers can continue to provide products that meet the consumption goals of their audience.

4.5.4.1 Price

In the world of live-streaming e-commerce, price sensitivity emerged as a key factor in driving benefit-based gratification. The potential for economic value, particularly the availability of high-quality products at competitive prices, also draws in viewers.

“If this thing is something I usually pay attention to, I also know its price, and then, in his live broadcast room, I can really see that this thing is good, and there are some guarantees, and the price is right. I will buy it.” (Participant 6)

“she can continuously recommend some good products with good quality and low prices.” (Participant 7)

Participants highlighted that influencers who regularly showcase cost-effective products or offer exclusive discounts via livestreams are more likely to secure repeat attention and secure viewer trust. This is particularly evident when viewers are already familiar with the standard pricing of certain products; the influencer's offer represents clear value for money. This sense of financial gain or satisfaction from getting a good deal becomes a reinforcing factor in viewer behaviour. Once viewers feel they have benefited materially from a purchase, they begin to associate the influencer with economic reliability and value creation. The perceived utility of pricing creates a psychological bond that transcends one-time viewership. Viewers then start to return for content, and for repeat access to valuable shopping opportunities, resulting in the transition from casual browsers to loyal followers.

4.5.4.2 Product quality

Product quality, which is closely intertwined with pricing, was also cited as a core dimension of benefit gratification. Thematic insights suggest that trust in an influencer's judgment is strengthened when they consistently recommend reliable products. Viewers are well aware of the risks associated with online shopping, particularly in live commerce and value influencers who can act as credible filters or curators.

“I think one is credibility. The products they recommend must be of reliable quality, not fake propaganda...The second is cost-effective recommendations. They can really find good products with high cost-effectiveness, rather than simply promoting those products that are very expensive but of very low quality.” (Participant 1)

Participants 1 emphasised that influencers who demonstrate credibility and due diligence in their product recommendations reduce perceived risk and enhance their credibility. High-quality products, especially when coupled with affordability, symbolise influencer integrity and expertise.

“she can continuously recommend some good products with good quality and low prices.” (Participant 7)

Participant 7 noted that when viewers find that products purchased through an influencer’s livestream meet or exceed their expectations, this positive experience reinforces their satisfaction after purchasing. Over time, this results in emotional and behavioural loyalty, establishing the influencer as the viewer’s go-to source for curated, high-quality recommendations.

This perception of product reliability creates a feedback loop of trust and reward, encouraging repeated interactions and strengthening the bond between influencers and their followers. As such, the benefits of product quality are not just about the item itself but also about the assurance it provides, the risk it mitigates, and the trust it builds.

4.6 Response from followers on influencers

In accordance with the S-O-R framework, the “Response” phase captures the observable outcomes that arise once internal gratifications have been activated by external stimuli and processed psychologically. This occurs after interacting with an influencer’s content in an emotionally engaging, cognitively enriching, or socially

fulfilling way. Viewers then transition from internal resonance to outward behavioural commitment. This chapter encapsulates how followers respond behaviourally to influencers, completing the cognitive-affective-behavioural loop initiated by stimulus exposure and internal organismic processing.

Thematic analysis reveals that follower responses manifest primarily in three interlinked forms: establishing trust, demonstrating sustained long-term engagement, and making purchases. Trust is the foundational mechanism, cultivated through perceived authenticity and professional credibility. Once established, this trust reinforces loyalty, prompting viewers to transition from transient engagement to regular viewing or subscribing. These followers often become long-term supporters. Ultimately, this relational depth often translates into concrete purchasing decisions, with followers choosing to support influencers by purchasing products they recommend or by taking part in live-stream shopping sessions.

The transition from passive observer to active consumer is not a straightforward process of persuasion but rather a cumulative response that is grounded in trust-based evaluation and value-driven gratification. Understanding these nuanced behavioural outcomes provides valuable insights into how influencers capture attention, drive commercial impact, and cultivate sustainable digital relationships (Shown in Table 6 for the codes associated with follower responses).

Table 6

Response from followers on influencers

Theme	Code
Response from followers on influencers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Building trust 2. Long- term following 3. Purchase

Note. Data collected by author on the 30th of May 2025.

The theme analysis of "Response from followers on influencers" comprehensively explains why live-streaming influencers with millions of followers are more successful. This phase of the S-O-R framework highlighted the behavioural outcomes that follow sustained emotional and cognitive gratification, illustrating how followers transition from casual viewers to loyal consumers. Participants consistently described behaviours such as purchases, trust building, and long-term following to influencers as indicators of attractiveness and gratification. Influencers who had previously succeeded in eliciting emotional and informational gratifications were more likely to receive strong behavioural responses in return, such as product purchases and social media engagement. These responses reinforced the influencer's visibility and perceived authority, generating a feedback loop in which trust and loyalty amplified the influencer's success. Thus, the ability of influencers to evoke and maintain such responses played a crucial role in scaling their follower base and securing commercial success. In essence, it is by continuously providing emotional value and maintaining external appeal that high-profile influencers are able to convert satisfied fans into long-term consumers and stable followers, thereby standing out in the competitive landscape of live-streaming e-commerce.

4.6.1 Building trust

Among these responses, building trust emerges as a critical inflexion point that transforms casual viewers into committed followers who actively participate in influencer-led commerce. Trust is not a singular, instantaneous emotion but the result of repeated positive interactions and experiences.

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasised that trust in influencers is built through a combination of expertise, authenticity, consistency, and personal resonance. These qualities help viewers to reduce uncertainty, which is particularly important in live-streamed e-commerce where product evaluation relies heavily on mediated interactions.

“It makes me feel that she is professional in beauty and makeup, which makes me trust her more.... The products she introduced made me feel very credible, so I bought a lot...This builds trust and triggers emotional resonance between me and her...authenticity builds long-term trust.” (Participant 12)

As Participant 12 shared, this excerpt illustrates how trust can be established through competence-based cues (e.g., expertise in beauty and makeup) and relational cues (e.g., emotional resonance and authenticity). The language of “credibility,” “authenticity,” and “long-term trust” suggests that viewers are conducting an ongoing, implicit risk assessment, which, when repeatedly satisfied, evolves into a durable psychological bond.

“He recommends some great fitness-related products, so I keep following his content...I trust his recommendations more because he himself uses the products he recommends.” (Participant 20)

Participant 20 further emphasised the importance of consistency and self-use in building trust. An influencer’s alignment between words and actions, as well as their use of the products they promote, is a key trust-building mechanism. This behaviour is interpreted as evidence of sincerity and responsibility, making the influencer seem more like a reliable peer or mentor, and less like a marketer. This creates a sense of mutual investment, showing that the influencer is genuinely invested in the viewer’s benefit, which strengthens their perceived integrity.

Importantly, trust also plays a regulatory role in shaping future behaviour. Once established, trust acts as a cognitive shortcut, streamlining the decision-making process for future interactions, including purchases. It fosters what may be termed anticipatory trust: the belief that future content and recommendations will align with the viewer’s values and needs. Therefore, trust is not just an emotional comfort—it is a strategic psychological resource. It reduces the perceived risk of monetary and time investment, enhances the influencer’s perceived social capital, and acts as a precursor to deeper engagement, such as repeated following, sharing, and purchasing. In live-streaming commerce, where viewers must make decisions in real-time with limited information, trust becomes the currency of conversion.

4.6.2 Purchase

In the context of live-streaming e-commerce, purchase behaviour is one of the most measurable and meaningful responses. This is not a spontaneous act but rather the culmination of an emotional, cognitive, and

relational process driven by the viewer's evolving trust and gratification. According to participant narratives, purchasing from influencers is portrayed as an informed, trust-based decision, rooted in repeated exposure to authentic, transparent, and relatable content. Influencers are not just sellers; they function as product buyers, validators, and experience-sharers whose lifestyles and choices resonate with their audience.

“I bought a lot of things she recommended...It can be said that it is her integrity and sense of responsibility that makes me trust her more and buy the products she recommends.” (Participant 5)

As Participant 5 described, this reflection shows that purchases are closely linked to how people feel about the influencer's personality, especially their integrity and sense of responsibility. Followers interpret these personal traits as signals of product reliability, thereby reducing the perceived risk typically associated with online shopping. This cognitive-emotional fusion encourages purchase intention and actual buying behaviour.

“I bought it once. She usually eats acai berry powder. In almost every video, you can see that she eats homemade yogurt with berry powder every morning. I think it's very reliable!...That's why I keep paying attention to her posts and buy the products she recommends.” (Participant 16)

Moreover, Participant 16 linked purchase decisions directly to how the influencer integrates products into their lifestyle. This suggests that the repeated, authentic use of products in an influencer's daily life normalises the consumption for viewers and positions the product as desirable and beneficial. Repeated exposure reinforces product familiarity, and the influencer's lived use becomes a powerful model of behaviour and a key factor in emotional response.

Purchases are also driven by perceived exclusivity and timeliness, particularly during live-streams where time-limited offers, product demos, and real-time engagement encourage impulse buying and create a sense of

urgency. This reinforces a sense of personalized endorsement, especially when the influencer responds to viewer questions or offers firsthand insights into product performance.

Consequently, these transactions carry social and psychological meaning, not just commercial value. Buying from a trusted influencer becomes an act of value alignment and symbolic identification, thereby reinforcing the influencer's position within the follower's community and lifestyle narrative. Thus, in live-streaming e-commerce, purchase behaviour is a complex emotional and cognitive response, not merely an economic exchange. It reflects internal trust, knowledge gratification, emotional connection, and emotional gratification. All of which are cultivated deliberately through the influencer's content strategy and interpersonal presence.

4.6.3 Long-term following

Although initial responses such as liking, commenting, or even purchasing may be quick, long-term following represents a deeper and more lasting form of engagement. It signals that the influencer has successfully become their followers' daily digital routines, emotional landscapes, and lifestyle aspirations.

Interview data shows that long-term commitment is never accidental. It is built through repeated gratification across multiple dimensions, including emotional, knowledge-based, benefit-based and social incentives. Viewers evolve into loyal followers when they consistently perceive value, trustworthiness, and a sense of closeness in an influencer's content and persona.

“First, she can continuously recommend some good products with good quality and low prices. Second, she does not make false propaganda. Third, there is no negative energy in her video content and live broadcast. These are the reasons that will affect me to continue watching her” (Participant 7)

As described by Participant 7, their decision to remain a follower was based on three stable factors: consistent product quality, honest communication, and emotionally uplifting content. These factors reinforce consumer trust and a sense of personal security and gratification, laying the groundwork for habitual engagement.

“Why I will continue to follow her is that after watching her for so long, her content is still relatively new and interesting...Then, there is emotional resonance. Some of the experiences and feelings she shared are similar to my current experiences, which will resonate with me. Then, I will be more willing to leave messages and interact.” (Participant 13)

Similarly, Participant 13 expressed that novel content and emotional resonance were important reasons for continuing to follow someone. A powerful identification occurs when followers see their own lives, struggles, or aspirations reflected in an influencer’s narrative. This emotional connection that goes beyond product interest becomes relational.

“Now, whenever she broadcasts live, I will go in to see if there is anything I like and interested in, and then place an order...In this way, a very good and stable fan relationship will be established between the fans and the internet celebrity...I think she provides a lot of emotional value to fans, which is why so many fans continue to follow her.” (Participant 15)

Participant 15 added a commercial aspect to the relational dynamic, highlighting that repeated viewing of the live-streams often leads to repeated purchases. This pattern establishes a cycle of trust and transactions, where emotional value leads to behavioural loyalty. Over time, the follower-influencer relationship matures into a stable fan-influencer bond characterized by routine interactions, mutual expectations, and perceived social proximity.

These insights demonstrate that long-term following is not just the extension of initial interest; it is a transformed relational state in which the influencer plays a semi-integrated role in the follower's personal or emotional life. Influencers effectively become anchors of identity, taste, and emotion through this process, rather than just content providers.

4.7 Chapter summary

This study enhances the theoretical understanding of the internal states that drive follower loyalty and contributes empirical depth to the field of influencer marketing. Influencers with millions of followers are more successful not merely due to their follower count, but because they possess a combination of critical stimulus attributes. These include high content quality, authenticity, interactivity, credibility, and clear value propositions such as product quality and price advantage. These stimuli effectively capture attention and serve as the initial conditions that activate internal gratifications within viewers. However, their success is determined by more than external features alone.

The study finds that influencers become successful when these stimuli align with deeper organismic gratifications, particularly emotional and knowledge-based ones, enabling followers to experience personal resonance, trust, and value in the content. These influencers do more than entertain; they foster psychological and emotional bonds by meeting their audiences' cognitive and affective needs. As a result, consumers transition from being casual viewers to becoming deeply engaged followers. This interest does not develop instantly but rather accumulates repeated exposures that consistently satisfy these internal needs. Consequently, consumers become more interested in this type of influencer. As viewers find value in an influencer's content, they become more deeply engaged, which leads to enduring loyalty and amplified influence. This is a mutually reinforcing cycle, whereby satisfied viewers increase influencers' exposure and credibility, propelling them to greater success in the highly competitive live-streaming environment. This S-O-R-based interpretation demonstrates that follower attention and loyalty are not spontaneous behaviours, but result from a complex interaction between external stimuli and internal needs. Influencers who can master both the strategic and emotional dimensions of content creation are best positioned to sustain a large and engaged following. These responses not only complete the S-O-R model loop but also explore the reasons why influencers are able to

succeed in attracting followers in the highly saturated live-streaming economy, as well as the circumstances under which viewers become their long-term followers.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to interpret the findings of the study by exploring the transformation process from viewer to follower and ultimately to consumer. The innovation of this study lies in its application of the S-O-R framework from the consumer's subjective perspective to map the multi-stage consumer engagement journey. This model enables a clearer understanding of how external influencer cues (S) lead to internal psychological gratifications (O), and subsequently, to concrete behavioural outcomes (R) such as trust, purchase behaviour, and long-term attention. This chapter discusses how specific influencer characteristics—such as content strategy, emotional resonance, and perceived authenticity—trigger internal states of gratification among followers and influence their decision to engage. Furthermore, the findings contribute to the evolving scholarship on influencer success by revealing nuanced consumer expectations and behaviours that extend beyond simple entertainment or price sensitivity. This chapter discusses the implications this study offers theoretically and practically. It also provides new opportunities for future research. Currently, these research findings deepen influencers' understanding of consumer needs. In the future, it will be possible to analyse more platforms and different types of influencers to explore consumer needs more comprehensively.

5.2 Discussion

This discussion section critically interprets the study's findings in relation to existing literature across three core areas: (1) influence, impact, and consumer psychology, (2) characteristics of successful social media influencers, and (3) consumer mentality in live-streaming environments. Using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, the chapter analyses how external stimuli such as influencer content and interaction (S) trigger internal consumer gratifications and psychological processes (O), which in turn drive behavioural responses such as trust and loyalty (R). By comparing these findings to past research, the chapter highlights new insights, contradictions, and extensions to established knowledge within influencer marketing and social commerce.

5.2.1 Influence impact and consumer psychology

The influence of live-streaming influencers on consumer psychology has become increasingly nuanced in recent years, requiring a re-evaluation of existing literature through the lens of the S-O-R model. This section discusses the psychological impact of live-streaming influencers and the internal gratifications that mediate viewer engagement, comparing current findings with prior academic research to uncover new insights. Key themes include evolving gratification types, influencer traits, mechanisms of trust-building, the emotional versus parasocial dynamic, and the interplay between external appeal and internal gratification.

5.2.1.1 Expanding beyond hedonic and utilitarian gratifications: a revised view of consumer motivation

Traditional studies of consumer behaviour in social media and e-commerce platforms often categorise motivations into hedonic (emotional enjoyment) and utilitarian (functional utility) types. Consumers are primarily drawn to social media platforms for either entertainment or information-seeking (Childers et al., 2001; Alhabash & Ma, 2017). While this binary framework has served as a useful starting point, the findings from this study indicate that such a division may be overly simplistic in the context of live-streaming commerce (Abidin, 2016). Participants reported four distinct types of gratification. They include emotional, knowledge-based, benefit-driven, and social.

Participant 18 stated, "His humorous video content makes me very interested in watching his videos.... When I check my phone after get off work, I hope to see humorous and relaxing content that helps relieve stress and mood". This reflects emotional gratification. For knowledge gratification, Participant 17 shared that influencers' product explanations helped them learn more and make informed decisions. Benefit gratification was illustrated by Participant 6, who appreciated time-limited discounts, which motivated real-time purchases. Social gratification, although less prominent, appeared in Participant 5's comment about joining live chats to feel a sense of community.

These findings align partially with prior research highlighting emotional and social engagement as key drivers on platforms like Twitch, but diverge by identifying knowledge and benefit gratification as distinct categories within the organism phase (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). The S-O-R framework captures this complexity,

showing how diverse stimuli activate multiple internal gratifications, ultimately driving behavioural responses. This study thus offers a more multidimensional understanding of consumer motivation.

5.2.1.2 Redefining influencer characteristics: beyond intelligence and positivity

Influencer traits such as being verbal, intelligent, and efficient have been identified, with comparisons drawn to corporate leaders (Freberg et al., 2011). While these traits were reflected in participants' evaluations, the findings introduced new attributes tied more closely to emotional resonance and interpersonal engagement. Participants consistently emphasised emotional intelligence (EQ), linguistic relatability, and positivity. For instance, Participant 10 remarked, "She is a very motivated internet celebrity...constantly learning and growing, she will also share some of her achievements with everyone". This demonstrates both EQ and a proactive sharing approach that builds connection. Language was also essential. Participant 15 mentioned that the influencer "always speaks clearly and in an easy-to-understand way," which helped foster a sense of personal trust, understanding and emotional alignment. Authenticity, attractiveness, and expertise are baseline influencer attributes (Jin et al., 2019).

Furthermore, positive energy differentiates successful influencers from their peers. This characteristic encompasses an upbeat tone and the deliberate communication of hope, encouragement, and emotional warmth. As participant 3 has shared, rather than being passively pleasant, these influencers actively construct a motivational atmosphere that resonates with viewers seeking emotional gratification. These expressions of positivity, when consistent, operate as long-term affective stimuli, reinforcing the internal satisfaction that keeps audiences engaged.

Collectively, emotional intelligence, linguistic relatability, and positivity energy are advanced psychological triggers. While competence and visual appeal may capture attention, these deeper interpersonal traits sustain connection. The findings suggest a need to move beyond traditional trait-based models of influencer success and instead recognise the multi-layered, emotionally grounded characteristics that drive ongoing consumer engagement.

5.2.1.3 Trust development as a gradual S-O-R process

Previous research often describes influencer credibility as a trait-based construct, where authenticity and expertise automatically translate into trust (Jin et al., 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). However, the findings of this study show that trust is not immediate but rather accumulates over time through repeated emotional and cognitive gratifications. Participant 4 explained, “he gave consumers a lot of compensation. He did not cover up in the video, and explained the whole story. In this way, it is very reassuring for consumers...their responsibilities for selling things, and their own integrity”. This response reflects a progressive trust-building mechanism; trust emerges only after a series of satisfactory interactions. Symbolic congruence between influencer and follower has been suggested as key to trust (Kim & Kim, 2021). The present study supports this but argues that the congruence is not pre-existing; it develops as viewers internalise emotional and knowledge-based value from the influencer over time. This process also involves a transaction from Influencer exposure to more consumer self-determined evaluations and experiences. Trust, therefore, should be seen as a behavioural response within the S-O-R model, resulting from repeated satisfaction across emotional and cognitive domains.

5.2.1.4 Reframing parasocial relationships as emotional gratification

Parasocial relationships have long been framed as emotionally one-sided bonds (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Hu et al., 2017). However, participants in this study described their experiences in more conscious and transactional terms, emphasizing emotional gratification over imagined intimacy. Participant 7 said, “She achieved success through her efforts... Even after the divorce, she did not complain...she gives us the strength to keep going”. This kind of response reflects a deliberate emotional payoff. The bond here is not passive; it’s a form of psychological nourishment. Hatfield et al. (1993) introduced the concept of emotional contagion, but findings here indicate that viewers actively seek emotional resonance, rather than simply absorbing it unconsciously. Emotional gratification, whether in the form of inspiration, comfort, or positivity, drives continued engagement. Thus, parasociality is reconceptualised within this study as a gratification mechanism tied directly to the organism phase of the S-O-R model.

5.2.1.5 The interdependence of external and internal influences in building loyalty

Participants repeatedly noted that while they were initially drawn to influencers due to surface-level traits like appearance and charisma, long-term loyalty stemmed from deeper internal gratifications. For example, Participant 11 stated, “I think the video content is what attracts me the most...I will pay more attention to whether the quality of the video content can influence me...the quality of their videos...Although interestingness accounts for half, the quality of the video content is also very important”. This indicates that people's focus is no longer solely on visual appeal, but also on their own intrinsic needs. Relatability and attractiveness were highlighted as vital traits (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). However, the present study finds that these alone are insufficient. Viewers need to feel consistently gratified, emotionally, cognitively, socially or economically, to remain loyal. This supports the argument for sustained opinion leadership, not just initial appeal (Casaló et al., 2018). The S-O-R model clearly maps this process. The first stimuli (visual appeal, personality) create interest, the internal states (emotional connection, knowledge gained) ensure more sustained involvement, and the response (trust, continued following) concludes the loyalty loop. This combined perspective highlights the importance of both the external attractiveness and internal fulfilment to the success of influencers.

Overall, this section has shown how this study's results confirm and expand on the previous studies on consumer psychology and influencer effect and expand on them. Incorporating the participants' stories, the discussion highlights how viewers can find multi-layered types of gratification, build trust gradually, and become emotionally attached to influencers in the long run. S-O-R framework offers a broad perspective through which these mechanisms can be understood, with consumer behaviour being understood as a multi-step process. Finally, this view can help us to understand better why some live-streaming influencers manage to build long-term, emotionally attached followings.

5.2.2 Characteristics of successful social media influencers

This part examines the attributes of effective social media influencers within the live-streaming environment. This discussion determines the attributes of influencers that are effective using the S-O-R framework. One of the areas of focus is on real-time interaction, content quality and influencer impression as dynamic success factors.

5.2.2.1 From content quality to real-time engagement: evolving expectations of influencer performance

In prior literature, the quality of content, authenticity, and audience engagement have been repeatedly emphasised as the key features of successful influencers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). These characteristics are confirmed by the participants in this study but are complemented with a more modern focus on real-time interactivity. For example, Participant 18 stressed that influencers can answer the questions and present the product, which immediately creates a sense of belonging and trust. In contrast to pre-recorded materials, live-streaming increases the anticipation of responsiveness, and engagement is an active, evolving process and not a fixed characteristic. This opinion is also supported by Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut, who believe that real-time interaction leads to trust and immediacy, which are the key to successful conversion (2020). However, this study narrows down the discussion by demonstrating that interaction is a transitional stimulus, which attracts attention at first but only becomes effective when it results in more profound emotional or cognitive gratification. The transition to participatory engagement is a significant change in the success metrics of influencers. With the increasing demands, influencers have to balance the high production quality with the personalised live feedback, which is a hybrid experience that is both professional and intimate at the same time.

5.2.2.2 S-O-R in action: the journey from viewer to loyal follower

The S-O-R model is especially helpful in the process of plotting the way viewers become loyal followers. The results indicate that the consumer experience starts with external cues, i.e., influencer images, attractive personalities, or professional demonstrations, but develops into internal satisfactions, i.e., emotional appeal and learning. Participant 13 “There is a sense of participation in raising electronic pets, which is really healing...people can feel the healing and happiness brought by pets through the Internet even if they don’t actually keep a pet”. This is an indication of a step-by-step procedure in which the content does not merely convince the viewer but is gradually satisfied. This sequence is consistent with the findings of Hou et al., who discovered that such factors as humour, interaction, and social display significantly impact the continued consumption intentions (2020). However, the present research takes a step further to demonstrate that these characteristics are not enough. Only through internalisation of stimuli, for instance, when a viewer experiences emotional elevation or acquires some practical knowledge, will they lead to long-term behavioural changes.

As a result, the S-O-R model not only depicts a model of attraction but also a model of long-term development of loyalty. Influencers should be thoughtful in planning every step of the viewer experience, and the content should always satisfy more fundamental psychological needs.

5.2.2.3 Moving beyond surface appeal: authenticity and internal gratification as loyalty drivers

Moreover, authenticity, which is commonly described as a feature of successful influencers, is regularly used as an aesthetic or branding tool (Jin et al., 2019). However, this study shows that authenticity should not be limited to superficial relatability to establish long-term emotional connections. Participant 3 stressed, “The family atmosphere shown in her videos is my ideal feeling, so it heals my soul when watching...When you work overtime and collapse, you will unconsciously slow down your breathing when you see this kind of video, and feel that the stress is cured...I watch the family atmosphere shown by Ye Zhu De Peng You Quan, it warms and heals my heart...”. This healing emotion creates emotional gratification, and this, in turn, creates behavioural reactions like re-watching and sharing. Trust depends on symbolic congruence, which is the situation when an influencer represents the values and identity of the viewer (Kim & Kim, 2021). This is supported by the findings that demonstrate how such congruence is developed over time via emotional and cognitive involvement. The internal organism component is fulfilled by the emotional resonance of the authentic self-presentation, and this ensures loyalty in the long run. In other words, authenticity is not simply what influencers show, but how consistently they gratify internal consumer needs. This insight enhances existing frameworks by positioning authenticity as a stimulus and an evolving relational mechanism that binds viewers to the influencer brand.

5.2.2.4 Strategic persona construction: external traits that stimulate internal connection

While literature discusses verbal ability, intelligence, and uniqueness as predictors of influencer success, the findings suggest that these traits function primarily as entry-level stimuli (Freberg et al., 2011; Casalo et al., 2018). Participant 9 mentioned, “Maybe it’s emotional intelligence that wins. It’s very important to be able to understand the needs of your fan group and be able to think from their perspective...Many people watch videos to seek emotional value”. This supports the argument that external appeal must be quickly followed by meaningful internal engagement. The S-O-R model helps clarify this two-tiered dynamic: an influencer’s persona (stimulus) initiates attention, but the follower’s continued engagement is dictated by whether their

cognitive and emotional needs are fulfilled (organism). The importance of source credibility has been underscored in previous studies (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Nevertheless, the current study extends this by suggesting that credibility must be demonstrated repeatedly, especially through consistency in live settings. Influencers who maintain a coherent, supportive, and educational presence succeed in reinforcing their persona over time, transitioning from novelty to necessity in the eyes of their audience.

5.2.2.5 Reinforcing success through content design: rhythm, clarity, and cognitive reward

Finally, this study underscores that successful influencers are charismatic performers and strategic communicators. Participant 18 noted, “If it is clear, I will know whether the product can meet my needs and thus generate the desire to buy...This allows me to buy fewer unnecessary products...When he is live-streaming, I can follow him and learn his skills immediately”. This comment speaks to the importance of rhythm, pacing, and clarity—elements of content strategy that are often overlooked but critical in live-streaming contexts. As noted by Hilvert-Bruce et al. and Hou et al. (2018; 2020), engagement is driven by clarity and entertainment value, yet the present findings refine this by linking content strategy to cognitive gratification. The easy-to-follow product demonstrations, clear explanations, and logical transitions make viewers feel informed and competent. These intrinsic rewards create a feeling of worth and lessen mental burden, which motivates the audience to watch again. In such a manner, the content design serves as a motivator and mental support system that enables long-term interaction. Effective influencers are, therefore, teachers and performers who are clear and charismatic to meet their audience's intellectual and emotional demands.

Thus, this demonstrates that the features of effective live-streaming influencers are not limited to the superficial features but involve a complex S-O-R process. Influencers generate a chain of gratifications, through initial appeal, strategic interaction, authentic persona construction, and well-designed content, that transforms consumers into active followers. Incorporating external stimuli with internal needs, influencers attract attention and guarantee long-term loyalty. These findings advance current models of influencer effectiveness and offer practical insights for content creators seeking to optimise their impact in the live-streaming ecosystem.

5.2.3 Consumer mentality on live-streaming and consumer psychology

Building on the initial discussions of consumer psychology and influencer traits presented in the previous sections, this section will explore the changing attitude of consumers in the live-streaming environment. Based on the testimonies of participants and theoretical knowledge, one can conclude that modern audiences are more rational, emotionally conscious, and highly agentive in their communication with live-streaming influencers. This trend breaks from the conventional portrayal of passive or impulsive consumers and focuses on a strategic and gratification-focused mindset. Through the prism of the S-O-R model, this section describes the internalisation process of stimuli (interactivity, quality of the content, emotional tone) by the viewers and the resulting behavioural response.

5.2.3.1 Escaping reality over parasociality

First, the previous literature often focused on the notion of parasocial interaction as the key to explaining why viewers follow and trust influencers. The concept that the audience develops one-sided relationships with influencers and perceives them as friends or companions, even without actual interaction, was explored in the works of Hu et al. and Sokolova and Kefi (2017; 2020). Such parasocial relationships were frequently viewed as emotionally satisfying and believed to be the motivators of loyalty and buying behaviour. However, the responses of participants in this research show a subtle change in this perception. For example, Participant 18 said, “His humorous video content makes me very interested in watching his videos... When I check my phone after work, I hope to see humorous and relaxing content that helps relieve stress and mood”. Such a type of commentary is not a fantasy connection with the influencer, but a search for emotional relief through content. This dynamic shift is consistent with recent research, which demonstrated that emotional displays like happiness in livestreams directly impact viewer engagement and financial support (Lin, Yao, & Chen, 2021). The meaning is obvious: content is a therapeutic stimulus, satisfies emotional needs, and helps regulate internally. Put in S-O-R terms, the emotionally resonant narrative or tone of the influencer (S) causes the internal state of calm, relief, or joy in the viewer (O), which results in long-term engagement (R). The present data indicate that emotional satisfaction is more self-centred and deliberate, unlike the earlier models that focused on parasocial attachment. The audience wants comforted, inspired, or distracted by stress, not a substitute for social connection.

5.2.3.2 Replacing impulse with intent

Building on this emotional shift, another major transformation is the emergence of rational decision-making in consumer behaviour. Although the visual attractiveness of posts has been emphasised as a common cause of impulse purchases among Gen Z consumers, the current study participants reported a more thoughtful and rational process (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Participant 12 observed that he does not buy because others are buying. She states, “It makes me feel that she is professional in beauty and makeup, which makes me trust her more...The products she introduced made me feel very credible, so I bought a lot...This builds trust and triggers emotional resonance between me and her...authenticity builds long-term trust”. These insights indicate that although stimuli, like limited-time offers or trend-based promotions, can attract attention, they are not enough without internal validation. This trend is justified by a study on influencer-product congruence, which demonstrates that trustworthiness and brand alignment are the factors that contribute to the high perception of consumer credibility (Kim & Kim, 2021). It has also been stated that the consistency of influencer, product, and consumer identity increases confidence and purchase intention (Belanche et al., 2021). These results support the claim that stimuli must undergo a strict internal assessment procedure (O) before a consumer is willing to take action (R). This shift in visual appeal to perceived worthiness indicates a more serious interaction with the stimulus, thus breaking the idea of live-streaming business as entertainment-based or impulsive.

5.2.3.3 Emotional and knowledge gratification as prerequisites for behaviour

In addition, emotional and knowledge gratifications were identified as the key drivers of consumer behaviour. Participant 11 said, “In my free time, I can watch beautiful designs and learn some knowledge...I think it not only makes me happy but also allows me to learn a lot of knowledge...There are two aspects. First, the content of her videos about fashion makes me feel very interesting, which attracts me to learn more and continue to follow them”. This testimonial is an example of a situation when the content of the influencer's publication (S) causes the feeling of trust and empowerment (O), which translates into the purchase decision (R). Xu, Wu, and Li (2020) also suggest that the direct impact of interactivity and presentation clarity is an increase in trust and, consequently, the purchase behaviour. However, the results of this research take a step further to indicate that emotional and cognitive gratifications should work hand in hand. According to Lou and Yuan (2019), informativeness and entertainment are the primary sources of influence. However, this study shows that

product descriptions can be lengthy, but if they lack emotional resonance and knowledge, viewers may pay attention for a short time but will not maintain long-term, stable attention. On the other hand, emotional appeal without any solid information may be rejected as shallow. In the S-O-R framework, these demands imply that influencers have to continuously provide and satisfy intrinsic needs that are informative or emotionally appealing to produce the desired effects.

5.2.3.4 Minority role of social gratification

Moreover, there is a significant change in the position of social gratification. Although the traditional perception placed social interaction, including commenting, sharing, and chatting, at the centre of engagement, the participants of this study had a more individualistic approach (Chen & Lin, 2018). Participant 18 said, “In fact, there is no shortage of beautiful faces on the Internet, but it is rare to find someone who can make you learn things with a smile and feel like you have made a friend...this builds a sense of community that allows everyone to participate”. This perspective indicates a more individualistic consumption and following behaviour, with the main reason being personal gratification instead of social connectedness. This change can be explained in the context of the changing platform cultures and user expectations. Immersive content and emotional authenticity are becoming more important than the necessity of collective interaction (Shiu, Liao, & Tzeng, 2023). Although live chat, viewer polls and audience recognition are still useful tools, they no longer seem critical in determining viewer loyalty or purchases. Rather, they are add-ons to the main experience. In the S-O-R perspective, social interaction is redefined as a secondary stimulus, which is useful but not vital in the production of organism-level engagement or behavioural response.

All these changes indicate a more mature consumer base that is no longer motivated by trends, social approval, or impulsive feelings. Rather, audiences critically consider the emotional, cognitive, and even ethical consequences of their interaction with influencers. Influencers, in their turn, have to perfect their strategies, leaving the superficial charisma or pushy promotions behind. They must provide clear, emotionally intelligent and contextually relevant content that appeals to the internal needs of a more discerning audience. This evolution is well captured in the S-O-R framework, which emphasises the fact that stimuli now have to go through more elaborate psychological filters before they can affect behaviour. This new consumer mindset is

an indicator of a shift in the meaning of influence, a shift in persuasion to partnership, a shift in visibility to value.

This discussion explored the psychological impact of influencers and putting consumer experience at the centre to identify four primary types of gratification: emotional, knowledge, benefit, and social. These gratifications expand upon the traditionally binary hedonic and utilitarian framework. These diverse forms of internal satisfaction act as mediating mechanisms through which consumer attention is sustained and deepened. Emotional intelligence, relatable language, and motivational storytelling emerged as critical attributes that enhance the emotional resonance of influencers, facilitating trust formation over time. Unlike the trait-based credibility models found in earlier studies, this study views trust as the cumulative result of the continuous gratification of the emotional and cognitive needs of the audience by the influencer's content.

Further, parasocial interactions—historically regarded as one-sided emotional bonds—are reframed in this study as mechanisms of emotional gratification, where viewers consciously seek psychological upliftment, inspiration, or comfort rather than mere symbolic companionship. This reconfiguration underscores a shift toward more agentic, self-aware forms of consumer engagement. The S-O-R model effectively captures this progression, portraying how initial attention to superficial appeal evolves into deeper loyalty through sustained gratification and trust.

In addition, this discussion focused on the characteristics of successful live-streaming influencers, and it is a more subjective analysis from the consumer's perspective. While reaffirming the importance of authenticity, content quality, and interactivity, the study emphasises the strategic construction of influencer personas and the deliberate orchestration of content rhythm, clarity, and emotional tone. Successful influencers are shown to be entertainers, educators, and emotional gratifiers capable of delivering both intellectual value and psychological comfort. Attributes such as high emotional intelligence and the ability to project positive energy were repeatedly identified by participants as differentiators of long-term success. These findings refine the definition of “influencer effectiveness” by illustrating that credibility and relatability must be consistently demonstrated, particularly in real-time engagement environments.

Lastly, this study provides evidence of the transformation of consumer mentality in the live-streaming context. Modern audiences are increasingly rational, emotionally literate, and intrinsically motivated. The study reveals that impulsive purchasing behaviours are being replaced by thoughtful decision-making grounded in perceived value, emotional resonance, and knowledge acquisition. Once central to influencer dynamics, social gratification now plays a secondary role as consumers prioritise personalised experiences over communal interactions. This shift signifies a maturation of consumer behaviour, where the influence process is no longer unidirectional but a co-creative dialogue between influencers and their audiences. This discussion illustrates how the S-O-R framework provides a robust lens for understanding the layered, iterative journey from viewer to follower. The discussion highlights that attention-grabbing stimuli do not solely drive consumer engagement but are contingent upon the influencer's ability to fulfil evolving psychological needs. This co-construction of influence, where stimuli and gratification interact over time, redefines influencer success as the capacity to build relational depth, not just reach or visibility.

5.3 Limitation & future research

Exploring the key drivers of consumer interest and the success factors behind live-streaming influencers with large followings provides valuable insights into the evolving field of digital consumer behaviour and influencer marketing. While previous research has primarily focused on metrics such as reach, content authenticity and engagement rates, this study suggests that deeper psychological mechanisms play a pivotal role in shaping long-term follower behaviour. These mechanisms include emotional and knowledge gratifications. Using the S-O-R framework, the study shows how internal gratifications mediate the relationship between influencer content and observable consumer responses, offering a more detailed understanding of how influencers gain and maintain a large following. However, as with all empirical research, this study has certain limitations that could be addressed in future research.

As a result, this research involved 20 participants, primarily aged between 20 and 40. Most of the participants held at least a bachelor's degree, and several had completed postgraduate education. This demographic profile suggests that the insights derived reflect those of a relatively educated and digitally engaged population

segment. While this cohort offers valuable insights into the key characteristics and success factors of live-streaming influencers, particularly about the emotional needs of followers, it may not represent the broader spectrum of consumer attitudes. Educational attainment can shape individuals' cognitive frameworks and influence how they interpret media stimuli (Greenfield, 2009). Age also plays a crucial role in shaping divergent thinking, indicating that perceptions and judgments may vary significantly across life stages (Reese et al., 2001). Therefore, future research should include participants with a more diverse range of educational backgrounds and across a wider age spectrum in order to capture a broader spectrum of consumer perspectives and ensure greater generalisability of the findings.

This study investigated the key factors that drive consumer interest in live-streaming influencers with large followings, focusing primarily on user experiences on the TikTok platform. While the research provides meaningful insights into audience engagement and behavioural responses in a TikTok-dominated environment, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the platform-specific nature of the data collection presents a significant limitation. All participants discussed their live-shopping experiences exclusively within the TikTok ecosystem. While highly influential, it does not encapsulate the full spectrum of influencers' live commerce environments. The app's success is largely fueled by its ability to deliver entertaining, emotionally stimulating content that is rapidly consumable and tailored to individual user preferences (Montag et al., 2021). This inherently biases the findings towards emotional and entertainment-driven consumer behaviour, potentially overlooking other dynamics such as brand trust and informational depth, which are more prevalent on platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Instagram (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Different platforms foster distinct modes of interaction between influencers and consumers, so generalising the identified success attributes to all influencers across platforms may be problematic. Future research should expand the scope to include multiple live-streaming platforms to address these limitations. A cross-platform comparative study would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the success of influencers across various digital contexts. Consequently, including influencers from YouTube, Instagram Live, and emerging platforms such as Kwai or Twitch in future investigations could yield a more holistic understanding of how platform-specific affordances, user cultures, and influencer strategies converge to shape consumer interest and influencer success in the ever-changing social commerce landscape.

Lastly, a notable limitation of this study is the focus on a limited number of influencer content categories referenced by participants. Most interviewees described their live-stream shopping experiences in the pets, fashion, beauty, and fitness sectors. Beauty content, in particular, is one of the most popular and visually engaging segments on TikTok. Cosmetic content on TikTok is particularly appealing to Generation Z audiences, generating higher levels of engagement than other types of content (Lontoh et al., 2022). This suggests that beauty-related material is more relevant and influential for this demographic within the platform's ecosystem. Although influencers in the beauty sector are well-represented, this does not capture the full breadth of product categories offered across the platform. Consequently, the findings are biased towards the characteristics of influencers and gratifications of consumers relevant to these specific domains, potentially excluding insights from other industries such as electronics, food, home goods and toys. TikTok's algorithm naturally prioritises visually stimulating, trend-driven content, which may explain why specific categories are overrepresented in participant narratives (Montag et al., 2021). However, this content bias limits the generalisability of the study's conclusions across all sectors of live commerce. Future research should aim to incorporate a broader array of follower needs and product categories to account for the varying consumer motivations, expectations, and engagement patterns across industries. A more inclusive exploration would allow for a richer understanding of how success factors differ depending on the nature of the product being marketed, as well as the specific psychological and informational needs of different consumer groups.

5.4 Implication

This study contributes meaningful insights into the evolving dynamics of consumer-influencer relationships within live-streaming commerce by offering theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it refines applying the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model in the context of digital influencers, demonstrating how consumer interest develops through a sequential and interactive process driven by external influencers and content attributes and the internal audience gratifications. Through in-depth qualitative data gathered from 20 participants, the research outlines how emotional and knowledge gratifications shape trust, long-term following, and purchasing behaviour. This extends prior models of digital engagement. In practice, the findings offer actionable strategies for influencers, platforms, and influencer marketers. These include designing external content strategies that align with the intrinsic needs of followers, incorporating emotionally resonant and informative elements into influencer personas, and refining training protocols to improve influencer

performance and connection with their audience, Together, these dual contributions provide a comprehensive understanding of how influencers can achieve success and transform their audiences from passive viewers into loyal, engaged consumers.

5.4.1 Theoretical implications

This study enhances our theoretical understanding of consumer behaviour within live-streaming commerce by examining the dynamic engagement between influencers and their audiences through the lens of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. Rather than conceptualising consumer attention as immediate or transactional, this research identifies it as a processual journey. This journey begins with external influencer stimuli, progresses through internal consumer gratifications, and culminates in measurable responses such as trust, follower numbers and purchasing behaviour. Drawing on the experiences of 20 participants, the findings illustrate that the initial attraction to live-streaming influencers stems from specific external cues such as expressive communication styles, credible product introductions, and emotional performances within the live-stream environment. However, the transformation from viewer to follower depends heavily on whether these external stimuli align with consumers’ intrinsic needs. This study shows that emotional gratifications and knowledge acquisition, including inspiration, emotional connection, and the feeling of acquiring practical knowledge, are the most influential factors in shaping audience loyalty. This confirms and builds upon previous research and prior work highlighting the importance of emotional resonance and content value in online parasocial relationships. In this study, only a small proportion of followers had an intrinsic need for online parasocial relationships, but the majority sought gratification in terms of emotional, knowledge and benefits. This study reveals the process by which viewers transform into followers under the influence of live-streaming. The model could be used in the future to test followers' demand for influencers.

Moreover, the research contributes to the study of influencers by refining the concept of their characteristics. While previous scholarship has emphasised credibility and authenticity, this study reveals that additional traits significantly contribute to influencer success (Lou & Yuan, 2019). These include demonstrating high emotional intelligence, positive energy, rhythmic control of live stream pacing, and the strategic use of language to sustain audience engagement. Participants repeatedly emphasised these characteristics, believing them to be the key elements in attracting and stimulating viewers to become potential followers. This has led

to a more in-depth analysis of the traits and attributes that future live-stream influencers need to develop. These qualities amplify external stimulation, enabling influencers to capture and sustain viewer attention more effectively in an oversaturated digital landscape. By unpacking these traits, this research extends personality-based models of influencer effectiveness and provides a more comprehensive account of the attributes that distinguish influencers with large followings.

Within the S-O-R framework, the Organism phase is pivotal in promoting long-term follower engagement by placing the consumer's internal needs at the centre of the influencer-audience dynamic. Influencers can satisfy these emotional and knowledge needs by reducing stress, fostering emotional connection, addressing the psychological need for healing, providing an opportunity to learning new things and providing practical insight. Therefore, viewers are more likely to evolve from passive observers into loyal followers. This internal gratification drives sustained attention and reinforces the influencer's credibility and appeal. The continued engagement of satisfied followers then contributes to the influencer's success and social capital, thereby amplifying their influence and market power. Thus, consumer-centric gratification becomes both the catalyst and foundation of influencer growth, demonstrating that enduring popularity is not merely a function of personality or content, but a reflection of how deeply influencers resonate with their audiences' evolving needs. In this sense, success is not solely driven by follower accumulation or algorithmic reach, but by an influencer's ability to provide internal gratification that is strong enough to be behaviourally reinforced over time. Influencers with millions of followers are not just content producers; they are responsive gratifiers, capable of aligning their persona and offerings with their audiences' ever-changing emotional and informational landscapes.

Importantly, this study also redefines the consumer response phase as a co-creative process rather than a passive reaction. Using the S-O-R framework, the study found that consumers' interest is co-produced through the alignment of influencer traits (S) with follower needs (O), resulting in measurable behavioural outcomes (R). Trust-building, long-term engagement, and purchasing decisions are shown to emerge not simply from exposure to content, but from a resonance between what the influencer presents and what the follower seeks. This means that although external stimuli such as the personality of influencers or the atmosphere of live streams may trigger user engagement, it is the more profound psychological need for continuous gratification

that can convert occasional browsers into loyal fans. When emotional and informational needs are consistently met, viewers begin to internalise the influencer's content as personally meaningful, thereby reinforcing their interest and engagement. This expands the influence and authority of influencers, for example, through word of mouth among fans, thereby promoting their success. This view echoes recent calls in consumer behaviour theory for a co-creative approach to engagement, where value is not simply delivered by the influencer but is co-constructed in interaction (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

In summary, this research presents a theoretical model explaining how viewers evolve into loyal followers through stimulus-driven, internally mediated, and mutually reinforced interactions. This research expands the applicability of the S-O-R model to digital influencer ecosystems. It proposes a conceptual process model that explains how consumer interest transforms into influence-driven outcomes. Future research can adopt this model to evaluate the impact of influencers across diverse content genres, platforms, and cultural contexts, thereby enhancing theoretical precision and generalisability.

5.4.2 Practical implications

First, the stimulus stage highlights the importance of carefully designing an influencer's external attributes to increase engagement potential. This includes content-related elements, such as content quality and content strategic planning of content, and the overall presentation of live-streams, as well as the impression made by the influencer, including their image and personality, positive energy, and ability to communicate effectively during product demonstrations. Live-streamers who demonstrate an ability to maintain a compelling rhythm during broadcast, use accessible yet persuasive language, and present themselves with a coherent digital persona are more likely to attract initial viewer interest and encourage viewers to follow. Platforms and agencies responsible for influencer recruitment or training should incorporate these attributes into their onboarding protocols and development curricula. Doing so can increase the likelihood of follower acquisition, enhance perceived professionalism, and ultimately support the influencer's commercial success. These specific attributes increase the probability of gaining attention and directly answer the broader question of what makes influencers with large followings more successful than their peers.

At the same time, the specific attributes of positive energy also contribute to the success of influencers with large fan bases. To emphasise positive energy as a core stimulus characteristic has emerged as a unique finding with immediate practical relevance. Influencers who project uplifting, emotionally resonant content have a clear advantage in an era of pervasive digital fatigue and social stressors. In this study, followers frequently highlighted their attraction to influencers who made them feel emotionally uplifted or inspired. This suggests that emotional contagion is crucial in satisfying inner emotional needs. For influencers and their managers, consciously incorporating positive narratives into content strategies and allowing influencers to showcase their positive personalities can be a powerful way to strengthen emotional resonance with audiences. Platform promotional strategies could also be tailored to prioritise such positive content, recognising its role in sustaining engagement and influencing long-term follower behaviour.

Thirdly, when designing influencer campaigns and training programs, it is important to consider both the external framework and the internal content of the influencer to meet the intrinsic needs of the target consumer group. The Organism stage of the S-O-R framework emphasises the internal gratification consumers experience when they watch the content from an influencer that resonates with their personal demands, habits, or identity. For instance, beauty influencers targeting skincare enthusiasts should prioritise sharing practical product knowledge and relatable emotional content, such as positive language, to create an emotional connection with their followers and satisfy consumers' inner need for positivity. This includes offering consistent emotional support and educational information that aligns with their followers' internal needs. Therefore, long-term attention and loyalty will naturally develop when followers believe that influencers are attractive in terms of their external content and personality and excel in gratifying their emotional and knowledge needs. Consequently, strategic content creation must be rooted in empathy and audience insight. Influencers who effectively combine compelling external stimuli with the ability to fulfil internal emotional and information needs are better placed to attract and retain a large audience. These insights address the practical reasons why specific influencers achieve sustained popularity while others struggle to maintain engagement.

Finally, this study highlights an important evolution in consumer behaviour at the Response stage: the rise of rational consumption and more intentional follower behaviour. While in the past, attractive pricing and high

product quality were sufficient to drive conversions, they can also increase sales in the live-streaming room. However, the current digital landscape demands more. Internal motivations, such as the need for emotional connection and knowledge, increasingly guide viewers. When influencers consistently meet these needs, trust deepens, and long-term engagement and purchasing behaviour become more predictable and stable. Influencers who fail to meet these deeper needs risk receiving only superficial or short-term following from viewers. As such, influencer training programs and platform-based promotions should integrate psychological insights into consumer motivation, emphasising strategies that cultivate long-term value rather than short-term attention. Content that reflects a deep understanding of internal consumer needs, combined with a well-executed external presentation, provides the dual advantage of immediate attention and enduring influence. Ultimately, this enhances the market competitiveness of influencers, consumer interest, and the long-term attention of their fans.

In summary, applying the S-O-R model to live-streaming influencer strategy shows that success in this area is not just down to popularity or appearance, but the result of a carefully orchestrated balance between external stimulus and internal consumer fulfilment. Those who heed these findings, platforms, agencies and individual influencers will be better equipped to navigate the increasingly complex and emotionally driven landscape of digital consumer engagement.

5.5 Chapter summary

This research offers a theoretical and practical contribution to the understanding of live-streaming commerce by examining the layered process through which consumers become long-term followers of influencers with large audiences. Unlike previous studies, which often assume that consumer interest is either algorithmically driven or passively reactive, this study demonstrates that audience engagement is a gradual, self-moderated process shaped by the dynamic interplay between external stimulus and the fulfilment of internal needs. The results validate and expand the S-O-R model by showing that emotional and knowledge gratifications are more influential than social or benefit gratifications in shaping sustained viewer loyalty. The study also deepens academic understanding of what makes specific influencers more successful than others. Distinguishing factors that elevate include traits such as high emotional intelligence, the ability to convey positive energy, strategic

content rhythm, and persuasive language use. Significantly, the study also reframes influencer success as co-constructed by the audience. It highlights that consumer trust, purchase decisions, and loyalty are not merely responses to content, but are actively shaped by internal gratification processes. These research findings provide actionable insights into how influencers can attract consumers' attention and convert it into loyal followership and increased trust.

In summary, this chapter consolidates the theoretical insights of the study and underscores the importance of aligning influencer attributes with their audience's changing emotional and cognitive needs. It also highlights how practical strategies based on consumer psychology can improve the effectiveness of influencers and increase engagement on platforms. These findings pave the way for future research and offer a robust conceptual model for understanding digital influence in the era of livestream commerce.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

6.1 Restatement of the research purpose

This study aimed to explore the key drivers of consumer interest and the success factors that differentiate live-streaming influencers with large followings from their peers. Based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, the research examined the multi-phase transformation whereby consumers shift from passive viewers into active followers, and eventually into loyal purchasers. By focusing on the use of live-streaming experiences and psychological motivations of consumers, this study aimed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer traits, emotional resonance, and gratification needs interact to drive influencer success within the live-streaming ecosystem.

6.2 Final reflection

The research identified several external attributes of influencers that trigger initial engagement. These included content-related strategies like visual quality, dynamic content pacing, and clear product presentation. Traits of influencers, particularly emotional intelligence, linguistic relatability, and consistently displaying positive energy, emerged as powerful stimuli that captured viewers' attention and stimulated their interest in continuing to watch. Viewers responded most positively to influencers who could maintain an engaging rhythm throughout the live broadcast while articulating the product's benefits in clear, persuasive, and relatable terms.

The second stage of the model uncovered that internal consumer states—particularly emotional and knowledge gratification—played a decisive role in determining long-term engagement. Viewers described emotional connection and stress relief as reasons for remaining loyal to specific influencers. Equally important was knowledge acquisition; followers valued influencers who provided educational content, product tutorials, or thought-provoking narratives. While social gratification (e.g., interaction) and benefit gratification (e.g., discounts, deals) were present, they had comparatively less influence than emotional and knowledge-based rewards.

The final stage revealed behavioural responses that emerged from the alignment of external stimuli and internal gratification. Trust was identified as the foundational response, built progressively through consistent emotional and intellectual fulfilment. Long-term attention, frequent viewing, and repeated purchasing were found to follow trust. These responses were not simply outcomes but formed a feedback loop that reinforced influencer credibility and expanded their reach. As a result, influencer success was shown to be a co-created phenomenon, sustained by the continuous fulfilment of evolving follower needs.

The research successfully applied the S-O-R model to the context of live-streaming commerce, demonstrating that consumer engagement is not passive or linear, but evolves through an iterative cycle of stimulus, internal processing, and response. This application extends the S-O-R framework beyond the realms of traditional e-commerce and entertainment by revealing that consumer–influencer interactions are far more dynamic and reciprocal than previously assumed. Specifically, the study reveals that stimuli produced by influencers do not elicit a one-directional response; rather, they activate a continuous interpretive process shaped by consumers’ prior experiences, emotional states, and gratification needs. In doing so, the findings advance existing theoretical understanding by highlighting how consumers actively co-construct meaning within the S-O-R sequence, thereby transforming influencer content into personalised gratification experiences.

Furthermore, it refined our understanding of what makes influencers successful by identifying nuanced characteristics, such as high emotional intelligence, positivity, and communication strategy, beyond generic credibility or attractiveness. These traits significantly enhanced the effectiveness of stimuli and contributed to the long-term retention of followers. At the same time, the study emphasised that followers are not passive recipients of content. Their continued engagement, trust, and purchasing behaviours are contingent on meeting their internal emotional and cognitive needs. This shift towards a consumer-centric perspective suggests that influencer success is as much a reflection of the audience’s internal experience as it is of the influencer’s content. This shift towards a consumer-centric perspective suggests that influencer success is as much a reflection of the audience’s internal experience as it is of the influencer’s content, thereby enriching the S-O-R-based understanding of consumer–influencer interaction in live-streaming environments.

Agencies and platforms should prioritise influencer training programs that emphasise content rhythm, emotional resonance, language strategy, and positivity. These elements significantly enhance first impressions and sustained interest. Moreover, influencers should create content that reflects not only their brand identity but also deeply resonates with their target audience's emotional and cognitive needs. Content creation must focus on emotional gratification (e.g., mood enhancement) and knowledge gratification (e.g., product education). As a result, long-term engagement is best sustained when influencers consistently meet the internal needs of their followers. This research emphasised the increasing significance of rational consumption and intentional follower behaviour, indicating that external appeal must be accompanied by substantial internal value to retain loyal audiences.

In conclusion, this study provides a nuanced understanding of consumer-influencer dynamics in the live-streaming context. The findings highlight that influencer success is not simply a matter of platform visibility or algorithmic favour but is deeply rooted in the psychological alignment between influencer attributes and consumer gratification needs. Those who can strategically manage stimulus appeal and internal emotional fulfilment are better positioned to cultivate trust, foster loyalty, and thrive in an increasingly competitive digital landscape.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A :



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

6 November 2024

Rong Zhang
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Rong

Re Ethics Application: **24/309 Key drivers of consumer interest and success factors in live-streaming influencers with large followers**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 6 November 2027.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact the Secretariat at ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: kjf7480@autuni.ac.nz

APPENDIX B :



Auckland University of Technology

Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ

T: +64 9 921 9999

AUT

Interview Guide

Topic: Key Drivers of Consumer Interest and Success Factors in Live Streaming Influencers with Large Followings

Introduction

1. The purpose of this interview is to understand your experience and engagement with live-streaming influencers.
2. I really value and appreciate your insights and stories, so please feel free to share in as much detail as possible.
3. During the interview, I will record our conversation, and at times, I may check my notes or take additional notes.
4. The interview will be in two parts. First, I will ask some general questions about the influencers you follow, and then we will discuss your experiences with them in more detail.

Starting questions: Open and descriptive

Briefly describe your background: e.g., What is your gender? What is your age? What is your education level? How long have you been using or watching live-streaming shopping? Which type of live-streaming influencers do you pay more attention to? Which sector's live broadcasts do you usually watch?

Consumers' insight into live-streaming influencers

RQs to answer: (forums OR chat groups)

- RQ1.** Which influencers are you currently following?
- RQ2.** When did you start following this influencer?
- RQ3.** Can you share the story or reasons behind why you started following this influencer?
- RQ4.** What factors influence your decision to continue following and watching this influencer?

- RQ5.** How is this influencer different from others you follow or have followed in the past?
- RQ6.** During livestreaming sessions, have you ever purchased anything promoted or suggested by this influencer?
- RQ7.** What influenced your decision to make a purchase during a livestream?
- RQ8.** What types of content from this influencer do you find most engaging and why?
- RQ9.** Can you describe specific aspects or elements of the influencer's content that influence your engagement?
- RQ10.** Which aspects or attributes of the influencer are most important to you?
- RQ11.** Which characteristics of the influencer do you find most interesting and appealing? Why?
- RQ12.** Can you elaborate on why these particular characteristics attract you?
- RQ13.** In your opinion, are these the qualities that a successful influencer needs to possess? And why?
- RQ14.** Do you believe these characteristics are what contribute to the success of an influencer? And why?

Summary Questions

- Now, in today's society where live-streaming influencers are emerging one after another, will you continue to follow the dynamics of your follow influencer? Please tell us why.
- If you know any other individuals who follow influencers and might fit with this study's focus or can aid our understanding of influencer success, please let me know.

Follow-Up

- Thank the interviewee for their participation.
- Inform the participant that they may be contacted for any clarifications or further discussion on key points.
- Offer the possibility to review a summary of the research findings once completed.



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

24/8/2024

Project Title

Key Drivers of Consumer Interest and Success Factors in Live-Streaming Influencers with Large Followings

An Invitation

We are a group of passionate researchers from the esteemed AUT University. We are thrilled to extend an invitation to you to participate in a research project that aims to explore and understand your valuable working experiences.

We understand that your experiences are unique and valuable, and we are eager to learn from them. Your participation in this project will help us gain insights into the challenges, opportunities, and rewards that come with various work environments.

We assure you that your participation will be completely confidential, and your privacy will be respected at all times. Additionally, your participation will contribute to the development of knowledge that can benefit individuals and organisations alike.

So, we warmly invite you to share your thoughts and experiences with us by participating in this research project. Your input will be invaluable in helping us to achieve our research goals.

Thank you in advance for considering our invitation, and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

What is the purpose of this research?

We are conducting a study to better understand the key factors driving consumer interest in live-streaming influencers. We invite you to share your experiences and insights on this topic.

The data we collect will be used for academic purposes, including writing articles, presenting at conferences, and publishing research papers. Your participation will help us uncover what makes certain influencers successful and how they impact consumer behaviour. By contributing, you will assist us in gaining valuable insights into the dynamics of influencer marketing in live-streaming and help shape effective strategies for brands in this growing digital landscape.

The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You were initially identified as you are:

- Participants who have purchased or have not purchased anything in live streaming, but were attracted as fans from the live broadcasts of influencers with millions of followers
- Around 18-50 years old
- Watch live broadcast on mobile phone
- Participants of different gender, ethnicity and language they speak can participate in this research survey
- Participants who signed a consent agreement to participate in the interview

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You can agree to participate in this research by emailing us your response at kjf780@autuni.ac.nz. Attached along with this document is a copy of the participant Consent form. If you agree to participate in this research, please

sign the consent form and email it back to us at kjf7480@aut.ac.nz or call us at 02041979255. You can find contact details at the end of this sheet.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

Following your acceptance to take part in this study, an offline interview schedule will be sent to you and you will be required to choose a time of your convenience for the interview.

The interviews will be held via offline meetings in a booked room at AUT University. It usually takes 30-45 minutes for each interview. The interview questions will relate to your use live broadcast. You won't be asked to provide any personal identifying information, your online IDs or email addresses will remain confidential, and only pseudonyms will be used in the final reporting.

What are the discomforts and risks?

There is a very minimal chance of any discomfort. The research team can assure you that the questions are non-invasive as we are not seeking a level of detail that may identify you or create any discomfort.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Participation is voluntary, and if for any reason you feel uncomfortable, you are able to decline to answer certain questions or even withdraw from the research project at any time prior to the study's completion without any consequences. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to choose a suitable time for participation.

AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- drop into our centre at WB203 City Campus, email counselling@aut.ac.nz or call 921 9292.
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant, and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health>

What are the benefits?

Participating in this research will assist us in gaining a deeper understanding of what drives consumer interest in live-streaming influencers, contributing new insights to the field of digital marketing. Your input will help identify successful strategies and characteristics of influencers, which can guide brands in leveraging live-streaming effectively. Additionally, this research may aid marketers and brands in refining their approaches and inform industry stakeholders about effective influencer engagement strategies. Your contribution will play a crucial role in advancing knowledge and shaping strategies within the rapidly evolving landscape of live-streaming and influencer marketing.

How will my privacy be protected?

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your identity will remain confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone except the research team. To ensure that privacy and the suggested limited confidentiality are respected, your name or online ID will be changed to pseudonyms, and contact information will not be disclosed in final reporting. Any data that the researcher extracts from the interview is for academic use only and all reports or published findings will not, under any circumstance, contain names or identifying characteristics. All data will be stored on a password-protected memory stick and consent forms will be stored in a password-protected cabinet with the research team after the project is completed. Data and consent forms will be deleted after a period of six years. Contact details of the researchers are provided in case of any concerns or complaints that need to be lodged.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no costs to you other than your time to participate in the study. The interview will take 30-45 minutes of your time.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You can take your time to decide if you wish to participate in the research. However, it would be appreciated for you to respond within 5 days from the date the invitation is sent. You have the choice of selecting the most appropriate time from date options sent by the researcher for the interview to take place.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

By completing a Consent Form or by responding to the invitation email, you may tick the box showing your interest in receiving feedback on the research's results. A result synopsis will be emailed to you once the study is complete. If the answer is 'no', then provide the participant with the reason.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the primary researcher, Zihan, Li, kjf780@autuni.ac.nz, (+649) 02041979255.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Primary research: Zihan, Li

Email: kjf7480@autuni.ac.nz

Phone number: (+649) 02041979255

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Project Supervisor: Rongmei, Zhang

Email: Rongmei.zhang@aut.ac.nz

Phone number: (+649) 0211480818

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTEK Reference number *type the reference number*.



Consent Form

For use when interviews are involved.

Project title: *Key Drivers of Consumer Interest and Success Factors in Live Streaming Influencers with Large Followings*

Project Supervisor: *Rongmei, Zhang*

Researcher: *Zihan, Li*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 1/8/2024.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted AUTEK Reference number type the AUTEK reference number



📌 Join Our Research on Live-Streaming Influencers! 📌

Hi! I'm Zihan Li, a Master of Business student at AUT, researching **the key drivers of consumer interest and success factors** in live-streaming influencers with large followings. I'd love to invite you to participate!

Research Topic:

Understanding what makes fans engage and what contributes to the success of live-stream influencers.

Who Can Join?

- 📺 Ages 18-50, who watch live broadcasts
- 🌍 All genders, ethnicities, and languages welcome! 👤
- 🎁 Whether you've made purchases during a livestream or simply enjoy watching, we want to hear from you!
- 🚫 Not closely connected to me as a family, friend, classmate, or teacher

If you are Interested? 📧 Email me at kjfi480@autuni.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTEK Reference number 24/309.

APPENDIX C:

20 interview

Codes

Name	Description	Sources	References
Organism	Consumers' inherent demand for influencers.	109	170
Benefit gratification	Consumer demand for benefits.	5	6
Niche	There will be followers who focus on niche items. That is why they pay attention to influencers from the perspective of their own interests.	1	1
Price	Consumers will compare the prices of different live broadcast rooms to find the one with the most advantages.	2	2
Product quality	Consumers will compare the quality and variety of products in different live broadcast rooms to find the one with the most advantages.	2	3
Emotional gratification	Consumers' emotional needs.	66	100
Affinity	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	1
Belonging	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	3
Brave	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	4	8
Comfortable	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	2	2
Enjoy	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	3	4
Entertaining	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	2	2
Friendly	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	1
funny	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	2	2
Happy	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	6	9
Healing	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	3	8
Honesty	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	1
Hope	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	2
Humorous	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	5	7
Integrity	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	1

2025.07.19

Name	Description	Sources	References
Interesting	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	10	14
Patience	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	1
Perseverance	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	1
Positive energy	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	6	12
Real	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	4	5
Relax	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	6	9
Reliable	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	1	2
Sincerity	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	2	3
Warmth	The inner emotions of followers' gratification by influencers.	2	2
Knowledge gratification	Consumers' need for practical knowledge.	31	53
Gain useful information	Consumers gain useful knowledge from influencers content.	10	14
Learning inspiration	Consumers get inspiration from influencers' videos and live broadcasts.	16	33
Professionalism	Make consumers think that they are influencers with professional knowledge, so they are willing to acquire knowledge.	5	6
Social gratification	Consumers' demand for social interaction.	7	11
Interaction	Interaction between influencers and followers	2	3
Parasocial	Parasocial needs generated by consumers.	5	8
Response	Consumers response to influencer.	47	71
Building Trust	Through the process of building their profile through SMI, their followers will eventually trust them.	14	19
Long-term following	Through the S-O-R process, consumers eventually respond to the influencer's long-term attention.	16	30
Purchase	Through the S-O-R process, consumers ultimately produce a purchasing behavioral response.	17	22
Stimulus	Through a consumer-centric way, discover what external stimuli will elicit their responses.	240	476
Content quality	Influencer self-video content.	47	85
Diversity of content	The video content shot by influencers is diverse. It is not a single type.	3	5
Entertainment	The content of influencer is entertaining and attractive.	9	14

2025.07.19

Name	Description	Sources	References
Interesting	Consumers will pay attention to whether the content of influencers is interesting and makes them interested in watching it.	11	17
Level of video content	The overall quality of the video content is high, and it can make people learn knowledge or reflect, rather than being vulgar.	14	32
Positive energy	It can make people feel positive energy, not negative energy, so that viewers can maintain a positive attitude to watch.	10	17
Content strategy	Influencer strategy to their own content. Overall, including the content strategy of the live broadcast room, and then successfully attract followers.	44	95
Buying point	Most of us will focus on the selling points. But as an influencer, you need to know the buying points of a product. Why do followers need this product? How can you attract followers to buy this product?	1	4
Collaboration with celebrities	Invite celebrities to collaborate and promote in the live broadcast room. Or promote the products sold by the influencer.	2	2
Content Publishing	Attract fans' attention through videos or live broadcasts produced by themselves.	17	44
Language usage understandable	The language the influencer use.	11	19
Product information	Product information displayed by influencers. Can it help followers better understand the product?	1	2
Rhythm	The rhythm of the influencer's overall rhythm in the video and live broadcast room.	4	11
Target audience	Do the influencers themselves have a clear understanding of their target audience and will not confuse the product among various groups?	3	5
Update frequency	How often the influencer updates.	5	8
Influencer impression	The impression that influencers have on their followers.	94	202
Influencer profile	Their own profile to attract follower.	34	68
Authenticity	Influencer profile is authenticity.	18	46
Consistent	Followers will pay attention to whether the influencer has consistent thinking or behavior, such as consistency in three perspectives.	4	5
Credibility	Influencers can make people trust them and buy the products they recommend or follow them through their daily content and explanations during live broadcasts.	7	11
Similarities	The similarities between influencers and followers can inspire followers to continue following.	5	6
Influencer image	The influencer's own appearance and figure.	35	75
No negative	Influencers themselves cannot be negative or do	5	8

2025.07.19