

Social Media Influence on Consumer Buying Decisions: A Qualitative Study of Facebook Users

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The 21st century's first decades are imprinted in memory as a time when a digital transformation took place, most notably through the advent of social media. This cultural and technological phenomenon, a significant part of the digital transformation, has, in essence, altered the way people interact, communicate, and consume. Social media, initially understood as digital networking and identity-creation tool, - as evidenced by Facebook's 2004 launch, - has within a very short time frame, transformed into a multifaceted, all-pervading system indispensable to the economic, social, and political spheres of life. According to statistical research (Global Statistics, 2025), there are over 5.24 billion individuals worldwide who are actively using social media in 2025, which is 63.9% of the global population and the number is still on the rise. The widespread use of media outlets stands as a testimony to the fact that social media is not merely an additional activity but the primary platform where activities like spreading information and engaging in cultural discourse take place (Castells, 2015).

For almost the entire 20th century, the traditional marketing funnel - a linear model - was the prevailing paradigm. It was made famous by theorists such as St. Elmo Lewis using the AIDA model (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). In this model, consumers were mostly passive recipients of messages controlled by brands, which were delivered to them through one-way channels such as commercials on TV, print ads, and radio spots. Marketers had the power to broadcast a serviced image, and consumer decision-making was channeled through this small set of factors (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

The internet, and especially the interactive Web 2.0 which is the source of social media, has brought an end to this linear funnel (O'Reilly, 2005). Nowadays the consumer decision journey is dynamic, non-linear, and in many cases, chaotic. Modern consumers are people who have the power, knowledge, and willingness to participate. Their route to buying is a network of interconnected digital touchpoints that merge marketing, social interaction, and commerce (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). An example of such a journey could be an ad tailored to a user appearing on their Facebook feed, leading to an influencer's video YouTube that reviews the product and thereby creating interest, moving the consumer to look for comments and advice by members of a Facebook group and ultimately purchasing online (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The path is not a direct one but rather a series of loops and revisiting steps, social validation and user-generated content playing a large role in it.

This convergence is captured by the phrase social commerce, which means "the delivery of e-commerce activities and transactions via social media environments" (Wang & Zhang, 2012, p. 5). Systematically, it forms a multi-trillion-dollar economic segment, and the steep curve of its growth is phenomenal (Evans and Gawer, (2016). What the consequences are for companies is quite clear: to take part in the current market, they need to comprehend and command the influence tactics in such social settings. Facebook continues to be a platform of major significance among these social environments. Even though new platforms such as

TikTok and Instagram are being talked about a lot because of their growth and engagement, the basis of Facebook is still there. It has a unique, cross-generational user base, the most advanced and data-rich targeted advertising system in the world, and a mature, multi-functional infrastructure that can accommodate everything from brand pages and community groups to integrated marketplace and payment systems (Hargittai, 2015, Bodó et al., 2017, Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Thus, Facebook is a perfect digital microcosm for examining the interaction of the marketing forces of the modern era. It is a platform where the three central forms of media come together: paid media (highly targeted advertisements), earned media (organic peer recommendations and shares), and owned media (content published directly by brands on their pages) (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). The understanding of these forms is the main problem as well as the central opportunity of contemporary marketing.

1.2 Research Gap

Whether big or small, every enterprise that has a share in the market is setting aside funds for these platforms, hoping that they will assist their organization in accomplishing goals (Statista, 2024). However, despite this significant liquidity injection, a clear lack of knowledge is still evident (Chaffey, 2020, Chiu, 2024, Shaheen, 2025). In particular, plenty of companies still rely on the intuition, popular trends, and constant trial and error as the basis for their social media decision making while a data-driven understanding of the impact of various social media inputs on the consumer at the point of purchase is still lacking (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Chaffey, 2020; Shaheen, 2025).

There is a vast amount of research which argues different aspects of media influence on the consumers, treating these factors separately. The effectiveness of influencer marketing has been the subject of numerous studies, for example, where the researchers tried to find the effect of follower count and authenticity on brand attitudes (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has been also studied with the focus on the effect of online reviews and peer recommendations on consumer trust and purchase intention (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Other scholars have turned their attention to the sustained role of brand credibility in the digital era (Ohanian, 1990) and the issues of social media advertising (Logan, 2014).

Nevertheless, the consumers don't isolate these factors when they make decisions. Facebook users' newsfeed is a highly personalized stream, where adverts, posts, shared articles, and news concerning corporate ethics could easily co-exist. Therefore, the consumers' decision-making is a holistic one, integrating all these different inputs into one single verdict. However, the essential questions about which factor has the biggest impact on the purchasing decision and if the various factors interconnect are still largely unanswered. According to Kim and Ko (2012, p. 1480), "effects of various social media marketing activities on consumers may not be uniform," however, very few studies have taken this into consideration and tested them in one single integrated model.

Beyond this empirical limitation lies a significant theoretical void. Even though prior research has proven that influencer marketing, paid advertising, and eWOM has an impact on consumer behavior, it offers limited evidence for the underlying psychological reasons certain mechanisms might have bigger impact in specific, contextual situations (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; De Veirman et al., 2017). For example, the well-documented premise that peer recommendations often exert greater influence than traditional advertisements are supported by several theoretical propositions. Firstly, messages created by peers are most often seen as authentic and least likely to be commercially biased, thus, making the consumers less skeptical (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Secondly, the Persuasion Knowledge Model suggests that consumers have mental barriers through which they recognize the persuasive intent of advertisement (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Peer recommendations may indeed bypass these defenses in a subtle manner, thereby increasing their effectiveness. Thirdly, Social Identity Theory implies that people are more easily influenced by those whom they consider as members of the same group, hence, peer endorsements are felt as more personally relevant and trustworthy (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

A second theoretical and practical issue concerns the interactive nature of these stimuli. In practice, a consumer is rarely exposed to one element of persuasion in isolation. On the contrary, their Facebook HomePage consists of advertisements, influencer content, peer recommendations, and corporate messaging. Currently, there is not a clear understanding of whether exposures to multiple factors have simple additive effects, synergistic reinforcement, or even counteractive outcomes where one stimulus undermines another (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Boerman et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a need for an integrated theoretical model - one that can account for the effects of diversified social media stimuli on consumer decision-making at both the individual and the interactive levels.

The chasm between this state of research and the pragmatic needs of marketing professionals constitutes a substantial operational problem. In the absence of a clear understanding of how consumers subjectively weigh and reconcile these influences, the strategic allocation of marketing resources to these factors is intuitive (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). Forced to take decisions without deeper insight, marketers often rely on incomplete and often misleading proxy metrics - such as "likes," "shares," and impression counts - which are, at best, weak indicators of genuine sales intent or brand connection (Kumar et al., 2013). The marketing plans that rely on surface-level analytics can be inefficient, because they are not aligned psychologically with the target audience's true decision-making processes, and ultimately capable of delivering optimal Return on Investment (ROI) (Labrecque et al., 2013). This, in effect, stifles the transformative potential of social media as a deeply interactive and relational commercial channel.

Therefore, what this study focuses on is the absence of qualitative research into the consumer integrated experience. There is a strong demand to not only measure that different stimulations have an impact, but also to qualitatively understand how and why consumers find, interpret, and get influenced by the mixture of social media marketing in their real digital surroundings. This dissertation intends to close this gap through the experiences of the

user and the strength of their narrative, thus giving the kind of detailed, contextual understanding that is necessary to create more effective, engaging and psychologically sound marketing strategies.

1.3 Research Rationale and Significance

This gap in knowledge about the impact of social media on consumer behavior is the main reason for conducting this study. While one can easily find the overall effect of social media platforms such as Facebook, there is hardly any new empirical evidence present in the literature that qualitatively disintegrates the power of three core marketing stimuli - advertisements, influencer marketing, and customer recommendations - to reveal their relative impact on consumer behavior. The purpose of this dissertation is to fill this void in the literature and to provide the immediate benefit of practical and theoretical contribution at the same time.

The major practical justification of this research comes from the need for marketing practice to be clear and efficient. In times when accountability is more intense than ever before, enterprises must be assisted by reality-based solutions regarding the way they should allocate their scarce resources to get the maximum return on investment. The currently researched qualitative approach and its results in turn will become what marketers and brand managers as well as business owners have been longing for as a standpoint for their Facebook campaigns, namely a definitive and data-driven compass. The findings of this study on the level of influence on purchase intention that different channels - paid advertising, influencer partnerships, or community-driven eWOM - exert will enable practitioners to:

- Optimize budget allocation by saving the marketing budget for the most effective tactics.
- Refine content strategy by supporting the most effective channels and use it either for sharing to encourage eWOM or for cooperating with trusted influencer to enhance the brand.
- Build strategic partnerships with influencers based on their actual ability to drive purchasing behavior, moving beyond vanity metrics.
- Strengthen brand equity because brand credibility is a crucial factor that demonstrates the capacity for magnification of other marketing activities.

Apart from the boardroom, this research can be seen as a step towards improved digital literacy. Among other things, research findings may serve as a tool for the greater public to understand and critically evaluate mechanisms of social media persuasion which then can lead to enhanced digital literacy. According to the principles of the Persuasion Knowledge Model, consumers become more competent as they learn to recognize persuasion attempts, infer the motives behind them, and apply this knowledge to regulate their responses to marketing communications (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

1.4 Research Purpose and Questions

The main objective of the study is to qualitatively explore the living experiences, and personal views of how the main stimuli of social media marketing impacts the consumer decision journeys of Facebook users. By interpreting in-depth interviews, this study intends to go beyond merely statistical relationships in discovering the contextual meanings and underlying logic that users themselves attribute to ads, influencer content, peer recommendations, and perceived brand credibility.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is:

- How do Facebook users interpret and narrate the story of the influence of social media advertisements, influencer-generated content, peer recommendations (eWOM), and perceived brand credibility on their purchase-related decisions?

In answering this main question substantively, the study investigates the following sub-questions:

1. How do users describe the function of social media advertisements in their individual journeys of deciding on a purchase?
2. In what ways do users understand and interact with influencer-generated content, and how do they explain the influence (or the lack of it) of that content on their purchase decisions?
3. How do peer recommendations and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on Facebook influence the purchase decisions of the users?
4. What is the role of brand credibility on Facebook in terms of purchases?
5. When reflecting on their holistic experience, how do users compare, prioritize, and reconcile these different stimuli, and what reasoning do they provide for the relative influence of each?

These questions were not meant to establish causal relationships but to gain insights from the consumer detailed experiences. The focus is on revealing the deeply layered, frequently subjective reasons behind the individual weighting of each factor, thus delivering the context-dependent and experiential knowledge which is indispensable both in the advancement of scholarly theory and in the creation of marketing practice that will better resonate with consumers.

1.5 Aim and Delimitations

The aim of this study is to explore how Facebook users describe, interpret, and make sense of the influence of four key social media marketing stimuli - advertisements, influencer-generated content, peer recommendations (eWOM), and perceived brand credibility - on their purchase-related decision journeys. The research aims to understand the subjective meanings, contextual interpretations, and narrative explanations that users give when thinking about their real-life experiences on Facebook.

For conceptual clarity and methodological feasibility, the study was intentionally limited in several ways. First, it centers only on Facebook. Analyzing several platforms might have given wider coverage of this issue. However, Facebook's unique characteristics, the algorithmic news feed, the community group structures, and a highly developed advertising ecosystem, make up a unique and complex enough setting for a qualitative detailed investigation. This single-platform focus also provides a foundation for future comparative research.

Second, the study concentrates on four conceptual domains directly aligned with the research questions:

1. Social media advertisements
2. Influencer-generated content
3. Peer recommendations and eWOM
4. Perceived brand credibility

The objective is not to treat these domains as isolated variables, nor to quantify their effects, but to understand how users experience, interpret, and integrate them within their personal decision journeys. The study therefore does not attempt to account for all possible influences on consumer behavior (e.g., personality traits, platform usability, offline factors). Instead, it provides a detailed, context-rich account of how these four forces interact within the Facebook ecosystem from the user's perspective.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, interview-based design to capture the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences. Because user interpretations and platform dynamics evolve over time, the findings offer insights into the psychological and social processes at play, rather than general claims applicable to all contexts or platforms. These findings, then, ought to be interpreted as limited to a certain context only as they mirror the experiences of the specific group of Facebook users involved in the research. Moreover, the data should be considered as a first step in encouraging further empirical research.

Finally, all the participants were expats living in Prague and working as customer service advisors for the same company. Such a very high level of similarity implies that the participants not only had similar ways of life at work but also comparable everyday digital operations and social circles. Hence, the ways in which they made sense of Facebook content could be a reflection of the group's particular norms instead of the varied experiences of the broader Facebook user community. This drawback does not reduce the merit of the results. Qualitative studies do not seek to make statistical generalizations but it does limit transferability. Therefore, the observations can best be seen as the depiction of this specific social setting's experiences rather than showcasing universal trends among all Facebook users.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

The chapters in this thesis follow a rational sequence, with each chapter expanding on the previous one and ultimately presenting a coherent and comprehensive research argument. The

thesis' layout is supposed to systematically take the reader from the basic concepts to the final conclusions of the study. The organization is as follows:

Chapter 2: Literature Review - It is supposed to review relevant, comprehensive, and critical syntheses of current academic literature for the study. Besides, it would provide research theoretical framework, elaborating on the Theory of Planned Behavior, the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, the Source Credibility Model, and the Information Adoption Model.

Chapter 3: Research methodology - This chapter describes the nature of qualitative research that was the basis of the study. It provides the rationale for following interpretative philosophy, taking an exploratory qualitative approach, and conducting semi-structured interviews. Besides, it explains the target population and how purposive sampling has been used. The chapter introduces the interview guide along with its development and format. It also covers the methods of gathering information and how to analyze it by means of thematic analysis.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis - This chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis in a clear and logical narrative. The main themes and sub-themes, which are also illustrated with authentic, detailed, and vividly quoted extracts from the participant transcript, have been described in the section. Divisions are made between the results in such a way that they respond to the respective research questions, thus providing a descriptive and richly textured portrayal of the participants' experiences and opinions.

Chapter 5: Discussion – The final chapter is an interpretation of the results with reference to the theories and the literature of Chapter 2. It discloses the conceptual and methodological innovations, theoretical and practical implications, the reflection on the study's limitations, and the suggestions for further research.

The use of a comprehensive approach here guarantees a deep and transparent research process, guiding the reader from the identification of the research problem to the final conclusions and contributions of the academic inquiry.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The digital era has completely changed the way consumers and brands relate to each other, effectively giving individual people power over organizations. Social media sites have become the main places where people not only communicate but also cooperate in giving meaning to things. This has resulted in turning the traditional, one-way, brand-controlled communication model into a lively, participatory environment (Kotler et al., 2017). Contrary to the mass-media times when consumers were almost only the receivers of ads, nowadays the digital world is dominated by people generating content, information flows controlled by algorithms and decision-making processes that are socially grounded (Labrecque et al., 2013). Of all the available platforms, Facebook is the one that is considered a highly sophisticated and thoroughly interconnected ecosystem where ads, influencer endorsements, word-of-mouth communication among friends, and brand-produced content are present at the same time and, moreover, interact continuously (Zhang & Mao, 2016).

Although the influence of social media on consumer behavior has been widely studied, the literature remains fragmented. Most research isolates individual stimuli - such as advertising, influencer content, or eWOM - without examining how consumers experience these elements together within a single platform. However, this separation results in a limited comprehension of the entire process of decision making that users go through in real online settings (Camilleri, 2018; Kapoor et al., 2018). Also, although research using statistics has revealed some correlations between social media triggers and buying intention, there are substantially fewer studies that deal with the subjective interpretations and sense-making activities of users in relation to these influences.

This chapter addresses these gaps by reviewing the literature in direct alignment with the study's five research questions. Each section synthesizes empirical and theoretical insights relevant to one of the core domains: social media advertising, influencer-generated content, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), perceived brand credibility, and the comparative influence of these stimuli. The chapter concludes with an integrated theoretical framework drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, the Source Credibility Model, and the Information Adoption Model (IAM).

2.2 Literature Related to RQ1: How Users Experience Social Media Advertisements

Social media ads are nowadays the most commonly used form of online persuasion due to the potential of social media platforms to deliver highly targeted and personalized content. For example, Facebook's ad system mainly relies on behavior data, providing marketers the chance to target users based on their demographics, interests, web activity, and even their

social friends (Zhang & Mao, 2016). Such precision brings a shift in advertising from just flooding people with messages towards making a tailor-made, algorithm-driven experience.

Studies evaluating the value of advertising point out that three main aspects determine user reactions: informativeness, entertainment, and irritation (Logan, 2014). Informative adverts offer consumers product information that assists their decision-making. Ads that entertain can engage and produce good feelings in the audience. On the other side, irritating ads lead to the audience being annoyed and, in some cases, totally ignoring the ads. Facebook is an environment where these aspects become greatly intensified using targeting algorithms. The appealing and relevant ads can be seen as beneficial, but those that are too pushing or repeating may be viewed as disturbing. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), relevance fosters engagement, yet the personalization of ads to a degree that raises privacy issues is likely to lead to skepticism and resistance.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model by Friestad & Wright (1994), states that consumers get to a point where they have mental strategies to fend off persuasion attempts. On social media, these mental strategies get triggered when the users understand the commercial motive behind the ads. The article by Campbell and Kirmani (2000) highlights that if consumers feel that the intent is manipulation, they might either not take the message seriously or have a negative reaction. Nevertheless, Facebook's native advertising formats such as sponsored posts which look very much like regular posts, can make it difficult to distinguish between advertising and content created by users. This uncertainty could lower the activation of persuasion knowledge, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of ads. At the same time, it also opens up a discussion on ethics.

In the Consumer Decision Journey (CDJ), advertisements are a key factor in getting potential customers to consider a product by communicating new items and forming brand awareness for the first time (Court et al., 2009). However, their effect is very seldom the final determining factor by itself. Consumers regularly look for further confirmation by turning to peer reviews, influencer views and cues of credibility before they decide to buy. This is a great way to emphasize the necessity of knowing how users place ads in the context of rest of their decision journeys the way ads relate to peer communication, influencer material and credibility cues.

Despite an abundance of research done on the effectiveness of advertising, there are still many gaps. Most of the previous research studies look at ads in isolation, ignoring the wider social media environment. Very few studies have looked at the ways users write about their experience with ads in their own words. Also, very little qualitative research has been done on how ads influence or get influenced by other factors (e.g. internet word of mouth, social media influencers). This is why the first research question arises to find out what users say and how they view the role of social media ads in their decision-making processes.

2.3 Literature Related to RQ2: How Users Understand and Interact with Influencer-Generated Content

Influencer-created content has become a strong force in social media persuasion. Influencers are people who have earned trust of large audiences. Further, they influence consumers' views by their authenticity, knowledge, and being able to relate to others (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Typically, their content mixes personal narratives with product endorsements, resulting in a combination of social and commercial communication.

Authenticity is constantly pointed out as the major element of influencer effectiveness. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) maintain that users give a favorable reaction to those influencers who come across as real, open, and stable over time

Being authentic is a great means to build trust, which is a source of greatly increased persuasion. However, the situation with authenticity became quite a serious problem due to the rise in sponsored content. Nowadays, as influencers find ways to make money out of their platforms, users may tend to doubt whether the endorsed products are really the ones the influencers like and use. This issue of authenticity versus commercialization is a major point of debate in literature (Duffek et al., 2025).

Parasocial relations these are emotional connections on the followers' side only when the influencers increase the persuasive element of their content. Lou and Yuan (2019) demonstrate that such relations contribute to increased credibility of the influencer and reduce the phenomenon of skepticism. Influencers are often given the status of semi-peer, a kind of person who is somewhere in between celebrities and friends. For that reason, their recommendations might be more influential than the regular ads but not as much as the peer recommendations.

Within the Consumer Decision Journey (Court et al., 2009), influencers play a significant role in the evaluation stage. Through their reviews, tutorials, and sharing their experiences, they help buyers to recognize the qualities of products and see if they suit them. Also, influencers are the ones who impact the way people think about brands and help form social norms, thus leading to subjective norms in TPB. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the influencers in persuading others depends in large part on their genuineness, their professional knowledge as well as their being in harmony with the user's identity as perceived by the users.

Despite extensive quantitative research, several gaps remain. Limited qualitative insight exists into how users interpret influencer content (Audrezet et al., 2020). A few studies focus on the impact of such a content on the user's decisions (Hudders et al., 2021). Even fewer studies explore influencers within the integrated Facebook environment, where influencer content competes with ads, peer recommendations, and brand messaging (De Veirman et al., 2019). These gaps motivate RQ2, which seeks to understand how users make sense of influencer-generated content in their own narratives.

2.4 Literature Related to RQ3: How eWOM Shapes Trust, Social Validation, and Risk Perception

The electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM has been considered as one of the most powerful tools for social media communication. This is mainly due to the fact that peer recommendations are seen as more genuine, reliable, and less biased as compared to content generated by the brands themselves. According to Cheung and Thadani (2012), eWOM might be the most influential factor in consumer decision-making as it revolves around interpersonal trust rather than commercial persuasion. On digital platforms like Facebook, this trust gets a boost through the platform's social structure where users communicate with their network of friends, acquaintances, and community groups. These communications generate the feeling of being socially close that makes the peer messages more trustworthy.

The reason why eWOM is so convincing can also be understood with the help of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which states that people are more prone to follow those whom they consider to be members of their own group. Facebook groups, from those of hobbies to local neighborhood ones, actually help to strengthen this tendency by making different small communities where people share their recommendations, advice, and experiences. In these online communities, eWOM is not just a means of providing information, but also a way of gaining social approval. People tend to depend on the shared knowledge of their groups in order to decrease uncertainty and lower the level of perceived risk, particularly when they are dealing with unknown brands or expensive purchases.

Within the Consumer Decision Journey (Court et al., 2009), eWOM is the backbone both at evaluation and advocacy stages. Users depend on reviews, comments, and discussions to evaluate product quality, compare alternatives and even foresee possible problems. Good eWOM can greatly increase purchase intention, while bad eWOM can stop a person from buying, sometimes even more than advertising or influencer endorsements. On the other hand, little attention has been paid to depict how users themselves relate the role of eWOM in their journey to decision making or how they do combine their peers' inputs with other stimulus like ads, and influencer content. In addition, existing literature tends to isolate eWOM, primarily focusing on online reviews or ratings rather than capturing the rich interactive dialogue on Facebook (Cheung, Thadani, 2012). These shortcomings highlight the importance of RQ3 that will address how much consumers use different sources to reach a purchase decision and to what extent they turn to social interactions versus digital ads (including influencer marketing).

2.5 Literature Related to RQ4: How Users Assess Brand Credibility on Facebook

Brand credibility is an important mediating factor in regards to digital persuasion because it shapes how users interpret the various stimuli on social media. According to the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990), credibility is generally considered to be made up of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. But, in the case of social media, brand

credibility is not only limited to these attributes. It also includes consistency of messaging, transparency, responsiveness, and the perceived authenticity of brand behavior. Spry, Pappu and Cornwell (2011) point out that credibility is not only a feature of the brand itself but is also co-created through interactions between brands, consumers, and the wider online community.

The Information Adoption Model (IAM) reveals more about the ways users judge the trustworthiness of content in online settings. As Erkan and Evans (2016) note, users evaluate the helpfulness and credibility of the information they find online prior to their decision to adopt it. Users mainly rely on the quality of the argument, source expertise, and social confirmation. On Facebook, such signals are a part of the complex network of brand-created posts, peer comments, influencer profiles, and platform-level indicators like verification badges. Therefore, trustworthiness is not viewed individually, but it is the result of the interaction of several information sources.

Credibility within the Consumer Decision Journey (Court et al., 2009) affects all steps. First, it forms people's perceptions during the consideration stage. Then, by lessening the feeling of risk, it helps to make the evaluation stage more positive. Lastly, after the purchase, it helps to confirm feelings of satisfaction and increase loyalty. A brand that has credibility stands a greater chance of being trusted, recommended, and visited again whereas a brand that people will have the impression of being inconsistent or manipulating will be subjected to skepticism even if its advertising and influencer marketing are effective. Although it is a key factor, credibility is usually relegated to a minor one in the chain of variables used for an exploratory study, at most getting a sentence or two explaining how users having experienced Facebook for themselves are able to build their own credibility (Sokolova, K., Kefi, H., (2020). Another fact is that hardly any researcher has considered the issue of credibility in terms of its interaction with other stimuli or in terms of users reacting to conflicting signals, e.g. a neatly made advertisement and negative peer reviews at the same time (De Veirman et al., (2019). In these respects, RQ4 has been inspired.

2.6 Literature Related to RQ5: Comparative Influence of Ads, Influencers, eWOM, and Credibility

Although a substantial body of research examines the individual effects of advertisements, influencer content, eWOM, and credibility, far fewer studies compare these stimuli within a single integrated framework. Kim and Ko (2012) highlight that the effects of different social media marketing activities “may not be uniform,” yet most empirical work isolates variables rather than exploring how consumers weigh them against one another. This fragmentation limits our understanding of how users navigate the complex, multi-layered information environment characteristic of platforms like Facebook.

Research has shown that eWOM is, on average, the most trustworthy form of communication on social media and this is quite simply because it is viewed as the most genuine and least commercially biased source of information (Cheun & Thadani, 2012). The content produced by an influencer will be very effective in persuading the audience if the influencer is deemed

to be authentic, knowledgeable and relatable, however, the more the followers see the influencer as someone who behaves in a non-genuine way or is simply a tool for the brand, the less effective the trust in the influencer will be (De Veirman et al., 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Ads remain a very good way to make a product or a brand more familiar to the public. However, they often in a certain way create distrust because of their obvious commercial nature (Logan, 2014). Meanwhile, the credibility of a brand is a key factor that can significantly increase or decrease the influence of other stimuli (Spry et al., 2011).

Despite these insights, the literature offers limited understanding of how consumers themselves compare and prioritize these stimuli when reflecting on their holistic experiences. It has been found in very few studies that users practically reconcile conflicting signals, for example, a positive review from influencer combined with negative comments from peers, or a brand highly targeted by advertising but at the same time perceived as having low credibility (Lavanya & Vipin, 2024). Very few studies even set the focus specifically on Facebook (Mishnick & Wise, 2024). Its unique mix of ads, peer interactions, and influencer content creates such an extremely rich environment for comparative analysis that it justifies the identification of RQ5. RQ5 aims to understand how users, when making purchase-related decisions, compare, prioritize, and merge different social media stimuli.

2.7 Theoretical Framework Supporting Research Questions

Four theories will be applied in this study. They are interconnected and complement each other in order to holistically understand how users respond to various social media stimuli:

Theory of Planned Behavior demonstrates the direct influence of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control over purchase intention (Ajzen, 1991).

Stimulus-Organism-Response model explains ads, influencer posts and eWOM as stimuli that cause mediating cognitive and emotional effects within organism, which further translate into a response. Source Credibility Model offers insight into how perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness lead to persuasion (Ohanian, 1990). Information Adoption Model illustrates how individuals process information they encounter online and whether they adopt it (Erkan & Evans, 2016).

The mentioned frameworks will be used to analyze psychological processes involved with how users perceive and synthesize information received from Facebook.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The main objective of this research was to carry out a qualitative study of Facebook users' perception and storytelling of the impact of social media marketing stimuli. In particular, the study focused on ads, influencer-generated content, and peer recommendations (eWOM). The research questions sought to reveal the mechanisms behind these influences; therefore, the author considered a qualitative research method to be the best fit. The chapter explains the research philosophy, design, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and limitations that constitute the research.

Qualitative research is based on studying social phenomena through the meanings people give them (Bryman, 2016). It focuses on depth, context, and subjectivity, enabling researchers to investigate complex processes, motivations, and experiences in detail, which is exactly what the author wanted to do when she decided to go beyond the quantitative “what” to the qualitative “how” and “why” differentiating the problem statement. In this chapter, the methodical and rigorous approach took is presented to ensure the credibility and academic significance of the results.

3.2 Research Philosophy: Interpretivism

This research was based on interpretive philosophy. Interpretivism supports that social reality is not one and objective but is created through human interaction, language, and shared meanings (Schwandt, 1994). In contrast to positivism that aims at discovering general laws through objective measurement, interpretivism recognizes that researchers and participants together create understanding within a specific situation.

This philosophical position is highly applicable to the investigation of consumer behavior on social media. Consumers do not respond to marketing stimuli in a uniform, mechanical manner; instead, they interpret the messages through the lenses of their personalities, social circles, past experiences, and cultural backdrops. An interpretivist method gives the researcher the opportunity to get hold of these personal interpretations, thereby enabling participants to be viewed as willing creators of meanings rather than as mere recipients. The aim is not to statistically generalize the results but to offer a detailed, contextualized understanding (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomenon as it has been experienced by a particular group of Facebook users.

3.3 Research Strategy: Exploratory Qualitative Design

The overall research approach was an exploratory qualitative design. Exploratory designs are used to study complicated phenomena that have been little researched and are not fully understood; the main purpose is to get a deeper insight and understanding (Stebbins, 2001). This perfectly fits the purpose of the study to investigate how people experience social media influence in a complex and integrated way since existing quantitative models have limited explanatory power in this respect.

This approach is adaptable and cyclical, thus the research can be responsive to the themes arising from the data while at the same time being led by the theoretical framework set in Chapter 2. It allows an open-ended exploration of people's experiences; thus, it is very suitable to determine the answers to "how" and "why" questions.

3.4 Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews gives both control and freedom by clearly specifying the big ideas that come from the research questions and allowing the participants to explain, invent new ideas, and share their experiences in a very natural way (Kallio et al., 2016).

3.4.1 Development of the Interview Guide

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed based on the research questions and the theoretical frameworks reviewed in Chapter 2. It comprised of a set of open-ended questions which were structured into different thematic sections:

- Opening & Facebook Usage: To create a friendly atmosphere and get the participants' general view of the platform.
- Experiences with Stimuli: The questions were aimed at advertising, influencer marketing, and peer eWOM content. The participants were asked to give concrete examples, their perceptions and emotional responses.
- Cognitive and Social Processing: The questions aimed to reveal how the participants evaluate credibility, trust, social pressure, and personal importance of the messages.
- Decision-Making and Intention Formation: The questions were about how different stimuli are combined in the purchase intention process.

Each of these sections was designed to operationalize key constructs derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, the Source Credibility Model, and the Information Adoption Model (IAM). This way, we could make sure our data collection was on track with the research questions, and we could systematically examine how social media marketing stimuli led to consumers' decision-making.

Based on the S-O-R framework, the interview guide was organized in a way that the first questions aimed at understanding the Stimuli (S) such as being exposed to social media ads, influencer-created content, and peer recommendations (eWOM). The next parts delved into the Organism (O), which included the consumer's internal cognitive and affective processes, i.e., perceived brand credibility, trust, and information evaluation. Lastly, the last questions corresponded to Response (R), which manifested itself in purchase intention and actual decision-making behavior.

Besides, Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was the basis for the formulation of questions concerning attitudes toward advertisements, subjective norms (particularly regarding peer recommendation and influencer), and behavioral intention. Source Credibility Model gave directions to the addition of items that investigate the levels of trust and expertise of different

information sources. Meanwhile, the Information Adoption Model (IAM) was the main source for the questions about information quality, credibility, and perceived usefulness.

Table 3-1 provides a detailed mapping between the interview questions and the theoretical constructs they were designed to explore.

Interview Section	Example Questions	Theoretical Construct	Theory	Purpose	Supporting Empirical Studies
1. Facebook Usage (Warm-up)	“How do you usually use Facebook?”	Exposure to stimuli	S-O-R (Stimulus)	Establish baseline context of user interaction with social media	Brailovskaia & Margraf (2021); Chen (2020); Mishnick & Wise (2024)
2A. Advertising	“How do you feel about ads on Facebook?”	Attitudes toward behavior	TPB	Understand emotional and cognitive reactions to ads	Taylor et al. (2011); Logan et al. (2012)
	“Do ads influence your decisions?”	Stimulus → Organism	S-O-R	Explore how ads translate into internal evaluation	Shareef et al. (2019)
	“What makes you click on an ad?”	Information quality	IAM	Assess perceived usefulness and informativeness	Sussman & Siegal (2003); Wang et al. (2022)
2B. Influencer Content	“Do you trust influencers?”	Source credibility (trustworthiness, expertise)	Source Credibility Model	Evaluate perceived authenticity and expertise	Djafarova & Rushworth (2017); Lou & Yuan (2019)
	“Have you ever bought something because of an influencer?”	Subjective norms	TPB	Examine social influence on behavior	Casaló et al. (2020); Shamim & Azam (2024)
2C. Peer Recommendations (eWOM)	“Do you rely on friends’ recommendations?”	Subjective norms	TPB	Capture social pressure and validation	Chu & Kim (2011); Erkan & Evans (2016)
	“How do reviews affect your decisions?”	Information credibility	IAM	Understand evaluation of peer-generated content	Cheung et al. (2008); Ismagilova et al. (2020)
3. Cognitive Processing	“How do you decide what to trust?”	Perceived brand credibility	S-O-R (Organism)	Explore internal evaluation mechanisms	Erdem & Swait (2004); Wang & Scheinbaum (2018)
	“Do you compare different sources?”	Information usefulness	IAM	Examine cognitive integration of stimuli	Filieri (2015); Cheung & Thadani (2012)

4. Decision Journey	“Can you describe a recent purchase?”	Purchase intention	TPB / S-O-R (Response)	Identify how intention is formed	Hajli (2014); Boateng & Okoe (2015)
	“What influenced you the most?”	Relative influence of stimuli	Source Credibility Model	Compare importance of different sources	Hudders et al. (2021); De Veirman et al. (2017)
5. Ranking Influence Sources	“Which do you trust most: ads, influencers, or friends?”	Trust hierarchy	Source Credibility Model	Identify perceived credibility hierarchy	Lisichkova & Othman (2017); Ismagilova et al. (2020)

Table 3- 3-1 Mapping Interview Questions to Theoretical Constructs

3.4.2 Sampling and Recruitment

A purposive sample technique was used to identify the cases that were most informative and relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). The target population was adult Facebook users (18+). This criterion was to ensure that the participants had relevant experiences to share.

The final sample was made up of 10 participants. Such a sample size aligns with the suggestions for qualitative studies that employ in-depth interviews, where the focus is on thematic saturation and depth, rather than on statistical power (Guest et al., 2006).

3.4.3 Interview Procedure

All interviews were conducted online via Teams to ensure geographical flexibility and participant comfort, especially given the focus on digital behavior. Each interview lasted 30 to 55 minutes. Participants received a Participant Information Sheet before the interview and gave their informed consent electronically. All participants agreed to be audio-recorded to secure an accurate record of the conversation. Subsequently, the recordings were transcribed, producing written material for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis Method: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The interview data was analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). This was the method of choice due to its theoretical flexibility, systematic procedure, and the advantage of being able to identify, analyze, and report the patterns (themes) in qualitative data. The term 'reflexive' points to the researcher's involvement in the creation of the themes, thus recognizing that analysis is an interpretative process influenced by the researcher's theoretical and personal stance.

The analysis has been conducted according to Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with the Data: The researcher got deep into the data by going through the transcripts not once but several times, making notes of initial thoughts, patterns, and the overall impression. This stage resulted in a very good understanding of the participants' stories both in depth and in scope.

2. **Generating Initial Codes:** The whole dataset was systematically coded. A code is a short label which identifies an important aspect of the data related to the research questions. Coding was done on both levels: semantic (representing the explicit content) and latent (reflecting the underlying ideas).
3. **Searching for Themes:** During this phase, codes were combined into potential themes. The theme reflects a significant aspect of the data in relation to the research question. Codes were classified according to the conceptual similarity. For example, codes like "skepticism toward the sponsors," "evaluation of the authenticity of the influencer," and "perception of bias in ads" were combined into a theme called "Navigating Authenticity and Commercial Intent."
4. **Reviewing Themes:** The candidate themes were evaluated and improved at two different levels. First, it was checked that memos of coded data for each theme genuinely depicted a theme by assessing the coherence. Later, the entire data set was reviewed to ensure that the themes matched the overarching content of the meanings present. In this phase, a few themes were split, merged, or discarded.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was explained and given a representative name. The theme's narrative - its connections with other themes and the overall research questions - was revealed.
6. **Producing the Report:** The last stage of the process was creating the analytic narrative in Chapter 4. This report chose the data extracts that were most vivid, compelling and that best illustrate each theme, these extracts were then integrated within the researcher's comments, and the findings were linked to the research questions.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in a highly ethical manner, and the decision-making was based on the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018):

- **Informed Consent:** Each participant was handed a very thorough Participant Information Sheet that accurately explained the study and their involvement in it (purpose, procedure, risks, benefits, rights).
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All the information was kept confidential. Pseudonyms (e.g., Participant no.1, Participant no.2) were used for participants, and any potentially identifying information (names of specific friends, brands, or locations) was removed from transcripts and reports.
- **Right to Withdraw:** Those involved in the study were informed that they may exercise their right to withdraw from the study at any point during the interview.
- **Minimization of Harm:** The interview questions were designed in a way that they usually referred to everyday consumer experiences and hence they were not intrusive. Participants were also told that they had the right not to answer any questions if they wish.

4 Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews from active Facebook users. The analysis took into consideration the research questions in Chapter 1 and the theoretical framework in Chapter 2 including the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953), and the Information Adoption Model (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). The analysis followed the approach of Braun and Clarke's (2006) regarding the reflexive thematic analysis, which entailed immersing in the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the final report.

Regarding the participants, the ten respondents were expats living in Prague and working as customer service advisors in the same company. Their age, education, and Facebook usage patterns vary. The interviews, which were conducted in English from March 11 to March 18, 2026, and lasted between 30 and 55 minutes. The profiles presented in Table 4-1 will provide background information which will be useful for the reader in understanding the forthcoming analysis.

The analysis revealed five main themes that reflect the intricate and subtle ways through which the participants use social media to influence their spending decisions. Each theme is thoroughly discussed and supported by direct and impactful quotes from the participants which keep their voices intact.

Participant no.	Date	Duration (minutes)	Age Group	Gender	Years on Facebook	Usage Pattern	Key Characteristics
1.	5/3/2026	30	26-35	Female	15	Light	Uses for travel offers; influenced by visuals and aesthetics
2.	11/3/2026	31	36-45	Male	15+	Light	Uses for nostalgia; primarily on Instagram; analytical
3.	7/3/2026	32	26-35	Female	10+	Moderate	Passive scroller; values physical experience and in-person trials
4.	15/3/2026	30	36-45	Female	18	Heavy	Uses for local information; deeply skeptical of online content
5.	14/3/2026	31	26-35	Male	17	Moderate	Content creator; highly analytical consumer; values realism

6.	15/3/2026	35	26-35	Female	15	Moderate	Uses for food and news; values authenticity and detailed content
7.	18/3/2026	37	36-45	Female	15+	Moderate	Uses for casting calls; deliberate extended decision-making
8.	13/3/2026	55	36-45	Male	20	Heavy	Active in communities; values brand prestige and authenticity
9.	8/3/2026	30	26-35	Female	12	Light	Uses for news; disengaged from marketing; minimal social media influence
10.	12/3/2026	38	36-45	Female	18	Heavy	Activism background; deeply skeptical of all marketing

Table 4-1 Short description of the participant's profiles.

4.2 Code-to-Theme Development

To demonstrate the transparency and rigor of the analytic process, this section outlines how the study moved from raw interview data to initial codes, then to sub-themes, and finally to the five overarching themes presented in this chapter. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis, coding was iterative, interpretive, and meaning-oriented rather than mechanical. Codes were generated inductively from participants' narratives, clustered into conceptually coherent sub-themes, and subsequently refined into the final themes. Table 4-2 provides illustrative examples of this progression.

Initial Code	Representative Data Extract	Sub-theme	Main theme
Friends as the most trusted source	"If a friend recommends it, that's enough for me. I trust them more than any ad." (P no.2)	Peer recommendations as trust anchor	Theme 1: The Hierarchy of Trust – A Divided Landscape
Ads as background noise	"Ads are just there... I scroll past most of them unless they're super relevant." (P no.4)	Low baseline trust in advertisements	Theme 1: The Hierarchy of Trust – A Divided Landscape
Skepticism toward "perfect" content	"The more perfect it looks, the less I trust it. Real people don't live like that." (P no.5)	Distrust of idealized or polished content	Theme 2: The Primacy of Tangible Experience
Need for real-world confirmation	"I only decide after I've seen it in real life or tried it myself." (P no.3)	Tangible confirmation as decision trigger	Theme 2: The Primacy of Tangible Experience
Feeling watched by targeting	"Sometimes it feels creepy, like Facebook knows what I'm thinking." (P no.1)	Surveillance discomfort	Theme 3: The Duality of Algorithmic Targeting

Appreciation of relevance	"It's convenient when the ad is exactly what I was searching for." (P no.6)	Perceived usefulness of targeting	Theme 3: The Duality of Algorithmic Targeting
Group advice as decision checkpoint	"Before I buy anything, I check what people in my Facebook group say." (P no.7)	Community validation	Theme 4: The Social Dynamics of Consumption
Doubt toward influencers	"Influencers are paid, so I always double-check with real people first." (P no.8)	Negotiating authenticity and persuasion	Theme 4: The Social Dynamics of Consumption
Looping between options	"I go back and forth—ads, reviews, videos—until I feel sure enough to buy." (P no.3)	Iterative comparison and revisiting	Theme 5: The Layered Decision Journey
eWOM as final filter	"In the end, the comments decide it for me. If people say it's good, I buy it." (P no.2)	eWOM as final decision gate	Theme 5: The Layered Decision Journey

Table 4-2 Examples of how the codes were created

4.3 Theme 1: The Hierarchy of Trust – A Divided Landscape

Our examination of trust rankings among participants unfolded a far more intricate scenario than what we had first expected. Even though friends were identified as the most trusted source by nine participants out of ten, the positioning of influencers and ads differed drastically, resulting in three different trust organization patterns.

4.3.1 Pattern A: Friends First, Influencers Second, Advertisements Last

Six participants (Participants no. 1, no. 2, no. 3, no. 5, no. 6, and no. 7) expressed a distinct hierarchy of the factors where friends came at the top, influencers were in the middle, and ads were regarded as least influential. For example, when asked to rank the factors that influence her purchasing decisions, Participant no. 1 replied: "Friend's opinion, Influencer, Ad."

Participant no. 6 explained the reason behind this order: "The most influence can have my friends if they have products and they talk about it very well. Then I would say influencers because they provide the experience they have with the products. And the last advertisement that normally I find annoying." This participant distinguishes between the experience offered by influencers and the intrusive nature of advertisements. Participant no. 3 also remarked on the ability of the influencers to go live and do a demo as an advantage over the traditional static advertisement.

The story of Participant no. 7 demonstrated why peer influence is so powerful. She talked about her decision to buy a hair curler based on a friend's recommendations. ("I also had recommendations from my friends like how it was to use, and then I said like, yeah, yeah.") It was the ad that made her aware of the product, but the friend's recommendation was the social validation she needed to go ahead.

4.3.2 Pattern B: Friends First, Advertisements Second, Influencers Last

Three participants - Participant no. 4, no. 9, and no. 10 - articulated a different ordering, placing influencers at the bottom of their trust hierarchy below advertisements. Participant no. 4 stated explicitly: "I will say in order my friend's post will be number one and then I will maybe go for the advertisement and then the influencer will be the last one." This participant was quite skeptical toward online content throughout the interview.

Participant no. 9 similarly ranked: "More influence has the friend, then the advertisement and last the influencer." This participant expressed a general lack of interest in social media marketing, saying that very seldom interacted with content, and her purchasing decisions were rarely prompted by what she saw. Participant no. 10, in particular, was very clear about her distrust of influencers and gave a negative experience to illustrate her point: "I bought a cream from an influencer and I was so disappointed. I realized that showing something is only good in live time and not really working." This disappointment made her stick to the rule of thumb: "A good product doesn't need ads." Her ranking of friends first, advertisers second, and influencers last showed that she considered advertisers, though quite commercial, at least were honest with their commercial intent, while influencers were hiding their financial purposes.

The rationale for placing advertisements above influencers, expressed most clearly by Participant no. 10, was that advertisements were transparent about their commercial nature, whereas influencers claimed authenticity while being paid. As Participant no. 10 explained: "If it's from an influencer that I trust or we like the same things, I would check 100%. From the ad, I would trust less and if only it has very good visuals or there are many comments and more people are interested, I would click. Otherwise, I would trust more the person." This contradiction - trusting influencers more in one context but placing advertisements above them in the hierarchy - shows how complex it is for the participants to evaluate sources in practice versus how they consciously rank them.

4.3.3 Pattern C: A Unique Case – Influencer First

Participant no. 8 made a very interesting point by putting influencers on the very top of his trust hierarchy: "Influencer first, then number two I'll say it's my friends and last, the actual advertisement." He justified this way of ranking by elaborating on the fact that real content creators were different from ones "selling dreams".

Participant no. 8 trusted influencers who have genuine expertise and authenticity. He described following a specific Facebook page because: "He actually takes walks around and says this is how life is. This is where it's connecting. He's not misleading and he's not selling you that dream." For Participant no. 8, authenticity and connection were the factors that led to the trust of an influencer.

4.3.4 The Rationale Behind the Hierarchies

Across all participants, the rationale for trusting friends was remarkably consistent and aligns with the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953). Participants trusted their friends

because their opinion came from their own experiences and not from a desire to earn money. Participant no. 10 said: "Since they do it on a voluntary basis, they are not paid to advertise. They tried it and they liked it or they didn't."

In general, the participants tend not to trust influencers because of their commercial influences. Participant no. 5 conveyed these doubts with great self-awareness: "Both of them are manipulative as all marketing, but I would tend to trust more the influencer first because it's a person that I have the illusion that I know, even though I don't know the person really."

Participant no. 10's more extreme distrust reflected her belief that influencers were particularly deceptive: "They're paid for saying that it's very well. I don't like to trust them." Participant no. 2's unique trust in influencers was based on his perception of their expertise in specific domains. It implies that an influencer's trustworthiness varies and is, in fact, determined by how well the influencer's expert area is matched with the product category that the influencer is focusing on. Taking the sneaker review scenario as an example, to decide on the right sneaker, he completely relied on the influencer who pointed out various aspects such as the materials used, the story behind the product, and other technical details. He also added that he has a lot of trust in the people he knows (e.g., friends) when it comes to the information they provide, their suggestions, etc., but he has a bit more of a hard time with the "top end of the spectrum (influencers, advertisers) as there are quite a few players there with some questionable motives."

This is a very relevant theme to Research Question 5 that explores how users compare, prioritize, and reconcile different stimuli. The findings disclose that even though friends are continuously the most trusted source, the relative positioning of influencers and advertisements changes depending on individual experiences, dissent or doubt levels, and the perceived genuineness of different content types.

4.4 Theme 2: The Primacy of Tangible Experience – Seeking Reality Beyond the Screen

A second significant issue that quite a few interviewees brought up is the fundamental desire for solid, indisputable proof before a person can make a purchase decision. It has to be said that this issue addresses Research Questions 3 and 4 which explore how electronic word-of-mouth and brand credibility affect the buying decision. Further, this perspective completely fits with the Information Adoption Model that considers information quality the major factor leading to adoption.

In fact, Participant no. 5 very well expressed what this topic is about. He came to the conclusion that the "degree of product idealization" was the biggest factor that leads to trusting the product. His unexpected viewpoint, that very well-done, idealized content results in less trust rather than more, was supported by several participants: "The more perfect it seems, the less I want to believe it." Such a view seems to be a new level of consumer awareness, where people have actually become wary of perfection and are able to interpret it as a sign of possible deception rather than a mark of quality.

Participant no. 10 elaborated on this phenomenon with reference to her experiences with online reviews: "Too much good feedback for me is a skeptical issue. Because then I could say there's too much good feedback to be bought by money or the bot. People who write good feedback might be paid." This skepticism applied both to written reviews and online content, and it showed a generalized suspicion to exclusively positive digital representations.

Participants employed various strategies to bridge the gap between digital representation and material reality. Participant no.4 argued that no online information is trustworthy at all. She explained: "You can only be sure if you have the item or go to the place." Her words well sum up the main problem for social media marketing: no matter how cleverly digitally portrayed products are, at the end of the day people still give their own senses more credit than anything else.

Participant no. 8 described how he verifies the information: "If something I've seen and touched and I like it, then I'll buy it because it's me. It's my money." He explained that when faced with conflicting online information about a product, he would actively seek physical evidence: "If a person says that it's a bad perfume, for example, I'll easily ask in the office what the colleagues think about this perfume. Some people say no, and some say they have never heard of it. OK, then I just go to the shop and smell it."

Participant no. 7's long decision journey is a good example. Specifically, she found a hair curler from an ad, but she didn't buy it right away. Rather, she took about two months of thinking: "I also got some recommendations from friends about the product, so I said, yeah, I probably took about two months before finally buying it." In fact, before making a final decision and buying it as a Christmas present, she went to a store to check the product itself. Even participants who acknowledged being highly influenced by social media demonstrated this need for tangible verification of the products.

Participant no. 3 stated: "I'm always the type of person that prefers to buy in real life." I can get ideas from what I see online and then I'm like, OK, maybe I can check other brands, or I can check from this brand and if I can try in real life, I will go in real life." Participant no. 1, who described herself as easily influenced by visual marketing, noted that after seeing an advertisement for a new bar, she "immediately became their loyalty member" and visited in person to experience the space.

The importance of tangible experience also manifested in how participants evaluated brand credibility. Participant no. 6 explained: "How does the brand present itself, so how much work has been done behind creating the brand itself. If there is a very good Facebook page if they put an effort into creating a post to publish about the products and to explain what they offer." However, even in this case, the assessment was dependent on the actual physical verification: "I would want the physical shop so I can try the tester on me and see if it really matches."

This theme answers Research Questions 3 and 4 as it shows that the participants value real, physical proof higher than the digital ones when deciding what to purchase. Preferring

physical experience signals an advanced level of assessing the quality of the information which implies first-hand, verifiable evidence rather than the well-marketed, polished content.

4.5 Theme 3: The Duality of Algorithmic Targeting – Appreciation and Annoyance

Participants' comments reflected their complex, and sometimes contradictory emotions toward Facebook's algorithmic targeting of ads. This duality reflects the very ambivalence of modern digital life. This theme also touches Research Question 1, which concerns how users experience advertisement and how they contextualize it. Besides, it is in line with the S-O-R framework, where the very same algorithm stimulus may result in different internal states based on user interpretation.

Participant no. 10 provided the most detailed analysis of this phenomenon, describing her evolving understanding of how algorithmic targeting works. She first thought the popularity of ads was due to a collective consciousness: "Earlier I thought that maybe our minds are connected. You know when you are thinking about pizza, at that very moment you will start seeing it everywhere because we become selective towards food-related things." However, she later developed a more sophisticated understanding: "But then I realized that it's not only about my brain, but it's really also listening to the stuff that you are talking or you're even searching out of Facebook on Google, and somehow like 10 minutes later you see this advertisement on your Facebook or Instagram page." This realization brought a combination of gladness for the ad relevance and uneasiness about the level of digital surveillance.

Participant no. 4 showed discontent with the fact that most of the ads were irrelevant, she reckoned that "about 90% I don't like because they come without any reason with things that maybe you don't know". She even admitted that in the last 10% of the time, the ads might be helpful if only they were a perfect match for her needs. This contradictory aspect was evident when she narrated a story of a barefoot shoes ad that got her attention, simply because it mentioned the most crucial factor for her getting shoes in her very small size. The advertisement's relevance transformed it from an annoyance to a potentially useful resource. Participant no. 2 revealed extensive knowledge of the ways algorithms can track people's behavior and cater ads accordingly. He articulated: "Advertisements are almost always really clear in their message, because they take that from what I have been searching for. So, I do get it that there are some very specific types of things being targeted at me." He elaborated that his interest in sneakers and the planning of the holiday to the special destination came up in the way the ads were served in his feed. This awareness allowed him to interpret algorithmic targeting as a reflection of his own interests rather than an external imposition.

Participant no. 6 had a rather gloomy perspective on ads. For her, ads were basically unwanted interruptions that spoil the flow when you are scrolling. So, most of the time, she is annoyed at the mere sight of an advertisement since what she is doing is just scrolling and viewing the content, and then there is an advertisement and you have to wait until it finishes to continue watching what you were watching. She gave the example of game ads that mislead you with promised gameplay that doesn't even come close to the actual product to

illustrate her point about portrayals in ads that don't correspond to reality being especially annoying. Her reaction was to disengage, waiting for the interruption to end rather than engaging with the content.

Participant no.1 had the opposite view and was happy with the ads that were well targeted and in line with her interests. She explained how the algorithm "works so well for me" and admitted that if an ad that was not only relevant to her interests but also visually appealing, she was "100% going to click on it". Such a positive reaction to targeted ads by an algorithm indicates that people's opinion about a piece of technology is influenced not only by the technology itself but also by the desirability and relevance of the content delivered.

The above theme responds to Research Question 1 by demonstrating the varied and sometimes contradicting ways in which users are affected by advertisements on Facebook. The paradox of algorithmic targeting, at the same time, is admired for relevance and hated for being intrusive, shows a major struggle in the user experience which marketers must deal with.

4.6 Theme 4: The Social Dynamics of Consumption – Community, Pressure, and Authenticity

The interviews showed that watching videos on social media is not a solitary activity at all; it is a social practice lying at the very heart of community life, influenced by social pressure, and directed toward the desire for genuine connection. This is the theme that answers Research Question 3 about how eWOM leads to trust, social validation, and changes in risk perception, and that also correlates with the Theory of Planned Behavior's idea of subjective norms.

Participant no. 8's story showed clearly how community can change our perception. As he remembers, a friend's post about a gun brand was enough to totally change his mind from being against it to being for it: "I am loyal to another brand. But that video, when he sent it to me, tagged me, was a turning point for me. It touched even me." It was a kind of breaking down the mental barriers that had been built around the brand in the person's mind, so community influence in this way, can be acknowledged as powerful enough to even change brand loyalties.

The concept of social pressure emerged in several interviews, though participants expressed it differently. Participant no. 6 acknowledged feeling social pressure to try products that were widely discussed: "It happened many times, like for example the chocolate that I bought recently that I see a lot of influencers talking about this new product. I went out and I really feel the need to try and see for myself this hype. So, I indeed feel the social pressure not to be the one left out." Such a view mirrors the FOMO (fear of missing out) that gives rise to consumption, particularly when products are generating such a huge social buzz. Participant no. 4 also acknowledged the situation when social pressure leads to making a purchase decision and said "yes" when the interviewer asked whether she felt the pressure to buy the products that most people were talking about. She explained how she came to this conclusion: "If everybody likes it, it must have something that makes people buy." The way

she thinks here is like social proof, since the popularity of a product is seen as a sign that the product is good.

However, this social pressure was not universal. Participant no. 5 explicitly rejected social pressure as a motivating factor: "No, I don't see. No, no, no, no. And actually, I tend to avoid buying things just because they are popular." He pointed out that curiosity towards popular products does not necessarily mean buying one. For example, he might be tempted to try a famous drink just to find out its taste but would hardly let popularity direct his main purchase decisions.

The influence of web-based groups in enabling consumption was clearly reflected in the discussion with Participant no. 8. He stated that being part of his community is one of his "activities. Also, I'm the same with resellers and staff. I am just curious to see what people are selling." This kind of interaction with people's posts influenced his buying habits and became his reliable way of getting important details. In fact, he didn't just read posts; he was continuously involved by checking, commenting, and sharing which shows that the community's impact is through being actively engaged and not just being exposed to it. Participant no. 10 stressed the importance of the community in her consumption deciding process as well; she said that she belonged to activist communities where talking about products and services was quite common. The community setting influenced her buying habits and gave her a piece of reliable information that she trusted much more than commercial advertising.

In fact, this topic connects with Research Question 3 by illustrating how the major source of trust formation, the establishment of one's social status, and the key influence on risk perception come from peer recommendations and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Conventional marketing approaches usually ignore that the social side of consumption, e.g. community influence, social pressure, or the quest for an authentic connection, significantly impacts consumer behavior.

4.7 Theme 5: The Layered Decision Journey – From Exposure to Purchase

Another big theme to emerge from the data was that of the consumer decision journey itself. Far from being just a straightforward process with a simple input leading to output in terms of a purchase, the participants described the consumer journeys as very complex, multi-layered ones with several touchpoints, time for deliberation, and use of different information sources over a period. This theme answers Research Question 5 which is about how users compare different stimuli and reconcile them and is also related to the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework and the Consumer Decision Journey literature.

Participant no. 7's experience with the hair curler exemplified this complexity. An advertisement was how she first learnt about the product. However, she did not buy it right away. The whole experience lasted for almost two months and intertwined with many influences: "I also got a little push by my friends telling me how was, how easy it was to use and then I was like, yeah, yeah... Maybe it took me nearly two months to decide to purchase."

The decision-making process took a long time and relied heavily on research, consultations with friends, and a physical visit to the store where the purchase was a Christmas present. An advertisement was just the spark that triggered the idea, but the final decision was made after being exposed to several sources for a long time.

Participant no. 2 described a similarly layered process for a jacket purchase. He saw the advertisement "maybe 2-3 times." The repetition of the advertisement created familiarity and eventually prompted action. The last spark was a mixture of easy reach and advertisements: "They have different products and you have many buttons and for example you see a specific jacket or something and you just tap on it, and it directly opens the page with the item on the web. That is the accessibility of it. It is definitely helping." The last nudge was a sales promo, showing how several things together can change a purchase decision.

Participant no. 5 provided a detailed account of his current decision process, which involved multiple stages of investigation. He described how he "put it into my radar and I investigated. I tried to seek some YouTube honest reviews and asked ChatGPT about technical aspects to be considered that are maybe a bit far from my understanding. Now I am getting all that information and taking my final decision whether to buy it or not."

Participant no. 6 described how different types of content served different functions in her decision journey: "An advertisement or an influencer can make the product known to me because they post a lot of products and it's often appearing in my feed. So, I get to know products that I wouldn't know otherwise. It is the way the influencers show the product that especially attracts me. As for the review of a friend, I will definitely believe his experience. I think these different functions reflect that the participants were able to think about how different content types are used at different stages of customers' decision journeys.

Participant no. 4's decision journey for the pain relief product she purchased was similarly multi-layered. Firstly, she saw an advertisement with clear information that the product was "medically tested." She then checked reviews from other users to see the opinions of the customers of the product. The mix of scientific trustworthiness and word-of-mouth praise eventually became the deciding factor for her purchase. This story is a good example of how people combine various kinds of proof - expert and peer - to arrive at their final decisions.

4.8 The Mediating Role of Perceived Brand Credibility

A subject that was discussed in every interview was perceived brand credibility, and the way it is considered the main factor explaining the pathway from social media stimuli to purchase intention. Participants talked about clever ways to judge the trustworthiness of brands based on the interaction on Facebook. Participant no. 5 said that the mix of things matters: "The brand's reputation and my own experience or relationship with the brand." He said that even for new brands that don't have a reputation yet, how well they present themselves and how they interact with customers can help them gain trust.

Participant no. 6 elaborated on how she assessed brand credibility: "How the brand presents itself, so how much work has been done behind to create the brand itself. If there is a very

good Facebook page if they put an effort into creating a post to publish about the products and to explain what they offer. Also, I would see the comments and what the people have to say. I would generally want to see more positive reviews of course, but some negative would show me that actually the comments are true."

Participant no. 8 spoke about the role of brand authenticity and presentation in trusting a brand: "If it's a famous brand then I would trust, you know, it is a famous brand and most of the time I also look at the reviews. But if this is something you see for the first time, then you have to check the website, see if it is professional, and if the information is lucid."

Participant no.10 also mentioned that she may think whether the brand was "selling on very like niche stuff" and additionally whether she could find it in physical shops, and she was using the availability of the product in physical retail as a signal of credibility. Participant no.1 revealed that she would try a brand after researching components and reviews, thus providing the active cognitive processing involved in credibility assessment. This notion corresponds to the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953) that reckons trustworthiness and expertise as the two aspects of source credibility. Participants evaluated both dimensions in their assessment of brands, seeking evidence of honesty (through authentic engagement and transparent communication) and competence (through professional presentation and detailed product information).

4.9 Synthesis and Summary

The five themes identified in this analysis can be considered as answers to the research questions that guided this study:

- Research Question 1 (advertisements) was answered by Theme 3 (the duality of algorithmic targeting) which showed the participants' mixed feelings that they went from liking to being annoyed depending on the level of relevance and intrusiveness. Participants liked ads that were relevant to their needs, but, on the contrary, they felt a strong aversion towards ads that were either irrelevant or intrusive.
- Research Question 2 (influencer content) was addressed through Theme 1 (The Hierarchy of Trust), which revealed a divided landscape. Six participants placed influencers second in their trust hierarchy; three placed them last, and one placed them first. The difference came from how the participants saw influencers in terms of authenticity, expertise, and transparency.
- Research Question 3 (peer recommendations) has been addressed by Theme 1 and 4 as they showed that the main reasons for peer recommendations are the consumers' perceptions of the influencer's genuineness and the social aspects of consumption. Friends were the most trusted source for 9 of 10 participants since their opinions were regarded as honest and based on real experience.
- Research Question 4 (brand credibility) was answered with a cross-sector analysis in section 4.7 that revealed how interlocutors actively assess the trustworthiness of a brand by interaction with the brand content, community feedback, consistency of the message and physical verification.

- Research Question 5 (comparison and reconciliation of stimuli) was addressed through Themes 1 and 5, which revealed the complex trust hierarchies (friends first for nine participants, but with varying placements of influencers and advertisements) and the layered decision journey where multiple stimuli are integrated over time.

The results reveal that participants are lively and discerning consumers who use complex and effective strategies for judging social media content. They mainly give value to authenticity and direct experience over simple well-advertised products, they can stay conscious and at the same time hesitant when dealing with the contradictory nature of algorithmic targeting, and they decide jointly on more than one level, including varied sources of information. Such revelations give us a lot of clues about the mental and social mechanism behind consumer behavior in a social media context and will be linked to the theory and existing research in Chapter 5.

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the results from a thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with active Facebook users. The aim of this qualitative research was to find out how users experience, interpret and narrate their influence of social media ads, influencer-generated content, peer recommendations (eWOM), and perceived brand credibility on their purchase decisions. The analysis in Chapter 4 resulted in five themes, namely (1) The Hierarchy of Trust – A Divided Landscape; (2) The Primacy of Tangible Experience – Seeking Reality Beyond the Screen; (3) The Duality of Algorithmic Targeting – Appreciation and Annoyance; (4) The Social Dynamics of Consumption – Community, Pressure, and Authenticity; and (5) The Layered Decision Journey – From Exposure to Purchase.

In this chapter, these results are discussed against the background of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, which comprised The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953), and the Information Adoption Model (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). The discussion follows the sequence of research questions and considers how the findings add to theoretical knowledge, present the practical side to the marketers, and point out the areas for future research exploration.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings in Relation to Research Questions

The purpose of this section is to interpret the five themes in relation to the study's research questions and to situate the findings within the broader academic literature. Rather than reiterating participant statements, the discussion synthesizes the thematic patterns to show how Facebook users make sense of advertisements, influencer content, peer recommendations, and brand credibility within their purchase-related decision journeys. The analysis demonstrates that users do not evaluate these stimuli in isolation but instead engage in a dynamic, socially embedded process of meaning-making that both confirms and extends existing theoretical and empirical work.

5.2.1 Research Question 1: How do users experience advertisements on Facebook?

The findings reveal that advertisements occupy a paradoxical position in users' decision journeys: they are simultaneously ubiquitous and marginal. Participants admitted that advertising makes people aware of a product or a brand and only very few of them thought of advertising as a major factor making them choose a brand or product. Such ambivalence of the users could be understood by considering the dual aspect of Facebook advertising that was discussed in Theme 3 (The Duality of Algorithmic Targeting). Users liked the ads that were well targeted and convenient and even called them helpful reminders that sometimes could meet their needs. Yet, at the same time, they expressed their displeasure at the thought of

being watched by algorithms and argued that they felt poorly about such survey because it was too intrusive.

This tension aligns with Logan's (2014) conceptualization of advertising value, which emphasizes the interplay between informativeness, entertainment, and irritation. The findings also support the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which supports that consumers are skeptical when they recognize persuasive intent. Participants' tendency to scroll past ads unless they were "exactly relevant" illustrates this defensive processing. However, the present study extends this literature by showing that advertisements are not evaluated as discrete stimuli. Instead, they function as entry points into a broader interpretive process. Participants frequently described seeing an ad, becoming curious, and then immediately seeking validation from peers or influencers. This contextualized role- ads as triggers rather than determinants - has been underexplored in prior research, which often treats advertising as an independent variable rather than part of a multi-layered decision ecosystem.

Besides, the findings also provide more detail to the Consumer Decision Journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) by showing that advertisements mainly affect the consideration stage whereas the evaluation and decision stages are hardly influenced by ads unless they are reinforced by other sources. Ads by themselves did not help to establish trust or alleviate the perception of risk; rather, they motivated users to look for more information from more reliable sources. This knowledge helps us form a more holistic view of how ads function on Facebook.

5.2.2 Research Question 2: How do users understand and interact with influencer content?

Influencer content was found to be a layer of trust situated in between the levels of the trust hierarchy that was uncovered in Theme 1 (The Hierarchy of Trust). Study participants specifically noted that they trusted those influencers who seem genuine, down to earth, and open, thus confirming the results of studies by Sokolova and Kefi (2020) and De Veirman et al. (2017). It was believed that influencers are more credible than advertisements but still less influential than friends. This middle ground is a clear sign of the dual nature of influencer communication. Specifically, it is a mix of personal narrative and business motive, thereby producing a type of persuasiveness that is both social and strategic.

The findings enrich the existing literature because it proves that influencer persuasion is more conditional than uniform. Participants did not accept influencer recommendations at face value; instead, they used influencer content as a secondary interpretive resource, often cross-checking claims with peer opinions or personal experience. This behavior challenges the assumption - common in quantitative studies - that influencer effects can be measured independently of social context. The present study shows that influencer content is embedded within a broader network of meaning-making processes, and its influence depends on how users negotiate authenticity, sponsorship, and social identity.

Theme 4 (The Social Dynamics of Consumption) points out that participants judging influencers depended on more factors than just their expertise or physical attractiveness, which are the two main aspects of the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990). They also checked if the influencers' values and lifestyles seemed to be in line with their own ones. Influencers who looked too perfect or solely focused on their commercial side were looked at with doubt, on the other hand, those who showed their flaws or offered their personal stories were considered as credible. This research further develops the existing debate in the literature by pointing out the function of authenticity that is different and additional to the usual credibility aspects.

In addition, the study reveals that influencer content is very important in the evaluation phase of the consumer decision-making process, especially when people are looking for demonstrations, reviews, or experiential feedback. However, influencers were almost never the last decision-maker. Their impact was edited by peer approval, which underscores the fact that the power of influencers is only one layer of a complex interpretive process leading to behavior and not a single driver.

5.2.3 Research Question 3: How does eWOM contribute to trust, social validation, and risk perception?

Peer recommendations emerged as the most trusted and influential stimulus across participants, confirming the centrality of eWOM in digital decision-making. Theme 1 and Theme 4 together demonstrate that participants consistently deferred to peer input when making purchase decisions, often describing eWOM as the “final filter” or “deciding factor.” This finding strongly supports Cheung and Thadani’s (2012) argument that eWOM is perceived as more authentic and less biased than commercial messaging.

On the other hand, the current research advances the comprehension of the phenomenon by presenting the reasons for the supremacy of eWOM. Respondents indicated that the opinion of peers was a form of social endorsement, a strategy for lessening the risk perception, and a tool for making one's choices consistent with the norms of one's social groups. The results, in a sense, support Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) which argues that people are more affected by those whom they think belong to their in-group. Facebook's group features intensify this influence by forming micro-communities within which members share tips and experiences. Thus, the research makes a contribution to the field by showing that eWOM is not just a source of information but a social tool it is closely linked to the sense of community and the sharing of identity.

Furthermore, the findings show that eWOM plays a central role in both the evaluation and advocacy stages of the Consumer Decision Journey. Participants relied on reviews, comments, and group discussions to find out how good a product was, look at different options, and also figure out what problems might come up. When customers shared something good about the product the intention to buy was increased, but if the customers shared something bad the intention to buy was decreased and, in some cases, even the bad comments lead to the intention to buy more than the advertisement or influencer endorsement

did. This social aspect of word of mouth, in other words its ability to reduce the perception of risk, is an element that researchers focusing specifically on Facebook have almost completely ignored, considering that these studies generally put emphasis on texts like reviews or ratings, rather than on the social dynamics of group interaction.

5.2.4 Research Question 4: How do users assess brand credibility on Facebook?

In fact, brand credibility was one of the key reasons that influenced how participants interpreted all the stimuli. They judged credibility based on various things like consistency, transparency, peer feedback, and whether the online claims matched their offline experience. In a way, this finding is consistent with the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and the Information Adoption Model (Erkan & Evans, 2016), both of which highlight the role of trustworthiness and argument quality.

Yet, the research goes beyond these models and discloses that credibility is not a characteristic that one can be pinned down to, but rather a changing, community-produced experience. People were always discussing the credibility very closely in the varied stages of the conversation they would check the brand claims, see if the influencer endorsements matched, look at peer comments, and even bring out their own memories of the product to make a decision. The second Theme (Experience as the Most Important Factor) disclosed that, at the end of the day, a person's belief in the credibility of an item or service came down to the extent to which their ready-made pictures from the web were consistent with the actual performance of the product in their daily life. This, therefore, shows the very unstable nature of credibility in digital spaces and, at the same time, it opposes those models which regard credibility as an unchangeable fact.

Moreover, the findings show that credibility plays a decisive role in the integration of stimuli. When credibility was high, participants were more receptive to advertisements and influencer content; when credibility was low, even positive eWOM struggled to compensate. This dynamic mediating function has been underexplored in existing literature and represents a significant theoretical contribution of the study.

5.2.5 Research Question 5: How do users compare, prioritize, and reconcile different stimuli?

The findings show that users do not follow a linear path but engage in iterative loops between advertisements, influencer content, peer recommendations, and credibility cues. This supports Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) argument that modern decision journeys are dynamic and non-linear. Yet the present study contributes new insight by demonstrating that users actively prioritize stimuli based on a trust hierarchy: peer recommendations first, influencers second, and advertisements last.

This hierarchy has been suggested in prior research but rarely demonstrated qualitatively through user narratives. According to the research, users actually end up resolving both pushing and pulling marketing by taking eWOM as their final decision gate. When, for

instance, an influencer recommended a product, but the peer reviews indicated it negatively, the respondents unhesitatingly chose the side of the peers. This result also makes the case for the integrated models of social media influence even more powerful and at the same time, it goes against the very idea of studies that look at isolated stimuli.

Theme 5 (The Layered Decision Journey) describes how people make decisions in a loop. They first compare options, check the facts, and find out what the options mean to them. On their way to a decision, they keep jumping from one thing to another to make sure that everything makes sense and fits together. This back-and-forth way of working points out not only how much trust and other opinions influence decision-making but also the kind of marketing that should be used as it has to know how digital persuasion works and it is connected.

5.3 Theoretical Contribution

This research has helped deepen our knowledge of the effects of social media on consumer behavior.

Primarily, it has enriched the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953), by revealing that source credibility is not something static, on the contrary, it is always being shaped by user's engagement. Instead of just seeing the ones who make a certain impression on others, for example by their expertise and trustworthiness, viewers also considered the content's authenticity and richness. This means that credibility, in a way, comes as a result of source-receiver interaction, rather than being a mere, unchanging feature of the source.

Second, our findings help improve the Information Adoption Model (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). They show that information quality and source credibility are not independent factors but are connected in complicated ways. For example, Participant no. 2 thought that high source credibility (influencer expertise) was able to offset a lower information quality (superficial content) in certain cases. On the other hand, Participant no.10 believed that a low source credibility (influencer commercial motivation) could take precedence over high information quality (detailed product information).

Third, the results broaden the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) by disclosing the complex, multi-layered consumer decision journey over time that was indicated by the participants. They recounted lengthy decision-making processes during which various stimuli were received over time, "Organism" state (perceived brand credibility) being constantly refreshed with new information. This means that the S-O-R framework, usually used for one single stimulus-response situation, could also be used to describe the changes in the consumer decision-making that happens through several stages.

Fourth, the results help expand the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) by showing the mechanism of subjective norms in the social media environment. It was found that participants were influenced by social pressure from their close social circle as well as from the wider online community. The notion of social proof which refers to popularity being an indicator of quality, was identified as a major factor affecting subjective norms and therefore

TPB could be modified to include the impact of perceived popularity and community endorsement.

5.4 Practical Implications for Marketing Practitioners

The results of this study can be very helpful to marketers who want to use Facebook as their marketing channel. For instance, they should focus on peer recommendations and community engagement, because friends were considered the most reliable source by nine out of ten participants. Therefore, it is crucial for them to come up with ways to encourage and highlight positive electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). Some ways to achieve that would be to create content and encourage consumers to share it, offer rewards to customers who refer others, and even build online communities where customers can discuss their experiences. They trusted friends not only because they shared their opinions but also because their opinions were seen as unbiased. Hence, authentic, user-generated content is more powerful than well-crafted brand messages.

Considering the fragmented picture of influencer credibility, using influencers may not work for all markets. In that case, marketers must introduce influencer marketing in the most thoughtful way. They must understand in detail when influencer marketing can work and when it cannot. For example, for the product categories that demand a certain level of expertise (like sneaker or cosmetic brands), partnering with niche influencers who have and demonstrate real knowledge in the field can be more effective than collaborating with the well-known mega-influencers who do not possess the required expertise.

Thirdly, always be honest and authentic to help a brand gain credibility. Credibility of a brand was mostly judged by study participants based on the ways the brands promoted themselves on Facebook. Brands that not only disclosed their product details but also sincerely interacted with the customers and were transparent about their offer were regarded as more credible than others. The fact that participants considered both positive and negative feedback as signs of authenticity implies that rather than trying to highlight only positive content, brands should be open and transparent.

Fourthly, it is important to understand the dual nature of algorithmic profiling. On one hand, the respondents liked the advertorials that were in line with their personal interest; on the other hand, they strongly opposed the intrusive or somewhat out-of-context ads. Hence marketers ought to concentrate solely on bringing forward the really pertinent, top-notch content that is able to offer something extra to the Facebook user's experience. An excessive or incorrectly targeted promotion can lead to irritation and avoidance, making one's marketing campaigns less successful.

Fifth, marketers must be familiar with the multiple layers of the decision journey. Participants shared their average or extended decision-making, involving different touchpoints over time. Marketers, therefore, should consider a multi-touch attribution model, purchase decisions are hardly the result of a single exposure. Content strategies should be aimed at engaging consumers at various stages of decision-making process, from raising initial awareness (via

ads and influencer content) to giving product evaluation tools (via detailed product information and peer reviews) to making purchases (via smooth checkout experiences).

5.5 Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research. First, one could think about a longitudinal study that looks at the changes in the level of influence of social media as users not only get familiar with the platform but also as these platforms keep on updating their features and algorithms. The outcome of such a study may be that trust hierarchies can either remain the same or change, and that user's interaction patterns may also alter as they become more skeptic about purchasers of social media.

Secondly, by contacting a comparative study among platforms, researchers would be able to find out whether the trends discovered in this research exist in other social media platforms as well. The particular characteristics of Facebook - a well-established environment, a wide range of users, and a built-in market - may create a very specific situation for social media influence which is quite different from that of Instagram a more visual platform, or TikTok an ephemeral one.

Thirdly, looking at the product categories that are most important to influence trust will help identify if trust hierarchies are different depending on what type of products are being bought by consumers. The results of this study indicate that for these participants, the fact that the influencer was an expert played a bigger role in their decision making in a product category that they had a strong personal interest in. Further work could be done to test whether and how product category has an effect on the way that the different social media stimuli influence individuals.

Fourth, research into the relative effectiveness of various influencer marketing strategies could lead to the creation of a more practical guide for professionals. When study subjects not only identified a harmless influencer but also recognize a person who was "selling a dream," it is natural that authenticity and expertise are probably more critical than reach. New studies should aim at investigating how different features of an influencer (expertise, genuineness, suitability with the brand) influence consumer reactions.

The fifth kind of study could focus on perceived brand credibility as a mediator and test our conceptual framework with quantitative methods. However, compared to our qualitative study which unveils the depth of the story behind the mechanism of brand credibility assessment, quantitative research would be able to measure the strength of the mediating relationships in the S-O-R framework.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

The aim of this study was to find out how Facebook users reach and understand the effect of social media advertisements, influencer-generated content, peer recommendations, and perceived brand credibility on their purchase decisions. Discussions with ten participants were held and topics went deep in the area of trust hierarchies, decision layers, and how thoroughly social media content is mentally processed.

The conclusions of this research present a strong challenge to the simplistic theories of social media influence that presume effects are the same on all users. On the contrary, they disclose that the chain of persuasion depends on different personalities in their level of sceptic, experience, and perceived authenticity. Although friends are for a majority of users the most trusted source of information, nevertheless, the relative power of influencers and advertisement changes according to factors such as their expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity.

Marketing experts can use the results as a powerful reminder that the key elements of success are still authenticity, transparency, and real interaction. Given the fact that consumers nowadays are well educated in persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994), the best marketing strategies may be the ones that put authentic value, trustful communication and deep involvement before the mere attractive messaging and big audience.

The results highlight for the consumers the importance of being very careful with social media content. Besides, the participants in this inquiry did not simply passively absorb the marketing communications, rather they were active, critical consumers who assessed the credibility of the various sources, even looked for solid proof of the brand and took time to think of the pros and the cons before they made their purchase decisions. This indirectly points to the fact that digital literacy, which refers to the skill of critically evaluating the content of the internet, is perhaps not just a capability that should be taught but it might be also a habit that many consumers already have.

At the end, this study offers a significant input to the knowledge of the level of influence social media has on consumer behavior in a time and world where people are more connected than ever. Information is almost unlimited, and there are many attempts at commercially persuading people. This thesis through the exploration of user voices and mainly their experiences provide conclusions which can be used for further theoretical research as well as practical usage in the ever-changing area of social media marketing.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

PART 1: PRE-INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

A. Participant Information Sheet

(This document will be distributed to participants via email before scheduling the interview)

Title of Research: How Social Media Influence Consumer Buying Decisions: A Qualitative Study of Social Media Users.

Invitation Paragraph: This is an invitation to participate in a research study about how Facebook influences people's shopping decisions. This study is part of an MBA dissertation. Before you decide whether to participate, please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study? This study attempts to discover the influence of different types of content on Facebook, such as ads, posts by influencers, or recommendations by friends, on people's purchasing decisions. We would like to know about your personal experiences and views.

Why have I been invited? You have been invited because you are an active Facebook user. Your experiences will provide valuable insights for the purpose of this research.

What will happen if I take part? If you agree to be a participant:

- We will schedule a 45-60-minute video call when it is convenient for you.
- The interview will take place on Teams
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded
- You will be asked open-ended questions related to your Facebook use and buying experiences. All responses will be confidential and anonymous

Are there any risks or benefits?

- **Risks:** Minimal. Questions focus on everyday consumer experiences. You may skip any question or withdraw at any time.
- **Benefits:** Your participation will contribute to academic understanding of social media marketing. You will receive a summary of findings upon completion.

How will my information be used?

- Audio recordings will be transcribed and then deleted.
- Transcripts will be anonymized (your name replaced with a code).
- Findings may be published in academic formats, but no individual will be identifiable.

What are my rights?

- Participation is completely voluntary.

- You may request to see your transcript.
- You may ask questions at any time.

B. Consent Form (To be completed before interview begins)

Statement of Consent: I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

I consent to participate in this study

I consent to audio recording of the interview

Participant Name (Printed): _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Name: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

C. Demographic Information (Brief, at start of interview)

(To be asked verbally after consent is obtained)

Age Group: 18-25 / 26-35 / 36-45 / 46-55 / 56+

Gender: Male / Female / Non-binary / Prefer not to say

Occupation: _____

How long have you been using Facebook? _____

On average, how much time do you spend on Facebook daily? _____

PART 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Section 1: Opening and Warm-up (5-7 minutes)

Objective: Build a relationship and understand the Facebook usage of the participant.

Main Question: "How is your typical day or week on Facebook?"

Probes:

- What kinds of content usually appear in your feed?
- Are you interacting with this content through liking, commenting or sharing?
- Do you follow any specific pages?

Section 2: Exploring Social Media Marketing Stimuli (25-30 minutes)

Objective: Explore how the participant is experiencing different marketing content.

A. Social Media Advertising

Main Question: "Think about any ads that you came across on Facebook, can you recall and describe one of them?"

Probes:

- What feature of the advertisement attracted your attention? (Images, messages, product)
- How did you react when you saw it? (Interested, annoyed, curious)
- Did the ad lead you to take any action? (Click, search, save)
- How do you normally distinguish between an ad and a normal post?
- In your own words, what makes an ad on Facebook 'good' or 'bad'?

B. Influencer-Generated Content

Main Question: "Do you follow any content creators on Facebook? If so, tell me about one whose recommendations you pay attention to."

Probes:

- What is it about this person that makes you trust their opinion?
- Can you recall a specific time when their post influenced your thoughts about a product?
- How do you feel when you see '#ad' or '#sponsored' on their posts?
- What's the difference, to you, between an influencer's recommendation and a regular advertisement?
- Have you ever purchased something because an influencer recommended it? Can you walk me through that experience?

C. Peer Recommendations (eWOM)

Main Question: "Now thinking about posts from friends or people in groups you belong to—how do recommendations from people you know affect your shopping decisions?"

Probes:

- Can you give me a recent example of a friend's post that influenced your thinking about a product?
- Why do you think a friend's opinion can be more or less influential than an influencer's or an advertisement?
- How do you decide which friends' opinions to trust when it comes to products?
- Have you ever sought recommendations from a Facebook group before a purchase?
- How do you feel about sharing your purchase experiences on Facebook?

Section 3: Probing Internal Processes (10-12 minutes)

Objective: Explore cognitive and social psychological processes.

Main Question: "When you see different posts about a brand or product—an ad, an influencer post, and a friend's review—how do you sort through all that information in your mind?"

Probes:

- What do you believe is the determinant factor that makes you trust or not trust information on Facebook?
- How do you decide if a brand is credible or trustworthy based on what you see on Facebook?
- Does seeing that a lot of people are talking about a product make you more likely to consider buying that product? Why?
- Have you ever experienced social pressure to buy something because others were talking about it?
- How do you manage to keep both sides of the story equally (e.g., friend loves it, influencer hates it)?

Section 4: Decision Journey and Purchase Intention (8-10 minutes)

Objective: Obtain an understanding of how decision-making is influenced by a combination of different stimuli.

Main Question: "If you think about the last time you seriously thought about buying something after seeing it on Facebook, could you explain the process to me?"

Probes:

- Which type of content first brought this product to your attention?
- What other Facebook content did you seek out or encounter about it?
- How did different types of posts (ad vs. friend review vs. influencer) affect your thinking at different stages?
- What was the last factor that pushed you to make a purchase decision (or not)?
- Among advertisements, influencers, and friends, which one influences your buying decision the most and which one the least?

Section 5: Closing

Closing Statement: "Thank you for your time and your openness in sharing your experiences with me. Your experiences are important for this study."