

**THE AUTHENTICITY OF MICRO-INFLUENCERS
PRODUCING PAID CONTENT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA
IN VIET NAM**

**Jyväskylä University School
of Business and Economics**

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ABSTRACT

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>Recently, influencer marketing is not only welcomed by brands, but the topic also attracts scholars' attention. With the rise of e-commerce, social media and influencer marketing in Viet Nam, many brands can easily reach out to micro-influencer for collaborations to promote products and drive sales on e-commerce and social media platforms. Therefore, the micro-influencers' authenticity management should be deepened to help both micro-influencers and brands decide suitable strategies in their partnerships.</p> <p>This study aims to understand the authenticity of micro-influencers producing paid content for social media in Viet Nam. The focus is on three views: 1) Understanding key features of content marketing in Viet Nam and how they have supported and propelled the development of micro-influencer in Viet Nam; 2) Expanding the current definitions and knowledge of micro-influencers and investigating the authenticity of Vietnamese micro-influencers and its beneficial effects; 3) The management of collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam to increase authenticity.</p> <p>The study used qualitative research and abductive reasoning to collect data. By using purposive sampling, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The research employed thematic analysis to analyze the gathered data.</p> <p>The findings of this study showed that changes in content marketing and social media enable changes in micro-influencer marketing. The study results indicated that authenticity is a complex concept with various elements and as micro-influencers' authenticity have various benefits, to increase their authenticity, micro-influencers should 1) Be true and consistent; 2) Ensure a good brand fit; 3) Be transparent about the collaborations. Moreover, the results implied that brands should carefully check the brand fit to select micro-influencers, give them the creative freedom, transparently disclose the partnerships, and build long-term partnerships instead of on-off ones to make the collaborations more authentic. The findings also suggested possible trends in micro-influencer marketing in Viet Nam.</p> <p>Overall, this study has broadened the current understanding of the subject and offered various managerial implications and directions for further research.</p>	
Keywords: social media; content marketing; social media; micro-influencer marketing; authenticity; brand strategy,	
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Topic

Marketing is one of the always-changing fields that has been dramatically influenced by the development of digital technology and the Internet. The Internet has fostered several changes in how consumers behave, make decisions as well as unfolded new marketing opportunities and ways to communicate, for example, social media, content marketing, influencer marketing especially micro-influencer marketing, etc. which are also the key concepts of this thesis.

Thanks to this upward trend, social media has been blooming during the last decade with the emergence of new social media platforms. According to *We Are Social* (2022), a Vietnamese person spends 2 hours 28 minutes per day on average on social media platforms and messaging applications. As expected, the Internet and social media have become crucial sources of information for consumers. Wang & Kim (2017) suggested that social media is changing consumers from passively receiving information into actively creating and sharing information with each other. In recent days, consumers spend time on the Internet and social media to search for information about products and services, purchase them online, and generate word of mouth/electronic word of mouth (WOM/eWOM) and reviews by sharing their experiences with others online (Stephen, 2016). Those behaviors can create positive impacts on marketing outcomes, for example, new customer acquisition and sales (Appel et al., 2019).

Social media cannot operate well without content and the rise of social media has also propelled the emergence of new content types. Content marketing plays an active role in enabling customers to interact with the brand such as sharing content or participating in the topic that they are interested in and contributing to the co-creation of a unique experience process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). By using useful, valuable, and relevant content, businesses can attract the right customers, drive engagement, satisfy them as well as establish long-term relationships with them (HubSpot, 2022).

The idea of using celebrities to endorse have been employed for a long time as it can bring several benefits to the brand. Spry et al. (2009) indicated that celebrity endorsement has positive impacts on advertising, brand attitude, and consumers' purchase intention, and with the rise of the Internet and social media, individual social media users can create their own content, draw attention, and gradually nurture intimate relationships with their followers. Khamis et al. (2017) suggested that ordinary people can gain fame and brands follow the trend that ordinary people can be potential social media influencers. Based on the number of followers, social media influencers can be classified as celebrity and mega-influencers with over 1 million followers, macro-influencers with 100,000 to 1 million followers, micro-influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, nano-influencers with under 10,000 followers. Besides the size of following, influencer

types can be varied based on their expertise, style, activities, branding and focus, and especially how consumers perceive them (Campbell & Farrell, 2020.)

Consumers consider micro-influencers as endorsers with uniqueness, authenticity, credibility, and accessibility when promoting a product and service. As they frequently disclose their personal lives and opinions on social media, those micro-influencers have a high level of accessibility and authenticity. In contrast with traditional celebrities who keep their personal lives private, those social media influencers allow their followers to interact with them by publicly sharing details about their daily lives, resulting in a sense of shared experience among their followers (Silalahi, 2021.)

The dramatic changes in Vietnamese consumers' shopping behaviors and the digital transformation have significantly contributed to the rapid growth of Viet Nam's e-commerce industry. Report about Viet Nam's e-commerce by Viet Nam E-commerce Association (VECOM) showed that Viet Nam's e-commerce grew by around 15%, reaching a value of approximately 13.2 billion USD by 2020. Viet Nam's e-commerce growth is projected to flourish throughout the period of 2021-2025. Particularly, the country's e-commerce scale is expected to reach 52 billion USD by 2025. In the same report, it is affirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic has also driven the changes in consumers' online shopping behaviors that selling products and services on social media and e-commerce platforms has become a rising trend in Viet Nam (VECOM, 2021.) Report about Viet Nam's digital landscape pointed out that 58.2% of Vietnamese Internet users from 16 to 64 years old purchased a product or service online each week. Additionally, they use social media, search engines, consumer reviews, brand and product blogs, video sites, vlogs, micro-blogs, etc. to figure out the products and online brands (We Are Social, 2022.) Moreover, while only 33% of Vietnamese consumers believe in advertising, 90% of Vietnamese consumers believe recommendations from influencers (Anymind, 2022). With the rise of e-commerce, social media and influencer marketing, many brands can easily reach out to micro-influencers for collaborations to promote products and drive sales on e-commerce and social media platforms.

One of the key reasons why brands would like to work with micro-influencer is that their followers consider them to be more authentic than mega-influencers (Park et al., 2021). Authenticity is an important factor in influencer marketing that can affect the purchase attention of consumers (Bakker, 2018; Poyry et al., 2019). When sharing the products or brands on their content, they can influence the opinions of their followers. For that reason, Poyry et al. (2019) have argued that it is crucial to find the authentic matches between micro-influencers and brands. If the followers question the authenticity of the micro-influencers, it can harm the reputation and image of both micro-influencers and the brands.

1.2 Research Justification

Content marketing is an intriguing topic that has received a great amount of interest from both academic researchers and marketers. Going through the previous research, there proved that social media and content marketing are interconnected (e.g. Ahmad et al., 2016; Schreiner et al., 2019; etc.). Ahmad et al. (2016) indicated that social media marketing cannot succeed without content as brands can create and share content with their audiences and an effective and meaningful piece of content is essential for a social media marketing campaign to increase the social media engagement. Schreiner et al. (2019) have suggested that social media facilitates content creation, which helps brands connect and communicate with social media users and better deepen the relationships with their current customers as well as develop new ones with prospective customers.

A significant number of studies have been dedicated to social media and content marketing, especially focusing on the consumer engagement behaviors (e.g. Schreiner et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2019); however, the literature on this topic is still limited in several ways. For instance, a lot of the prior studies mainly focused on concepts or provided a constrained conceptualization of social media engagement behaviors (e.g., Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Dolan et al., 2019). Thus, many academic researchers just focused on an area of content marketing, for example, entertaining or informational content (e.g., Dolan et al., 2019) or emphasized on testing the engagement behaviors on a specific social media platform like Instagram or Facebook (e.g., Dolan et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2019) instead of content across platforms or content on new platforms like TikTok. Not to mention, each market or country favors different types of platforms and contents as well as has different digital behaviors, so Shahbaznezhad et al. (2020) have suggested that it is essential for both researchers and practitioners to understand them and have different strategies.

In recent years, influencer marketing is not only welcomed by brands, but the topic also attracts scholars' attention. However, despite the expanding relevance and importance of influencer marketing, research has only focused limitedly on elaborating its basic concepts. For instance, Enke and Borchers (2019) developed a conceptual framework of social media influencer communication and used the findings in the study to build on definitions of social media influencers and strategic influencer communication. Meanwhile, Vrontis et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of influencer marketing revolving the social media settings to identify relevant themes and major concepts.

Literature on the authenticity of influencers is also scarce. There are only a few noteworthy studies revolving around this topic that have been carried out. In particular, Audrezet et al. (2018), Bakker (2018), and Poyry et al. (2019) have highlighted the importance of authenticity in social media influencer collaboration and how influencers' authenticity affects the purchase intention of consumers. However, Audrezet et al. (2018) have also suggested that because of the rapid development of influencer marketing, the social media influencers' authenticity management should be deepened as it can help not only influencers

but also brands decide suitable strategies in their partnerships. Furthermore, those studies have only paid limited attention to the authenticity of influencers in general, instead of testing the authenticity of different types of influencers, for example, micro-influencers, or their authenticity in a specific market, such as Viet Nam. In addition, in the context of Viet Nam where e-commerce is rapidly developing and brands can easily reach out to micro-influencers for collaborations, a proper study on this topic will not only be helpful for researchers but also marketers and micro-influencers themselves to manage strategic and effective partnerships.

In general, as the use of content marketing and micro-influencers in Viet Nam is expanding, it is of paramount importance to improve the theoretical foundation by studying more about the specificities of content marketing in Viet Nam and gaining more knowledge of characteristics of micro-influencers and their authenticity in Viet Nam. Although being aware that content marketing and social media are interconnected, this thesis will focus on content marketing in Viet Nam in terms of social media context, instead of analyzing all aspects of content marketing and social media in Viet Nam. Moreover, through better comprehension of content marketing, micro-influencers and their authenticity, the partnerships between brands and micro-influencers might reach their fullest potential. Figure 1 summarizes key topic areas that this thesis will focus on.



Figure 1. *Key topic areas*

1.3 Research Objectives and Research Questions

Based on the identified research gap and the interest in the topic, the purpose of this research is to make contributions to the field of content marketing and micro-influencer management in Vietnamese context by studying the nature of content marketing in Viet Nam and how micro-influencers in Viet Nam manage their authenticity when they produce paid content. One of the main focuses of this thesis is to understand key features of content marketing in Viet Nam in the context of social media and how they have supported and propelled the development of micro-influencer in Viet Nam. In addition, another focus of the research is to expand the current definitions and knowledge of micro-influencers and investigate the authenticity of micro-influencers in Viet Nam and its beneficial effects as well as the management of collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam to maintain and increase authenticity, as the further research on the subject has been stated necessary in previous publications (Audrezet et al., 2018). The qualitative methodology is carried out for this explanatory research.

Therefore, to clarify the key objectives of this study, the research questions (RQ) have been illustrated in Figure 2.

The primary research questions have been set as follows:

RQ 1: *What is the nature of content marketing in Viet Nam in the context of social media?*

RQ 2: *How do Vietnamese micro-influencers maintain their authentic voice when they produce paid content?*

In addition to the primary research questions, a secondary research question has been developed to further study the management of collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam:

RQ 3: *How do brands manage the collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam to maintain and increase authenticity?*

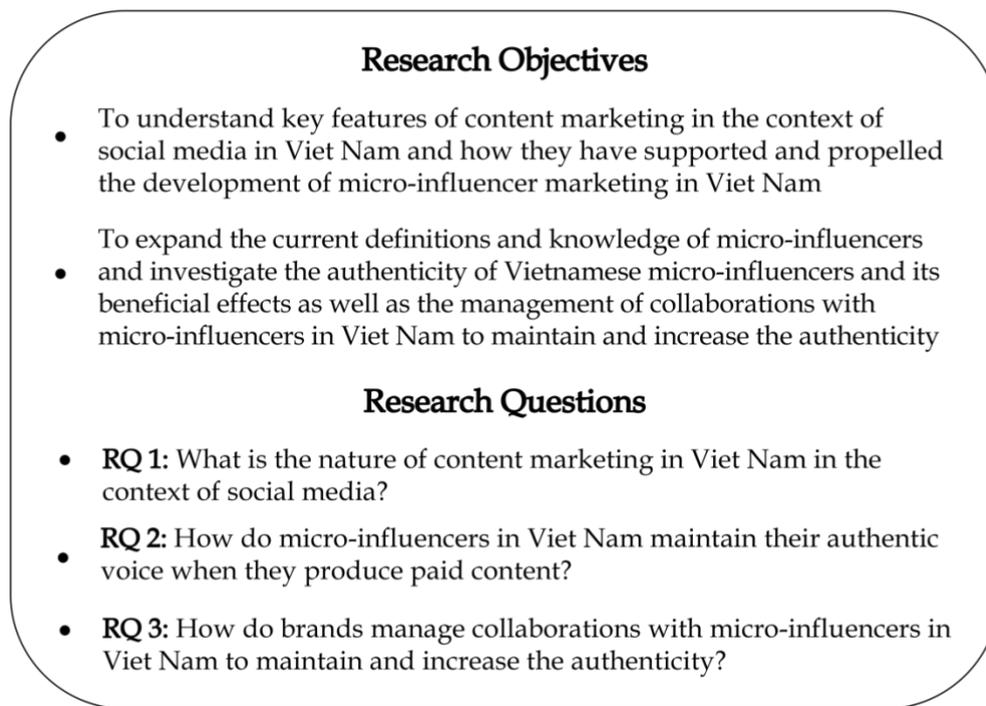


Figure 2. *Research objectives and questions*

1.4 Research Structure

This study is formed by six key chapters (Figure 3). The first chapter introduces the background of the study, research justification, research objectives and research questions as well as explains the structure of the thesis.

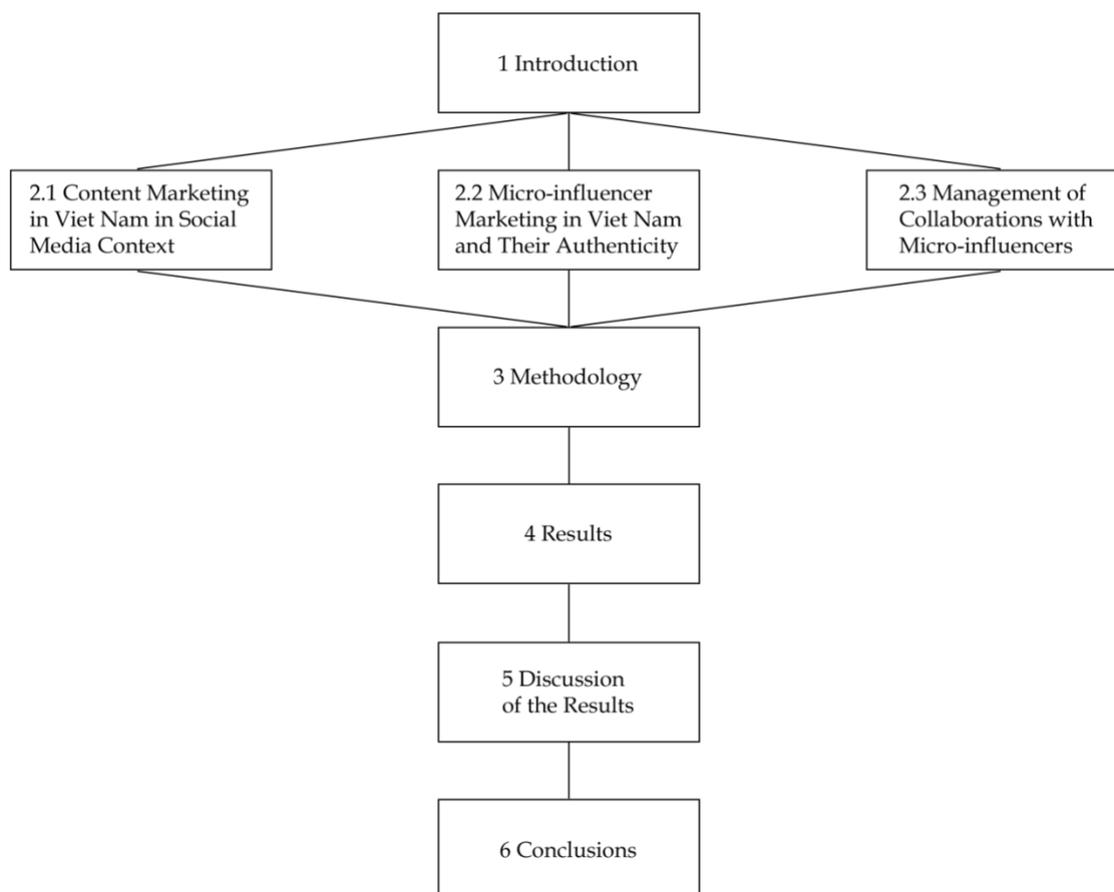


Figure 3. *Research structure*

Followingly, in the second chapter, the theoretical framework of the study is examined. To find the relevant knowledge about the selected major topics, the current literature on content marketing, micro-influencers, authenticity, and brand management are extensively researched. To better understand the authenticity of micro-influencers, related journals on consumer psychology are also carefully examined.

Then, the third chapter thoroughly explains about the research methodology and data collecting procedures. The chapter also provides the background information of the sample group who took part in the study.

Next, the empirical results of the study are covered in the fourth chapter. Besides using quotes and concluding paragraphs to present the study findings, the findings under the major themes are illustrated based on the reviewed literature and major concepts.

Followingly, the fifth chapter discussed, examined, and analyzed the study findings by relating them to the theoretical framework. Using the chosen analysis methodologies, the theoretical and empirical results are reframed into an explanatory synthesis.

In the final chapter, after comparing the study findings to the theoretical framework, the sixth chapter attempts to summarize and provide comprehensive responses to the primary and secondary questions of this thesis in the theoretical

contributions. Moreover, the sixth chapter also draws conclusions on the managerial contributions, tests the quality and trustworthiness of the study, states the research limitations as well as suggests the recommendations for future research.

Specifically, beyond utilizing the Word spelling and grammar checking, no AI-based software were used in conduct this pro-graduation thesis.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section examines prior research and relevant concepts on content marketing, micro-influencers and authenticity. The literature presents the framework on which interview topics are constructed and the analysis referring back to the theories will also be discussed in this section. In this section, the scope of the research and related terms are also introduced. The theoretical framework is divided into three parts.

Firstly, the background of content marketing in Viet Nam is explained. Although being aware that content marketing and social media are interconnected, this thesis will focus on content marketing in Viet Nam in terms of social media context, instead of analyzing all aspects of content marketing and social media in Viet Nam.

Secondly, these concepts will better guide readers on the second section, where the concepts of micro-influencers, authenticity and beneficial effects of authenticity are examined. All of these concepts are crucial when brands take into account choosing and collaborating with micro-influencers.

Thirdly, the theoretical considerations of micro-influencer management are discussed, with a strong emphasis on micro-influencers' authenticity management that can be a vital part of the marketing strategy suggested by Audrezet et al. (2018).

2.1 Content Marketing in Viet Nam in Social Media Context

2.1.1 Definition of Content Marketing

Although content marketing has been prominent worldwide, this concept is not new and has actually been around for a long time. John Deere's Furrow Magazine was the first to produce a piece of content marketing by training farmers on new technological advances and ways to run more profitable businesses instead of directly selling the company's products. Therefore, it is suggested that the goal of content creation is to increase consumers' interest for the brand and foster the long-lasting relationships with them rather than just to immediately benefiting from it (Pulizzi, 2012.)

The definition of content marketing is varied in different dimensions. One of the first definitions of content marketing was offered by Pulizzi & Barrett (2009) that content marketing is to create and distribute informative and/or attractive pieces of information in the variations of formats in order to acquire and/or keep customers. Followingly, Rose & Pulizzi (2011) stated that content marketing is a marketing strategy centering around the production of valuable experience that can enrich communities, establish the leading position for the brand, and help customers figure out products or services that match their interest. Pulizzi (2014) defined content marketing as a process of developing and disseminating

valuable and compelling content to lure, gain, and engage with a precisely defined and well-understood group of audiences. Other authors (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Vollero & Palazzo, 2015; Wang et al., 2017; CMI, 2022) proposed variations giving similar definitions with slightly different emphases. Table 1 summarizes the different definitions of content marketing.

Table 1. *Summary of different definitions of content marketing*

Author	Description	Focused activity	Nature of content	Goal
Pulizzi & Barrett (2009)	Content marketing refers to creating and distributing educational and/or compelling information in a variety of formats to attract and/or maintain customers.	To create To distribute	Educational Compelling	Profitable customer relationships
Rose and Pulizzi (2011)	Content marketing can be understood as a strategy revolving around creating valuable, engaging, and shareable information and experiences which are beneficial for the community, helpful for consumers to discover the product or service on their own as well as able to make the brand to be a pioneer compared to their competitors.	To create To share	Valuable Engaging Shareable	Customer value creation; Positioning; Brand differentiation and preference
Pulizzi (2014)	Content marketing refers to a marketing and business process centering on the	To create To distribute	High-quality Appealing	Profitable customer actions

	creation and distribution of high-quality, valuable and appealing content with the goal of attracting, acquiring, and engaging the targeted groups of consumers, which enables them to have profitable actions.			
Holliman & Rowley (2014)	Content marketing is to create, distribute, and share relevant, appealing, and timely content which holds the ability to engage consumers at the right of stage in their purchasing process and persuade them to take profitable actions.	To create To distribute To share	Relevant Compelling Timely	Profitable customer engagement and actions
Vollero & Palazzo, 2015	Content marketing is an integrated marketing communication strategy focusing on producing and sharing high-quality and relevant content that helps the brand to reach a spearheading position, engage with customers, build trusted relationships with	To create To share	Relevant High-quality	Positioning; Customer engagement; Trusted relationships with customers; Profitable customer actions

	them, and drive profitable actions.			
Wang et al. (2017)	Content marketing is considered as a marketing tactic focusing on developing, distributing, and sharing relevant, useful, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the right stage in their purchasing process, encourage profitable actions, and building relationships with them.	To develop To distribute To share	Relevant Useful Compelling Timely	Customer engagement; Profitable customer actions; Customer relationships
CMI (2022)	Content marketing refers to a strategic marketing approach revolving around the creation and distribution consistent, valuable, and timely information to draw and keep attention of the targeted customers and encourage them to take profitable actions.	To create To distribute	Valuable Relevant Consistent	Profitable customer actions; Customer relationships

Although the goals and nature of content can be slightly different, the key activities of content marketing are mostly identical in all definitions. This thesis adopts the definition of content marketing in line with these descriptions in Table 1 that content marketing is a marketing strategy of creating, distributing, and sharing valuable, helpful, compelling, relevant, and timely content for targeted customer with the goal to engage, develop and maintain trusted relationships with them for profitable actions and outcomes.

Holliman & Rowley (2014) pointed out two key characters of content marketing. Firstly, content marketing made a transformation from selling culture

to helping customers (Jefferson & Tanton, 2013; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Wang et al., 2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). To strengthen this point, content marketing was compared with other methods of marketing and communication, such as advertising. The most notable difference between content marketing and advertising is the goals. While content marketing is aiming at recruiting, developing and maintaining the long-lasting relationships, engagement, and trust with customers, advertising is directly aiming for sales. To elaborate, it is explained that although content marketing aims for sales in the long run, in doing so the first thing to do is building and maintaining the engagement and trust of customers (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019.) Secondly, content marketing requires the understanding of the responsibility of the publishers which needs the careful identification of target audiences and understanding of content that is most suitable for them. For that reason, it is important for brands to differentiate with other competitors by telling their own stories to targeted audiences (Holliman & Rowley, 2014.)

Many authors (e.g. Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015) indicated that the objectives of content marketing are remarkably similar to the objectives of social media marketing as they are both based on the creation and dissemination of digital content. Rose & Pullizzi (2011) stated six main objectives of content marketing including 1) increasing and strengthening brand awareness; 2) generating and nurturing leads 3) increasing customer conversion; 4) improving customer service; 5) upselling; 6) increasing passionate subscribers.

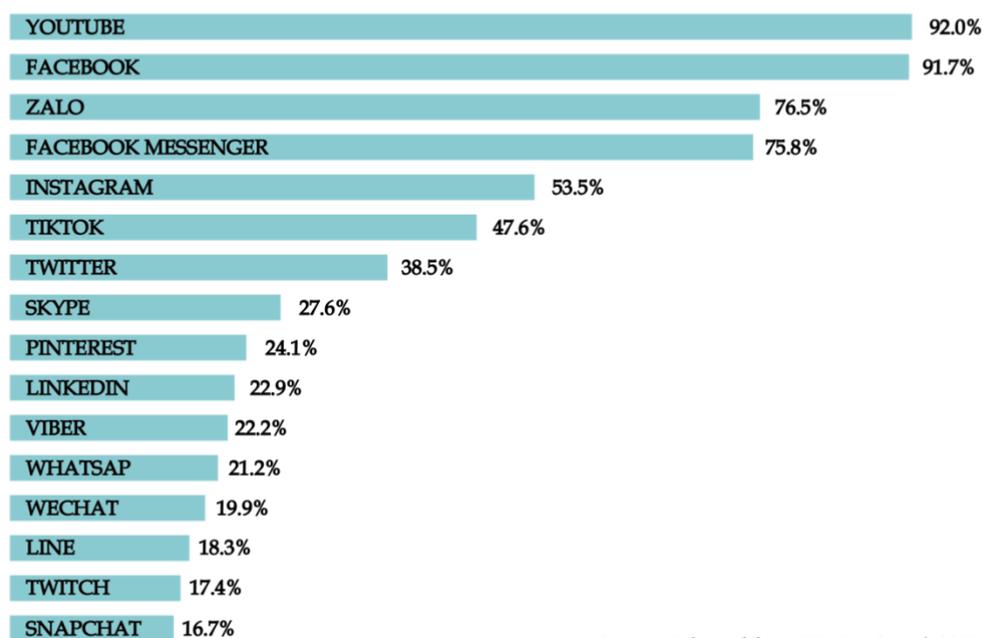
Although content marketing can be distributed in traditional formats and channels, the digital transformation has enabled the changes in content marketing formats and channels into digital ones (Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015; Vollero & Palazzo, 2015). Jarvinen & Taiminen (2015) stated popular shorter forms of digital content including photos, videos, infographics, animations, blog posts, social media posts and some longer forms of digital content namely articles, webinars, e-books, or podcasts.

2.1.2 Content Marketing in Viet Nam

Besides similar objectives, Jarvinen & Taiminen (2015) indicated that content marketing utilizes the social media environments that content can be distributed and shared through a collection of social media platforms and channels. The report about Viet Nam's digital landscape conducted in 2022 shows that social media platforms are the most popular sources of information for online brand research that it takes up to 62.6% of Vietnamese Internet users from 16-64 years old using this type of platforms for researching brands and products online. It is also stated that a Vietnamese citizen spends 2 hours and 28 minutes on social media on average (We Are Social, 2022.) Figure 4 and Figure 5 below show the changes in the top five social media platforms in Viet Nam in 2021 and 2022:

MOST USED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN VIET NAM - 2021

Percentage of the Internet users aged 16-64 that has used each platform each month

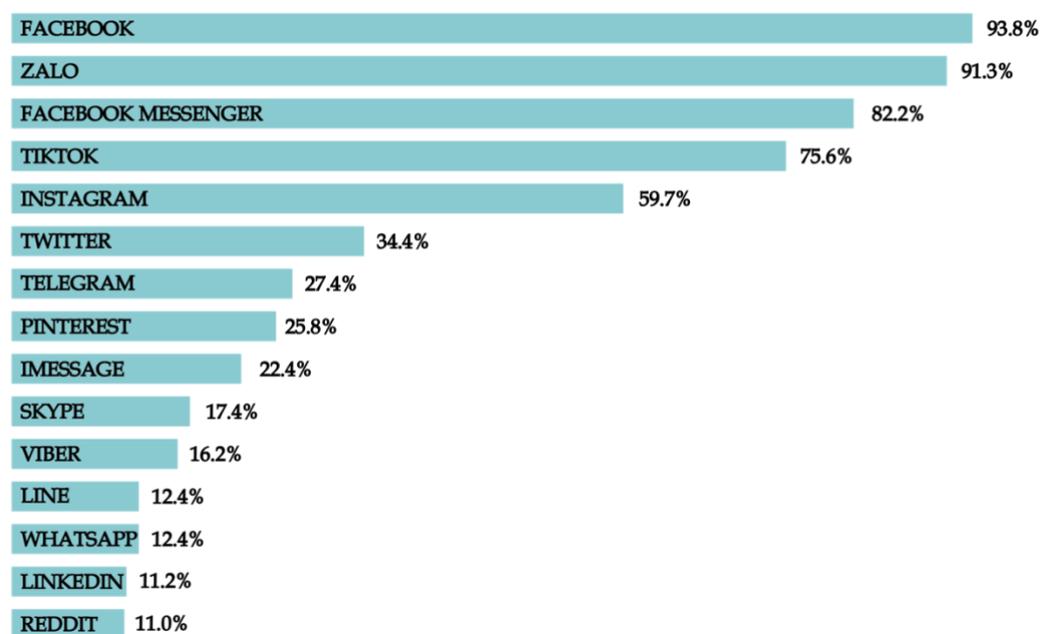


Source: Adapted from We Are Social, 2021, p.47

Figure 4. Most used social media platforms in Viet Nam in 2021 (Adapted from We Are Social, 2021, p.47)

MOST USED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN VIET NAM - 2022

Percentage of the Internet users aged 16-64 that has used each platform each month



Source: Adapted from We Are Social, 2022, p.53

Figure 5. Most used social media platforms in Viet Nam in 2022 (Adapted from We Are Social, 2022, p.53)

As shown in the Figure 4 and Figure 5 above, Facebook has replaced YouTube to be the most prominent social media platform in Viet Nam. In addition, it can be clearly seen that TikTok has been flourishing to be the fourth most frequent-used social media platform in 2022 which is evidenced by from 47.6% in 2021 to 75.6% in 2022 of Vietnamese Internet users from 16-64 years old have used TikTok each month.

2.2 Micro-influencer Marketing in Viet Nam and Their Authenticity

2.2.1 Micro-influencer Marketing

In recent years, influencer marketing has been a rising trend and proved to be effective to many brands. According to Bakker (2018), influencer marketing can be considered as a new way of digital WOM. Scott (2015) defined influencer marketing as a marketing strategy using influential individuals or key opinion leaders to increase brand awareness and drive purchasing behaviors of consumers.

There are five forces contributing to the rise of influencer marketing. Firstly, consumers have switched from offline to digital media. Secondly, in the Internet environment, consumers respond to advertising differently and they tend to be more goal-directed which makes them less receptive to overt advertising. In general, this has created more challenges for digital advertising and encouraged the employment of subtler, less obvious, and more authentic marketing approaches. Thirdly, consumers spend a significant amount of time on social media platforms. In contrast to traditional media, social media platforms enable their users to compete to attract followers by creating content and testing followers' reactions, which leads to the birth of talent that is both incredibly fascinating and frequently seen as more authentic than content created by brands. Fourthly, the use of social media has extended the phases of consideration and evaluation in the customer purchasing process, which requires briefer but more frequent exposure to content about brands and products. Finally, the Internet has facilitated the simpler formation of groups of consumers with mutual interests, enabling the development of influencers who are appealing to those groups of audiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020.)

Influencers are individuals who share content on social media platforms in return for compensation, whether monetary or non-monetary (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). In sponsorship, brands can send free products or money in exchange for the endorsements of their products or services on influencers' social media platforms. Depending on the agreements between brands and influencers, the types of endorsements vary from single mention to multiple mentions on social media or long-term collaborations in different campaigns and projects (Luoma-aho et al., 2019.) Lou and Yuan (2019) gave a more detailed definition about influencers that influencers are content creators who have expertise in a

specific area, garner a number of captive audiences, and hold marketing values to brands by creating and sharing worthwhile content on social media platforms. One of the most intriguing and dynamic aspects of influencers is the diverse spectrum of characteristics that influencers can not only be categorized by number of followers, but also their branding, concentration, engagement rates, monetary requirements for partnerships, and their expertise. All of these differences have broadened the scope of influencers, from nano-influencers to celebrity influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020.) Table 2 describes six types of influencers based on the size of following and their key characteristics.

Table 2. *Types of influencers (Adapted from Huttula, 2022, p.7)*

Type of influencer	Number of followers	Key characteristics
Celebrity influencer	Mass media coverage	Fame is outside of social media Distant from fans
Mega-influencer	> 1 million	Large reach
Macro/Meso-influencer	100,000 to 1 million	Large reach Higher engagement than mega-influencers
Micro-influencer	10,000 to 100,000	High-quality content High engagement with audiences Higher authenticity and intimacy than macro-influencers
Nano-influencer	< 10,000	Direct reach The strongest engagement rate
Virtual influencer	0 to > 1 million	Always online

Micro-influencers are proved to be more effective and persuasive than mega-influencers (Park et al., 2021). The scale and scope of micro-influencers are lower than celebrity influencers, mega-influencers and macro-influencers; however, they are still lucrative enough to gain reputation and earn a living as influencers. The collaboration between micro-influencers and brands is more flexible and diverse, and the majority of their earnings is from affiliate programs and partnerships with different brands. Their followers are often between 10,000 to 100,000 followers, more locally targeted and micro-influencers have high engagement with their audiences. Micro-influencers know how to utilize different functions and formats on social media platforms, especially the video formats (e.g. review videos on TikTok, Instagram Story, etc.), to engage with their audiences and increase their accessibility and authenticity. By this way, they can highly affect their followers' purchasing decisions and drive sales for brands as a large number of their followers consider that their suggestions are more

genuine than celebrity influencers, mega-influencers, and macro-influencers. Not only because of the more affordable booking fees compared to celebrity influencers, mega-influencers, and macro-influencers, their high level of authenticity, trust, and engagement with followers is accounted for why more and more marketers choose to collaborate with micro-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020.)

2.2.2 Micro-influencer Marketing in Viet Nam

Micro-influencers account for the largest proportion among other types and dominate the sponsored collaborations in all countries in Asia. Specifically, 35.65% of Vietnamese influencers are micro-influencers. In Viet Nam, brands use them mostly for awareness-driven purposes rather than performance-driven purposes. Moreover, in Viet Nam, the top three categories that brands invest in micro-influencer marketing are food and drinks, family and education, fashion and beauty (Anymind, 2022.)

The most popular four platforms to run micro-influencer marketing campaigns in Viet Nam are namely Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. While Facebook is the most favorable platform for micro-influencer marketing in Viet Nam, TikTok is the only platform that has largest mentions by influencers and have the highest engagement rate between micro-influencers and their audiences among other platforms. Although Facebook has accounted for 79.1% of influencer marketing campaigns in Viet Nam, Vietnamese marketers have gravitated towards integrating multi-platforms while running influencer marketing campaigns (Anymind, 2022.) Table 3 compares the engagement rate of micro-influencers with engagement rates of nano-influencers and macro-influencers on the top four platforms in Viet Nam.

Table 3. Average engagement rates of 4,000 randomly chosen nano-influencers, micro-influencers, and macro-influencers on four social media platforms in Viet Nam (Adapted from Anymind, 2022, p.26)

	Nano-influencers (1K - 10K followers)	Micro-influencers (10K - 100K followers)	Macro-influencers (100K - 1M followers)
Facebook	8.59%	1.48%	1.03%
Instagram	4.79%	3.08%	1.92%
YouTube	7.29%	1.34%	0.44%
TikTok	15.60%	9.59%	4.11%

As shown in Table 3, it is noted that nano-influencers have the highest engagement rates in all four social media platforms, the engagement rate of micro-influencers is ranked second, and macro-influencers are the ones have the lowest engagement rate.

2.2.3 The Authenticity of Micro-influencer

The high level of authenticity is one of the key features explaining why more and more marketers and brands would like to work with micro-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Although authenticity is commonly described as being real, true, or genuine (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Napoli et al., 2014), a myriad of marketing scholars considered it as a concept with multilayered and sophisticated meanings (Spiggle et al., 2012; Poyry et al., 2019). Table 4 demonstrated how the concept of authenticity is differently defined in various marketing and communication contexts.

Table 4. Summary of different definitions of authenticity in different marketing and communication contexts

Author	Description	Nature of Authenticity	Context
Modella (2010)	Authenticity refers to sincerity, truthfulness, genuineness, uniqueness, or originality.	Sincere True Genuine Unique Original	Public Relations & Communication
Morhart et al. (2015)	Authenticity is considered as staying true, genuine to oneself and delivering meaningful values to consumers whether it is a brand or a human brand.	True Genuine Meaningful	Branding; Influencer Marketing
Moulard et al. (2015)	Celebrity authenticity is the belief that a celebrity behaves in accordance with their true selves.	True	Influencer Marketing
Duffy (2017)	Authenticity of influencers refers to their realness, originality, uniqueness, and visibility.	Real Original Unique Visual	Influencer Marketing
Becker et al. (2019)	Authenticity in advertising refers to staying real, true, or genuine in content creation and advertising execution which contributes to the advertising effectiveness.	Real True Genuine	Advertising

Lee (2020)	Authenticity of communication refers to being real and true and consists three components including authenticity of source, authenticity of message, and authenticity of interaction.	Real True	Public Relations & Communication
Lee & Eastin (2021)	Visibility, uniqueness, sincerity, expertise, and transparent endorsement made up the authenticity of influencers.	Visual Unique Sincere Expert Transparent	Influencer Marketing
Balaban & Szambolics (2022)	Authenticity can refer to trustworthiness, originality, sincerity, accuracy and spontaneity. Content production is a vital element to reflect the authenticity of influencers. The message's authenticity is determined by its consistent communication style, visibility, creativity, transparent endorsement, and spontaneity.	Trustworthy Original Sincere Accurate Spontaneous Consistent Visual Creative Transparent	Public Relations & Communication Influencer Marketing

In line with these definitions from Table 4, this study refers authenticity to the realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, originality, uniqueness of a brand or human brand that can deliver meaningful values to consumers or audiences and authenticity can be divided into three sub-categories including authenticity of source, authenticity of message, and authenticity of interaction. Although there are overlapping concepts with credibility, authenticity is distinct from credibility because of its realness and genuineness; while credibility revolves around the concepts of expertise and trustworthiness. Moreover, while credibility is a very narrow concept that its functions are purely sharing and persuading information, authenticity incorporates various aspects of interactive media, for example, portraying genuineness and realness and building close engagement with the audiences. For example, micro-influencers can express themselves in novel ways on social media, interact and build close relationships with their followers (Lee, 2020.)

Authenticity by creating and sharing content that matches with micro-influencers' true selves and values is a crucial factor that makes them succeed (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Kapitan et al., 2021). Moreover, authenticity is also considered as a vital component to determine the

effectiveness of paid endorsements (Kaptian & Silvera, 2016). Audrezet et al. (2018) pointed out that remaining authentic in endorsement can have multiple benefits (whether non-commercial or commercial). Firstly, by creating and sharing paid content that matches with their true personality, value, and style, micro-influencers can drive behavioral outcomes, for example, expressing opinions beliefs about the products, increasing intention to look for the sponsored products, driving willingness to pay, spreading eWOM, etc. In addition to this, a behavior is considered to be more authentic when it comes from internal reasons and motivations rather than external pressures and forces - that is when micro-influencers present their genuine self. Furthermore, comparing to celebrities who have teams to portray them to the public, micro-influencers mostly work on their own, from visual and style direction to content creation on social media to portray their true selves, which can positively bring along behavioral outcomes (Kapitan et al., 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022.) Secondly, authenticity can help micro-influencers establish intimate and long-term relationships with their followers. Social media platform affordance and features create opportunities to build such close relationships by frequent updates, interactions, and engagement with their followers such as reposting, commenting, liking, sharing on their posts, replying to their comments, direct messaging, etc. By doing so, micro-influencers can gain trust from their followers that whenever they share their content (whether unpaid or paid), their followers will consider them to be mostly authentic and genuine (Lou, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022.) Thirdly, authenticity can increase the persuasiveness and effectiveness of messages via transparent partnership and paid content (Poyry et al., 2019; Balaban & Szambolics, 2021). Finally, staying authentic during the partnerships between micro-influencers and brands can help brands drive traffic for their platforms, improve brand awareness, and ultimately increase purchase intentions, boost sales leads and conversion rates (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Poyry et al., 2019).

2.3 Management of Collaborations with Micro-influencers

Balancing an authentic voice with brand strategies in sponsored endorsements contributes to the success of micro-influencers. At the start of micro-influencers' career, it might be easy to be authentic; however, when they rise to stardom, they can face various challenges in managing their authenticity (Balaban & Szambolics, 2021.)

Firstly, the lack of ethics in sponsored endorsements can have negative effects on the authenticity of micro-influencers (Wellman et al., 2020). Endorsers' behaviors can be viewed as more authentic when it comes from their internal desires, such as liking or disliking a product or service, instead of external forces, such as receiving compensation from brands to promote a product or service. When viewing the sponsored content produced by endorsers, consumers can

develop assumptions and opinions about the endorsers' belief in the product or service. If they give up their authenticity and integrity and only promote the product or service solely for personal purposes, such as monetary gain, instead of expressing their true thoughts and feelings towards the product or service, they can be seen as dishonest, inauthentic and insincere. As a result, it can decrease their effectiveness, consumers' trust, attitude towards brand or product, and purchase intention (Kapitan et al., 2021.) In addition to this, Luoma-aho et al. (2019) also pointed out that over positivity or negativity in endorsers' sponsored content can damage its authenticity. Secondly, non-transparent paid endorsements can harm the authenticity of endorsers (Audrezet et al., 2018). In fact, Wellman et al. (2020) stated in their study that most consumers find it difficult to distinguish between unpaid and paid content. When the endorsers do not clearly disclose the partnerships, it can make their followers feel they are being cheated, which ultimately results in the loss of authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018). Thirdly, the mismatch between micro-influencers and brands can also be harmful to the authenticity. When the endorsers promote a brand or product that does not align with their style, image, and values, it can make their followers react negatively to the sponsored content (Poyry et al., 2019.) Bakker (2018) suggested that ensuring a good fit between the brands and endorsers should start from the selection process and both qualitative and quantitative indicators should be taken to evaluate the selection. Moreover, even if the brand or product matches their style, identity and values, they should be mindful about the number of sponsored endorsements as their followers might question the reasons behind those sponsored endorsements (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Kapitan et al. (2021) also stated that there would be situations that brands require to have control over endorsers' creative production in the sponsorship contracts which can make not only endorsers unable to show their uniqueness and true selves but also brands to be considered unworthy in consumers' eyes. Fourthly, micro-influencers can lose their authenticity if they lose interactions with their followers. For instance, once the endorsers gain more popularity, they might neglect nurturing tight-knit relationships with their communities by reposting, liking or commenting to their followers, etc., which will make it hard for their followers to stay up-to-date with them. Consequently, this will decrease the engagement and effectiveness when they post sponsored content (Lou, 2021; Balaban & Szabolics, 2022.) Finally, it is proposed that long-term partnerships between brands and endorsers instead of one-time collaborations are perceived as more authentic since they can boost the brand image. (Enke and Borchers, 2019).

Besides those above-mentioned tensions, not only micro-influencers but also other types of influencers are facing specific challenges in Viet Nam that can make them lose their authenticity in commercial opportunities. To increase the transparency of sponsored content, a myriad of governments and social media platforms have enforced regulations or laws requiring endorsers to clearly disclose the sponsorship in their content, for example, by including #ad or #sponsored (ASA, 2019). However, according to Viet Nam's Law on Advertising (Viet Nam Government, 2013), there is no regulation on labeling sponsored content, which makes it even more confusing for Vietnamese consumers to

differentiate between sponsored and unsponsored content. Moreover, the changes in consumers' behaviors together with the exponential development of social media and e-commerce in Viet Nam, have facilitated the growth of influencers in Viet Nam as well as increased the number of collaborations between influencers and brands in affiliate programs and campaigns (VECOM, 2021; We Are Social, 2022; Anymind, 2022). Realizing the potential of the industry that influencers can make a lucrative career if they have enough following, various influencers sacrificed their authenticity, ethics and integrity to use immoral methods to garner followers, for example, faking or mimicking contents from popular and authentic accounts (Dumas & Stough, 2022). According to Kim & Han (2020), fraudulent influencers can buy engagement bots that produce likes and comments automatically to gain fake engagement and followers. In fact, YouNet Group (2019, as cited in Brands Viet Nam, 2019) found that 98% of influencers in Viet Nam have unqualified profiles with inactive or fake followers. Consequently, it will be challenging for brands to identify whether the influencer is organic or not and to consider the actual type of the influencers (whether nano-, micro- or macro-influencer).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In chapter 3, methodological considerations taken in this study are demonstrated. Figure 6 describes the methodological process of this research. The methodological considerations were taken in this study to reach the research goals and questions.

Firstly, this chapter gives demonstrations about ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods of this research. Secondly, the chapter demonstrates how qualitative research is discussed in this study. Thirdly, the purposive sampling is explained about the selection of interviewees. Fourthly, the ways on how data is collected in this research is presented accordingly. Fifthly, the chapter also describes how data is analyzed. Finally, the results and conclusions for the research are discussed in the following chapters.

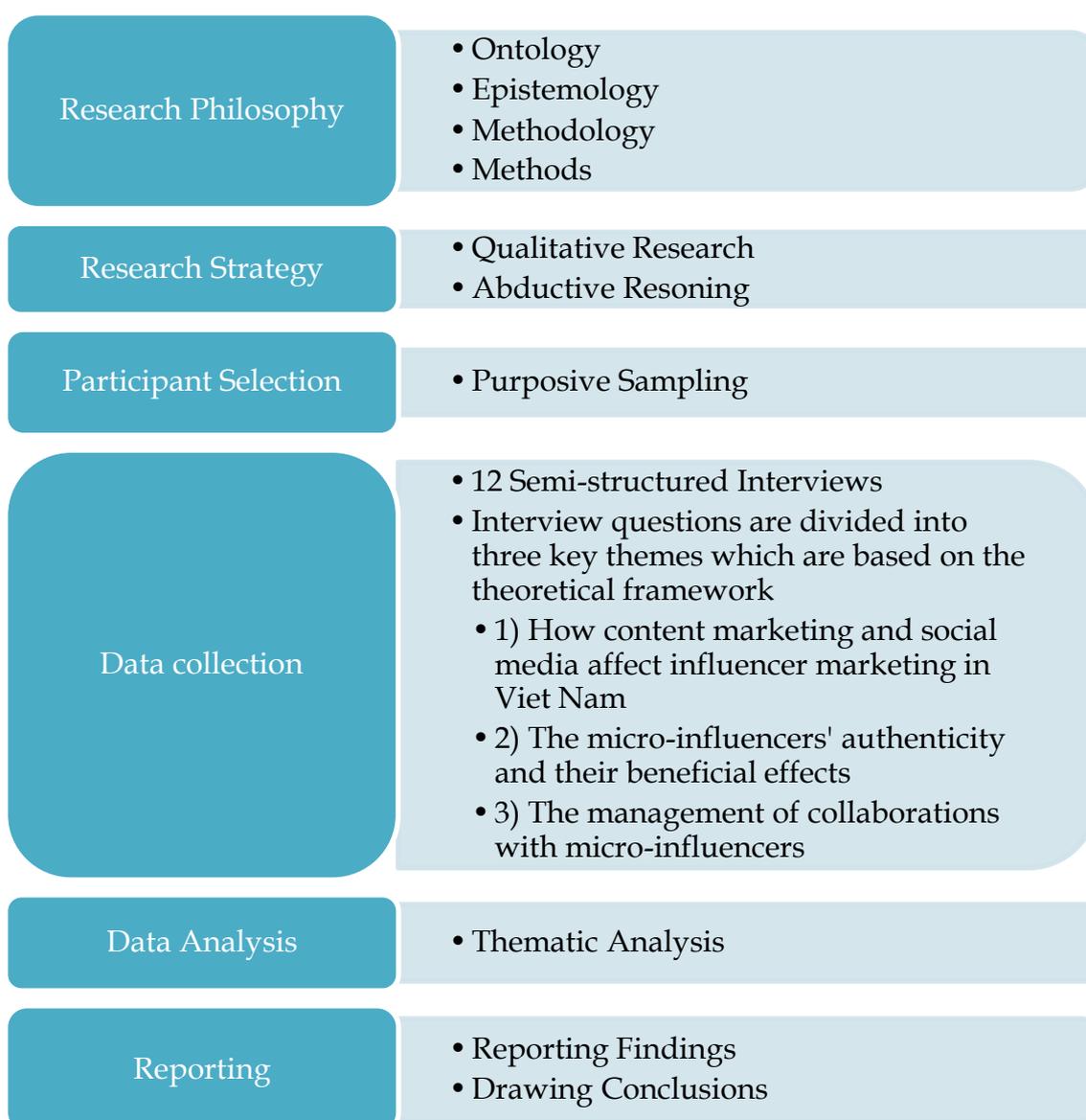


Figure 6. *Methodological process of the research*

3.1 Research Philosophy

The essence of research is to produce new knowledge. The key components of the research process include ontology, epistemology, methodology, methods, and sources (Grix, 2002). Figure 7 shows how those components are interconnected in the research process.

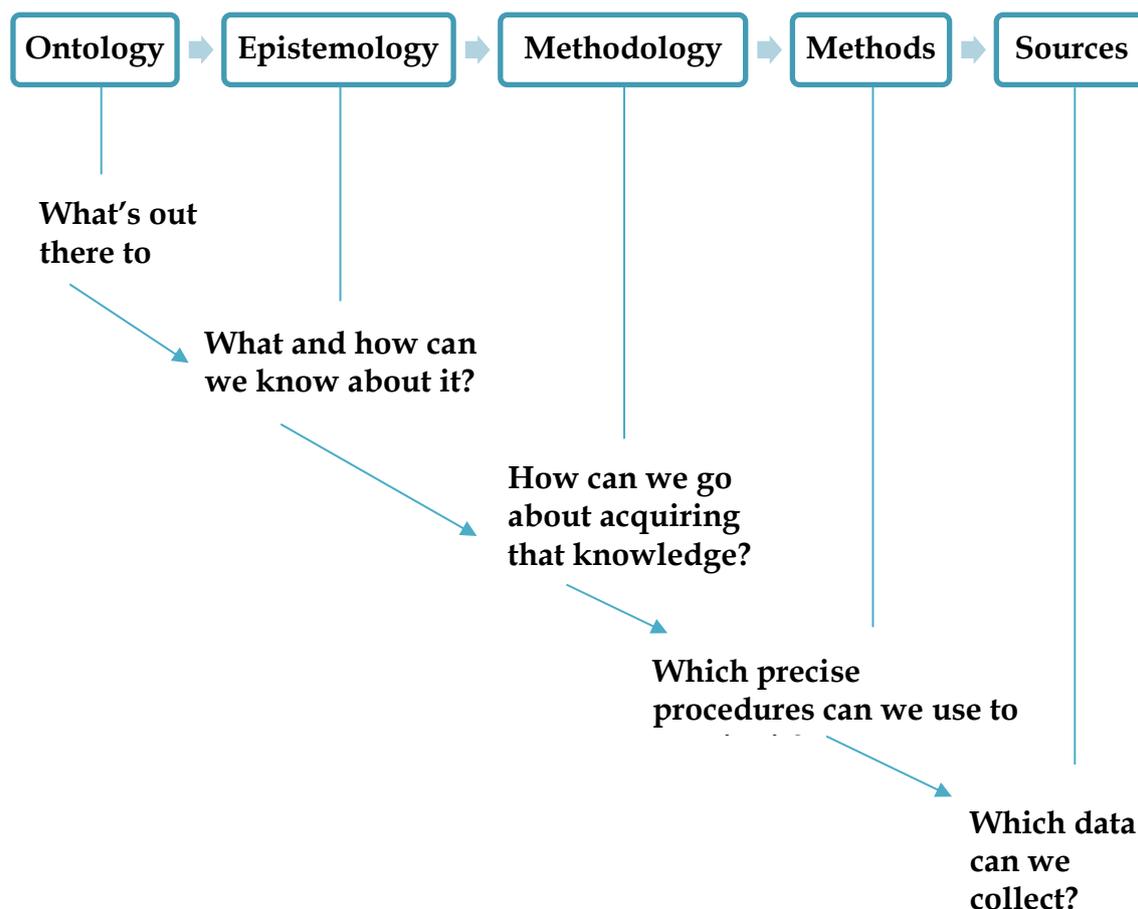


Figure 7. *The interrelationship between the building blocks of research (Adapted from Grix, 2002, p.180)*

Ontology refers to understanding the nature of reality. Two distinct positions, objectivism and constructivism, explain the importance of ontological assumptions. While objectivism considers the social world as independent external factors to social actors, constructivism considers reality as socially constructed entities that can be created and understood by different individuals (Bell et al., 2019.) Constructivism refers to answer the question 'how' – and this research is concerned how social media and content marketing have propelled the development of influencer marketing in Viet Nam, how micro-influencers in Viet Nam maintain an authentic voice while producing paid content, and how brands manage micro-influencers in Viet Nam.

Epistemology concerns the link between the researcher and the studied phenomenon and what can be known about the studied phenomenon. There are two types of philosophical approaches to science: objectivist and subjectivist. As this research is constructive, its epistemology is naturally subjectivist that the research findings are made by the researcher, who creates, adapts and interprets the reality by his or her own (Bell et al., 2019.) Ontological and epistemological assumptions shape the researcher' choices of research methodology and methods. Methodology and methods sound very similar and confusing; however, they are extremely distinct. Methodology revolves around the logic of scientific research, specifically, studying the potentialities and limitations of specific techniques or procedures in order to produce knowledge. In other words, methodology is about how research is conducted, how researchers discover findings, and how knowledge is produced. Meanwhile, methods can be simply understood as procedures or techniques employed to collect and interpret data. The choice of methods for a research should be intricately tied to the research questions and the sources to collect data, as shown in Figure 7 (Grix, 2002.)

Research paradigms can be described as a collection of disciplines or guidelines for researchers about the nature of phenomenon, how to study it, and how to interpret the findings. Different research paradigms result in different research orientations and decisions including the selection of methodologies and methods. As a result, research paradigms will explain how meanings are generated from the collected data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Bell et al., 2019.) Bell et al. (2019) also highlighted the concept of research paradigms on how philosophical assumptions influence the formation of either a qualitative or a quantitative research strategy.

3.2 Research Strategy

In the above-mentioned section, it is indicated that different philosophical assumptions affect the formation of either a qualitative or quantitative strategy which will provide different orientations for scholars (Bell et al., 2019).

As this study is exploratory in nature, qualitative research is suitable to address the research questions. Qualitative research is frequently employed to illustrate, comprehend, and interpret experiences and meanings of a particular phenomenon. Hence, qualitative research concentrates on a relatively small number of participants, however, with a meticulous analysis. Since qualitative research allows researchers to collect rich and sophisticated data, that data can be utilized to investigate the studied phenomenon comprehensively in its own term or environment for more in-depth understanding. Qualitative research is considered as valid when the examined phenomenon is complicated and aims at addressing the question 'how' (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Fossey et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2019.)

There are some common criticisms raised among qualitative research. One popular criticism of qualitative research is its subjectivism as the findings are

made by researchers who create, adapt, and interpret the phenomenon on their own. However, in natural sciences, there are situations requiring researchers to respect differences between the people and the phenomenon in order to draw in-depth meanings of the social actions. Another common problem in qualitative research can be having poor generalization as the sample size in qualitative research is relatively small. However, qualitative research puts an emphasis on comprehending the phenomenon in its own term or context rather than the statistical generalization. To put it differently, what matters in assessing generalization is the quality of theoretical conclusions obtained from the qualitative data (Bell et al, 2019.)

To address the research questions, qualitative research is chosen for this study as the most suitable research strategy. Firstly, the goals of this thesis and qualitative research are in parallel which both attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon. Moreover, this study and qualitative research both put an emphasis on the importance of context and acknowledge that the context and the phenomenon can be interconnected. Not to mention, both show interest in a phenomenon that lacks prior research: the authenticity of micro-influencers is still very new, much less the authenticity of micro-influencers in Viet Nam which requires further investigation. Also, this thesis and qualitative research both attempt to address the question 'how'. To be specific, this research is concerned how social media and content marketing have propelled the development of influencer marketing in Viet Nam, how micro-influencers in Viet Nam maintain an authentic voice while producing paid content, and how brands manage the collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam. Last but not least, the nature and purposes of qualitative research align with the ontology and epistemology of this thesis, which are constructivism and subjectivism respectively (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Fossey et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2019.)

Theory development can be approached either in an inductive or deductive manner. While the process of deduction revolves around testing a hypothesis or theory to gain findings, the process of induction begins with observations to develop a theory as a result at the end of the research process. The deductive reasoning is frequently employed in quantitative research and the inductive reasoning is often associated with qualitative research (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Bell et al., 2019.)

In reality, many researchers combine both deductive and inductive reasoning. In recent years, abductive reasoning has gained more popularity in research. Abductive approach is the mix of deductive and inductive approaches. Abductive reasoning refers to the development of new theories based on a guiding theoretical framework which helps establish the empirical environment and data analysis. One of the advantages of the abductive approach is the growth for existing theories as researchers can conduct research based on prior observations or findings and have the opportunity to be surprised by the data (Bell et al., 2019.)

This research employs abductive reasoning. The theoretical framework for this research roots from the prior research in content marketing, micro-influencer

marketing, authenticity and brand management. As these topics are always changing, abductive reasoning is considered as the most appropriate. The abductive approach is evident throughout this thesis, in the interview questions to gather data, development for the theoretical framework from the empirical findings as well as the research methods, which will be explained in more details in the following sections.

3.3 Participant Selection

Purposive sampling is considered as a crucial sampling method in qualitative research and is recommended to achieve the goals of qualitative research. Purposive sampling is known as a non-probability sampling method where participants are intentionally chosen to stay relevant with research questions for insightful and useful data collection. In other words, researchers do not sample participants randomly, but carefully select the participants after assessing how useful and insightful the information will be before starting to collect it. To guarantee the variety and quality of the sample results, researchers frequently set specific criteria or characteristics which are relevant with the research questions for data collection. Moreover, as qualitative research aims at gathering valuable and insightful data, the quality of the sample is more valuable than its size (Bell et al., 2019.)

This study uses the purposive sampling method to select participants. To better understand content marketing in the context of social media in Viet Nam, micro-influencers in Viet Nam and the effects of their authenticity, as well as the management of micro-influencers in Viet Nam. The criteria set for the selection of participants are described as below:

- 1) All selected participants have knowledge or work in the field of influencer marketing, especially micro-influencer marketing
- 2) Participants were chosen from both business and academic backgrounds, including micro-influencers, marketing specialists/managers who use micro-influencer marketing, and researchers working in micro-influencer marketing field with the aim to gather useful and valuable insights from diverse perspectives
- 3) No selection of participants based on gender, socio-economic or other criteria was considered

Details about sampling and participants' information will be described in the next section.

3.4 Data Collection

Based on the methodological process (Figure 7), the next step is to collect and analyze data. To collect the data for this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed into written form. After those steps, the data was analyzed and coded with different themes based on the theoretical framework and findings extracted from the data.

Before collecting data, it is of paramount importance to establish a detailed and systematic guide for researchers in regards to types of information needed to collect, sources of information, methods to conduct collection, etc. (Johnston et al., 1999; Bell et al., 2019) In qualitative research, there are numerous methods to collect data including ethnography or participant observation, interviews, focus groups, language-based approaches, and documents as sources of data (Bell et al., 2019). Despite the fact that each method has its own advantages, interviews were chosen as the most suitable method for this thesis for two reasons. The first reason is that it is impossible to receive and investigate thoughts, feelings, or motives of participants without asking them questions (Patton, 2002). Consequently, interviews are considered as a useful method to unfold the deeper meanings and the intentions of the interviewees which can provide in-depth and valuable findings for the studied phenomenon in its own context (Hopf, 2004). Another reason is that specific interview questions precisely aiming to address the research questions will help researchers improve the targeting (Yin, 2003).

Types of interviews can be categorized based on the quality and flexibility of the interview questions, varying from structured interviews to more open types, such as semi-structured interviews and the unstructured interviews. The more flexible the interview is, the more it allows researchers to obtain insights from the interviewees' perspectives and discover what is significant to them (Bell et al., 2019).

Semi-structured interview method is recommended if researchers have a clear focus and specific research goals in mind from the beginning rather than a vague idea of the research topic. As the topic areas, research justifications, research questions, and methodological process have been very clear from the start of this study, this study employed semi-structured interviews to gather data. In semi-structured interviews, researchers still have the flexibility to ask further questions for deeper and more significant answers from the interviewees while still being guided by a list of pre-formulated questions. In addition, researchers also have the freedom to not follow the same order or ask exactly as described in the interview protocol. During the interview, to gather rich and insightful information, researchers can choose what to ask, eliminate some questions, ask additional questions, or adjust wording based on the interviewees' answers. The flexibility and ability to collect data of predefined themes are considered as the advantages of semi-structured interviews (Hopf, 2004; Bell et al., 2019.)

Interviewers are the important factors significantly contributing to the success and the quality of an interview. A high-quality interview requires thorough planning and preparation (Patton, 2002.) To ensure the quality of an

interview, it is recommended to use projective questions or open questions for the flexibility and freedom in answers as well as avoid using poorly constructed questions and bias in responses that interviewees only give answers based on what they assume the interviewers want to listen to (Yin, 2003; Bell et al., 2019). For that reason, it is suggested that interviewers should design questions in a systematic manner, thoroughly prepare and be trained to make sure participants give honest answers during the interview (Johnston et al., 1999; Patton, 2002).

To ensure a systematic and consistent manner for the data collection process, it is crucial to develop an interview protocol. The interview protocol will serve as a manual to guide both interviewers and interviewees throughout the interviews. In the interview protocol, not only lists of questions but also a summary of the research topic, explanation about the interview process, an invitation to the participants to raise questions concerning the research and interview process, consent etc. might also be included. In addition, simple language and neutral tone of voice should be employed for interviewees to easily understand. Moreover, the interview questions must stay relevant with the theoretical framework, research questions and epistemological position of the study (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Arsel, 2017.) In this study, 41 questions for micro-influencers, 46 questions for marketing specialists and managers, and 39 questions for researchers were tailored to suit each type of interviewees, categorized under three main themes, and included in the interview protocol (Appendix 1). The three themes were chosen in accordance with the theoretical framework provided in chapter 2. To reach the research objectives and solve the research questions, the interview questions are divided into three major themes as below:

- 1) *Content Marketing & Social Media Consumption in Viet Nam*
- 2) *The Authenticity of Micro-influencers and Their Effects*
- 3) *The Management of Collaborations with Micro-influencers*

Although a systematic approach is employed in this study, some adjustments and adaptations in the interview questions were made to better suit each type of interviewees. Moreover, these adjustments and modifications were tailored to make them more comprehensible and appropriate for different interviewees and interview contexts instead of completely changing the meanings of the questions. Aside from the slight modifications, the interview questions may not always be asked in the same form or order; however, they would be useful to lead the discussions in the three interview major themes. Furthermore, during the interviews, questions can be flexibly added or eliminated based on the different contexts and the answers of the interviewees as this study utilized the semi-structured interview method.

The participants for the interviews were chosen based on the purposive sampling method as described in the last section. For that reason, the size of participants was not considered as a key factor and only participants that are relevant to the selection criteria were contacted. Therefore, eight micro-influencers, five marketing managers, three marketing executives, and two researchers were contacted through email with an interview invitation. Although the email interview invitations were sent before Christmas and Lunar New Year,

the invitations still received a high rate of responses with 100% of receivers replied to the invitations; however, only 12 of them agreed to take the interview with five micro-influencers, three marketing managers, two marketing executives and two researchers.

Table 5 provides background information about the participants. In general, five micro-influencers varying from the one who just has started their career as a micro-influencer to the one who will rise into macro-influencer in the near future, five marketing executives and managers ranging from the middle level to senior managerial positions, and two researchers working in the field of influencer marketing for more diverse perspectives. To respect the participants' privacy, random aliases were applied to call participants rather than using their real names or changing their names into alphabet letters or numbers.

Table 5. *Participants' background information*

Name	Title	Details	Date	Length	Location
INFL1	Micro-influencer	12K followers	17.12.2022	75 min	Offline
INFL2	Micro-influencer	85K followers	20.22.2022	105 min	Online
INFL3	Micro-influencer	36K followers	17.12.2022	85 min	Online
INFL4	Micro-influencer	96K followers	22.12.2022	90 min	Online
INFL5	Micro-influencer	51K followers	18.12.2022	76 min	Online
MGR1	Marketing Director	In charge of campaigns and partnerships at an international group	21.12.2022	120 min	Offline
MGR2	Senior PR Manager	In charge of relationships with the public, celebrities, and influencers at a global brand	19.12.2022	97 min	Offline
MGR3	Influencer Manager	In charge of planning social	16.12.2022	98 min	Online

		media strategies and managing relationships with influencers at medium-size company			
MGR4	Marketing Communication Specialist	In charge of recruiting and maintaining relationships with influencers at a small-size company	18.12.2022	72 min	Online
MGR5	Influencer Associate	In charge of recruiting and maintaining relationships with influencers at a medium-size company	22.12.2022	86 min	Online
RES1	University Lecturer & Researcher	Conducts research on influencer marketing	19.12.2022	90 min	Online
RES2	Researcher	Conducts research on influencer marketing	21.12.2022	120 min	Online

The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, based on the choice of interviewees. Despite the fact that face-to-face interviews can maintain rapport with interviewees, online interviews still have various advantages. Firstly, it is more time and cost saving for interviewers especially when there is a geographical difference as interviewers do not need to travel to interview locations. Secondly, it is easier and more flexible to reschedule the online interviews if there are any last-minute adjustment requests. Thirdly, there is little evidence showing that online interviews are less insightful than offline interviews. In fact, interviewers can record the interviews and re-watch after the interviews for more insightful analysis, for example, body language, expressions or emotions, etc. of the interviewees (Bell et al, 2019.) In this study, participants can freely choose between face-to-face interview or online interview which is

utterly up to their interest and convenience. However, most of the participants prefer online interviews more than face-to-face interviews due to their personal schedules and geographical differences.

Appendix 2 to 4 illustrate detailed interview questions for different types of interviewees. The interviews were taken mainly in Vietnamese, with four exceptions conducted in English as there are four participants who come from Finland, Germany, Canada, and the United States. Whether it was face-to-face or online, the average length of the interviews was around 92 minutes. Although there was an interview protocol (Appendix 1), the interviews were more likely discussion-based which can help prevent response bias and make participants feel more comfortable as they can have more time to think, understand, and reflect before giving answers. During the interviews, to make the discussions between the interviewers and interviewees go smoothly, some questions were eliminated or combined once the interviewees had already covered them in their previous answers. In addition, some questions were added based on the answers to dig deeper into the topic. All of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for data analysis purposes. Before the interviews, all of the participants agreed to give consent for being recorded and using their information for this study only.

3.5 Data Analysis

In this section, methods used to analyze data are explained. This process can begin with listening and transcribing the recorded interviews. Transcribing refers to the action of precisely transforming a recorded specific conversation into a more visible format which is convenient for later analysis (Kowal & O'Connell, 2004). Transcribing is a vital initial step in the data analysis process. The aims of the research, methodological approach, sources, and interview questions play important roles in deciding the selection for data analysis approach. In addition, as qualitative research usually deals with large amounts of unstructured data, it is recommended to develop an analytical strategy with suitable analytical procedures and techniques for the study (Schmidt, 2004.)

This study employed thematic analysis as the main analytical approach. Thematic analysis is known as one of the most common methods for data interpretation in an objective and systematic manner (Adams et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is viewed as a powerful approach for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns in data. It is frequently used when researchers need to comprehend information in a greater depth, especially when the focus is to comprehend experiences, views and behavioral tendencies of humans. In other words, it can assume that the ultimate goal of thematic analysis is to identify, synthesize, organize data in a systematic way, and provide insights in themes across the data set in order to draw inferences (Malhotra & Birks, 2007, Braun & Clarke, 2012.)

The two key advantages for using thematic analysis are its accessibility and versatility. For those who are still inexperienced with qualitative research, thematic analysis is an entry-level analysis approach to conducting research that can be complex, confusing, and vague as it employs the techniques of coding and analyzing information in a systematic way which can subsequently be connected to wider theoretical concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2012.)

To interpret the collected data, this study used the six-phase process by Braun & Clarke (2012), including: 1) Data familiarization; 2) Initial codes generation; 3) Searching for themes; 4) Reviewing potential themes; 5) Defining and naming themes; 6) Compiling report. Particularly, in the first phase, after the collected information was transcribed into textual data, it is recommended to take notes about potentials codes or raising questions related to the data set while re-reading the textual data and re-listening to the recorded files in order to be totally familiar with the data set and notice matters can be relevant to the study. Note-taking in this stage can be observational and casual rather than systematic and thorough. Followingly, the second phase with developing codes is the beginning of a systematic data analysis. Codes will identify and demonstrate the characteristics of the data that might be relevant and useful to the research questions. To make it easier for finding themes, potential codes previously developed in the first phase were combined with the new codes into a systematic code book. Next, the third phase refers to evaluating codes and detecting any similarity across the codes in order to unfold any wider topics emerging from the codes. It is important to start investigating the relationships between themes and determining whether these themes can work together or individually to shape the overall story about the data. To prepare for the next phase, it is recommended to develop a thematic map demonstrating candidate themes and collate data related to each theme. Then, the fourth phase revolves around examining the relations between the themes and the whole data set. The goal of this phase is to create a set of themes capturing the most relevant and essential aspects of the data and the overall tone of the data in regard to the research questions. In the fifth phase, it is of paramount importance to clearly describe what is distinctive and specific in each theme and summarize the essence of each theme with a few key words. This phase requires careful and deep analytical effort as it entails selecting and presenting extracts with clear and compelling examples that can tell the overall meanings of the data and support the theoretical framework. Each theme should be presented in a logical order and connected with each other meaningfully. Finally, the last phase involves the production of a report that can provide convincing and meaningful insights based on the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012.)

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Lengthy, low-quality, and unstructured reports can cause difficulties for readers to follow, judge the reliability of the study findings, or comprehend the study results for their own individual circumstances. To avoid those difficulties, it is recommended to organize the reporting based on the theoretical framework to produce a comprehensive and reader-friendly report. In addition, a comprehensive report can also minimize reporting bias, prevent effort duplication, and guide future research. Not only should this chapter be written in a logical and orderly manner, it should also focus on the evidence that is needed to answer the research questions or hypotheses which have been examined (Yin, 1981; Arundel et al., 2019.)

Inspired by this aforementioned idea, the findings of this study are presented based on the theoretical framework to make them more reader-friendly and logical to follow. The chapter is divided into three main sections to present the answers for the three research questions. It begins with the impacts of content marketing and social media consumption on micro-influencer marketing, especially in the context of Viet Nam. Then, the focus is shifted to micro-influencers' authenticity and their effects, and finally, the management of micro-influencers. Not to mention, to make it easier for readers to comprehend, the reporting is also divided into different subchapters. Furthermore, the key points are highlighted in each subchapter to make it easier and faster for readers to scan the report and identify the findings which are of their interest.

4.1 The Impacts of Content Marketing and Social Media Consumption on Micro-Influencer Marketing

The theoretical framework of this study shows content marketing, social media and micro-influencer marketing are significantly interconnected as micro-influencers utilize social media environments to distribute content to their targeted audiences. Meanwhile, changes in content marketing and social media landscape highly affect micro-influencers to adapt to these changes. In other words, it can be said that content marketing, social media, and micro-influencers marketing depend on each other. This subchapter unfolds how content and social media consumption influence micro-influencer marketing, especially in the context of Viet Nam.

4.1.1 Platforms

According to the interviews, all interviewees asserted the popularity of social media and how social media had changed dramatically with the emergence of new trends and new platforms. The emergence of new platforms and the shifts in audiences in each social media platform require both brands and influencers

to adapt to these shifts. For both brands and influencers, it is unnecessary to be presented on all platforms; however, it is of paramount importance to understand and balance between the targeted groups, objectives, and expertise to choose the most appropriate platforms for the targeted groups.

INFL5: "Social media has changed drastically in the last few years. As part of my job, I need to stay updated with new trends and platforms and learn about them to not fall behind."

MGR1: "There will always be new social media platforms with new room for content creation and engagement increase. Apparently, some social media platforms have been flourishing into popularity and acquiring an astounding number of users in just an incredibly short amount of time. A lot of influencers realize this early trend and grasp this opportunity to grow their follower base and rise into stardom. Meanwhile, brands use those influencers to reach out, grow, and engage with larger audiences in the hopes of converting them into customers and increase sales."

MGR2: "From our company's side, it will be a waste of time and resources to be presented on all social media channels and understand how all of them operate. We need to balance our resources with our goals, our focused groups and our products to be active on the most effective channels."

RES1: "For influencer marketing, it always depends on the targeted groups and the objectives of the influencer marketing campaigns to choose which social media platforms are effective in such campaigns."

Although the targeted audience groups, goals, and expertise are seen as prerequisites for the choices of social media platforms, Instagram is the most favorable among micro-influencers and marketing specialists because of its diverse visual-based content formats, more balanced audience demographic, and higher conversion rate. The second platform that is gaining popularity among micro-influencers and marketing specialists is TikTok because of the new opportunities for new target groups and sales generation with TikTok Shop. Although Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Viet Nam and Facebook's audience demography is very diverse with the potential of high reach for influencer marketing campaigns, this platform exposes various disadvantages for both micro-influencers and brands, including the fierce competition to appear on audience's newsfeeds, strict advertising policy restricting display frequency, and the difficulties in performance measurements. For those reasons, micro-influencers and brands are gradually switching to Instagram and TikTok to target at smaller and nicher groups of audiences.

INFL1: "I use Instagram and TikTok to distribute my content. Because of its visual functionality, Instagram is more suitable to build a more professional and

well-presented image. Because the audience on TikTok is relatively younger, it is more suitable to present a friendlier version of myself on this platform."

INFL4: "Like I said, it is still up to the type or expertise of the influencer and the targeted audience to choose the suitable platforms. For my case, I like to create and spend time on Instagram and TikTok. I can engage with my followers through comments, direct messages or live-streaming, and answer their questions (...) I also own a brand so through live-streaming I can increase sales on my TikTok Shop as well."

MGR3: "Well, we used to run big marketing influencer campaigns for awareness raising purposes on Facebook because this is the most used social media platform in Viet Nam which can help us reach wide and different audiences but at the same time the competition is fierce. Facebook also has a strict advertising policy which limits the advertising display frequency. If your target group is too small it can result in a person seeing that advertising too many times which makes them annoyed and report our advertising (...) We also have difficulties in performance measurement due to the inaccurate extracted data. As we wish to aim at a small and niche market, we change to Instagram and TikTok for our influencer campaigns."

MGR4: "Instagram and now with the rise of TikTok are two dominant platforms for micro- and nano-influencers. Instagram has many content formats such as story, post, reel, live-stream, etc. The conversion rate on Instagram is also high. For example, an influencer can drive traffic from the attached links on their stories to our website or official e-commerce site, and influence followers to buy our products (...) TikTok is somewhat similar as influencers can attach links to their profiles and influence followers to buy on TikTok Shop or their live-streams."

4.1.2 Content Formats

According to the interviews, as social media platforms are introducing and prioritizing new video features such as story, video duet, live-streaming, etc., video is the most popular and preferable content format and expected to remain trending in the future. Short-form video content is what audiences and brands look for because of its high return on investment (ROI) and quick consumer behaviors. This requires influencers in general to adapt quickly and learn to produce the type of content that audiences expect to see. Moreover, only two interviewees mentioned photo content as a second popular format.

INFL2: "Originally, I was a Youtuber. I have produced long content with full experience on YouTube so I am more familiar with YouTube. But with new platforms like Vine and now TikTok, Reels, or YouTube Shorts where people prefer short-form content with precise and straight-to-the-point information, I need to adapt to my audiences' preferences on these platforms and produce more "snackable" content."

INFL3: *“Social media big names like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc. are all investing in short videos, from 15 seconds up to 2 minutes. They are introducing new features for their applications like story, video duet, live-streaming, etc.”*

MGR1: *“From brand perspective, we prefer short videos that audiences can quickly consume and have the ability to engage with audiences in just a few seconds and make them stay until the end of the video.”*

MGR5: *“Videos, especially short videos like Reels, TikTok and stories, are what our company looks for and would like to continue to invest in the upcoming years as they have the highest ROI compared to other content formats.”*

RES2: *“The social media trends that will keep thriving are video marketing and influencer marketing. At the moment, anything that can be consumed fast like short videos are gaining more popularity (...) Influencers and platforms like Instagram are adjusting to the content that most audiences want to see.”*

4.1.3 Measurement

To measure content and platforms, the number of followers and reach are the two key indicators mentioned in all interviews. However, eight out of twelve interviewees emphasized that there are many more important metrics rather than number of followers and reach. It is highlighted that measurement can be taken in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Quantitative metrics can be number of followers, reach, click through rate (CTR), views, engagement rate, ROI, conversion rate, brand mentions, etc. Qualitative measurement can be taken based on the quality of content, followers' comments, etc. Moreover, an informant asserted that it is crucial to match every indicator to the right stage of the marketing funnel and customer journey.

INFL1: *“Well, I look at the number of followers to measure my fanbase growth. I also look at the number of views and the engagement in each content.”*

INFL2: *“Followers, likes or views can be clearly seen when I measure performance of my account and content. But I also read comments of my followers in comments or direct messages to get to know their preferences better so that I can adjust direction for myself.”*

MGR1: *“It would be a big mistake if we merely rely on the number of views, reach, or followers to assess performance of an influencer campaign. As per our previous collaborations, there were situations that one influencer who has smaller followers and has gained only one-third of views compared to another influencer, however, the smaller quantity of views gained bigger conversion rates and generated more sales.”*

MGR2: *“In influencer marketing campaigns, especially for awareness raising purposes, the quantity of followers, views, or reach are common indicators. But it will be too shallow if we only look at those metrics alone. Those metrics do not tell us whether our messages are distributed to the right target or whether it has any influence on them (...) Our company follows the marketing funnel and the customer journey to match each indicator to the right stage, from raising brand awareness, nurturing audience to conversion stage.”*

RES1: *“Measurement can be taken quantitatively and qualitatively. In fact, they should be combined. Quantitative indicators can be, for example, reach, engagement rate, conversion rate, ROI, affiliate links, and so on. For qualitative metrics, data can be found through comments, the quality of content, you name it.”*

4.2 The Authenticity of Micro-influencers and Their Effects

While the first subchapter focuses on finding how social media content marketing and social media have impacts on influencer marketing, to specify, micro-influencer marketing, this second subchapter emphasizes on the explaining the term ‘micro-influencer’ and ‘authenticity’ and the effects of micro-influencers’ authenticity.

4.2.1 Definition of Micro-influencers

In the interviews, interviewees first talked about how the term ‘influencer’ was defined and how different types of influencers could be categorized before going deeper in the definition of micro-influencers. The term ‘influencer’ from the interviews is very similar to the one in theoretical literature. ‘Influencer’ can be understood as an individual who utilizes the social media environment to create and distribute content to their target audience and is recognized by brands.

INFL3: *“As an influencer, my job is to create content and spread them on my (social media) platform”*

MGR3: *“The term (influencer) is quite popular now but we would like to call them content creators or creators for short. Their purpose is to create exceptional content and building influence is a result of that process.”*

MGR5: *“Well, influencers or creators, in my opinion, are content kings and queens. Whether it is for a living or not, they have the ability to empower themselves to create content and distribute them on social media. Through social media, they allow audiences to enjoy their works and their story-telling on a regular basis.”*

RES1: *“Social media influencers are the ones who gain online fame, reach their target groups, build their influencer capital over time. They start from zero and create their own capital by creating and disseminating different content to specific target groups. At a certain point, they attract corporations and partners.”*

RES2: *“An influencer is the third party that has many relevant relationships, can be utilized by organizations as well as produces and distributes content for their audience on behalf of the organizations.”*

Moreover, according to the interviews, the follower count is a great and common metric to classify the types of influencers. However, there are more characteristics to consider the type of influencers rather than just the quantity of followers. Influencers can be put in different types based on their attractiveness, their audiences' demographic, their engagement with their followers, the impacts that they make, etc. Notably, influencers are considered to be very distinct from celebrities as influencers gain their popularity online while celebrities can be popular in the outside world as well.

MGR5: *“The easiest way to classify a type of an influencer is to look at their follower count and engagement rate.”*

MGR3: *“Well, to categorize influencers, quantity of followers can be a good metric. But to take it deeper, other metrics to consider can be their interactions with audiences and the audience demographics.”*

RES1: *“I will always see a difference between influencers and social media influencers (...) The thing that makes influencers and social media influencers different is the source of fame. Influencers can be actors, singers who gain popularity in the outside world. Social media influencers' fame comes from their work on social media (...) A dominant one (to classify influencers) is based on follower accounts. They can be called nano-, micro-, mega-, whatsoever influencers. However, other measures can be their attractiveness, reach, the engagement they made with their followers, and the impacts that they created.”*

RES2: *“Mostly, influencers are considered to be distinct from celebrities (...) The categorization can be based on the number of followers and the distinct features of each influencer type.”*

Based on the data, micro-influencers do not have a large number of followers compared to macro-influencers and mega-influencers, often between 10,000 and 100,000 followers. They have the ability to produce high-quality content, and mostly by themselves, to reach a niche target group. They also can be perceived to be more authentic and retain the intimacy and engagement with their followers.

INFL3: *“Well, I consider myself a micro-influencer as my follower count now is 51K followers (...) I am trying to create more higher quality videos that my followers want to see by carefully studying and engaging with them.”*

INFL4: *“I started to post videos in 2018 just for fun. When it first started, I was not very purposeful and consistent with my content so I only posted random videos that I preferred so the followers grew very slowly. But then in 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I had more time to focus on the quality of content and understand my followers’ preferences, my channel actually blew off, now I have nearly 96K followers.”*

MGR1: *“Micro-influencers hold the ability to reach the most specialized groups, which is very crucial in marketing (...) And for various micro-influencers, a large portion of their following is built based on their closed relationships, like their family or friends, you know, these people that they actually know and know them well. This can help micro-influencers start off engagement rates.”*

RES1: *“Micro-influencers are more defined by the fact that they do not have as many reach as other bigger types of influencers. They also have not started a lot of collaborations with brands. Often, they are considered to be still more connected to their follower base.”*

RES2: *“I would define micro-influencers who have from 10,000 to 100,000 followers. They have the ability to produce high-quality content by themselves because bigger influencers might have media companies to help them produce content for them. Micro-influencers are perceived to be more authentic, more a person that people can really relate to, and they have the peer-to-peer effect so they are more intimate with their followers. They can discuss with their followers, reply to messages, and so on.”*

According to the interviews, there are five reasons explaining why micro-influencer marketing is gaining more popular compared to bigger influencers such as macro-influencers or mega-influencers, including: 1) cheaper cost 2) higher engagement rate; 3) opportunity to reach new and niche target groups; 4) content types; 5) authenticity. Seven out of twelve respondents asserted that micro-influencers were more effective and authentic than bigger influencers. Notably, the interviewees argued that follower count was not the main reason for collaborations between micro-influencers and brands.

INFL4: *“I was not really recognized until I had a strategic content path. So, as a content creator, it is critical for me to focus on what makes my content stand out among other creators. I discovered that building a strong authentic personal brand is much more beneficial than just increasing more numbers. And that is what brands look for me.”*

INFL5: *“Honestly, I do not think brands want to collaborate with me because of my number of followers. What they want from me is that I stay close and honest with my followers, so it will be easier for the brands to introduce products to my followers.”*

MGR2: *“From my perspective, micro-influencers are more effective and authentic than macro-influencers. I believe marketers are using more micro-influencers because they can help them engage with new and niche audiences that they have never reached and increase their brand awareness.”*

MGR4: *“When I interview micro-influencers, I always say the number of followers is not important but the growth rate is crucial for us. We need to know whether their account is active with their followers or whether there is any opportunity for that account to grow in the future. There are many cases where influencers buy fraud accounts, so their honesty and authenticity are very important to us too.”*

RES1: *“One primary reason why micro-influencers are gaining popularity is because they are not very costly. Corporations do not have to put too many resources such as financial resources. And like I just said, they are more connected with their follower base. Their content is often seen as more genuine and more effective.”*

4.2.2 Definition of Authenticity

Based on the data in the last section, authenticity is a crucial element that brands look for to collaborate with micro-influencers. In this section, the interviews focused on explaining the term ‘authenticity’. As described in the theoretical framework (Table 3), authenticity refers to the realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, originality, and uniqueness of a brand or human brand that can deliver meaningful values to consumers or audiences. The definition of authenticity and features that made up authenticity of micro-influencers were explained by respondents in Table 6 as below:

Table 6. Summary of authenticity definitions and features that built up authenticity of micro-influencers from respondents

Respondent's quotation	Features building up authenticity of micro-influencers
INFL1: <i>"I do not want to be fake. The majority of my followers are people who actually know me in real life or they know me quite well through my content so I do not want to say anything that can get my followers confused about who I am, what I am doing, or what I am standing for."</i>	Sincerity Realness Truthfulness Genuineness Honesty
INFL2: <i>"Authenticity is more difficult to obtain in the online environment as there is a barrier and distance between me and my audiences, you know, we just remain our relationship through the screen (...) When I organized a small offline fan meeting with my audiences, some said to me: 'You are the same person as you are on social media in real life.' I think, this is the highest level of authenticity to me, when you can honestly express and be the online version of you as the same as you are in real life, I mean I do not divide these two."</i>	Sincerity Realness Truthfulness Genuineness Honesty Connection
INFL3: <i>"Well, I think it is about not lying, not cheating on your followers. I am serious because followers are very smart to recognize even your smallest difference. It is my responsibility to communicate with my followers transparently."</i>	Sincerity Realness Truthfulness Genuineness Honesty Transparent communication
INFL4: <i>"Social media provides a great environment for you to distribute content and to find new ideas and new trends for your content. It is normal to recycle those ideas, however, whenever I surf with the trend, I try to be as creative as I can. I add a little touch of myself to the trend. I think being original is very important."</i>	Creativity Originality Truthfulness
INFL5: <i>"In my opinion, the core value of an influencer is to be true to yourself. Nowadays, audiences can easily distinguish whether you are acting or not, just through some actions or words. So, the core value is your personality, your own character, your originality, and uniqueness. As I said before, this significantly contributes to my channel's direction from the beginning. Once audiences love my personality, I do not have to act or to polish myself too much on my videos."</i>	Truthfulness Honesty Personality Character Originality Uniqueness
MGR1: <i>"Well, to me, authenticity refers to being true and honest, not only to the influencers themselves, but also to their followers, and to us, as business partners. We do not want to work with micro-influencers who polish their online personas"</i>	Truthfulness Honesty Visuality

<i>too much, for example, a lot of photo editing in their visibility, like they look completely different in real life."</i>	
<i>MGR2: "Being yourself, being genuine and being real have become requirements if an influencer wants to make a living, gain visibility, trust or credibility. In this regard, that influencer needs to convey his or her realness and genuineness in identifiable ways, whether he or she needs to use tools to convey it through messages, visibility, or whatever it is."</i>	Truthfulness Realness Genuineness Visuality Message Trust Credibility
<i>MGR3: "From my point of view, authenticity, engagement and influence have a very tight connection. Influencers need to motivate their community to take actions as part of their job. To do so, they need to nurture that community, by one-on-one conversations, replying to comments, live-streaming, and so on, to engage with them. You know, honest intimacy. By doing so, they can gain trust from their community. Once the trust is gained, they can influence."</i>	Engagement Connection Intimacy Honesty Trust
<i>MGR4: "As I mentioned earlier, the number of followers is not very crucial to our company. They can easily buy fraud accounts or bots or spam accounts to fake the quantity of followers. Followers or brands like us can easily recognize if this situation happens. We need influencers to prove that they are more real, more honest, more unique, more trustful, not merely stay true to themselves, but also to their followers and be an authentic match with our brand."</i>	Realness Honesty Uniqueness Trust Truthfulness Relevance Fit between micro-influencer and brand
<i>MGR5: "Well, in my opinion, authenticity means being yourself, and being consistent. For example, if they have a posting schedule, just stick to it. We want to work with influencers that have a similar style, tone of voice, personality with our brand, who can resonate with our messages, products, and character."</i>	Truthfulness Consistency Relevance Fit between micro-influencers and brand
<i>RES1: "Authenticity is not new in influencer marketing. It is the currency of influencer marketing. I would say authenticity is always something or someone staying true to oneself. Whatever that person does, it needs to reflect their historic behaviors. Influencers gain their authenticity through their lifespan on social media. Creating content that fits their online personas, creating para-social relationships with their followers by reacting, replying to their comments, creating stories, creating content that reflects their genuine experiences and opinions about brands or products. Through that process, they create authenticity."</i>	Truthfulness Reflection of behaviors Relevance Fit between content and online persona Connection Honesty
<i>RES2: "Well, authenticity is being true, being real. Authenticity from influencers' perspective, is when they are honest about what they are doing, when they promote, they do</i>	Realness Honesty Transparency

<i>not lie about their life or the content they are producing, what are the reasons they do the collaborations, whether they are interested in the brand or they just look for the money."</i>	
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According to Table 6 above, the most common features building up authenticity are sincerity, realness, truthfulness, honesty, genuineness. However, Table 6 also shows that authenticity is a sophisticated concept that includes various features rather than only sincerity, realness, truthfulness, honesty or genuineness. Figure 8 below summarizes all of the features in the data that makes up the concept of authenticity.



Figure 8. Summary of authenticity features found in the data

4.2.3 Beneficial Effects of Micro-Influencers' Authenticity

Maintaining and increasing authenticity of influencers in collaborations can have various advantages, whether it is monetary or non-monetary benefit (Audrezet et al., 2018). After defining micro-influencers and authenticity, respondents discussed beneficial effects when micro-influencers are authentic, including benefits for themselves, for brands, and for followers when producing paid content.

In the interviews, respondents mentioned three key benefits that micro-influencers can have if they are authentic. Firstly, they can gain more followers for their platforms. Four interviewees asserted that this is extremely important for micro-influencers when they start their own brands. If micro-influencers are inauthentic, micro-influencers' reputation can be harmed so that their followers can turn their back on them and unfollow them. Secondly, being authentic can help micro-influencers have more possibilities to be recognized by brands for new partnership opportunities. Thirdly, being authentic can also help micro-influencers to create tight-knit relationships with their followers, which can help

them reduce negative effects in collaborations. These three main benefits are reflected in some quotations by respondents as below:

INFL2: *“Like I said in my previous answer, I do not want to separate my online persona and real-life person. I stay true and consistent as the same person from the start of this channel because followers want to follow me because of who I am. When I recently started my own brand or introduce products through live-streaming, I realize this is even more important, because when followers think that what I say, what I do is authentic, it is easier for them to accept my brand and products that I introduced.”*

INFL3: *“As I mentioned before, audiences are very smart that they can recognize whether you are acting or you are telling the truth. If you lie to them, your reputation can collapse in just one night.”*

INFL5: *“I am very friendly and active with my followers. And of course, it is my platform, I should understand them the most, so I want to build a close connection with them, even if it is through live-streaming, replying to comments or messages. And I think that is the key why brands want to work with me and other micro-influencers. I can say that being authentic, being close with my fans can bring me new opportunities to work with new brands, even the big names that I have never imagined before. And when I have a close relationship with my followers, I can mitigate risks can happen in the collaboration.”*

MGR5: *“Consumers or audiences are super smart. They realize the smallest changes, whether micro-influencers are changing their posting schedule, whether they change their style, or whether they are exaggerating the products. They know it all. You might have heard of this recent scandal of a quite famous micro-influencer who got boycotted from many restaurants that they refused to serve her because of her exaggerated reviews. Her accounts were flooded with negative comments. Her followers turned back on her and unfollowed her. And that situation when influencers are inauthentic is what influencer managers like me want to avoid.”*

The interviews also discussed two benefits of micro-influencers' authenticity towards brands. According to the respondents, when micro-influencers express their authenticity, they can help brands achieve their objectives, whether to increase the brand awareness, to increase the effectiveness or trust in messages, or to persuade followers to take behavioral actions. Moreover, when micro-influencers are authentic, brands can get more high-quality collaborations. Those benefits are reflected in some answers as follows:

INFL2: *“To influence, you need trust, and to be trusted, you need to be authentic. If I want to influence my followers to buy products from my personal brand or buy products that I introduce to them through affiliate programs, I need their trust, and to gain their trust, I need to stay sincere, stay true to myself.”*

MGR2: *“Being authentic can help micro-influencers and brands reach their objectives. Micro-influencers are these ones that have already had a good base of loyal intimate followers, so when followers see them as authentic, they will also see our brand authentic as well, this can boost our reputation, credibility, and awareness to the followers that might have never used our products or heard of us.”*

MGR4: *“Well, if they (micro-influencers) are authentic, we can get more high-quality collaborations. We need them to be authentic and honest with us even way before the collaboration (...) We have been contacted by many micro-influencers, however, when I asked for the numbers of their previous collaborations, they were like ‘oh, I always get this number of likes and comments or I always have this conversion rate per my last collaborations’, but when I went and checked on their accounts, I could see that those comments were not good, for example, they were negative or were generated by bots. To ensure the quality of the partnerships, we really need them to be authentic.”*

The interviewees mentioned one benefit that the micro-influencers’ authenticity can create towards followers. If the micro-influencers are authentic, they can be a reliable source of information for followers as followers view them as experts in their niche fields.

INFL1: *“Even in my paid posts, I try to talk openly and fairly about the products. I mean, being transparent and honest about the reasons behind why I use the product or why I choose this particular brand. I do not only talk about the bright sides of the products, but also the dark sides so that my followers can have a trusted information source for their references before actually purchasing them.”*

Table 7 illustrates the summary of the beneficial effects of micro-influencers’ authenticity found in the interviews.

Table 7. *Summary of the beneficial effects of micro-influencers’ authenticity found in the interviews*

Beneficial effects of micro-influencers’ authenticity	
Towards micro-influencers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Gaining more followers and strengthening reputation 2) Being recognized by more brands 3) Reducing negative effects in collaborations by building tight-knit para-social relationships with followers
Towards brands	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Achieving objectives 2) Gaining more high-quality collaborations and ensuring the quality of the collaborations
Towards followers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Being a reliable source of information for followers

To maintain or increase the authenticity of micro-influencers, respondents stated three key measures, including 1) Being true and consistent to oneself; 2) Ensuring the fit and relevance between micro-influencers and brand; 3) Being transparent and honest with followers about the collaboration.

INFL4: "I think I will keep producing more authentic and unique content in the future. I will surf with the trends on social media but I will also be consistent with my personal style."

MGR5: "As I defined authenticity previously, I think to maintain micro-influencers' authenticity, or the authenticity of any kind of influencers, the vital value is to be yourself. From brand's perspective or even my personal audience's perspective, I will suspect that influencers have any differences in styles, tone of voice, messages, values, behaviors, etc."

RES1: "There are some studies which have proved that influencers are perceived as more honest and authentic if they disclose the partnership with the brands with their followers. They should be transparent when it comes to the reasons behind that partnership."

4.3 The Management of Collaborations with Micro-influencers

The authenticity of micro-influencers has been shown as a key element for the collaborations between the micro-influencers and the brands in the previous chapter. This chapter digs deeper in how to manage the collaboration with micro-influencer to maintain and increase the authenticity.

4.3.1 Pre-collaboration

In general, the respondents stated three main ways to propose a collaboration with micro-influencers. Firstly, micro-influencers can actively contact the brand they want to work with. Secondly, brands will directly approach the influencers that they would like to collaborate with. Last but not least, the collaboration can be proposed through agencies or micro-influencers' managers. The respondents also highlighted that the most suitable approach would be applied based on the size of the company or the campaign:

INFL1: "Well, my channel is not that big, I only have 12K followers, so I mostly work by myself so if I find a brand that I am interested in, I will contact them directly through direct messages or emails. This only happens when I find a match between me and the brand."

INFL2: *“In the past when the size of my followers was not as many as today, I worked alone. But now when I get more popular and the workload is higher as well, I have a team to help me with content planning, editing, and finding jobs as well. My manager is the one who finds the collaboration opportunities for me and works directly with the brand, you know, about contracts, requirements, and so on. I step aside to let him take care of that, he will brief me on the tasks or schedule so that I can focus on developing the content with the production team.”*

INFL3: *“I did not do paid collaborations until a brand contacted me and said they wanted to work with me. My first collaboration was through an affiliate program by an e-commerce platform. They contacted me via email and asked whether I am interested, if yes they would give me some promotion codes.”*

INFL5: *“I was first recruited to be a video jockey (VJ) intern for a media company that produces content and manages a lot of other VJs and influencers. So, from the start of my internship when my channel started from zero up to now when I have received a bit of reputation, I had already had my company at my back. They guided me in content direction from the start. Everything will go through my company, they will tell me if there is any brand that wants to work with me or they will propose me to the brand if they feel I am appropriate.”*

MGR1: *“Everyday me and my team members receive a lot of invitations from influencers for collaborations. But we often work with talent agencies who manage a network of different influencers to find and decide who are the best fit for our brands and can deliver our objectives. Moreover, through the talent agencies, we can also utilize their influencer social listening tools to track the influencers’ data and optimize our campaigns.”*

MGR4: *“I just directly ask if they (micro-influencers) want to collaborate with our brand through Instagram Direct Messages because it is very convenient and easy to ask. Then if they are interested, I will propose some interviews with them.”*

MGR3: *“In my opinion, it is up to the company size and the campaign size to choose the way to work with micro-influencers. If the company is small, they will just directly work with the influencer. If the company size is big or the campaign requires a lot of influencers for different occasions or purposes, it will be easier to work through agencies as they can suggest suitable influencers and it will be easier to manage the workload.”*

To ensure the quality of the collaboration, the interviewees emphasized the importance of selecting the best micro-influencers. In the light of maintaining and increasing authenticity in this selection process, the fit or the match between micro-influencers and the brands was highlighted in all answers. The brand fit between brands and micro-influencers was understood as a broad concept including various elements. The meaning of the brand fit for collaborations is elaborated by some respondents in Table 8 as below:

Table 8. The meaning of the brand fit for the collaboration between micro-influencers and brands according to the interviews

Respondent's quotation	Meaning of fit
INFL1: <i>"I am very into sustainability. I am also a vegan so it is irrelevant if I work with a brand, for example, having bad practices to the environment or testing on animals."</i>	Value fit
INFL2: <i>"When brands contact us (micro-influencers) for booking, they view everything from the brand's perspective which affects the way they evaluate our content. For example, if a brand books a channel focusing on reviewing products but they want that micro-influencer to create funny content or acting, then obviously this conflicts with the color or the style of the channel and the content will hardly touch the heart of that channel's audiences."</i>	Platform fit Content fit Style fit Audience fit
INFL5: <i>"I think one of the most common mistakes that brands often have when they want to work with us (micro-influencers) is that they do not study or research us thoroughly. For example, my target audience and their target audience are totally different. I have a cute friendly girl-next-door kind of vibe but there was a time the brand required me to change my tone of voice on my content to match with their image so I refused that opportunity."</i>	Audience fit Content fit Style fit Image fit
MGR1: <i>"I think apart from the match in platform, content, or audience, the personality of one particular micro-influencer is also very important in the selection process. For example, in the interviews, we can figure out whether a micro-influencer is nice or active or responsible as a person or not since if he or she is not a nice person in general, it will be difficult to work with during the collaboration."</i>	Platform fit Content fit Audience fit Personality fit
MGR4: <i>"We will require micro-influencers to give numbers and insights about their followers to see whether those followers are the ones we want to target or not. It is not about the follower count but about the right target group."</i>	Audience fit
MGR3: <i>"We only look for micro-influencers that genuinely love and have positive thoughts about our brand. They have to be the ones who enjoy our brand first so they can influence their followers. We also carefully check whether they are working or have ever worked with our competitors before as we do not want any conflicts in image, messages or confuse our customers."</i>	Value fit Emotion fit Message fit

According to the data shown in Table 8, it can be seen that brand fit is also a complex concept with multi-layered meanings. The summary of the meanings of brand fit according to the interviews is illustrated in Figure 9 as below:

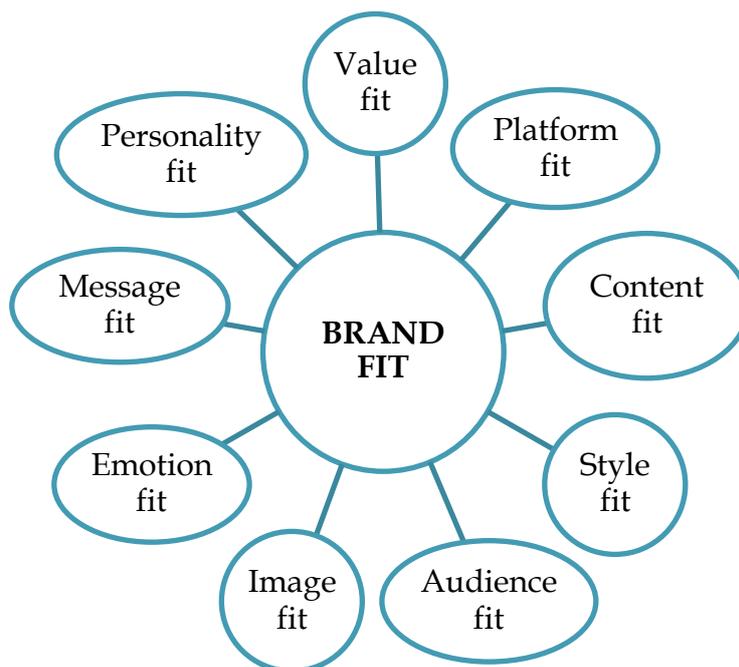


Figure 9. Summary of the different meanings of brand fit found in the data

In the interviews, the respondents also mentioned challenges in finding the fit between micro-influencers and brands as well as consequences if there is a mismatch in the collaborations, for example, reducing in the quantity of followers, suspicion about the collaborations, destroying reputation and image, etc. Again, to emphasize, those consequences can reduce the authenticity.

INFL2: *“From the start of my channel up to now, I do want bookings to generate more revenue from my channel. But I want to create content based on the spirit for my audiences instead of integrating too much product information or brand introduction in the videos. This does not mean I will ignore the requirements from brands (...) I need to find a balance between serving my audiences and serving brands’ requirements.”*

INFL5: *“Like I said earlier, audiences are super intelligent that they can recognize whether we are telling the truth (...) If content creators who receive bookings and tell too many good things about the products, or there is an increase in the number of paid content without any match, followers will question the authenticity or honesty of content creators whether content creators are really interested in the brand or product or content creators only look for the money.”*

RES1: *“Of course, there are some situations that brands want to trade up or trade down other target groups so it is not 100% fit. However, most of the time fit is a requirement in collaboration to secure the authenticity of both micro-influencers and brands.”*

One notable finding in this interview stage is that it is vital for both brands and micro-influencers to build relationships first before any collaboration. By saying so, this requires understanding from both sides.

MGR1: *"I think any relationship, for example, friendship takes time to actually be close to each other. Partnership is also similar so before any collaboration, it is crucial to build relationships with the creators first to get to know both sides."*

4.3.2 During collaboration

In the next part of the interviews, respondents discussed how to manage the authenticity once the collaboration is formed. They talked about what to include in the collaboration contracts such as goals, number of posts, schedule, product or brand information, number of people reached, engagement, conversion rate, number of sales generated after the collaboration, etc. In addition to this, interestingly, one interviewee thought that the quality of the content should be more important than the key performance indicators (KPIs) such as views or engagement rate because content creator is viewed as a creative job which should not be framed by KPIs.

INFL3: *"Well, I got a lot of requirements from brands about achieving KPIs such as this particular number of views or engagement per one content, but from my perspective, I do not think creativity should be framed in such KPIs. So, during the discussion stage with brands, we always say that we do not ensure such KPIs in our content. However, we will show and ensure that the content that brands want us to produce will be the most optimized, effective, suitable and targeted with the brands, in terms of quality."*

MGR5: *"Contract is a super important part in a collaboration. We often include the objectives and goals to be achieved, key performance indicators needed in this campaign, for example, 100K reach, 50K likes, or number of sales generated per livestream. We will also agree on the amount of content to be distributed. And of course, the booking price of the incentives that micro-influencers will get."*

Moreover, issues that might happen during the collaboration showing the inauthenticity of micro-influencers during collaborations were also brought up in the interviews, such as the violations to the contract, misconducts or lying about their performances, etc. Some interviewees asserted as below that the penalties if one party violates the terms or conditions should be also included in the contract:

MGR1: *"Apart from agreement on content, messages, and products, it is vital to also include punishments, for example, if the micro-influencers do not post on schedule, or they collaborate with another competitor brand."*

MGR4: *"Issues that occurred to me when collaborating with micro-influencers can be that they do not read the contract, they do not send back the content product, or they fake the numbers, you name it. Based on the bad experiences that we had, we always include penalties if they violate the contract."*

Not to mention, it is affirmed in the interviews that the contract should be two-way communication and have a clear guideline to ensure the smooth collaboration and authenticity.

INFL2: *"I think it is the best when brands can provide clear objectives, deliverables, messages or expectations in this particular collaboration. In my opinion, being on the same page with the companies is very critical and also giving out all the specifics ahead of time to ensure there will be no gray area in the collaboration is also very vital. One thing that our team finds very helpful is to send back the video script or messages to the companies before we start producing the videos."*

MGR5: *"Well, the clearer the contract and guideline is, the easier for micro-influencers and brands to work together."*

The next part of the interviews discussed the freedom in content creation. To avoid crises, brands want to control content that micro-influencers make. All of the micro-influencers and three marketing executives in the interviews assured that they wanted brands to have more beliefs in them and give them the freedom to create effective content with examples as below:

INFL2: *"In my opinion, brands should have more beliefs in creators when they are hired to create content, and be more active and attentive while listening to the way creators will approach the content for the brands. Regarding creators' side, you can persuade brands by previous products to prove that being active and having freedom in brainstorming content ideas and content execution, you can produce creative and effective videos."*

INFL5: *"I want to bring a fresh viewpoint while collaborating with brands. I enjoy having the freedom to express myself in my own unique way when I collaborate with brands."*

MGR3: *"We have discovered that micro-influencer campaigns are the most effective when brands give micro-influencer creative freedom in their content production. They are professional content creators so they understand their followers the most and what is effective for their channels. The collaboration will be the most effective if the content is genuine and unscripted. As a result, the collaboration will be like a natural fit and perceived as authentic to followers."*

RES2: *"The difficult thing is to keep a balance. There is a dilemma that companies want to control the influencers' content because they are afraid of misconduct, miscommunication, scandals, etc. so they may interfere too much in the content creation process. This will affect the authenticity of micro-influencers and reduce their effectiveness. So, companies should keep a balance and let the influencers have creative freedom."*

Transparency was also considered as a key element to ensure and increase the authenticity of micro-influencers in collaborations. The interviewees affirmed the importance of transparently disclosing the partnerships between micro-influencers and brands as it would make both sides look more genuine and authentic in the eyes of followers. Moreover, all interviewees stressed the urgency of having advertising labeling in paid content in Vietnamese law.

INFL1: "I think transparency in collaboration is very important. It is connected to authenticity. Putting on the #advertising or labeling paid content has been made mandatory in many countries. The majority of influencers disclose the paid collaboration as a moral obligation to their followers. Regarding engagement, I think it is okay to get compensated to use a product that you truly support and enjoy using it. I mean, for example, all of the products that I reviewed and recommended on my channel are products that I actually use and I would personally buy it as a consumer."

INFL2: "Well yeah, in Viet Nam, we do not have the kind of law to put on #advertising so I try to clearly communicate with my followers about the sponsor, for example, 'I collaborate with this brand' and also tag the brand. I put the #advertising on my content sometimes. Overall, my followers have responded quite positively towards the paid content if the advertising is integrated in a fun, positive, pleasant, and organic way. Some of the paid videos on my channels have even gone viral. So, I think not only micro-influencers but all influencers should have a clear communication with their audiences even though Viet Nam has not had any law on this. I hope it will be enforced soon."

MGR2: "From my view, it is very urgent for Viet Nam to have a law on advertisement disclosure as it is extremely dangerous when audiences, especially the young adolescents and children, cannot distinguish the sponsored content. Moreover, talking about the partnerships transparently are advantageous for both brands and the influencers. If advertising is transparently disclosed, and the audiences feel the partnership is a logical match, a natural fit, it strengthens both images of the brand and the influencer as well as increases the authenticity."

RES1: "It is a collaboration so it needs two sides. Transparency is a crucial point in collaboration, the clearer it is stated, the more followers will not reject it. Transparent collaboration can make followers accept it better and the authenticity will be maintained or increased. If the transparency is hidden, it will decrease the authenticity."

4.3.3 Post-collaboration

The next part of the interviews discussed what micro-influencers and brands can obtain after an authentic and transparent collaboration. Based on the data, both micro-influencers and the brands are beneficial from an authentic and transparent partnership. Regarding micro-influencers' side, they can strengthen

their reputation and authenticity and gain more opportunities to work with other brands. In terms of the brand's side, brands can gain new followers, reach the new niche target groups, increase engagement and generate more sales.

INFL3: *"If I stay true with myself, stay consistent and be honest in my content and paid collaboration, audiences will view me as more authentic."*

INFL5: *"Well, I think the authentic and transparent collaboration is very beneficial for my channel growth. For example, when I collaborate with big brands, and the collaboration is successful, more people will get to know me and I can gain more followers."*

MGR5: *"What I notice from my work is that if the collaboration is authentic then more influencers want to work with us. Both brands and influencers can gain more audiences, more followers, more engagement, more sales, and other effects. When you get better collaborations, you get better quality of content, you get better relationships, you get also contacts with other influencers."*

Talking about the management of post-collaboration, there was an intriguing finding that long-term partnerships are preferred from both micro-influencers and brands.

INFL5: *"Honestly, I do not want the product or the brand to appear only once time on my channel. I prefer long-term partnerships. Because if the product or the brand only appears once on my channel, my followers will question my authenticity. They can be like, if the product is so good, I say I like it a lot, then why they never see I mention about it again?"*

MGR1: *"From our brand's view, we would like to build long-term relationships with micro-influencers. Because it takes a lot of time to go through our company's process. And it is not easy to find an influencer that has a good match with our company. If we can collaborate with them in the long-run, the cost to manage them will decrease because at the start of the collaboration we may have costs to identify the influencer or we need to take time to contact them, get familiar with them, and give them instruction."*

MGR3: *"Relationships between micro-influencers and the brand can increase the influencer capital because it is more credible to stick to one brand and not change the partnerships in every other week. For example, if a micro-influencer says 'this is a very good brand, I love that brand, etc.' And after a week, they have another partnership with another brand. That is very authentic. So, sticking to a brand on a long-term basis is actually a win-win situation because for the company's side, the credibility will also increase, and for the bigger purpose, the para-social relationships with the micro-influencers will increase."*

MGR5: *“At the very first collaborations, companies might always be a bit cautious because they fear that the influencers can create content that does not fit with the brand. So, if you think about the level of relationship on one scale and the fear of misconduct or fear for conflict. The higher the relationship, the less danger of misbehaving in influencers. And also, the longer the relationship stays, the better the uses you can gain from micro-influencers.”*

RES1: *“If you have several campaigns with these micro-influencers, for example, you know he or she is doing pretty well, then you can give him or her more freedom, and that actually makes him or her create better content. You might integrate him or her more in your processes and then the influencer can gain full potential because influencer can be used beyond a virtual billboard to promote your product. You can get them involved in more company’s activities, for example, getting feedbacks for some certain products. However, it is a way to get there.”*

4.3.4 The Future of Micro-influencer Marketing in Viet Nam

The interviewees predicted four possible trends about the future micro-influencer marketing in Viet Nam. Firstly, four respondents asserted that micro-influencers and nano-influencers would continue to rise in at least one year, as exemplified as below:

MGR4: *“I think micro-influencer and nano-influencer marketing will keep thriving for at least one year. Brands look for genuine and authentic online persona that relate and enjoy their products and their brands and be able to influence others. The follower base of micro-influencers and nano-influencers are already genuine and authentic with high engagement rates which can help brands to engage with new niche users.”*

Secondly, two interviewees mentioned that live-streaming and short-form videos would continue to be trending:

INFL3: *“Well, from my observation, live-streaming will be more and more favored, especially when we talk about authenticity, live-streaming gives real-time moments for audiences. A lot of brands and e-commerce platforms in Viet Nam like Shopee, Lazada, Tiki, and newly TikTok Shop, are utilizing social media to live-stream with micro-influencers to foster the purchasing process, reduce touchpoints, increase credibility as audiences can get to know more about the product in real-time, as well as increase brand love through interactions in the live-streaming sessions (...) These e-commerce platforms also facilitate and encourage the recruitment of micro-influencers and nano-influencers for live-streaming sessions through affiliate programs.”*

RES2: *“Like I said earlier, I think snackable video content will be the trend to stay in 2023. When platforms are investing in more new video functions, marketers and influencers will also invest more in video production.”*

Thirdly, two interviewees predicted that affiliate and micro-influencer marketing programs will be integrated:

INFL3: "Well, because I said about the popularity of live-streaming and affiliate marketing, I think another related trend is integrating influencer marketing in affiliate programs. For example, you can see that TikTok Shop support payments on their platform and TikTokers who can introduce products from other sellers in their videos and through livestreaming function to generate sales for the sellers and gain commissions."

MGR3: "Influencer marketing emphasizes on increasing awareness and engagement. Affiliate marketing emphasizes on generating sales and conversions. For the strategy optimization, I think influencer marketing and affiliate marketing can be combined to support each other."

Finally, the prediction about artificial intelligent (AI) and micro-influencer marketing was also mentioned:

INFL4: "AI has been developing much faster than I imagined. A lot of chatbot technology, virtual assistants, contents or designs generated by AI are hot topics these days. In my opinion, this trend is related to authenticity that we discussed earlier. In the light of AI development, micro-influencers like us have to be even more authentic, more unique to stand out and compete with AI."

MGR4: "AI is changing rapidly in such a short time and it definitely keeps developing. The use of AI like chatbots or virtual influencers is not new anymore. The question is that will AI be a useful assistant for brands and influencers or will it be the competitor that influencers can be afraid of?"

5 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

This fifth chapter compares the study findings with the theoretical framework. In general, the results validate the earlier theoretical framework; however, there are some alterations made to the theoretical framework as a result of the investigation. To make it logical and reader-friendly, the discussion of the key results, which follows the same order and titles of the section 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3, is presented in more details as below:

5.1 The Impacts of Content Marketing and Social Media on Micro-Influencer Marketing

In the theoretical framework, it is suggested that content marketing and social media is very connected and dependent on each other as they have similar objectives and content marketing utilizes social media environments to distribute pieces of information for targeted audiences (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015). Moreover, the digital transformation has also enabled changes in content formats and platforms, which requires not only brands but also influencers to adapt to these changes for better understanding and catering targeted audiences as well as standing out among other competitors (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015; Vollero & Palazzo, 2015). The results of this study show that changes in social media and content marketing significantly affect influencer marketing, for example, changes in the use of platforms or content formats.

The research focusing on the Vietnamese market shows that Instagram and TikTok are more preferable because of their visual functionality, higher engagement and conversion rates, opportunities to reach and engage with small and niche target groups. The study also indicates that short-form video content with more snackable and concrete information is what micro-influencers audiences and brands look for. This finding is similar to the previous study by Jarvinen & Taiminen (2015). Thus, to adapt to the changes in social media and content marketing, the study findings suggest that both qualitative and quantitative indicators should be taken to measure the performance of the content and platforms.

5.2 The Authenticity of Micro-Influencers and Their Effects

According to Campbell & Grimm (2019), influencers are individuals who share content on social media platforms in return to gain monetary or non-monetary compensation. Lou and Yuan (2019) defined influencers as content creators with

expertise, have a captive number of followers, hold marketing values to brands by creating and distributing worthwhile content on social media. The study results agree with the definitions in the theoretical framework.

Thus, the study results also confirm previous study about the follower count is a great metric to categorize different types of influencers; however, there are many more characteristics to categorize them (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). However, there is a slight difference from study results compared to the previous study by Huttula (2022) that celebrities are very distinct from influencers and may not be considered as influencers as their source of fame can also come from real-life world instead of only online fame like influencers.

Micro-influencers are defined as online personas who have from 10,000 to 100,000 followers, and have higher engagement and authenticity with their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Huttula, 2022). The research results admit this and indicate that micro-influencers are more authentic and effective because of affordable booking cost, content types, opportunities to reach new and niche target groups, and most importantly high level of authenticity.

According to definitions of authenticity in Table 3 in the theoretical literature, authenticity can be understood as realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, originality, uniqueness of a brand of human brand that can deliver meaningful values to consumers or audiences and authenticity can be divided into three sub-categories including authenticity of source, authenticity of message and authenticity of interactions. The study results agree with those definitions; however, the study results point out that there are various features building up the authenticity of a micro-influencer. These features of authenticity have been summarized in Figure 8.

The study findings prove the previous study by Audrezet et al. (2018) is true by indicating multiple benefits of the authenticity of micro-influencers in paid collaborations. The study findings summarized in Table 6 show that authenticity can not only bring beneficial effects to the micro-influencers themselves but also to the brands that they collaborate with and their followers as well.

Previous studies (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Balaban & Szabolics, 2022; Kapitan et al., 2021), authenticity is a vital factor contributing to the success of micro-influencers. For that reason, the research results suggest three key methods to maintain and increase the authenticity of micro-influencers in paid collaborations, including 1) Being true and consistent to oneself; 2) Ensuring the fit and relevance between micro-influencers and brands; 3) Being transparent and honest with followers about the collaborations.

5.3 The Management of Collaborations with Micro-Influencers

Previous studies (Audrezet et al., 2018; Bakker, 2018) highlighted the importance of ensuring a good fit between brands and influencers to maintain and increase authenticity. Poyry et al., (2019) also suggested a mismatch between the brands

and endorsers can make audiences react negatively to the sponsored content. The study findings agree with this idea and indicate that the insurance of the fit between the micro-influencers and brands play a vital role in selecting the best micro-influencers for the collaboration. Bakker (2018) also suggested that qualitative and quantitative criteria should be combined in the selection process; however, the study results show the different meanings of brand fit which have been summarized in Figure 9. The quantitative criteria to ensure the brand fit between the brands and micro-influencers are not strongly highlighted.

Thus, being dishonest or lacking ethics in sponsored collaborations can harm the authenticity of micro-influencers. Micro-influencers' behaviors are considered as more authentic when they truly come from their intrinsic desires instead of external forces such as receiving monetary or non-monetary compensation to promote a product or service. Through the sponsored content produced by micro-influencers, audiences can make assumptions and opinions about the honesty, credibility, and authenticity of micro-influencers. The audiences also think that if micro-influencers give up their authenticity and integrity and only say good things to promote the product or service just for personal purposes, for example, monetary gain, instead of expressing their true selves, thoughts, and feelings, those micro-influencers will be considered as inauthentic, dishonest, and insincere (Wellman et al., 2020; Kapital et al., 2021.) The research findings confirm these previous studies by Wellman et al. (2020) and Kapital et al. (2021). The research findings imply that micro-influencers should always be true and consistent even before, during, and after the collaborations to maintain and increase their authenticity. If not, they can lose their followers, make followers suspicious about the collaborations, or destroy the reputation or image.

The result findings support previous studies (Audrezet et al., 2018; Wellman et al., 2020) that non-transparency in sponsored collaborations can harm the authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2018) also stated that if the endorsers do not transparently disclose the collaborations, followers can feel they are being cheated by that action. Although the previous studies (Audrezet et al., 2018; Wellman, 2018) only mentioned about the negative effects that non-transparent collaborations can cause to the endorsers, the study findings show that it can also make the brand inauthentic in the eyes of followers.

Kapital et al. (2021) stated that the excessive control over endorsers' creative process in collaborations can make the endorsers unable to show their true and creative selves and make the brands unworthy in the eyes of audiences. The study findings validate this point and imply that although it is essential to have a clear guideline to make the collaborations work smoothly for both sides, the trust and freedom in content creation can make the collaborations authentic in the eyes of followers.

Moreover, Enke and Borchers (2019) stated that brands prefer to have long-term partnerships with the endorsers because they can help brands strengthen their brand image. Not only do the study findings agree with this, they also elaborate the positive effects they can bring to the micro-influencers.

The study findings imply that the long-term partnerships are viewed as more authentic and win-win for both sides.

6 CONCLUSIONS

To draw conclusions, this final chapter is divided into four subchapters. Firstly, the theoretical contributions discuss the study findings to address the research questions proposed at the beginning of the study. Then, the managerial implications focus on proposing ideas to increase the authenticity of micro-influencers in paid collaborations in the context of Viet Nam. Followingly, the evaluation of the study is examined. Last but not least, the limitations and directions for further research are suggested.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

As discussed in the previous chapter, although there are some differences, this study mostly confirms the earlier theoretical framework. This study has three main theoretical contributions. The theoretical contributions and the answers for the research questions proposed in the introduction are summarized in this subchapter.

The first theoretical contribution of this study is made to content marketing in the context of social media in Viet Nam as the first research question is, *“What is the nature of content marketing and social media in Viet Nam and how they affect the development of influencer-marketing?”* According to the theoretical framework (Table 1), content marketing, a sophisticated concept with different dimensions, can be understood as marketing strategy of creating, distributing, and sharing valuable, helpful, compelling, relevant and timely content to targeted audiences with the aim to engage, develop and maintain trusted relationships with them for profitable actions and outcomes. The study results confirm previous studies (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Jarvinen & Taiminen, 2015; Vollero & Palazzo, 2015) that content marketing, social media are interconnected and the changes in content marketing and social media affect changes in influencer marketing and require adaptations from both brands and influencers. Moreover, the study results also discover that Instagram and TikTok are more preferable for micro-influencer marketing and short-form video content is what both brands and micro-influencers’ followers look for. Not to mention, the results also imply that not only brands but also micro-influencers are also very professional that it is suggested to use both qualitative and quantitative methods to measure the performance of their content on their platforms. Surprisingly, the number of followers is not the key indicator in this evaluation process. However, the study focuses on the Vietnamese market, so the findings might not be applicable for other countries.

The second contribution is to the authenticity of micro-influencers with the second research question which is, *“How do micro-influencers in Viet Nam*

maintain their authentic voice when producing paid content?" The study findings support previous definitions about influencers that they are individuals who have a captive number of followers, hold marketing values, have special expertise, and utilize social media platforms to distribute worthwhile content (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Not to mention, the study findings also validate the definition of micro-influencers as individuals who have from 10,000 to 100,000 followers on social media and have higher engagement and perceived as more authentic compared to larger types of influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Huttula, 2022). As high level of authenticity is one key reason why brands want to collaborate with micro-influencers, the study results imply that authenticity is a complicated concept that can be understood further than the realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, originality, uniqueness of a brand of human brand that can deliver meaningful values to consumers or audiences (Table 3). The features that build up the authenticity of micro-influencers can contain more elements than the ones in Table 3 and these features are summarized in Figure 8. The study findings support previous research by Audrezet et al. (2018) by examining different benefits that authenticity can bring to micro-influencers, brands and followers. The study results also suggests three key ways that micro-influencers can do to main and increase their authenticity when producing paid content, which are: 1) Being true and consistent to oneself; 2) Ensuring the fit and relevance between micro-influencers and brand; 3) Being transparent and honest with followers about the collaboration.

The third contribution is to the management of collaboration with micro-influencers, with the third research question which is *"How do brands manage collaborations with micro-influencers to ensure authenticity?"* The study results strengthen the point in previous studies (Audrezet et al., 2018; Bakker, 2018) that brand fit plays a crucial role in protecting and increasing the authenticity of the micro-influencers and the brand, especially in the selection of micro-influencers for the collaborations. Not only in the selection process, the study findings suggest that it is of paramount importance for brands to also ensure micro-influencers always stay honest, show ethics, and consistent throughout the collaborations as audiences can always make assumptions about the credibility, honesty, and authenticity of micro-influencers' behaviors and if micro-influencers sacrifice their authenticity and ethics, they will be considered as inauthentic (Wellman et al., 2020; Kapital et al., 2021). By exposing issues might happen in the collaborations such as misconducts or violations to the contracts, the study findings imply that not only the micro-influencers but also the brands can face horrendous consequences due to the inauthenticity of micro-influencers so it is vital to have clear guidelines for both brands and micro-influencers to easily work together. Moreover, the study findings support prior studies by Audrezet et al. (2018) and Wellman et al. (2018) that it is essential to clearly expose the collaborations between the brands and the endorsers to protect the authenticity. One intriguing finding is that although Viet Nam does not have the law to put #advertising or #sponsored on their content, some micro-influencers are seen as professional by actively putting the hashtags on or explaining the collaborations by other ways. Furthermore, Kapital et al., (2021) also argued that

giving the endorsers the freedom in their creative production can make their works more effective and authentic. The study results agree with this argument. A prior study by Enke & Borchers (2019) highlighted that the long-term partnerships between brands and endorsers can help boost the brand image. The study findings validate this; and it is suggested that long-term partnerships can make both brands and micro-influencers more authentic. The previous reports (VECOM, 2021; We Are Social, 2022; Anymind, 2022) showed the changes in Vietnamese consumers on e-commerce and social media platforms have unfolded new trends such as video marketing and facilitated the development of influencer marketing, especially micro-influencers marketing. The study results support this theory and predict four trends in micro-influencer marketing in Viet Nam, including: 1) The continuing thrive of micro-influencer and nano-influencers; 2) The focus on live-streaming and short-form video content; 3) The integration of micro-influencer marketing and affiliate marketing; 4) AI and influencers. However, these predictions are still uncertain and they might be applicable for Vietnamese context only.

To draw conclusions for the answers of the three aforementioned research questions, Table 9 presents the key answers as below:

Table 9. Summary of key answers to the research questions

RQ1	Answers
<p>“What is the nature of content marketing and social media in Viet Nam and how they affect the development of influencer-marketing?”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The connection between content marketing, social media, and micro-influencer marketing in Viet Nam: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Content marketing and social media are inter-connected. ○ The changes in content marketing and social media enable the changes in micro-influencers which require the adaptation from both micro-influencers and brands. • Platforms: Instagram and TikTok are preferable for micro-influencers marketing because they have diverse visual-based content formats, more balanced audience demographic, higher engagement and conversion rate. • Content format: short-form video content is more preferable. • Measurement: Not only brands but micro-influencers are very professional that they use the combination of quantitative and qualitative metrics to measure their performance and growth.
RQ 2	Answers
<p>“How do micro-influencers in Viet Nam maintain their authentic voice when producing paid content?”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Micro-influencer marketing is gaining more popularity because: 1) cheaper cost; 2) higher engagement rate; 3) opportunities to reach new and niche target groups; 4) content types; 5) high level of authenticity • Rather than realness, truthfulness, sincerity, genuineness, originality, uniqueness, there are various features building up the authenticity concept which make it a sophisticated concept. • The authenticity of micro-influencers can have beneficial effects on micro-influencers, brands, and followers. • To maintain and increase the authenticity of micro-influencers when producing paid content: 1) Being true and consistent; 2) Ensuring the brand fit; 3) Being transparent with followers about the collaborations.
RQ 3	Answers
<p>“How do brands manage collaborations with micro-influencers to ensure the authenticity?”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-collaboration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Carefully checking the micro-influencers to ensure the brand fit in the selection process. ○ Meanings of brand fit are varied: value fit, platform fit, content fit, style fit, audience fit, image fit, emotion fit, message fit, personality fit. • During the collaboration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Disclosing the partnerships transparently. ○ Giving micro-influencers freedom in their production. • Post-collaboration: Long-term collaborations are better than one-time collaborations • Trends in micro-influencer marketing in Viet Nam: 1) The continuing thrive of micro-influencer and nano-influencers; 2) The focus on live-streaming and short-form video content; 3) The integration of micro-influencer marketing and affiliate marketing; 4) AI and influencers.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Apart from the theoretical framework, this subchapter offers several practical recommendations and implications for marketing professionals in terms of managing the collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam to maintain and increase authenticity.

First, as fake performance and inactive/fake followers have become a significant concern in the influencer marketing field (Abidin, 2018; YouNetGroup, 2019), the study results imply that it is critical to thoroughly check the brand fit between micro-influencers and brands rather than just relying on the follower counts to choose the micro-influencers. To avoid the inauthenticity in selection process, instead of only looking at the number of followers that micro-influencers have, brands should consider their growth rate, engagement and interaction they have with their followers, too see whether their interactions with followers are real and whether their channels can develop more in the future. Moreover, brands should also pay attention to criteria like value, platform, style, image, audience, message and content of micro-influencers to evaluate whether they naturally match with the brands or not. Apart from those aforementioned criteria, emotion and personality are criteria that marketing practitioners should not neglect in the selection process. For instance, during this very first stage, brands should carefully consider micro-influencers' attitude and emotion to see whether they have a nice personality and professional working style, whether they have any scandals or unethical and dishonest behaviors, etc.

Second, the transparent disclosure of the collaborations will increase the authenticity of the partnerships between brands and endorsers (Audrezet, 2018; Wellman et al., 2020). The study results indicate that both brands and micro-influencers hold the duty to transparently explain about the sponsorships and the products or services that they promote, especially in the case of Viet Nam where there is no law about the disclosure of the paid partnerships. Although there are many professional micro-influencers who disclose the paid partnerships of their own free will, brands can include this agreement in the contract with micro-influencers, for example, putting on the #advertising, mentioning the name of the campaign or product that they endorse, or tagging the brand, etc. By this way both brands and micro-influencers can make the collaborations more credible and increase the brand awareness among targeted audiences.

Third, the results suggest that the contracts between brands and micro-influencers should be two-way communication. Apart from requirements about the sponsorships, brands should also provide information about the objectives of the paid partnership, targeted audiences, KPIs needed to be achieved after the collaborations, style, etc. The penalties if one party violates the contract should also be clearly stated, for example, if the endorsers do not post content upon agreed schedule. The clearer the instructions, the smoother the collaborations

will be. It will help the micro-influencers consider whether to participate in the collaboration or not (Martinet-Lopez et al., 2020).

Fourth, although it is understandable for brands if they want to have control over micro-influencers to avoid misconducts and crises, various authors (Martinet-Lopez et al., 2020; Kapital et al., 2021) stated that the control over endorsers' creative production can make the collaborations inauthentic and unworthy in followers' perspective as creativity is one of the key reasons why followers follow them and consider their messages credible. The study results imply that the key is to keep a balance between what to control: giving clear guidelines to help them understand the tasks as well as make the collaborations run smoothly on both sides, not controlling their content or interfering too much in their creative production. In addition to this, micro-influencers are more familiar with their channels and audiences than the brands, so marketing practitioners should give them creative freedom to create valuable, effective, engaging, and authentic content that is suitable for their audiences' taste and requirements from the brands. Besides finding the sweet spot between their audiences and the brands, micro-influencers should also vouch for the quality of content that they produce for the brands and prove that their ideas have a strong fit with the brands.

Fifth, Enke and Borchers (2019) argued that long-term partnerships between brands and endorsers instead of on-and-off ones can improve brand image and make the collaborations more authentic. The study findings suggest that if brands and micro-influencers establish a strong tight-knit relationship based on trust from the beginning, it will reduce the fear of misconducts. Furthermore, brands and micro-influencers should establish long-term partnerships, for example, facilitating endorsers to fulfill their roles as brand ambassadors, because the long-term collaborations will look less suspicious and more trusted in the eyes of followers compared to the one-time collaborations. Not to mention, it is not easy to find a great match between brands and endorsers and sometimes the selection process needs to go through several complex procedures, so long-term partnerships can save a lot of time and effort for both brands and micro-influencers. Moreover, once the long-term relationship is built, brands can enable micro-influencers to reach their full potential by involving more in the companies' activities, for example, getting feedbacks for a certain product or service. In return, for the future improvement of micro-influencers in the next collaborations, brands should evaluate the performance of micro-influencers in each collaboration to give them feedbacks and insights, especially the perception of targeted audiences about the collaboration and whether the targeted audiences have engaged in any brand-related behavior inspired by the endorsers.

6.3 Evaluation of the Study

In this subchapter, the trustworthiness and quality of this study are investigated. The main goal of this subchapter is to demonstrate how this study is developed and guided by the theoretical literature and methodological process.

Yin (2003) stated that the quality of a study is commonly assessed by conducting validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. However, it is argued that concepts of validity and reliability in quantitative research are very distinct from those in qualitative research as they are more commonly used to deal with numerical values, so they are not suitable to assess the trustworthiness of a qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Therefore, Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggested using a different set of criteria including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Followingly, these criteria are employed to evaluate the quality and trustworthiness of this study results.

Credibility can be understood to evaluate how truthful and precise the findings collected from the interviewees are. Data triangulation and respondent validation are the two popular methods to assess the credibility of the findings. While data triangulation entails employing various sources of data to simultaneously verify the findings and look for possible inconsistencies in the gathered data, respondent validation refers to requiring the interviewees confirm that the findings are in line with their points of view (Bryman & Bell, 2019.) In order to increase the credibility of this study, several micro-influencers, marketing specialists in different companies and researchers working in the influencer marketing field were chosen by purposive sampling to take part in the interviews. Furthermore, to create an open and confidential setting for the interviews, random aliases were applied to call the participants instead of their real names and their company names were agreed to remain undisclosed. In addition, the interviews were also conducted as semi-structured to facilitate honest conversations so the researcher could ask more questions based on the answers of the interviewees. Not to mention, the study results were re-examined by the interviewees to check that the results were in line with their answers.

Transferability involves whether the study findings can be transferable or applicable beyond its context (Bryman & Bell, 2019). It is noted that the main goal of this study is not to offer generalization, but to better understand a phenomenon in a specific context. The context of this study was explained thoroughly in chapter 1. Although the study was conducted specifically in the Vietnamese context, the findings went well with the theoretical framework showing that they might be applicable to other types of influencers or nations. However, more extensive investigation is much-needed to support this notion.

Dependability refers to whether methodological considerations of the research is thoroughly explained so that the study results can be duplicated if the same research was carried out in the same or a comparable situation (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Chapter 3 thoroughly explained the methodological considerations including research philosophy, research strategy, participant selection, data

collection, data analysis. In particular, interview protocols with background information, interview themes and interview questions were sent to better guide the interviewees (Appendix 1 to 4). All the interviews are recorded, transcribed and translated to preserve the nuances. Followingly, the gathered data were analyzed and coded into different themes. As a result of the data collection and analysis, it is reasonable to assume the study can be repeated and obtain comparable findings in the same or similar situation.

Confirmability concerns the objectivity of results to make sure that the collected results are based on the interviewees' narratives and the researcher does not have any bias (Bryman & Bell, 2019). In particular, all interviewees' answers were presented in direct quotes. Furthermore, to test the confirmability, the findings were presented and reported to interviewees to let them express their thoughts about the findings. After reviewing the data, interviewees confirmed the results to strengthen the objectivity of the data analysis.

In conclusion, concerns about the quality and trustworthiness of this study should be resolved. The credibility, dependability, and confirmability were assessed as effective. The transferability of the research could not be considered as outstanding as the research used semi-structured interviews to collect data and to better investigate the phenomena in its specific context. However, it is highlighted that the study particularly focused on Vietnamese context instead of aiming at providing generalization. Nevertheless, the alignment between the study results and the theoretical literature suggests that it might be applicable in the same or similar contexts if only further investigation was conducted.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

There is no perfect research and this study is not an exception. Although the study made various theoretical and managerial contributions, it still exposed some limitations. This final subchapter focuses on discussing shortcomings of the study and suggesting directions for further research based on some intriguing phenomena indicated in the study results.

First, the major limitation of this research is its small sample size. Although the study used purposive sampling with interviewees chosen from both business and academic backgrounds, including micro-influencers, marketing specialists/managers who use micro-influencer marketing, and researchers working in micro-influencer marketing field with the aim to gather useful and valuable insights from diverse perspective, the study lacks the audiences' perspective. Therefore, this offers a great opportunity to further carrying out a larger quantitative research concerning the authenticity of micro-influencers when producing paid content in the perspective of the audiences.

Second, the research focused on investigating a phenomenon in a specific context which is the authenticity of micro-influencers when producing paid content in Viet Nam. Due to its specialized location, it might not be applicable to generalize the study results in other nations. For that reason, in order to provide

the generalization in larger contexts, further investigation is very much-needed. Moreover, the study findings suggested that the concept of authenticity is not only important to micro-influencers, but generally, every type of influencers. In the future, it would be intriguing to further examine the authenticity of other types of influencers when they produce paid content and to compare whether the results will be the same as micro-influencers.

Third, the findings implied that ensuring brand fit, transparency, freedom in content creation, and building long-term collaborations are vital in managing the collaborations with micro-influencers to maintain and increase the authenticity. Therefore, future research could consider thoroughly investigating each element, for example, the different meanings of brand fit, the importance of transparent disclosure in paid partnerships, how creative freedom in the content production can make the collaborations more effective and authentic, or why long-term collaborations are more authentic than on-off ones, etc.

Last, the study results also suggested four trends in micro-influencer marketing that need further examination, including: 1) the continuing thrive of micro-influencer and nano-influencers; 2) the focus on live-streaming and short-form video content; 3) the integration of micro-influencer marketing and affiliate marketing; 4) AI versus influencers. With these suggestions, it would be interesting if future research could further investigate why micro-influencers and nano-influencers are better than mega-influencers, the authenticity of influencers in live-streaming industry, the authenticity of micro-influencers in affiliate programs, or between AI and human influencers which one is more authentic, etc.

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APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Topic: The authenticity of micro-influencers producing paid content for social media in Viet Nam

Thesis' Key Topic Areas: content marketing, social media, e-commerce, micro-influencers, authenticity, brand strategy

Research Objectives and Questions:

Research Objectives

- To understand key features of content marketing in the context of social media in Viet Nam and how they have supported and propelled the development of micro-influencer marketing in Viet Nam
- To expand the current definitions and knowledge of micro-influencers and investigate the authenticity of Vietnamese micro-influencers and its beneficial effects as well as the management of collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam to maintain and increase the authenticity

Research Questions

- **RQ 1:** What is the nature of content marketing in Viet Nam in the context of social media?
- **RQ 2:** How do micro-influencers in Viet Nam maintain their authentic voice when they produce paid content?
- **RQ 3:** How do brands manage collaborations with micro-influencers in Viet Nam to maintain and increase the authenticity?

Interview Structure: Semi-structured interview

Interviewees:

- Micro-influencers
- Marketing executives and managers
- Researchers working in influencer marketing field

Interview Protocol: To reach the research objectives and solve the research questions, the interview questions are divided into three major themes as below:

- I. Content Marketing and Social Media Consumption in Viet Nam
- II. Micro-influencers' Authenticity and Their Effects
- III. Management of Collaborations with Micro-influencers in Viet Nam

APPENDIX 2 - DETAILED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MICRO-INFLUENCERS

I. Content Marketing & Social Media Consumption in Viet Nam

1. What do you think about the digital landscape of Viet Nam right now?
2. What are the key trends (content marketing/on social media) and how do you think they are going to change in the future? Why do you think so?
3. What types of social media platforms do you spend the most time on for your content creation? And why?
4. Why do you think you spend so much time on (name of the platform)?
5. What types/formats of content do you prefer producing and why?
6. What types/formats of content do you find the most effective on your social media platforms? And why?
7. What are the social media channels that you think the most influential/effective for your content dissemination? And why?
8. How do you measure your content/platform/followers? How does this influence your future content creation?

II. Micro-influencers' Authenticity and Their Effects

1. How do you define influencers? (Then micro-influencers)?
2. What types of influencers do you call yourself?
3. Where do you get the ideas for your content creation?
4. Do you project yourself as an authentic/true persona/genuine individual? Why?
5. How do you think your authentic personality/style affects your followers? Negatively or positively? And why?
6. How do you manage your content/image with your followers?
7. What do you think about being transparent/true/authentic to your followers and yourself?
8. Do you think you are beneficial from being true to yourself? In contrast, how do you think being untrue/inauthentic/ingenuine can affect you?
9. What are the measures that you do to maintain/manage this true self towards your followers?
10. Do you explain your partnership with brands with your followers when you produce paid content? If yes, how do you explain?
11. What are the characteristics/values that you think are important when collaborating with brands?

III. Management of Collaborations with Micro-influencers

1. How frequent are you on social media for your content creation? Do you follow a schedule? Do you plan keywords, calendar events, content ideas? If so, how do you manage these works?
2. Do you get approached by brands or do you contact them by yourself? Do you have an agent/manager?

3. How do you manage your work with your agent/manager?
4. How are you being approached by brands? (e.g. email? Affiliate program? Social Media? Etc.)
5. What kind of brands have approached you? How do you choose a brand to work with?
6. What are the characteristics/reasons for you to work with a brand? What are the characteristics/criteria of the brand you want to collaborate with?
7. Do you have any process to work with a brand? If so, can you explain about it?
8. Have you ever accepted/declined brand collaborations that do not match your style? Why?
9. Do you think the fit between you and the brand is important to maintain your authentic voice/image with your followers? And why do you think so?
10. What things are being considered before, during, after the collaboration?
11. Are the collaborations short or long-term? Does each collaboration have its own reasons? How many collaborations have been undertaken?
12. How are the contracts being decided? (booking cost, incentive whether monetary or non-monetary, types of contents, platforms, number of posts, schedule, message, etc.)
13. Can you tell me any details about your contract? What do you usually include in the contract?
14. If the collaboration is formed, how would you manage posting-related works? (number of posts, schedule, platforms, types of content, etc.)
15. Are you required to explain your partnership with the brands in your content? If so, how do you explain them?
16. Have you ever encountered conflicts in your paid collaboration? If so, what kind of conflicts have you encountered?
17. How do you manage conflicts?
18. What are the things that should be considered to avoid conflicts?
19. What do you think you get in return after each collaboration?
20. How do you measure the success in paid collaborations? What are the steps that you would do to replicate your success?
21. In your opinion, what are the important points that made the collaboration successful?

APPENDIX 3 - DETAILED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MARKETING SPECIALISTS AND MANAGERS

I. Content Marketing & Social Media Consumption in Viet Nam

1. What do you think about the digital landscape of Viet Nam right now?
2. What are the key trends (content marketing/on social media) and how do you think they are going to change in the future? Why do you think so?
3. What types of social media platforms do you use for your brands? And why do you use them?
4. What types/formats of content do you prefer producing for your brand? And why?
5. What types of content you do find the most effective on your brand' social media platforms?
6. What are the social media channels that you think the most influential/effective for your content dissemination? And why?
7. How do you measure your content/platform/followers?

II. Micro-influencers Authenticity and Their Effects?

1. Do you use influencer marketing? And why?
2. How do you define influencers?
3. How do you categorize different types of influencers?
4. What does micro-influencers mean to you?
5. Do you use micro-influencers in your campaign? And why?
6. Why do you choose to work with micro-influencers instead of other types?
7. What are the things/features that you think can make the micro-influencer authentic/genuine?
8. Do you think micro-influencers are more authentic/effective than other types? And why?
9. What do you think about micro-influencers being transparent/true/authentic to their followers and themselves? What if this results in a brand you represent to miss out on a great opportunity? Do you think they receive benefits from being true to themselves? In contrast, how do you think being untrue/inauthentic/ingenuine can affect them?
10. How do you think micro-influencers should ensure being true/genuine/authentic to themselves?
11. What do you think about the transparency in collaboration with micro-influencers?
12. How do you ensure/increase the great transparency in collaboration with micro-influencers?

13. What do you look for in the influencers you choose to work with? (E.g. number of followers, types of content, engagement rates, platforms that they use, their authenticity?)
14. Why do you think this particular influencer is good for your brand?
15. Do you explain the paid partnership with micro-influencers with your followers? If yes, how do you explain?
16. What are the characteristics/values that you think are important when collaborating with micro-influencers?

III. Management of Collaborations with Micro-influencers

1. How do you approach micro-influencers? (e.g. email? Affiliate program? Social Media? Etc.)
2. Have you ever been approached by micro-influencers or agent for collaboration?
3. How do you manage your work with micro-influencers or agents?
4. Where and how do you find the influencers? By your own connections or direct contacts with them or their agent or through agency? Do you use any platform or agency to manage the influencer?
5. What is the process that you use to choose the micro-influencers?
6. What are the criteria to choose the micro-influencers for your brand?
7. Do you think it is important to build a clear process/guideline to choose micro-influencers? Why do you think so?
8. What are the characteristics/reasons for you to work with micro-influencers? What are the characteristics of the micro-influencers you want to collaborate with? Why do you want to work with micro-influencers?
9. Have you ever accepted/declined collaborations with micro-influencers that do not match your brand style? And Why?
10. Do you think the fit between the brand and micro-influencer is important in the collaboration? And why do you think so?
11. How do you ensure the brand fit in the collaboration?
12. What things are being considered before, during, after the collaboration?
13. Are the collaborations short or long-term? Does each collaboration have its own reasons? How many collaborations have been undertaken?
14. How are the contracts being decided? (booking cost, incentive whether monetary or non-monetary, types of contents, platforms, number of posts, schedule, message, etc.)
15. Can you tell me any details about your contract? What do you usually include in the contract?
16. If the collaboration is formed, how would you manage posting-related works? (number of posts, schedule, platforms, types of content, etc.)
17. Do you require micro-influencers to explain the partnership with you in their content? If so, how?
18. Have you ever encountered conflicts during the collaboration with micro-influencers? If so, what kind of conflicts have you encountered?
19. How do you manage conflicts?

20. What are the things that should be considered to avoid conflicts?
21. What do you think you get in return after each collaboration?
22. How do you measure the success in paid collaborations? What are the steps that you would do to replicate your success?
23. In your opinion, what are the important points that made the collaboration successful?

APPENDIX 4 - DETAILED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

I. Content Marketing and Social Media Consumption

1. What are the key trends (content marketing/on social media) and how do you think they are going to change in the future? Why do you think so?
2. What types of social media platforms do you think are popular for influencer marketing? And why?
3. What types/formats of content do you think are being preferred?
4. What types/formats of content do you find the most effective on social media platforms? And why?
5. What are the social media channels that you think the most influential/effective for content dissemination? And why?
6. How do you think the effectiveness of content/platforms are measured?

II. Micro-influencers' Authenticity and Their Effects

1. How do you define influencers?
2. How do you categorize different types of influencers?
3. What does micro-influencers mean to you?
4. Why do you think micro-influencers are gaining more popularity?
5. Why do you think more and more brands choose micro-influencers instead of other types?
6. What do you think are the things that brands look for in micro-influencers for collaboration? (E.g. number of followers, types of content, engagement rates, platforms that they use, their authenticity?)
7. How do you define authenticity? And how do you define the authenticity of micro-influencers?
8. What are the things/features that you think can make the micro-influencer authentic/genuine?
9. Do you think micro-influencers are more authentic/effective/genuine than other types? And why?
10. What do you think about micro-influencers being transparent/true/authentic to their followers, themselves, and the brand?
11. What do you think authenticity can bring to the micro-influencers and the brands? In contrast, what do you think being inauthentic can affect them?
12. What measures do you think micro-influencers can do to maintain/increase their authenticity?
13. What do you think about the explanation of the paid partnership between brands with micro-influencers with their followers?
14. What do you think about the transparency in collaboration between brands and micro-influencers?

15. How do you think the great transparency in collaboration between brands and micro-influencers can be ensured/increased?
16. What are the characteristics/values that you think are important when collaborating with micro-influencers?

III. Management of Collaborations with Micro-influencers

1. How do you think brands approach/find micro-influencers? (E.g. By their own connections or direct contacts with them or their agent or through agency?)
2. When choosing micro-influencers, what are the important criteria you think that should be considered?
3. Do you think it is important to build a clear process/guideline to choose micro-influencers? Why do you think so?
4. What do you think about micro-influencers/brands accepting a collaboration that does not fit/match with them?
5. Do you think the fit between the brand and micro-influencer is important in the collaboration? And why do you think so?
6. How do you think the brand fit can be ensured in the collaboration?
7. What things should be considered before, during, after the collaboration?
8. How do you think contracts are being decided? (booking cost, incentive whether monetary or non-monetary, types of contents, platforms, number of posts, schedule, message, etc.)
9. What can be the issues in the contract between the brand and the micro-influencer? What do you think they should include in the contract?
10. If the collaboration is formed, how would you think they should manage posting-related works? (number of posts, schedule, platforms, types of content, etc.)
11. Do you think it is required to explain the paid partnership between brands and micro-influencers? And why?
12. What kind of conflicts do you think that micro-influencers and brands can encounter?
13. How do you think they should manage conflicts?
14. What are the things they should consider to avoid conflicts?
15. What do you think they can get in return after a transparent and effective collaboration?
16. In your opinions, what are the important points made the collaboration successful?
17. How do you think they should measure the success of the paid collaboration? What metrics/things that they should consider?