Influencer Marketing and E-Commerce Returns: Exploring the Impact on Return Behavior and Sustainability

Master´s Thesis

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List of Abbreviations

CO2e	CO2 Equivalent
EU	European Union
(e-)WOM	(Electronic) Word-Of-Mouth
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
SMI	Social Media Influencer
UGC	User-Generated Content

Abstract

The rise of e-commerce has sparked criticism regarding its sustainability, especially considering high return rates. As shopping habits have moved online, so has marketing with influencer marketing aiding the rise of e-commerce. Previous research has focused on the influence of influencer marketing on the purchase process and brand image. This thesis addresses how influencer marketing affects return decisions by considering them as an extension of the purchase decision. Using a mixed-method approach, it compares the effects of influencer marketing on order value and return share for an e-commerce brand against price-based and no-incentive marketing. It explores the reasons behind return decisions to provide a holistic understanding. The analysis finds that influencer marketing increases order value and decreases return share, with a price-based outperforming a no-incentive marketing. Return reasons reveal patterns between groups, showing high product engagement among influencer-marketing consumers but also negative spillover effects for the other groups, such as feelings of unfairness when discounts are discovered post-purchase. This research extends current knowledge by highlighting the impact of influencer marketing on returns and guiding future research through identified return reason patterns.

Keywords

1. Introduction

E-commerce is projected to reach 5.9 billion euros in revenue by 2029 (Statista 2024). However, this trend raises significant sustainability concerns, with Amazon.com alone emitting more CO2 emissions than the country of Austria in 2022 (Amazon 2023; Global Carbon Project and Our World in Data 2023). These concerns are heightened because products are frequently returned, often due to consumers changing their minds or the product not meeting their expectations. The growth in e-commerce is driven by consumers spending more time online, increasing their use of social networks. Subsequently, marketers have seized the opportunity to leverage this new advertising space, mainly through influencer marketing.

Social media has translated into business opportunities for marketers and users alike. Recently, influencer marketing has become an integral part of modern marketing due to its relatively low cost, high speed, and direct connection to the consumer. It can transcend from a mere promotional tool to an aftersales service, market research, and product development tool if used wisely and managed well.

This thesis aims to establish how influencer marketing affects return behavior for online purchases. While criticism regarding the sustainability of influencer marketing has arisen, there are reasonable arguments that influencer marketing improves marketing performance, targeting, and consumer satisfaction. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior in online shopping, mainly focusing on its influence on purchase decisions and product return rates. By examining the effects of homophily, parasocial relationships, and social capital, the paper seeks to understand how influencer marketing decreases perceived risk and enhances product desirability, making purchase processes more seamless and product returns less likely.

This approach addresses a significant research gap by extending the previously studied relationship between influencer marketing and purchases to include return behavior. Earlier research has predominantly focused on purchase decisions, leaving a limited understanding of

how these influences extend to post-purchase actions, especially returns. This thesis also views online product returns through a marketing, rather than an operations lens. Furthermore, the sustainability dimension of e-commerce returns will be explored to enrich the discussion and view return behavior beyond a cost perspective. This thesis employs a mixed-method approach to explore the effects of influencer marketing on purchase and returns decisions and the specific reasons for returns. It contributes to academic research and practical applications for marketing managers in e-commerce.

The empirical analysis will investigate quantitative data on purchase value and return share to establish how consumers incentivized by influencer marketing differ from those given price-based or no incentives. A qualitative assessment will complement the research by adding insights into the reasons for product returns among these consumer segments. This comprehensive approach will quantify the impact of influencer marketing and provide nuanced insights into consumer behavior, offering a holistic view of how influencer marketing can be optimized to reduce return rates and enhance overall consumer satisfaction.

2. Influencer Marketing and E-Commerce Returns

To understand how influencer marketing affects return decisions, this chapter will introduce the concept and essential definitions of influencer marketing and illuminate its online landscape. After presenting these concepts, the effect of influencer marketing on the purchase decision will be discussed, setting the stage for a deeper analysis of its impact on return behaviors.

Social media influencers (SMI) are content creators who use their networks on the internet and predominantly on social media platforms to establish opinion leadership and thus affect their followers' opinions and purchase decisions (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 226). This definition highlights three cornerstones of influencer marketing: First, influencers are content creators. They create visually appealing and original user-generated content on platforms, which can take the form of blog entries, pictures, or videos (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017, p. 801; Vrontis et al. 2021, p. 625). Second, they establish credibility and thus opinion leadership in their niche. Their claim to opinion leadership does not originate from a celebrity status but rather their content creation (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 228). Third, their legitimation and credibility stem from their followers, which are their network. Conversely, celebrities derive credibility from sources outside their online following (Fowler and Thomas 2023, p. 935).

Influencers have a high degree of interaction with their followers. In contrast to influencers, the perceived distance between celebrities and followers is higher than between influencers and their followers (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020, p. 224). SMIs establish communities around themselves on social media networks. Network theory states that humans are interconnected through individual links in a network. Therefore, for SMIs, both the relevance of their connections and the sheer quantity of their followers are significant (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 228).

Influencer marketing can be described as the monetarization of this network. Influencers chosen by a brand create user-generated content (UGC) with sponsored advertising to increase

engagement, make sales, or drive profits. With growing distrust in traditional media sources and increased cost pressure due to economic stagnation (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, pp. 227–28), marketers choose a seeding strategy to promote their products and services (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017, p. 798). Furthermore, influencer marketing has proven superior to celebrity endorsements, its predecessor, as influencers are considered more trust-worthy and relatable (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020, p. 226). Communication, including via influencers, does not always directly aim at persuasion to purchase. Instead, it may aim to create brand or product awareness, build trust, or inform (Batra and Keller 2016, pp. 131–32).

2.1 Social Media Influencer Landscape

Being an influencer has evolved from a happenstance to a viable career (Graeme and YouGov 2021). This professionalization on the side of creators mirrors the side of marketers seeking influencers with the best fit for their brand and marketing targets. As marketers must decide which SMI to collaborate with, focusing on measurable variables to evaluate and compare different influencers is essential. One of the most prominent and used screening criteria in research and in practice is the size of the following of an influencer (Janssen, Schouten, and Croes 2022; Tian, Dew, and Iyengar 2024).

Campbell and Farrell (2020) categorized and characterized these following-size categories. Despite the overall rise in the number of followers in the entire social media platform world, there are four distinct categories of social media influencers by size: *Mega influencers* have more than a million followers, thus aiding brands in reaching a vast audience (Campbell and Farrell 2020, pp. 3–4). *Macro-influencers* have a following of 100k-1 million followers and thus still have an extensive reach. They often reside in one content area, such as beauty, fashion, or food, and have higher engagement rates. They are attractive to marketers because of their lower cost and relatively high exposure. *Micro-influencers* have a following of 10k to 100k followers and are perceived as more credible due to a more authentic and less commercial

image. Their following tends to be more local, allowing them to earn money via affiliate links (Campbell and Farrell 2020, pp. 3–4). Lastly, *nano-influencers*, theoretically, have between 0 and 10k followers. However, it is notable that in this case, the lower end is semantics, as the definition applied to influencers requires some social interaction, making an influencer with zero followers an unlikely marketing partner. Nano-influencers often have a niche and a high engagement rate with their followers, leading to high perceived authenticity and credibility. Cooperations frequently take the form of a company providing free products without additional compensation (Campbell and Farrell 2020, p. 4).

These influencer categories are a basis for marketers' decision-making and present a tradeoff. A larger following generally increases reach and effectiveness (Leung et al. 2022, pp. 108–11). Perceived popularity can increase purchase intentions (Vrontis et al. 2021, p. 625). When considering costs, evidence points to nano-influencers being the better investment in e-commerce (Beichert et al. 2023, pp. 16–17). Furthermore, they are perceived as authentic and have high engagement with their followers (Campbell and Farrell 2020, p. 4). In summation, follower size is a tradeoff between reach and authority against cost and relatability.

2.2 Influencer Marketing and Purchase Decisions

After defining the role of influencers in the online landscape and as a promotion tool, this chapter aims to establish *how* SMIs affect purchase decisions. Combining marketing, social sciences, and economics theories it will explain how SMIs have risen to become a popular marketing tool. First, a theoretical foundation will be built on purchase decisions and risk perception. Based on this foundation, three theoretical concepts from the field of social psychology will be used to examine the dynamics of influencer marketing that shape the purchase decision. These deliberations will especially consider e-commerce marketing, where consumers primarily rely on a company's online presence and word-of-mouth (WOM) to influence consumers' opinions. WOM-marketing refers to product-related communication amongst consumers. E-

WOM, or electronic word-of-mouth, marketing describes the same activity in an online setting, e.g., via online reviews (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, pp. 39–41).

When making a purchase, consumers weigh the combined features of a product to assess product attractiveness and willingness to pay (Du, Hu, and Damangir 2015, p. 33). They decide to purchase the product they perceive as having the most attractive combination of attributes (e.g. look, brand) and price. This decision is an inherently risky one, as the consumer must make a decision that considers not only current satisfaction with the bundle of features on offer, but must also account for future expected satisfaction. This perceived risk colors the entire consumer journey, from pre- to post-purchase behavior (Petersen and Kumar 2015, p. 270).

To explore how risk perception influences purchase decisions, the economic model of prospect theory factors in risk considerations as perceived by consumers. With their groundbreaking paper, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) introduced common violations to utility maximization problems and proposed a different theorem for decision-making under risk: prospect theory. It argues that the area considered influences a value function's slope. The prospect theory value function is concave and steeper in losses and convex in gains. It also establishes that most people assign a penalty to expected values in risky decisions in the gain area. One core assumption of prospect theory states that most people are risk averse and losses outweigh gains of the same monetary value (Kahneman and Tversky 1979, pp. 275–80). While the theory is decades old, it is still relevant today, e.g., in finance and insurance (Barberis 2013, pp. 180–89). It balances relative simplicity with increasing the applicability of economic theory to marketing questions and allows for the mental accounting of risks in purchase decisions.

For this paper, prospect theory provides valuable insight and two practical implications. First, consumers overestimate the negative utility associated with a risk. This leads to risk-avoidant behavior. Second, based on prospect theory, brands have two levers for positively influencing purchase decisions while maintaining price levels: minimizing risk perception to decrease the risk penalty or increasing expected utility to balance the equation even under higher

risk. Figure 1 depicts the considerations of consumers deciding on a purchase decision and how marketing can influence both levers.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

To optimize marketing, purchase decisions have been studied extensively, ranging from decision stage models to testing of store environments. According to this, in-store purchase experiences have been studied and improved. When encouraging consumers to purchase a product, one cornerstone of a strategy must involve reducing the perceived risk associated with the purchase. The in-store environment can be tailored to signal quality and encourage purchases. For example, music can reduce the uncertainty of purchase decisions, while pleasant smells encourage purchases and evoke emotions (Soars 2009, pp. 293–94). Engaging and involving the senses is a fundamental strategy for brands to differentiate themselves and increase sales in-store. For online purchases, these sensory clues are outside of brands' control.

In an online context, buyers must rely on a highly curated representation of a product. They can access the brand website, an e-commerce platform like Amazon.com, or read reviews. However, they are deprived of experiencing a product before their purchase. This lack of experiential inputs introduces two risks to the purchase decision: product fit uncertainty, i.e., does the product look as described, and quality uncertainty, i.e., does the product quality match the expectations (Hong and Pavlou 2014, pp. 334–38). Thus, online shopping consumers need to make a decision under heightened consideration of risk compared to in-store purchases (Lăzăroiu et al. 2020, pp. 4–5). To address the lack of experience, for more expensive purchases, users are more likely to search for information on social media (Hall and Towers 2017, p. 512).

The following subchapters will explore how influencer marketing can address both levers of the purchase decision by increasing trust in a brand and the desirability of the product it sells. The purchase decision, including its antecedents, is framed as a pivotal moment in a consumer journey and as one determinant of post-purchase behavior, including returns. This section will introduce three fundamental concepts that may explain how influencer marketing affects

the perceived purchase prospects. These three concepts are homophily – the self-selected similarity between influencers and their communities; parasocial relationships – the one-sided social interactions on social media platforms; and social capital – the general goodwill from social networks. To reduce the risk associated with a purchase decision, increased trust in the marketing message or the brand is needed. All three theories offer puzzle pieces to explore how influencer marketing can increase trust in brand and product, decrease perceived risk, and increase product desirability and perceived utility. Furthermore, it indicates how a marketing strategy that consists of targeting, engagement, and trust to encourage purchases can be implemented. The introduced theories grow more encompassing, starting with only the follower, then exploring the dyadic relationship between follower and influencer before extending to encompass communities and social networks. The three concepts will be explained and critically evaluated for their use in assessing how influencer marketing affects purchase decisions.

2.2.1 I am like you – homophily's effect on credibility and purchase motivation.

In ancient times, philosophers Aristotle and Plato observed that people liked associating with others who resembled them. The term homophily is used to describe this tendency to seek out people with similar sociodemographic, behavioral, or relational characteristics (Campbell and Farrell 2020, p. 5; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, pp. 415–16). Homophily can be divided into two categories: status homophily and value homophily (Dunkake 2019, p. 331). Status homophily refers to the observable identity of a consumer, e.g., demographic, race, size, or attractiveness. Value homophily refers to morals and beliefs (Dunkake 2019, p. 331; Shoenberger and Kim 2023, p. 370). Homophily has been proven to be a significant factor in the effectiveness of social media marketing (Onofrei, Filieri, and Kennedy 2022, pp. 107–8).

Homophily could reduce the perceived risk of purchase by increasing general trust in the communication and allowing a consumer to glimpse how they would perceive the product without experiencing it. Perceived similarity increases the trust in influencers' branded posts

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(Lou and Yuan 2019, p. 68). In a relationship, homophily increases trust and perceived closeness, especially in newer relationships. Here, it addresses both cognitive and emotional trust, the credibility of information and a feeling of safety (Ertug et al. 2022, p. 49). On a product level, homophily was also beneficial. Shoenberger and Kim (2023) found that status homophily increased perceived popularity and purchase intent (Shoenberger and Kim 2023, pp. 377–79). Homophily as an antecedent to trust was also shown to affect the purchase intention of product attitude significantly and trumped the effect of influencer expertise in a specific field (Kim and Kim 2021, p. 228; Lou and Yuan 2019, p. 68). One possible explanation is that perceived shared experience lends expertise not in the specific product segment but rather in the consumer's individual experience. For example, how the consumer will feel in the jeans (shared experience) is more valuable than influencer expertise in fashion quality and trends (product expertise). In fact, on social media platforms like Facebook, non-experts' endorsement is more beneficial in encouraging consumers to try a product (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019, pp. 91–92). Through improved trust in the relationship and the message, homophily in influencer marketing could reduce consumer risk perception.

Furthermore, homophily could also increase the desirability of a product. Perceiving a substantial similarity with a person can lead to comparison. This comparison can lead to envy, defined as observing someone else with qualities, objects, or achievements one wants but does not possess. Envy can be classified as benign or malicious. Both emotions are unpleasant because of the perceived disparity, but malicious envy is accompanied by hostility towards the person being envied (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009, p. 420). Benign envy can boost motivation to change, especially when the road to change seems achievable (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011, p. 790). A study on adolescents found that more homogenous social networks increased positive envy (Noon and Meier 2019, p. 11). This envy could be more likely to spark purchase intentions as it comes with perceived agency that change is possible. Another study confirms that homophily increases benign envy. Furthermore, the researchers

found that benign envy did increase purchase intentions for the shown product (Wang et al. 2024, pp. 285–87).

Outside of balancing the purchase decision under risk by addressing risk perception and increasing desire for the product, homophily is an advantageous mechanism in influencer marketing, as it allows brands to target consumers through self-selected online communities (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 233). Follower-brand fit has become a much-researched aspect of influencer marketing. A good fit increases the likelihood of positive reception, purchase intentions, and trust in the advertisement (Janssen, Schouten, and Croes 2022, p. 118; Vrontis et al. 2021, p. 625). Furthermore, perceived similarity increases the search for user-generated product information, thus driving engagement with the product (Leonhardt, Pezzuti, and Namkoong 2020, p. 166).

The evidence reviewed here suggests that homophily can increase trust by giving consumers the feeling of shared experiences and, thus, shared preferences with an influencer advertising a product. It may also lead to aspirational purchases to increase similarity between influencers and followers. Thus, homophily can be a powerful tool to increase a perceived product value while decreasing perceived risk.

2.2.2 You belong with me – parasocial relationships for trust and communication.

After discussing the self-selection of followers into online communities and the resulting benefits for perceived risk reduction and increased expected value of a product, this chapter will explore how followers and influencer (inter)actions guide purchase decisions. Fans and followers of online and media personalities can often feel a strong connection, loyalty, and even a feeling of kinship with a public figure. These one-sided relationships are called parasocial relationships (Lou and Kim 2019, p. 4). As the etymological origin of the word parasocial (compound of beside and companionship) indicates, these relationships mimic friendships through

an illusion of intimacy that is often created by personal insights into the celebrity's everyday life (Lou and Kim 2019, p. 4; Oxford English Dictionary 2023).

Trust and social relationships are crucial for successful influencer marketing. A follower feeling a parasocial relationship with an influencer forms brand trust and increases purchase intentions (Leite and Baptista 2022, p. 303). This parasocial relationship can lead to the established trust extending to cooperating brands (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 234). Furthermore, parasocial relationships also positively affect positive e-WOM intentions, meaning that an effective seeding strategy can snowball throughout social networks (Hwang and Zhang 2018, p. 165).

Influencers can actively work on establishing stronger relationships with their followers. Creating authentic content strengthens the parasocial bonds between influencers and followers and increases credibility and homophily effects (Weinlich and Semerádová 2022, pp. 66–67). The perceived authenticity of influencers can also improve emotional attachment (Kowalczyk and Pounders 2016, p. 352). Thus, overall risk perception can be reduced through parasocial relationships by increasing trust in advertising messages and source and increasing general positive messaging about a brand / product online.

After addressing how parasocial relationships reduce risk perception, this section will summarize how parasocial relationships may lead to increased valuation of an influencer-advertised product. Parasocial relationships could inspire followers to emulate an influencer's lifestyle and incentivize consumers to buy products. It also imbues brands and products with the attributes the followers ascribe to the influencer and positively affects product attitudes (Bi and Zhang 2022, p. 166; Cheung et al. 2022, pp. 9–11). Establishing a social presence by allowing followers authentic glimpses into an influencer's daily life positively affects trustworthiness, brand attitude, and envy, which can lead to encouraging a purchase (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019, pp. 570–74). Furthermore, parasocial relationships lower consumer perception of persuasive intent, positively affecting marketing effectiveness (Breves et al. 2021, p. 1220).

With the reduction of the perception of persuasive intent, influencer marketing content would likely be perceived as authentic word-of-mouth. WOM is crucial to reassure consumers, especially in the final stages of a purchase decision (Sweeney, Soutar, and Mazzarol 2008, p. 346).

Parasocial relationships are a virtuous cycle involving the triadic relationship between the follower, influencer, and brand. They can increase loyalty to the influencer and increase purchase intention for influencer-advertised products (Hwang and Zhang 2018, pp. 163–65; Vrontis et al. 2021, p. 625). Furthermore, participation in parasocial behavior also aids the relationship between homophily and consumer participation behavior, thus increasing the effects of homophily. (Bu, Parkinson, and Thaichon 2022, p. 14). Here, smaller influencers have an advantage over influencers with a larger following, as consumers are less likely to perceive that they are being used to sell a product. Their reactions and endorsements are perceived as more genuine (Cascio Rizzo et al. 2023, p. 3,17).

Furthermore, parasocial relationships increase the trust and relatability of influencers by mimicking offline relationship dynamics. Therefore, the influencer must balance commercial objectives with community- and relationship-building practices (Kozinets et al. 2010, p. 83). These could reduce the risk perception of a purchase and increase the effect of e-WOM and a consumer's desire to buy a product.

2.2.3 We are a community – social capital and monetization of connection.

After discussing how individuals choose influencers to follow and how they relate to them, this chapter closes out by discussing how these individual connections form networks that provide power and authority to influencers. Network theory is a commonly applied theory in influencer marketing that explains how ideas, contents, and creators diffuse in a network (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 231). Social capital theory can explain how strategically building and using these connections can lead to access to resources, influence, and information (Lin 2017, p. 31).

Social capital is the goodwill, resources, and trust that originates from the networks of relationships between individuals within communities or societies. As a concept, it combines many studied theories and phenomena of human interaction, including informal organization, social networks, and reciprocity. The theory states that social capital summarizes the benefits of human interactions for individuals (Adler and Kwon 2002, pp. 17–18). Like monetary capital, individuals and groups can purposely build and use it (Lin 2017, p. 30). Social capital theory predates online social media networks, where it has become more monetizable and quantifiable than ever. The concept of social capital signifies that influencers can tactically accrue these resources. By sharing authentic content, building relationships, and engaging with followers, SMIs expand their social capital as they would financial capital by investing in stocks (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 231). Influencers can build social capital through their position within a network of influencers, strategically assessing whom to follow (Goldenberg et al. 2023, p. 5). In research, three dimensions of social capital have been discussed: structural – the number and strength of ties; cognitive – shared languages and narratives; and relational – shared trust, norms, and identification (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998, p. 251). This chapter will summarize how these dimensions function in building communities around social media influencers and how this community building, in turn, influences purchase decisions.

The relational element of social network ties is based on parasocial relationships, which increase trust and decrease purchase risk. Social capital as a resource can be built and used to increase trust in an influencer's opinion. The structural element of social capital can also play a role in reducing risk. Influencers with a high number of followers and likes can increase trust and purchase intention. Interestingly, this principle is inverted for influencers focused on sustainability (Pittman and Abell 2021, p. 76). This suggests that followers want to distinguish themselves from the mainstream in some niches.

 The cognitive and relational elements of social capital can also increase purchase intention and expected utility. Shared narratives and norms can be expressed through patterns of

consumption. In contrast to envy and aspiration as drivers of a purchase decision, the community element comes to the forefront here. Social identity can increase the desire for a product and improve brand attitude (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006, p. 55). By purchasing a product, people can signal their belonging to a group, e.g., a fan community around an influencer (Liu et al. 2015, pp. 35–36). This phenomenon is strengthened through communication about products in the peer group (Wang, Yu, and Wei 2012, p. 204). Influencers, as central nodes in a network, can lend their social capital, structural, relational, and cognitive, to the collaborating brands.

Criticism of social capital includes that its metaphorical and theoretical connection to financial capital ends at transferability (Sobel 2002). However, influencer marketing challenges the assumption of limited transferability, as research indicates that influencers can at least partially transfer their brand image onto cooperating brands (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 235). Social capital theory can address both levers in the purchase decision: it can reduce risk through increased trust and incentivize consumers to buy a product to signal group belonging.

Summarizing the previous three sub-chapters, the literature on homophily, parasocial relationships, and social capital offers valuable insight into the mechanism behind influencer marketing. Moreover, they highlight possibilities for marketers to improve consumer experience. Consumers experience the risk associated with online purchases as an uncomfortable barrier to purchases. Influencer marketing can be a valuable tool to reduce this barrier and empower consumers to feel confident in their decisions. Group belonging and aspiration to mimic an influencer's look or lifestyle can also incentivize consumers to buy products. All three theories highlight the relational elements of social media marketing, which must transcend and sometimes even blur the commercial and persuasive intent behind content creation.

2.3 Influencer Marketing and Return Decisions

Building on the previous exploration of how influencer marketing affects purchase decisions, this chapter delves deeper into the subsequent phase of the consumer journey: the return decision. In the context of online shopping, where purchases are made under conditions of

uncertainty and without full experiential knowledge, the return decision emerges as a continuation of the initial purchase decision. Every purchase decision entails a subsequent return decision, unless a company does not allow for product returns. By examining the interplay between consumer expectations and the reality of product experience, this chapter provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics of e-commerce product returns and how they can be reduced through influencer marketing.

2.3.1 Conceptualizing return decisions as a continuation of the purchase decision.

As explained in the previous chapter, purchase decisions are inherently risky, as the anticipated value often includes considerations of product longevity and long-term use. In-store purchases allow the shopper to feel and experience the product and, in some cases, even test it. This experiential dimension of the purchase decision is lacking for e-commerce. The option of product returns can reduce the inherent uncertainty by allowing a consumer to revise their decision upon receiving the product. In a study on the value of a money-back guarantee, the option to return a product reduced the perceived risk (Heiman et al. 2015, p. 105).

The lack of experiential cues in e-commerce purchase decisions introduces product fit uncertainty as well as product quality uncertainty which are both linked to increased e-commerce returns. Product fit uncertainty describes doubt about whether a product will meet their personal expectations and requirements based on limited online information, while product quality uncertainty pertains to concern about the overall standard and performance of the product, which may not be fully conveyed through digital descriptions and images (Hong and Pavlou 2014, pp. 335–38). The experiential dimension includes seeing the product with their own eyes, touching it, and experiencing a store environment. All of these can make up crucial cues to stimulate purchase behavior (Ofek, Katona, and Sarvary 2011, p. 42). Viewing the return decision through the same factors as the purchase decisions and accounting for how uncertainty mitigation works with influencer marketing, can improve understanding of the factors that

might motivate a consumer (not) to return a product. Therefore, the purchase process concludes when a consumer actively decides not to return a product, having learned all the information they would typically collect when making a purchase decision in-store.

In an attempt to reduce costs, many online retailers are aiming to reduce returns by increasing friction in the returns process. These measures might be very unpopular with consumers and could even lead to a reduction in sales. In a survey, only 27% of people indicated that they were willing to pay for returns (Statista Consumer Insights 2024, p. 22). Nonetheless, fees are becoming more common, with fashion retailers like Uniqlo and H&M introducing them (Jensen 2023). Research paints a more nuanced picture of the ideal number of returns. Up to a threshold, the option of product returns leads to more purchases in the future. Returns can signal assurance to a consumer. A lenient return policy can reduce anticipation of regret and risk in an online purchase decision, which is deprived of the experiential aspects of in-store purchases (Wood 2001, p. 158). A study on Swedish consumers exploring the signaling effect of return policy leniency found that a lenient return increased purchase intention. Notably, this relationship was fully mediated by consumer trust (Oghazi et al. 2018, pp. 195–96). This is likely due to lower perceived risk from the consumer side when return policies are lenient (Petersen and Kumar 2009, p. 47). Thus, total consumer satisfaction is influenced by returns and returns processes. This heightens the importance to marketers as satisfaction increases future advertising and promotion efficiency (Luo and Homburg 2007, p. 142). While there is a tradeoff between cost and consumer goodwill, returns can be seen as an investment to reduce the overall marketing costs. Furthermore, returns offer consumers the option to avoid the cognitive dissonance they may experience when a purchase does not meet expectations. Without a return option, a consumer is forced to make peace with the purchase, leading to increased satisfaction to avoid feelings of regret. However, even though satisfaction is increased, repurchase intentions are reduced (Geva and Goldman 1991, p. 159). Lenient policies may help to maximize customer lifetime value.

On the other hand, research suggests that a full refund return policy might not be optimal as its value is smaller than the associated cost (Shang et al. 2017, p. 60). This was confirmed by a meta-analysis that correlated a lenient return policy with both increased purchase and return proclivity (Janakiraman, Syrdal, and Freling 2016, p. 232). However, the overall effect depends on the uncertainty of the purchase for the buyer and the salvage value upon return for the seller, among other factors. While these factors were established in a model of a monopoly market, the research was verified by practitioners, allowing for some applicability (Chaleshtari et al. 2022, p. 12). In an experiment, it was shown that return experiences have an influence on consumer loyalty. A seamless return experience increases consumer loyalty, while a negative one reduces it (Seger-Guttmann et al. 2018, p. 127). Other measures to reduce the return rate, especially in fashion retailing, are less inconvenient to the consumers. These include measures to reduce fit uncertainty, which is especially prevalent in fashion. Virtual try-on options and sizing recommendations have been shown to reduce uncertainty and returns (Gallino and Moreno 2018, p. 784). Advancements in augmented reality and virtual reality can be utilized to facilitate these tools.

2.3.2 Impact of influencer marketing on return decisions.

Similarly, influencer marketing can be used as a positive tool to reduce returns by increasing confidence in the purchase decision and engaging consumers to improve post-purchase satisfaction. Based on the assumption that returns are a continuation of the purchase decision, the foundation of return behavior is laid in the marketing process that leads to the consumer placing the order. Here, influencer marketing can improve targeting, increase trust, and lead to heightened enthusiasm about a product. These positive pre-purchase emotions form the foundation of avoiding returns. The following chapter will address how influencer marketing can relieve the two most common uncertainties leading to returns: product fit and product quality uncertainty. Connecting the theories that affect the purchase decision, it will also explore how the connection

with the brand and the positive attitude toward it can be carried into the final purchase or return decision.

The mechanisms of homophily, parasocial relationships, and social capital, which enhance the desirability of products and decrease consumer risk perception in online purchases, also contribute to reducing e-commerce returns. By fostering trust and aligning consumer expectations with influencer endorsements, homophily increases satisfaction with purchases. Parasocial relationships deepen emotional investment and commitment, making consumers less likely to return products out of loyalty and attachment. Additionally, the social capital of influencers assures consumers of the product's quality and reliability, reducing the likelihood of dissatisfaction. Collectively, these mechanisms facilitate seamless purchase decisions and mitigate post-purchase dissonance, leading to lower return rates as consumers' expectations are more likely to be met. Figure 2 provides an overview on how the previously discussed theories affecting the purchase decision affect the return decision, which will be detailed and discussed in this chapter.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

The first common reason for return is that a product does not fit the consumer. Product fit uncertainty can refer to the product sizing in fashion purchases or a mismatch of a product to a consumer need. Research finds that the majority of returns occur because the product does not match consumers' perception of the online listing (Martínez-López et al. 2022, p. 2). This product fit uncertainty is usually resolved into certainty upon arrival as the fit of the product is apparent upon trial. Thus, the ideal time to reduce product-fit risks is pre-purchase. In a KPMG survey, consumers suggested that more information would help to curb product returns. 57% of participants suggested to have better product descriptions, while 43% wished for more detailed product pictures. This indicates a higher need for information to avoid a product not meeting consumers' expectations (Statista and KPMG 2022, p. 10). As established in the previous chapter, purchases are a risky decision for consumers. One common tool to reduce returns is to

reduce the uncertainty of a purchase to avoid regret. This can be done through high-quality pictures, detailed descriptions, and purchase-risk notices, which signal to the consumer that a product might look slightly different in person. Interestingly, such notices do not deter from purchases by making purchase risk more salient, but they do reduce regret and returns (Martínez-López et al. 2022, pp. 7–8).

Since visual appearance is one of the most important criteria, influencer marketing may reduce returns by showing products in a variety of settings and photographed in a variety of styles. On a website, this could disturb the coherence of a brand identity. Influencer-created content can offer more variety in depiction. Furthermore, it is often perceived as more authentic (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 237). When the brand-influencer fit is good, it is plausible that through the self-selection of consumers into online communities, this good fit transfers into a good follower-brand fit. This can build a virtuous cycle for influencers, followers, and brands. As influencers engage in endorsements that are perceived as truthful and authentic, their credibility increases (Lee and Eastin 2021, p. 833). Authenticity can be achieved through passion and transparency about a brand sponsorship (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020, p. 564).

Product quality uncertainty is another common reason for returns. In contrast to product fit uncertainty, quality uncertainty might not immediately be resolved as it requires prediction of longevity and long-term quality. While receival of the product puts information levels on par with those of an in-store purchase, signaling is required to reduce product quality uncertainty-related returns. Store websites can serve as an important signal for quality as website quality positively influences perceived product quality (Wells, Valacich, and Hess 2011, p. 385). The presence of online reviews may also reduce the return rate (Sun et al. 2021, p. 10). Remarkably, persuasive word of mouth, e.g., influencer marketing, can also be an incentive for product quality (Godes 2017, p. 274). This reveals that word-of-mouth can be an important gauge as well as a driver of product quality, which increases its signaling power.

These findings are transferable influencer marketing, as social media influencers can be a source of electronic word-of-mouth marketing (Liu et al. 2015, p. 51). Their opinion is perceived as authentic and can shape the expectations that a consumer has upon product arrival. When the quality does not match the expected quality based on word-of-mouth, this can lead to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort experienced when holding two conflicting beliefs or attitudes simultaneously (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, pp. 3–4). In the context of a purchase decision, the past beliefs that led to the decision, e.g., the trust in influencer reviews, might conflict with the actual product performance, causing psychological discomfort. To minimize cognitive dissonance, consumers can alter their perception of a product post-purchase to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of regret. The higher their belief in their own free will and trust in their own decision is, the more satisfied consumers are with purchases because they do feel responsible for making the purchase decision (Fernandes et al. 2022, pp. 120–21). Through effective influencer marketing that builds trust and alleviates knowledge of persuasive intent, influencer marketing as a form of word-of-mouth marketing can be used to improve the perceived quality of a product upon arrival at the consumer.

Besides reducing the most common uncertainties associated with product returns, influencer marketing can also help foster a long-term relationship between brand and consumer. First, influencer marketing can increase the meaning and value of a product by expanding its attributes to include some of the influencer's attributes. The interchangeability or uniqueness of goods influences post-purchase evaluation. Goods that are perceived as more unique are more likely to lead to regret of not purchasing, whereas material goods that are interchangeable are associated with purchase regret (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012, p. 220). This presents an opportunity for marketers to imbue their products with more uniqueness through influencer marketing. Furthermore, it is possible to blur the line between material and experiential goods. Connecting with influencers through products, seeing them post-purchase on the influencer, and the feeling of community could transform a material good into a mixed good. It can also

improve the mood that consumers feel when purchasing a product. When they are entertained by an influencer and decide to purchase a product, this positive pre-purchase mood can increase satisfaction with a product (Ozer and Gultekin 2015, pp. 74–75).

This chapter has reviewed the two most common return reasons, product fit and product quality, and hypothesized how influencer marketing can alleviate both uncertainties to increase consumer confidence in the purchase decision and reduce return rates. By providing reassurance and embedding consumers into communities, marketers can utilize the social aspects of decision-making to reduce online returns and increase consumer satisfaction. Furthermore, it explored how the sense of belonging in an online community can improve the relationship between brand and follower through interactions with the influencers.

3. Sustainability Considerations of E-Commerce Returns

In the European Union, consumers may return products ordered online within 14 days without providing any justification (*Directive 2011/83/EU* 2014). Thus, at least in the EU, a certain percentage of e-commerce returns will be unavoidable. Furthermore, offering (free) returns can have significant benefits for a brand by signaling trustworthiness and quality. But excessive returns may aggravate the negative environmental effects caused by excessive consumption. To understand the sustainability dimension of influencer marketing in the context of product returns, this chapter will explore the environmental cost of e-commerce returns. Product returns incur environmental costs through waste of packaging material, excess transportation, and, if not adequately managed, complete product loss (Statista and EHI Retail Institute 2022, p. 23). This chapter will focus on the environmental sustainability dimension, focusing on ecological considerations.

Online shopping can be less sustainable than shopping in-store due to excessive packaging and transport (Oláh et al. 2018, p. 7). However, a US simulation study found significant greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions savings when compared to omnichannel or in-store shopping. Routes for the delivery vehicles are usually planned very efficiently, and people will also use

motorized vehicles to go shopping in-store (Jaller and Pahwa 2020, pp. 9–11). However, this simulation was limited to two urban areas in the US. Urban infrastructure and the mode of transportation for the last mile introduce large variability in the environmental effects of transportation. But especially in rural regions of the EU, this potential saving of GHG emissions is also applicable (Siikavirta et al. 2002, pp. 92–94). Furthermore, consumer behaviors and choices (e.g., instant delivery) and also returns can affect the sustainability of e-commerce (Rai 2021, p. 15). The environmental benefit of online orders over in-store shopping especially relies on the assumption of substitution effects, meaning that the online order actually substitutes for a shopping trip. An international review found weak evidence for substitution effects in some shoppers (Le, Carrel, and Shah 2022, pp. 279–84). However, e-commerce returns incur additional transportation due to trips to drop-off points for returns. The European Return-o-Meter (EUROM) estimated that returns in Germany accounted for 795,000 t CO2e, the equivalent of 150,000 round-trip flights from Frankfurt to New York (Asdecker, Felch, and Karl 2022; Klimareferat Stadt Frankfurt am Main -).

Managing return flows is a crucial step in managing sustainability in sales (Lahti, Wincent, and Parida 2018, p. 6). This can be a challenge as, on average, 24.2% of orders are (partially) returned (Asdecker, Felch, and Karl 2022). The organization of returns and the restocking are resource-intensive. If products are restocked, retailers typically only recoup a limited share of product value due to the necessity of restoring and refurbishing the product (Ofek, Katona, and Sarvary 2011, p. 43). While, on average, retailers are able to recover 93.2% of returned articles, returns still result in the destruction of 17 million articles (Asdecker, Felch, and Karl 2022). Fashion items (clothes) are most frequently returned, followed by shoes, outdoor, and sports items (Statista Consumer Insights 2024, p. 15). As fast-fashion and ultra-fast-fashion brands continue to grow, the problem of unsustainable returns could be aggravated. These business models often rely on a very fast supply chain, continuous launches, and advertisement of new products, often through influencer marketing (Camargo, Pereira, and Scarpin

2020, p. 546). While those characteristics make these businesses successful, they do not necessarily support sustainable returns. By the time that items are returned, they might already be out of style.

In summary, the sustainability impact of e-commerce returns presents challenges for the environment, consumers, and companies. The environmental costs of carbon emissions through excessive transportation, energy consumption, and waste generation through production and recovery negatively affect the impact assessment of online shopping. Addressing these challenges necessitates a multifaceted approach, encompassing improved accuracy in product descriptions, more efficient return logistics, and heightened consumer awareness about the environmental consequences of returns. Influencer marketing offers the benefit of a highly targeted audience, high engagement of followers and thus consumers, and the opportunity to quickly adapt to changes or challenges in the market environment to reduce returns and ensure consumer satisfaction. However, when considering the sustainability impact of influencer marketing, the isolation of its effect on returns does not paint the full picture. Rather, one must also consider possible overconsumption through increased marketing intensity.

4. Empirical Analysis and Results

This empirical analysis investigates the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior in an online shopping context, specifically focusing on order value and return behavior. Building on the literature research that frames the return decision as an extension of the purchase decision, this analysis examines how influencer endorsements not only influence initial purchases but also potentially reduce return rates. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study first employs quantitative techniques to analyze transaction data from an e-commerce retailer, assessing the differences between purchase value and return share among consumers exposed to influencer marketing, discounts, and no incentives. This analysis is subsequently complemented with a qualitative assessment to explore the underlying reasons behind return decisions,

providing a comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketing shapes consumer behavior throughout the purchase journey.

4.1 Data and Methodology

The dataset encompasses 5,687,823 orders from a European brand that designs and produces phone cases and other accessories. Its marketing strategy is based heavily on owned social media, influencer marketing, and discounts. All orders were uniquely identified by an order identification number. To study typical consumer behavior, orders with more than 20 items were excluded from the analysis. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the number of items in one order after the threshold of 20 was applied. The median number of items ordered is 2, with an average of 2.923. This means the exclusion of 88,337 orders that exceed the median by more than ten times, leaving 5,599,486 orders. The distribution of the number of items in one order is displayed in Figure 3, which shows an expected right-skewed distribution – most orders encompass one to two items.

Insert Figure 3 about here.

Of these orders, 3,575,121 were ordered with a voucher code, which results in a price reduction for the consumer and allows a company to identify and track influencer campaigns. When a price discount is granted, it is on average 455.91. An average order costs 566.82, so the discount is substantial and is granted for about half of the orders. However, not all discount codes are uniquely associated with influencers. They might also indicate seasonal discounts (Christmas, Summer) or other sale events (e.g., Black Friday). Only known influencer codes were considered to isolate the effect that influencers have on return patterns. This was achieved by cross-referencing the return codes entered when ordering with a list of influencer codes. Thus, the dataset encompasses 554,056 orders that were placed with a known influencer code.

The orders were divided into three categories. A *control* set that contains orders that did not receive a price discount and did not enter an influencer code, the *discount* category that contains orders that did receive a price discount but were not associated with an influencer code,

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and the last category of orders which received a price discount via an influencer, called the *influencer* category. There was a share of orders that could not be sorted into categories because they did not meet the sorting criteria. For a list of included dependent variables, as well as their descriptive statistics, see table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

4.2 Effect of Influencer Marketing on Purchase Behavior

Based on the effect of influencer marketing discussed previously, we would expect to see an increase in order value if an influencer code was used. The hypothesis is that influencer marketing leads to higher order value is grounded in the idea that influencers, through homophily, parasocial relationships, and social capital, increase product desirability. Here, it is important to abstract the effect of social media influencer marketing from the effect of the discount that is associated with it. Social media influencers are usually assigned a code that they can share with their followers. The consumer inputs the code when they order and receive a discount in return. This allows the influencer and the brand to track the effectiveness of influencer marketing activities and permits for comparison of effectiveness across influencers. In this study, this poses a challenge of an influencer code signaling a dual incentive for the consumer: a price discount and the promotion of the influencer. The discount may encourage consumers to increase their spending on an order due to the perception of having secured a favorable deal. This is why the sample was split into three groups: a control, discount, and influencer group.

The effect of the influencer campaign E_{IC} can be described as such: $E_I + E_D = E_{IC}$. E_D defines the effect that is achieved by the discount alone. Therefore, the effect of the discount code on influencer orders should be considered. The aim of this analysis was to identify if E_I, the advertising effect of the influencer itself, is a positive contribution regardless of discount. This positive contribution is based on the relationship between follower and influencer that was established and that encouraged a purchase decision. Thus, the hypothesis is formulated as:

H1:Orders with an associated influencer code have a higher order value than merely discounted orders or orders with no discount.

To test this hypothesis, a new variable that encompasses the value, not the price, of the order was created. Then, an ANOVA is used to identify if there is a significant difference between groups. The average order value is 935.486. This measure has a high spread, which can be explained by the distribution of the number of items in an order and the correlation between number of items and order value. Order value was chosen over order price as order price is correlated with the group distinction as it indirectly considers discounts granted for the discount and influencer group. However, this does have the disadvantage of possibly not accurately displaying consumer behavior which is likely more driven by the price paid rather than the value. Descriptive statistics seem to confirm the hypothesis. The *control* group without influencer code and discount has a mean order value of 518.214, the *discount* group has an increased order value of 772.989 and the *influencer* category an order value of 2845.469. Due to the large spread in these measures, an ANOVA was used to minimize the chance of sampling error or outliers skewing this result.

The one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences in the mean order values across the three groups (control, discount, and influencer) ($F(3, 5599482) = 771173$, $p < 2e\text{-}16$). This signifies a highly significant difference between the groups. A Tukey's post-hoc test was used to determine where these differences between the groups arose. All groups differed significantly from each other at a 95% CI, confirming the results from the descriptive statistics.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Visual inspection of the QQ-Plot depicted in figure 4 revealed non-normally distributed residuals in some areas. Furthermore, both assumptions of equal group size and equal group variance are unmet.

Insert Figure 4 about here.

Thus, a robust ANOVA was conducted to confirm the results. The Welch's test showed significant differences in mean order values across the groups (F(3, 672571) = 235145, p < 2.2e-16). This indicates that the mean order values differ significantly between the *control*, *discount*, *influencer* groups. Thus, we can confirm hypothesis 1. The purchase value *control*, *discount* and *influencer* group differed significantly, and the effect of the influencer marketing combined with the influencer discount code yielded the highest order value.

4.3 Effect of Influencer Marketing on Return Behavior

After establishing how influencer codes relate to purchase behavior, the next question is how influencer marketing affects return behavior. First, a new variable, the return share, is introduced. Return share is a variable that indicates the percentage of an order that was returns. The denominator of the variable in this case is the order price to ensure that a fully returned order has a return share of 100%. As of the time of writing this thesis, the store allows registering returns until 14 days after receiving the order. There is no restocking fee or refund deduction, but the consumer must cover the cost of return shipping.

Based on the literature research, the expected result is that the return share of discounted orders is lower than that of the *control* group. This is because the price determines part of consumers' assessment of whether a purchase has positive utility. The *influencer* code is expected to have a further positive influence on lowering return shares as it affects both sides of the equation: lowering the price through a discount and increasing the perceived product value as well as mitigating general uncertainty. Influencer marketing lowers return shares is based on homophily, parasocial relationships, and social capital, which together enhance consumer trust and satisfaction. Thus, the second hypothesis is formulated as:

H2: The control group has the highest return share, followed by the discount group. The influencer group has the lowest return share.

The mean values seem to confirm this hypothesis. The overall return share is at 3.326%. The *control* group has a return share of 4.614%, higher than the *discount* group at 3.297%. The

return in the *influencer* group is less than half and is at only 1.51%. Again, an ANOVA was used to confirm a significant difference in mean between these groups. Due to the high variance both a conventional and a robust statistical method were applied. Both the one-way ANOVA ($F_{(3, 5599482)} = 3813$, $p < 2e\text{-}16$) and the Kruskal-Wallis test (chi-squared = 1980.7, df = 3, $p < 2.2e\text{-}16$) revealed significant differences in the return share across the groups. Post-hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD test showed significant pairwise differences between all groups, with the influencer group having the lowest mean return share, followed by the discount group. The control group had the highest return share. The results are listed in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here.

To further understand how influencer marketing influences return behavior, differentiations within the *influencer* group related to the following size of the influencer will be assessed. The dataset included a classification of influencers, as described in chapter 2, with the addition of the category of nano-nano-influencers. Those are influencers with fewer than 1000 followers. The distribution among orders in these influencer size categories is not even, with most orders placed with a code associated with macro-influencers. Based on higher degree of perceived authenticity and relatability, we would expect smaller influencers to outperform larger influencers by having a lower return share. Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H3: The smaller an influencer's following, the lower the return rate.

H3 will be tested using a regression analysis. The independent variable is the influencer category, ranging from mega to nano-nano influencers. The descriptive statistics detailed in Table 4 reveal that there is likely no linear effect of influencer size on return share.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Insert Figure 6 about here.

As seen in Figure 6, the highest share of returns is in association with nano-nano influencers (2.61%). Then, the ranking follows the expected pattern of highest associated returns with mega-influencers (2.26%), followed by macro-influencers (1.83%). The lowest return rate was

for micro-influencers (0.9%). The regression analysis summarized in Table 5 shows that the influencer category significantly affects the return share. Specifically, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers have lower return shares compared to mega-influencers, while nano-nano-influencers have a slightly higher return share. However, the model explains only a small portion of the variance in return share (R-squared = 0.29%).

Insert Table 5 about here.

This indicates that the size of the influencers following has no linear effect on the return share. The regression analysis cannot find sufficient support for H3; visual inspection of the relationship suggests a non-linear relationship.

4.4 Qualitative Assessment of Return Comments

The subset of the dataset that contains returns and reasons from the initial analysis encompasses 92,125 orders and returns. The data was filtered by selecting for orders with a positive return rate and containing a comment. After that, the dataset which contained all comments was further sorted to only include comments from the category "other reasons". The final set covered 13,306 orders, containing 3,374 entries in the *control* group, 8,906 entries in the *discount* group and 1,026 entries in the *influencer* group. In a next step, the isolated comments were analyzed through tokenization. As the group size differs significantly, the 50 words that were used most frequently by relative frequency are displayed in figure 6.

Insert Figure 6 about here.

The relative frequency allows for comparison between groups even with different group sizes. There is a remarkably similar distribution between groups for the first 35 words. The first divergence occurs in 36th place, where both the *discount* and *influencer* group mention quality as a return reason, which is not mentioned in the control group at all. On the other hand, the *influencer* group does not mention wrong, which is usually used in the context of wrong order/product, as much as the other groups. But they do mention damaged goods more often. While the quantitative exploration of text data can offer interesting directions for research, it is also

susceptible to errors. In this context of writing return reasons for orders, spelling mistakes are often made, which cannot be accounted for other than through manual screening. The different languages also disguise when words appear multiple times.

Language is a rich medium for communication and the true meaning of a word is often only understood in its true context (Nadkarni, Ohno-Machado, and Chapman 2011, pp. 544–46). While research methodologies have made strides in natural language processing in the past years, especially with the rapid development of artificial intelligence, interpreting the true meaning of comments in different languages, many of which contain grammatical and spelling errors, posed too many risks. This meant that human processing was required to better understand the contents of the other reasons sections. For this purpose, the smallest population, the *influencer* group comments were taken as a benchmark. This entity contained 1,026 comments. Accordingly, 1,026 comments were randomly sampled via software from the other two groups: *discount* and *control*. All three sets were treated separately. Comments in languages other than German or English were translated to English using an automatic translator and quality checked by the author. The comments were then categorized by the scheme in Table 6 which also includes examples from the comments.

Insert Table 6 about here.

The categorization was developed from a subset of 100 comments to fit the most common return reasons and did allow for clear categorization. In cases of doubt, a 0 which stands for no further information, was assigned as not to include interpretation bias. After examining all three groups, the results show patterns within groups and overarching themes.

Insert Figure 7 about here.

Over all groups, the most common return reasons were accidental orders and wrong delivered articles, as well as issues of product fit and look. Here, the advantages of human analysis, which can spot patterns even if wording is dissimilar comes to play. The origin of the accidental orders and wrong articles is most likely of a technical nature, as commenters describe not receiving

order confirmations, frequently leading them to reorder as they assumed that their order had been processed. Furthermore, the website offers and automatic detection of the buyer's phone model to offer the correct type of case. The malfunction of this tool is a likely explanation for several comments which mention the wrong size being delivered. Product fit, even if the correct model had arrived, was another frequent reason for a return. This mostly concerned cases fitting too tight or loose or phone holders for cars not fitting the car model. Lastly, the product look was a frequent reason for return over all groups. Consumers either did not like the colors in real life or the product look did not meet their expectations, e.g. in terms of materials. The analysis also reveals that consumers factor in returns in their purchase decisions. A substantial number of consumers in each group commented that they ordered multiple items to choose from with the intention of not keeping them all, e.g. *"Ordered more so i [sic] could choose"*. Generally, these consumers ordered two items but one consumer from the *control group* admitted to ordering as many as 5 cases to choose from.

These overarching themes also offer an interesting point of observation for differences between groups. The *influencer* group was much less likely to order a wrong article for example. However, they were most likely not to like the look of a product in real life or to find it did not meet their expectations. One commenter said : *"The print on both is blurred and it just doesn't look nice! What a pity! The colors don't look as bright in real life either!"* [translated from German]. In the same vein, this group reported most quality issues with the products they received. *"Miserable quality, looks used and broken!!! FRAUD for the money"* [translated from German]. They also frequently admonished the fit or functionality of the product.

The *discount* group was most likely to reconsider their purchase, especially under cost consideration. One commenter wrote *"Its [sic] to [sic] expensife [sic] for me right now"*. They were also often disappointed that they had to cover the cost of returning the product: *"I find the return costs very sad... You have lost me as a customer as a result"* [translated from German]. They were also least likely to explain their return.

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Lastly, the *control* group were most likely to return an item because they found a discount code. The consumers freely admitted to ordering twice to obtain a lower price: *"A few hours after purchase I get an offer of 50% on the same product. So I buy this and return the original purchase at full price."*. Some consumers apologized for the double orders, while other tried to first rectify the situation through customer service, which did not yield results. Generally, consumers seemed disappointed and felt cheated when they found out they could obtain a discount. The consumers in the *control* group were also most likely to order multiple products to choose from.

5. Discussion

By exploring the return decision through the lens of and as an extension of the purchase decision, this paper allows for a holistic view on influencer marketing and the return decision. The empirical analysis uncovered that influencer marketing had significant benefits. These benefits included a higher order value and fewer returns as well as higher engagement with the product. In this discussion, the groups and their distinctive characteristics will be discussed to derive implications for marketing strategies. Comparing the results from both assessments group by group allows for a synthesis of findings from both quantitative and qualitative research which enriches the methodology.

The *control* group, which did not receive any discount or indicated that they had viewed influencer marketing, exhibited the lowest order value and the highest return share. This suggests that without price incentives (discounts) or endorsements, consumers are less inclined to make larger orders and more prone to return products. The absence of influencer-driven trust and the lack of price-based incentives likely contributed to this group's cautious purchasing behavior and higher likelihood of post-purchase dissatisfaction. This is also reflected in the comments they left upon returning products. They frequently indicated that they returned products because they discovered that they could find a lower price. This does not only display regret but also reveals that many of these consumers exhibited continued search behavior even

after they ordered. This seems to confirm that for online orders the purchase ends only upon product receival and the decision not to return the product. It may also be a sign of cognitive dissonance and increased risk perception after the purchase leading to consumers trying to re-assure themselves that they had indeed made the right choice by continuing to look at products and alternatives.

Compared to that, the *discount* group demonstrated higher order values and lower return rates, indicating that price incentives positively influence purchasing behavior and return decisions. The increased order volume suggests that discounts effectively motivate consumers to make more significant purchases by providing immediate economic benefits. However, the propensity of this group to reconsider their purchases between order and delivery, often for economic reasons, highlights their sensitivity to financial considerations. This suggests that while discounts can drive initial purchase decisions, they may also attract price-sensitive consumers who are less engaged with the product and more likely to reconsider their purchase. Additionally, the lack of engagement with the product is evident in their frequent failure to provide reasons for returns, indicating a transactional rather than a relational approach to shopping. These findings underscore the effectiveness of discount strategies in boosting sales but also point to potential challenges in fostering long-term consumer loyalty and product engagement.

The *influencer* group emerged with the highest order value and the lowest return rate, underscoring the effectiveness of influencer marketing. These outcomes are in line with the theoretical groundwork, which highlighted that influencers enhance product desirability while simultaneously diminishing perceived purchase risks. By building trust and credibility through their recommendations, influencers motivate consumers to make larger purchases with greater confidence. Analyzing the return comments suggests that consumers who return purchases are very engaged with the products. Most of the return reasons directly concern product look, functionality, and fit. For brands, this can be considered positive as many consumers also indicated that they would give the brand a second chance. However, the comments also potentially

indicate high expectations and a possible disconnect between viewing pictures and videos of products from social media influencers and receiving the products. The disappointment seems to be directed towards the brand/ products rather than the influencers.

The hypothesis suggested that influencers with smaller followings would have the lowest return rates due to their targeted audiences. The data indicates a goldilocks principle for influencer selection to reduce return shares. Influencers with a higher follower count offer a broad reach and high legitimation which can increase desirability. Large influencers may be an inspiration and encourage aspirational purchases. Furthermore, they also can lend legitimacy which may reduce uncertainty and thus risk perception. On the other hand, smaller influencers, although highly relatable, did not achieve the same level of impact. This suggests that the perceived trust from following popular influencers and the personal connection provided by smaller influencers both play crucial roles. Therefore, the effectiveness of influencer marketing lies in finding a balanced approach. A mixed strategy that harnesses the broad appeal and trend-setting power of larger influencers while also leveraging the deep, personal connections of smaller influencers could be optimal. The choice of influencers should also be tailored to the specific product and associated risks, ensuring that the right blend of trust, relatability, and reach is achieved to meet the desired outcomes.

Over all groups, these findings support the use of social media influencer not only to increase revenue but also to reduce returns. Influencer marketing, signified by influencer codes, positively influenced order value and reduced return share. However, these results need to be critically evaluated to form a balanced opinion. Isolating the effects of price incentive through the *discount* group, reveals that part of the effectiveness of influencer marketing can likely be attributed to the price incentive. Importantly, there are negative spillover effects for the non-influencer-groups, especially the *control* group. Widespread influencer marketing also means a constant flow of information, including to consumers who ordered without any incentives. Through advances in social media algorithms, these consumers are more likely to be shown

influencer content. If this content includes a discount that they missed out on, this can negatively affect their attitude to the company and lead to returns. This is evident in the return comments indicating finding a discount led to the return of the original order, as it also violates consumers perception of fairness.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the effects of influencer marketing on consumer return behavior. It posed that the fundamental dynamics of influencer marketing, the targeting through homophily, increasing loyalty through parasocial relationships, and strengthening identification through communities, not only incentivize purchase but also change how consumers relate to a brand or product. This in turn changes how a consumer approaches the return decision. The social dynamics of influencer marketing can lead to a greater commitment which reduces uncertainty and e-commerce returns. Furthermore, it can help alleviate the potential negative sustainability implications of excessive consumption spurred on by influencer marketing. Currently, e-commerce contributes significantly to environmental damage, not least due to waste and emissions created by product returns.

The analysis has identified that influencer marketing is an effective strategy to increase purchases and reduce return shares. To a lesser extent, offering a discount code can also positively influence both purchase and return behavior. The analysis of the return reasons has revealed that most intentional orders are returned due to product fit, look, or functionality. It also revealed that the purchase incentive shapes the consumer return behavior. Consumers who used influencer codes were more engaged with the product, evoking product-related concerns, like quality and product fit as reasons for returns. When consumers were only given a price-based incentive, they proved more price-sensitive post-purchase, which was indicated by reconsiderations, e.g. due to financial reasons. They appeared less engaged with the purchase and the brand, frequently leaving no return reason. While both incentives increased order value and decreased return share, influencer marketing outperformed giving only a price-based marketing

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incentive. However, influencer marketing cannot be uncritically recommended: *the control group revealed negative spillover effects from the other marketing strategy as consumers can feel treated unfairly if they find a cheaper option post-purchase. They returned products because they found a cheaper price after the purchase. This indicates a downside of ubiquitous influencer marketing. When consumers encounter the influencer content *post*-purchase and discover that they could have bought the product at a cheaper price, this might trigger cognitive dissonance and a feeling of unfairness. This could not only lead to a product return to repurchase the product at a cheaper price. In fact, this might be the best-case scenario for a brand. It could also lead to reduced product valuation, negative brand attitude and negative word-of-mouth. Thus, for non-followers, influencer marketing could potentially have inverse undesired spillover effect.

6.1 Managerial Implications

Influencer marketing offers many opportunities for practitioners both in improving marketing and sustainability outcomes in e-commerce. By using influencer marketing, brands can build stronger relationship with consumers. The thesis allows three recommendations to be made to managers: First, when considering the purchase process and the return process, managing and reducing perceived purchase risk should be considered. Frequently, the promotional element of marketing focuses on an increased reach and desirability of a product. A holistic view of the marketing process, that extends to returns and sustained customer satisfaction, should consider how familiar consumers are with the product, how the price and return policy affects their risk perception and how influencer marketing can be effectively used to address common uncertainties. For example, if quality uncertainty is prominent because a product is expected to last a long time, long-term cooperation with influencers should be prioritized to show the reliability of not only the product but also the brand. Second, marketers should consider that even successful and efficient marketing strategies can have downsides, that need to be adequately managed. In this case, the post-purchase exposure of consumers who did not receive a discount, to

influencer communication containing discounts can lead to returns and negatively influence repurchases. Notably, many consumers reordered the product from the same brand at a cheaper price, indicating that they still wanted the product. Here, a price-matching policy for a timeframe post-purchase where returns are allowed might be an appropriate tool to reduce negative spillover effects. This allows consumers who display increased post-purchase search behavior to avoid a return while not affecting the influencer marketing campaign. Third, the analysis highlighted the fundamental importance of the purchase process for the return decision. Analysis of the return reasons reveals that many returns are available by addressing product quality and fit uncertainty. While systematic analysis of these comments is resource intensive, the comments contain valuable direct consumer feedback. In this example, technological solutions, like increasing the reliability of order confirmation emails can reduce returns.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this research contributes to the understanding the impact of influencer marketing on return decisions and the underlying causes of returns, it has limitations. Viewing the return decision as an extension of the purchase decision allows for the development of a theoretical framework of mechanisms that lead from a purchase to the return decision. The dataset does not allow to test for each element of the framework or to establish causality. Here, experimental studies are needed to control the environment and isolate specific effects, e.g. of homophily. The second limitation is one that is shared by all companies evaluating the effectiveness of their influencer marketing: the use of influencer codes. In theory, assigning codes to influencers is an excellent way to track the impact of each individual influencer by incentivizing consumers to share who referred them. In practice, multiple influencers' content could have led to the purchase decision. Alternatively, these codes could also not signify any effect of influencer marketing but could have been found by consumers specifically looking for a discount code.

All figures and tables are the authors own work.
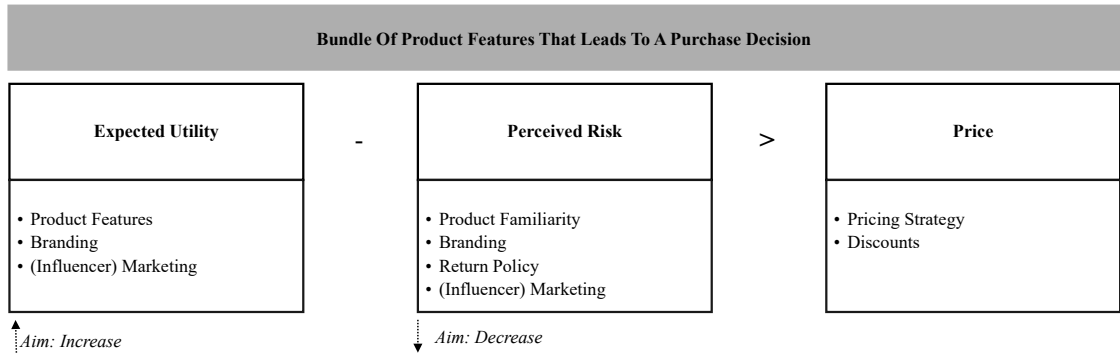
Figure 1 Consumer Valuation of Purchase Decisions

Bundle Of Product Features That Leads To A Purchase Decision		
Expected Utility	**Perceived Risk**	**Price**
• Product Features • Branding • (Influencer) Marketing	• Product Familiarity • Branding • Return Policy • (Influencer) Marketing	• Pricing Strategy • Discounts

Aim: Increase   *Aim: Decrease*

Figure 2 Mechanisms of Influencer Marketing affecting Purchase Decisions

Theoretical Construct

	Homophily	**Parasocial Relationships**	**Social Capital**
Interaction Level	*Individual*	*Follower-Influencer-Relationship*	*Community*

Purchase Decision Impact			
Increase Desirability →	• Envy and Aspiration • Targeting	• Enrich Brand Identity • Social Presence • Lower Perception of Persuasive Intent	• Social Identity
Decrease Risk ↓	• Trust • Shared Experience	• Authenticity • Emotional Attachment	• Trust • Perceived Popularity

Figure 3 Distribution of Number of Items in One Order
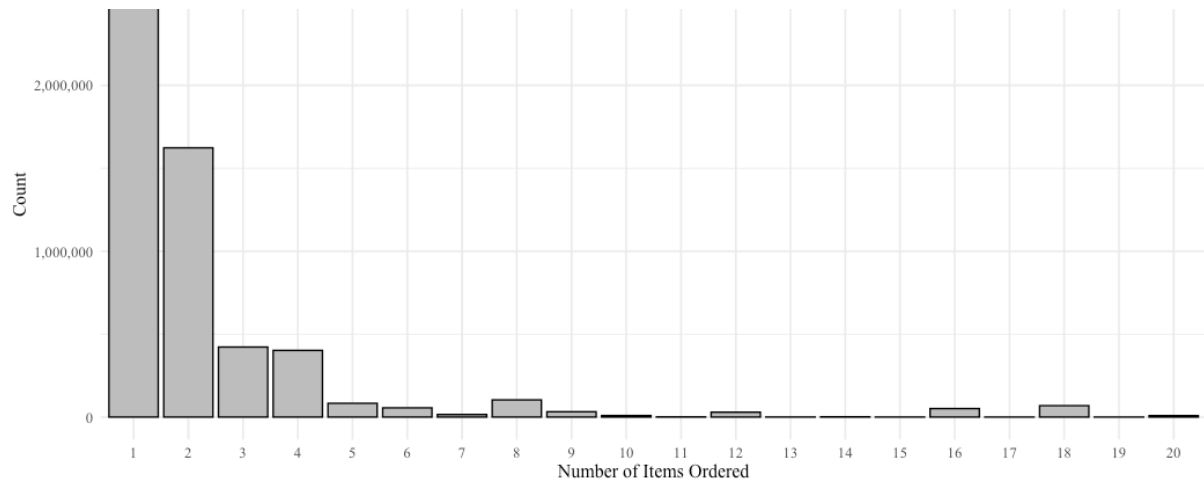
Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variables

	Total Sample (n= 5,599,486)		*Control (n=878,751)*		*Discount (n=4,002,098)*		*Influencer (n=525,814)*	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Order Value	935.486	598	518.214	401.664	772.989	605.420	2845.469	1960.198
Return Share	0.0333	0	0.0461	0	0.0330	0	0.0151	0

Table 2 Results ANOVA 1: Effect of Group on Order Value

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Sum of Squares	F Value	Pr(>F)
Group	3	2.178e+12	7.259e+11	771,173	<2e-1***
Residuals	5,599,482	5.271e+12	9.413e+05		
Welch's test					
	Num: 3 Denum: 672,571			235,145	p-value < 2.2e-16

Figure 4 QQ-Plot of ANOVA 1 Residuals (Test for Normality)

Normal Q-Q Plot
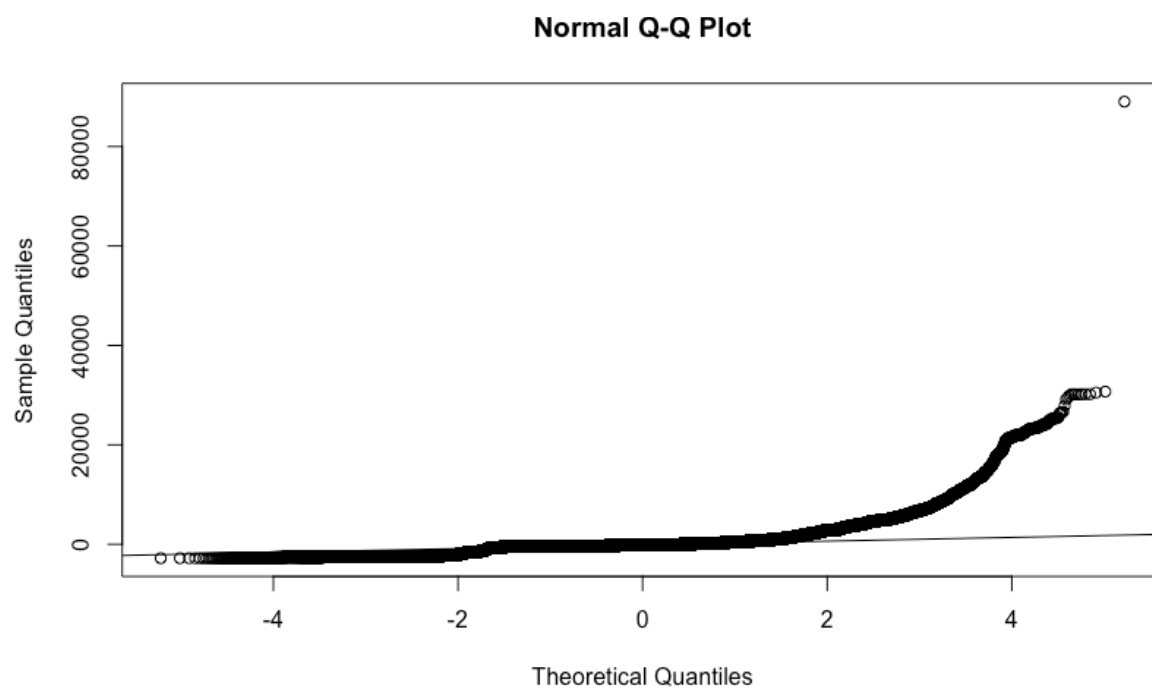
Table 3 Results ANOVA 2: Effect of Group on Return Share

	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Sum of Squares	Test Statistic	Pr(>F)
Group	3	321	107.12	3,813 (F-Value	<2e-16 ***
Residuals	5,599,482	157,297	0.03		
Kruskal-Wallis					
	3			1,980.7 (chi-squared statistic)	< 2.2e-16***

Table 4 Mean Return Share by Category Variables

Influencer Category	N=	Mean return share
mega	39,030	0.0226
macro	47,390	0.0183
micro	83,833	0.0096
nano	40,868	0.0139
nano-nano	8,223	0.0261

Figure 5 Average Return Share per Influencer Class

Return Share by Influencer Category
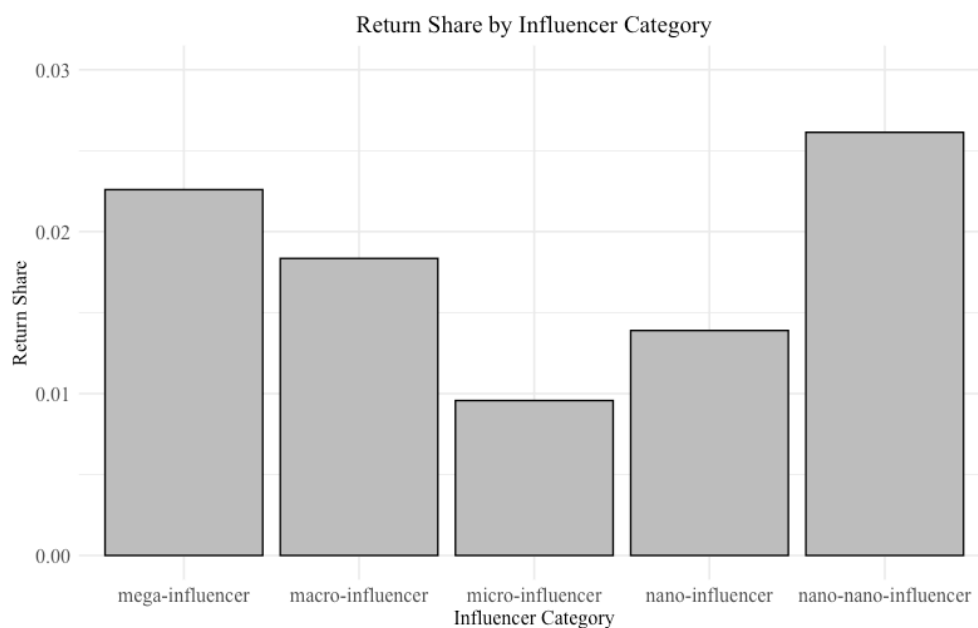
Table 5 Regression Results

Influencer class	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
Intercept	0.0183495	0.0004599	39.896	< 2e-16***
mega	0.0042486	0. 0.0006844	6.208	5.38e-10 ***
micro	-0.0087808	0.0005754	-15.259	< 2e-16 ***
nano	-0.0044570	0.0006759	-6.594	4.28e-11 ***
nano-nano	0.0077841	0.0011961	6.508	7.64e-11 ***
Residual standard error: 0.1001 on 219339 degrees of freedom				
Multiple R-squared: 0.002865, Adjusted R-squared: 0.002847				
F-statistic: 157.5 on 4 and 219339 DF, p-value: < 2.2e-16				

Figure 6 Relative Word Frequency in Other Reasons Comments

Top Words in Return Reasons by Group (Relative Frequency)
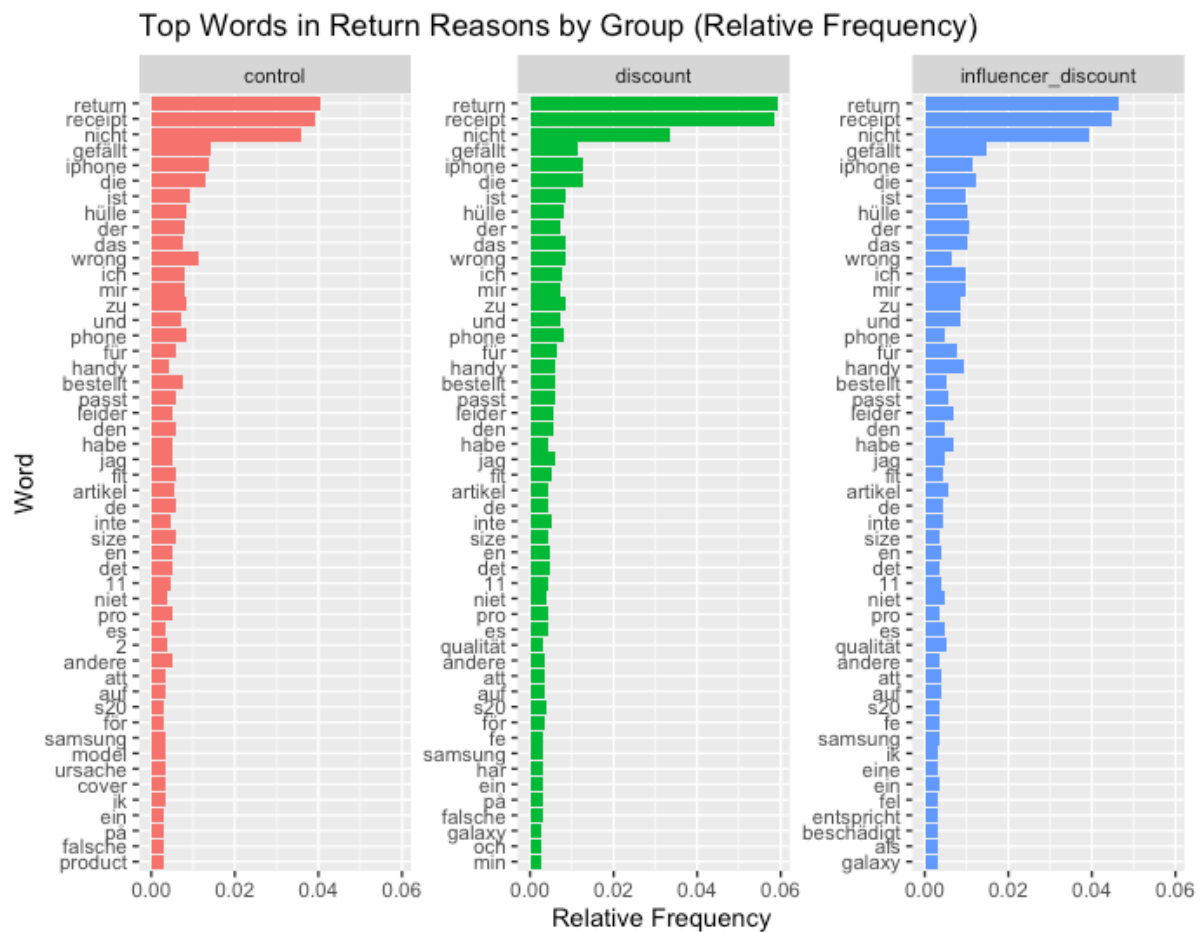
Table 6 Classifications of Return Reasons with Examples

Code	Return Reason	Example
0	No additional information	„Claim"
1	Product functionality (e.g. protection)	"Cases offer too little protection for the phone"
2	Product fit	"The case does not fit my phone"
3	Product look/ does not meet expectations	"I do not like the colour"
4	damaged item/ quality issue	"Damage on the front of the case."
5	ordered multiples	„Ordered several to choose from"
6	orders arrived late/ order not needed anymore	"You wrote that it is fast delivery but it was not! I did not receive my order after a week. I can't receive it because I am going abroad on 11/06"
7	found cheaper price/ discount	"A few hours after purchase I get an offer of 50% on the same product. So I buy this and return the original purchase at full price."
8	accidental order/ wrong article	"I accidentally ordered a charger for an Iphone."
9	reconsidered	„Want to buy another model"

Figure 7 Distribution of Return Reasons

	No additional information	Product functionality (e.g. protection)	Product fit	Product look/ does not meet expectations	damaged item/ quality issue	ordered multiples	orders arrived late/ order not needed anymore	found cheaper price/ discount	accidental order/ wrong article	reconsidered
Influencer	182	130	199	182	94	37	76	11	107	8
Discount	234	94	135	156	65	32	74	8	215	13
Control	168	87	144	159	61	52	79	48	225	5

Influencer   Discount   Control

Appendix B: Literature Review Tables

Table 7 Literature Review Table

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Bu, Parkinson, and Thaichon 2022 *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*	• Mechanisms of social media influencer marketing: homophily and parasocial relationships • Effects of social media influencer marketing: brand value, customer co-creation and purchase intention	• Influencer Marketing • Engagement and Co-creation behavior • Homophily	• Social Media Marketing	• Online Survey	• Homophily positively affected participation and citizenship behavior • Both behavior types affected brand value and purchase intention • Parasocial Relationships moderated the relationship between homophily and customer participation behavior	• Online survey with a US focus → holistic exploration of the effects of homophily

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Campbell and Farrell 2020 *Business Horizons*	• Roles of social media influencers	• Influencer Marketing • Following Size	• Social Media Marketing	• Literature Review	• Influencers fulfill multiple roles in a marketing campaign • Size differentiation and strengths of different influencer categories	• - → Summary of previous literature with a focus on the advantages and disadvantages of different following-sizes
De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017 *International Journal of advertising*	• Influence of perceived popularity, opinion leadership and product attributes on brand attitude	• Influencer Marketing	• Social Media Marketing	• Online Experiment	• Number of followers of a sponsored influencer negatively affected perceived brand uniqueness	• Partially only conducted on female participants → highlights potential downsides to high-followership influencer

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Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
						marketing campaigns
Fernandes et al. 2022 *Journal of Marketing*	• Influence of political identity on satisfaction	• (political) identity theory	• Satisfaction with service/ experience	• Experiment • Analysis of online reviews	• Conservatives are more satisfied with products/ service experiences • This relationship is moderated by free will and trust in the own decision	• US focus leads to limited transferability, especially considering political system (two main parties) • Satisfaction not directly product related → insight on how sense of agency can influence purchase decision

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Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Goldenberg et al. 2023 *Journal of Marketing*	• Seeding strategy • Triadic Closure	• Network Theory • Triadic Closure • Influencer Marketing	• Social Media Marketing • Unpaid Endorsements	• Multimethod • Simulation • Experiment	• Targeting triadic closure is an effective strategy to build a network	• Focus on unpaid endorsements → connects network theory and social capital theory with influencer marketing
Heiman et al. 2015 *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics*	• Risk Assessment Effect of Returns/ Money Back Guarantees • Assessment of value of Money Back Guarantee	• Prospect Theory	• In-store vs. catalogue purchase	• Consumer Survey	• Cost of uncertainty is three-fold: return cost, disappointment cost, overweighting of likelihood of return cost • Value of return policy highly dependent on individual consumer risk attitude	• Limited sample size → Deconstruction of cost of disappointment/ returns

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Hong and Pavlou 2014 *Information systems research*,	• Product Fit Uncertainty as a driver of e-commerce returns	• Uncertainty/ Risk perception • Consumer Decision Journey	• E-Commerce	• Survey • Analysis of secondary data from two online marketplaces	• Product uncertainty possesses two distinct dimensions: product fit and product quality uncertainty • Product fit uncertainty is mainly driven by lack of familiarity with a product	• Marketplaces may not be representative for all forms of e-commerce → Deconstruction of product related uncertainties
Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019 *Journal of marketing*	• Content and source characteristics affecting influencer marketing success	• Elaboration Likelihood Model • Consumer Decision Journey	• Social Media Marketing • Blog Marketing	• Field study • Experiment	• Popularity of influencers increases campaign effectiveness • Effect of blogger expertise on purchase likelihood depends on campaign	• Comparing Facebook and Blogs might not adequately represent social media landscape today → Distinction of social media influencer marketing

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Janakiraman, Syrdal, and Freling 2016 *Journal of Retailing*	• Effect of return policy leniency on purchases and returns	• Signaling Theory • Consumer Risk Perception	• Retail	• Meta-analytic review	• Return policy leniency positively affects purchase decision • Return policy leniency also increases returns, but to a smaller degree	• The papers used for the review most often measure intentions which might not adequately reflect behavior → cross-time and -industry evaluation of both purchase and return behavior/ intentions
Kim and Kim (2021) *Journal of*	• Antecedents and consequences of trust in influencers	• Social Exchange Theory • Source Credibility: expertise + authenticity • Homophily	• Social Media Influencer Marketing	• Online survey	• Expertise, Authenticity and homophily positively affect trust • Trust increases loyalty to	• Participants were asked to evaluate influencer they view most frequently which introduces bias

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Business Research					influencer and purchase intention and improves product attitude	→ centers the concept of trust which is important to mitigate risk
Le, Carrel, and Shah 2022 *Transport Reviews*	• Environmental Impact of e-commerce through traffic	• (Urban) geography • Search behavior	• E-commerce • Environmental impacts of commerce	• Systematic literature review of empirical studies	• Online shopping may substitute for in-store shopping trips	• No consensus whether substitution or complimentary effect is dominant • Results differ highly dependent on existing infrastructure → International representation of effects

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
						of e-commerce on travel
Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022 *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*	• Definition of Online Influencer Marketing • Factors of influencer marketing effectiveness • Connecting Social Capital Theory and Online Influencer Marketing	• Social Capital Theory • Authenticity • Content Characteristics	• Influencer Marketing • Brand management perspective	• Expert Interview • Survey	• Decoding of influencer marketing success factors into targeting, positioning, creativity, trust benefits • Identification of content incongruence and customer retention threat	• Limited samples • Most participants aged between 20-30 → Connection between follower <--> influencer relationship, content criteria and marketing effectiveness

Authors (Year) Journal	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Lou and Kim 2019 *Frontiers in psychology*	• Antecedents and effect of parasocial relationships between influencers and followers	• Influencer content type • Parasocial Relationships • Adolescents' use of social media	• Social Networks • Influencer Marketing	• Online survey of children	• Attractiveness, perceived, expertise , trustworthiness and similarity are predictors of parasocial relationships • Parasocial relationships are positively connected with materialism and purchase intentions	• Survey research cannot control for all variables • Results not necessarily transferable to adults → Contributes to understanding connection between homophily and parasocial relationships
Martínez-López et al. 2022 *Information & Management*	• Effect of purchase risk purchases on purchase and return decision	• Transparency • Risk perception • Decisions under risk	• E-commerce	• Online Survey • Scenario Experiment	• Purchase risk notices reduce returns due to mismatch • Purchase risk notices do not negatively affect purchase intentions	• Effect was only tested on colour variation which might be different than to e.g. quality → showed the effect of

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
					• Purchase risk notices increased satisfaction and increase repurchase intentions	communicating risk to consumer
Ofek, Katona, and Sarvary 2011 *Marketing Science*	• Impact of presence/ lack of experiential information on purchase and return decision	• Decision-making	• Multichannel retail	• Modeling	• In-Store experience may reduce returns	• Model uses monopolist which may lead to oversimplification → emphasizes the difference in purchase decision between online and in store
Oláh et al. 2018 *Sustainability*	• Three dimensions of sustainability in e-commerce	• Three pillar model of sustainability • Development of e-commerce	• E-commerce	• Literature Review • Case Study	• Returns are an important factor in the environmental	• Broad exploration of theoretical contributions • Very small case-study

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
					sustainability of online retailers	→ broadens the euro/America-centric view
Petersen and Kumar (2009) *Journal of Marketing*	• Antecedents and consequences of customer return behavior	• Utility maximization • Purchase Decision	• Catalogue Order	• Modeling • Testing model on catalogue order firm	• Returns positively affect future buying behavior • Moderate returns as part of calculated strategy increase profits	• Modeling based on only one firm → explores role of returns in purchase decisions
Petersen and Kumar (2015) *Journal of Marketing Research*	• Benefits of managing returns and regret • Customer Risk Perception	• Risk in the stages: pre-, post- and mid-purchase	• B2C Online Retailer	• Field experiment	• Management of product return cost increased profits	• Modeling based on only one firm → splits risk along purchase decision

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Rosenzweig and Gilovich (2012) *Journal of personality and social psychology*	• Purchase Regrets	• Types of purchases: material vs. experiential • Types of regret: regret of inaction and regret of action	• Generic purchase decision	• Experiment • Online Survey	• Material goods were more likely to lead to regret of action, experiential goods to regret of inaction	• Student sample → insight into source of regret
Shoenberger and Kim (2023) *International Journal of Advertising*	• Influence of different types of homophily on purchase intentions • Mediating role of perceived authenticity and reasons to follow	• Two-dimensional model of homophily • Authenticity	• Influencer Marketing	• Online survey	• Reasons for following an influencer moderate relationship between different types of homophily and purchase intentions	• Limited to US • Study investigated a person's favorite influencer which might not represent general effects → dissection of the concept of homophily

Authors (Year) *Journal*	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
Vrontis et al. (2021) *International Journal of Consumer Studie*	• Mechanisms of Social Media Influencer Marketing	• Social Media Influencers • Influencer Marketing	• Influencer Marketing • Influencer-generated content • Outcome-related variables of influencer marketing	• Systematic Review of 68 articles	• Key Mechanisms include homophily, parasocial relationships, credibility, attractiveness and popularity	• Only English language articles and large journals → excellent overview of theoretical base
Weinlich and Semerádová (2022) *New Techno Humanities*	• Effects of Influencer marketing on consumer attitudes and purchase decisions	• Three-dimensional attitude model: emotional, cognitive, conative	• Influencer Marketing • Influencer-generated content	• Experiment with questionnaire and eye-tracking	• Influencer content triggers emotions • Consuming influencer-generated content increases attitude homophily and purchase intentions	• Mega influencers might not be representative for all categories • Student sample → holistic study of attitudes
Wood (2001) *Journal of Marketing Research*	• Dynamics of Remote Purchase Environments • Effect of Return Policies on purchase behavior	• Purchase Decision and Regret • Endowment Effect • Signaling Theory	• Catalogue Orders	• (Conjoint) Experiment	• Lenient return policies increase orders • Lenient return policies led to increased search behavior and more	• Old Research, focus on catalogues vs. online environments → allows transfer of concepts and

Authors (Year) Journal	Research Focus	Theoretical Background	Context	Method	Main Findings	Critical Evaluation → Reason for Inclusion
					positive product quality assessments	

Table 8 Comparative Literature Review Table

	Influencer Marketing				Purchase Decisions			Return Decisions		
Citation	*General*	*Homophily*	*Parasocial Relationships*	*Social Capital Theory*	*Process*	*Remote Purchase*	*Risk Perception*	*Antecedents*	*Risk Perception*	*Sustainability*
This study	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Bu, Parkinson, and Thaichon (2022)	x	x	x		x			x		

	Influencer Marketing				Purchase Decisions			Return Decisions		
Campbell and Farrell (2020)	x									
De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017)	x				x					
Fernandes et al. (2022)					x			x		
Goldenberg et al. (2023)	x	x		x						
Heiman et al. (2015)						x	x	x	x	
Hong and Pav-lou (2014)					x	x	x	x	x	

	Influencer Marketing			Purchase Decisions			Return Decisions		
Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019)	x	x		x					
Janakiraman, Syrdal, and Freling (2016)						x	x	x	
Kim and Kim (2021)	x	x		x	x	x		x	
Le, Carrel, and Shah (2022)									x
Leung, Gu, and Palmatier (2022)	x	x	x	x	x				

	Influencer Marketing				Purchase Decisions			Return Decisions		
Lou and Kim (2019)	x	x	x		x					
Martínez-López et al. (2022)					x	x	x	x	x	
Ofek, Katona, and Sarvary (2011)						x	x	x	x	
Oláh et al. (2018)						x				x
Petersen and Kumar (2009)					x		x	x	x	
Petersen and Kumar (2015)					x	x	x	x	x	

	Influencer Marketing			Purchase Decisions			Return Decisions		
Rosenzweig and Gilovich (2012)				x			x		
Shoenberger and Kim (2023)	x	x		x	x				
Vrontis et al. (2021)	x	x	x		x				
Weinlich and Semerádová (2022)	x	x	x	x	x				
Wood (2001)				x		x	x	x	

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Affidavit

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