



**Social Media Influencers' Product Endorsement – The Ethical Aspects of Influencer Marketing and Its Negative Effect on Consumers' Well-Being**

**Case Study: (1) KERA's vegetable candies, (2) 600 fake brands of milk powder, and (3) Hanayuki cosmetics—in Vietnam**

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<b>Number of pages and appendix pages</b> 43 + 0
<p>The rapid growth of <b>social media influencer (SMI) marketing</b> has fundamentally reshaped consumer purchasing habits, generating billions in revenue but simultaneously creating a significant ethical dilemma. This thesis investigates the ethics of SMIs' product endorsements and their consequent <b>negative effects on consumer well-being</b>. Specifically, the research addresses the question: <i>What are the ethics of social media influencers' product endorsements on online consumers?</i> Employing a relevant theoretical framework and analyzing three high-profile case studies from Vietnam—involving the fraudulent promotion of <b>KERA's vegetable candies, fake milk powder, and Hanayuki cosmetics</b>—this study demonstrates the urgent need for accountability in the digital sphere.</p> <p>The findings establish that the <b>primary motivator</b> for unethical endorsements is <b>financial gain</b> driven by greed, leading SMIs to promote low-quality, misleading, or counterfeit goods. This lack of integrity not only erodes public trust and reputation but also subjects consumers to financial harm and psychological distress. The research confirms that the influence held by SMIs necessitates corresponding <b>legal and ethical responsibility</b>. The thesis concludes by providing a structured set of <b>Future Recommendations</b> for regulators, social media platforms, brands, and educational institutions to enforce transparency, mandate expert vetting for regulated products, and ultimately better safeguard consumer well-being in the digital marketplace.</p>
<b>Key words</b> Influencer marketing, social media influencer, product endorsement, consumer well-being, public trust

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# 1 Introduction

This is a research-based thesis for the Degree Program in International Business in the Marketing major at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. Readers will know the background to the topic of social media influencer marketing to understand the reasons behind the research questions stated below.

## 1.1 Background to the topic

The booming of digital and social platforms has changed and shaped new purchasing habits for consumers. Businesses that have to rent physical space are now having a hard time maintaining their businesses, while many have had to close down due to the inability to compete with online retailers who can cut down on such costs.

The shift toward digital commerce is driven in large part by the massive growth of social media influencer (SMI) marketing, an industry valued at billions of dollars and expected to grow exponentially in the coming years (Statista.com, 2022). This contemporary form of promotion sees brands partnering with individuals who have cultivated high levels of trust and perceived authenticity with their followers, leading to a significant impact on consumer purchase intentions (Digital Marketing Institute, 2024; Taylor & Francis Online, 2019). While influencer marketing offers a cost-effective and engaging avenue for brands, this reliance on perceived credibility has created a troubling ethical “dark side” (University of Portsmouth, 2025). The ethical challenges are severe, often revolving around a lack of transparency regarding sponsored content, promotion of potentially harmful or misleading products, and the dissemination of misinformation (18h08.fr 2024 & DecisionMarketing 2025). When influencers promote unverified supplements or health products, or engage in deceptive consumption practices, the consequences can range from financial harm to serious psychological distress for consumers, including fostering comparison culture and diminished well-being (Emerald Publishing 2023 & DecisionMarketing 2025).

## 1.2 Research question

This thesis argues that the unchecked influence of SMIs—and the moral dilemmas stemming from their dual role as authentic content creators and paid entrepreneurs—presents a critical challenge to consumer trust and public welfare. In Vietnam, this issue is particularly acute, as demonstrated by high-profile cases involving the deceptive endorsement of products like KERA’s vegetable candies, 600 fake brands of milk powder, and Hanayuki cosmetics. These incidents underscore the urgent necessity of establishing clear boundaries of accountability for all stakeholders in the

influencer ecosystem. Therefore, this research seeks to address the overarching question: **What are the ethics of social media influencers' product endorsements on online consumers?**

Through investigative questions that explore the role, motivations, and accountability of SMIs, this thesis will provide a robust ethical framework for the practice of influencer marketing. For the field of business and marketing, this research is timely and essential, offering a deep dive into the regulatory and reputational risks that brands face in this dynamic environment. For me, as a potential future business professional in the marketing field, undertaking this project represents a crucial step in developing the critical judgment needed to navigate the ethical tightrope of digital marketing. This study on accountability, transparency, and consumer protection in a key Southeast Asian market will be invaluable in ensuring that future commercial strategies prioritize long-term consumer well-being over short-term sales gains.

IQ 1: Who are social media influencers (SMIs) and what do they do for a living?

IQ 2: Why do consumers follow SMIs and believe in their product endorsements?

IQ 3: What are the drives for influencers to endorse a product?

IQ 4: How ought SMIs to take accountability for the products they promote/endorse?

### **1.3 Demarcation**

The scope of the thesis narrows down to the ethical aspects of social media influencers' behaviors on the well-being of consumers who follow them on different platforms. The data comes from three case studies in Vietnam that have affected millions of consumers.

### **1.4 Benefits**

The thesis primarily serves the purpose for the author to gain deeper insights and understanding of the creator economy, the values that social media influencers and their content and promotions contribute to the society's economy, and how their ethical behaviors affect their followers and consumers, especially in terms of their *well-being*. With the limited research, the thesis author hopes to contribute her small effort to raise awareness among end consumers in order to help them reflect on and be more level-headed about their purchase decisions based on the influence they get from social media content creators.

### **1.5 Key concepts**

Presented below are the definitions of the main concepts touched upon throughout the thesis.

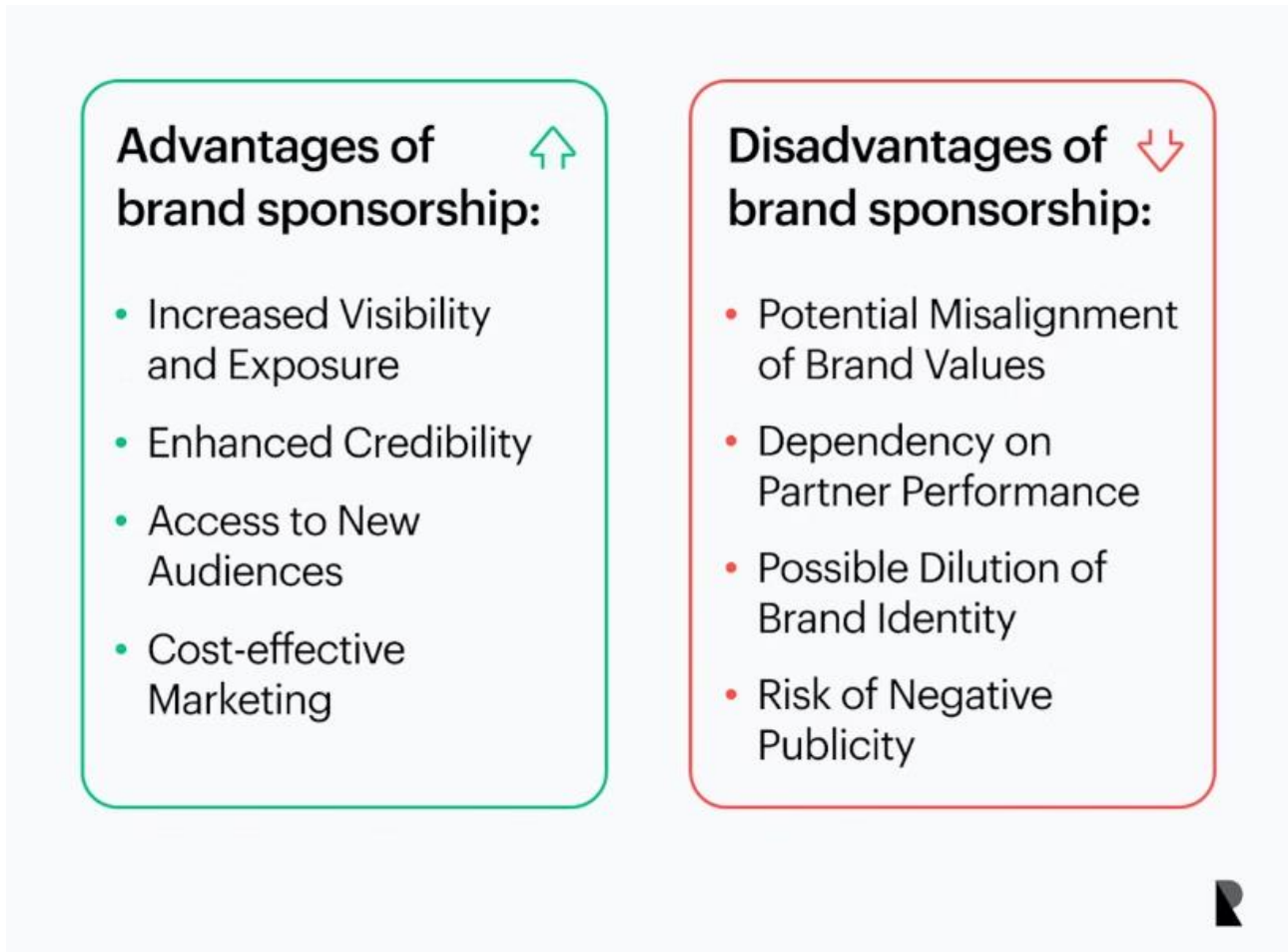
**Social media** includes platforms and mobile apps that enable individuals and businesses to form communities and exchange information, ideas, and content among one another. While social media is mostly used by individual users for personal purposes—businesses, organizations, and content creators also make use of social media to build their audience, communities, and brands to sell their products and services. (Buffer 2024.)

An **influencer** is a well-known figure, usually in an industry, a celebrity, or a content creator on social media who focuses on a niche and has achieved a certain audience base. This person usually possesses a base of knowledge in a certain field that attracts people as the audience and influences their decisions – especially in purchasing (Yesiloglu & Costello 2020, 9). Álvarez-Monzoncillo (2022, 6) states in his book “The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: A Multidisciplinary Approach” that an influencer is considered an opinion leader, who “others within a social system listen to and follow”.

**Influencer marketing** is a marketing approach where brands collaborate with online influencers (usually popular) to promote the brands’ products or services (McKinsey 2023). The characteristics of successful influencer marketing include social proof, authority, liking, scarcity, consistency, and reciprocity (Yesiloglu & Costello 2020, 7-8).

**Product endorsement** is a statement made by a person of influence, e.g, a celebrity, an expert, a social media influencer that communicates approval or support of a brand’s product via an ad campaign or, mostly nowadays, social media. (SocialPilot 2024.)

**Brand sponsorship** is one of the marketing strategies where brands sponsor a product, individual (usually influencer), and service in exchange of increased brand awareness, promotion, and an expanded audience base. There are four main goals of brand sponsorship: to increase brand awareness, enhance brand image, drive more sales, and strengthen customer loyalty. (Ramotion 2023.)



**Figure 1.** Pros and cons of brand sponsorship (Ramotion 2023)

**A sponsored post** is a piece of content created by an influencer that is sponsored by a brand to promote a product or service on his or her social media. **Sponsored posts** are a popular form of influencer marketing where brands can use the image of the influencer to advertise their products to their target customers who belong to the followers of the influencer. (Stack Influence 2024.) Using an influencer's endorsement can increase the brand awareness and impact consumers' purchase decisions because people tend to be inspired by and believe in the words of the individuals they follow.

## 2 All about influencer marketing and social media influencers

### 2.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media

With the birth and growth of social media users by July 2024 of around 5.17 billion global users, accounting for 63.7% of the total global population – according to Data Reportal by Kepios (2024), social media are an indispensable tool in everyday life for the majority of people. Companies and content creators have in this recent decade taken on social media as a leverage for their businesses and brand awareness. However, everything has two sides – and so do social media; if used properly, it is a leveraging tool that increase the quality of life for many, if used otherwise, it can become a disaster to any users.

The figure 2.1 below states both the advantages and disadvantages of social media at both individual and professional levels.

Users	Advantages (Buffer 2024)	Disadvantages
Individuals	<p><b>Build relationships:</b> find friends and connect with like-minded people from e.g online communities; therefore, users can form new relationships and foster existing ones. One's relationship and networking circles (e.g on LinkedIn) can easily expand times more thanks to social media.</p> <p><b>Develop personal voices:</b> Social media provides platforms for users to express themselves, form their own identities, show their interests and talents to the public.</p> <p>Discover and educate oneself</p>	<p><b>Distraction</b> is what commonly happens when a person, especially young people, use social media at a relatively high frequency. It has been a widespread concern among adolescents. Distraction studied to be higher at adolescents whose social media usage is longer and more frequently, according to a study by Teun Siebers, Ine Beyens, J. Loes Pouwels &amp; Patti M. Valkenburg (2021). Their study shows that about 82.5% adolescent participants share a positive correlation between distraction and social media usage (SMU), while only 1.8% show negative correlation.</p> <p><b>Peer-pressure and self-comparison</b> happen when people</p>

		<p>see others posting positive things from their lives, while the ones seeing the posts here comparing the online glory to their low points in reality, therefore generating envy and jealousy to others' achievements and positive things shown on social media. Comparison stems from thinking that the grass is greener on the other side, and peer pressure causes one to strive for more to achieve similarly.</p> <p><b>Anxiety</b> comes from peer pressure, self-comparison, low self-esteem and insecurity, and feeling isolated from others around. For example, when a person, especially young one, sees a post from a friend on social media about some achievements or rewards, this person would feel low about himself as he thinks he is not as good enough and feels unfair for not having the same/similar things. Anxiety also manifests when one constantly has to put on a false but perfect identity in order to look good to others on social media and show that one's life is well put together— e.g, having a perfect career, perfect family, perfect marriage, perfect outlook, or a perfect vacation trip.</p> <p><b>Criminal and cyber-bullying activities</b> share a connection with</p>
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		<p>social media, where users with horrible motives utilize them to carry out their schemes. Cyberbullying has become a new way of bullying where a group of people post all kinds of malicious, threatening comments as well as posts, targeting an unarmed and – in many cases – innocent and has nothing to do with them.</p> <p>(Amedie 2015.)</p>
<p>Businesses, Content creators, and influencers</p>	<p><b>Cost-effective</b> (or ‘budget-friendly’) marketing channel that can easily reach a much larger audience compared to other channels such as TV, billboards, and ads.</p> <p><b>Increased brand exposure:</b> with the help of algorithms, brands can find ways to expose themselves to 5 billion users around the world.</p> <p><b>Targeted marketing:</b> brands can create targeting ads, e.g. on Facebook and Instagram, and take advantage of the algorithms to deliver them to the targeted audience across the platforms to increase more awareness and possible online sales.</p> <p><b>Customer engagement:</b> brands can leverage social media as a customer service channel to engage with customers age between 18 and 54, and stand out among other</p>	<p><b>High competition and noise</b> come from the fact that nowadays most content developers and businesses use social media as one of the major platforms to target their audience. Statistics show that in 2020, 91% of B2B marketers and 86% of B2C marketers distribute their content on social media. It has become more challenging for brands and creators to fight for users’ attention on social media with just mediocre content. Making high-quality, strategic, and relevant content to the audience, at the same time utilizing the algorithm to boost the content reach a wider audience.</p> <p><b>Lack of control and ownership</b> happens when you are distributing content on social media platforms – where you are basically renting the platforms, so you have to comply with their terms of use, policy, and</p>

	<p>businesses who do not engage with their audience on social media.</p>	<p>conditions. In addition, the work of algorithm greatly affect how your content display and reach the target audience. Your account might also be suspended or banned if you violate the platform's policy.</p> <p><b>Negative comments</b> are bound to happen in the online world where people share all kinds of opinions that either support you or even tear you down mentally – if you are greatly dragged by those comments.</p> <p>(Content Development 2025.)</p> <p><b>Damage in reputation</b> can happen when a mistake from your content goes viral. For example, a badly-worded tweet or post, being controversial in social politics or other issues can also spark arguments from the audience towards the brand's image. (Varga 2024.)</p>
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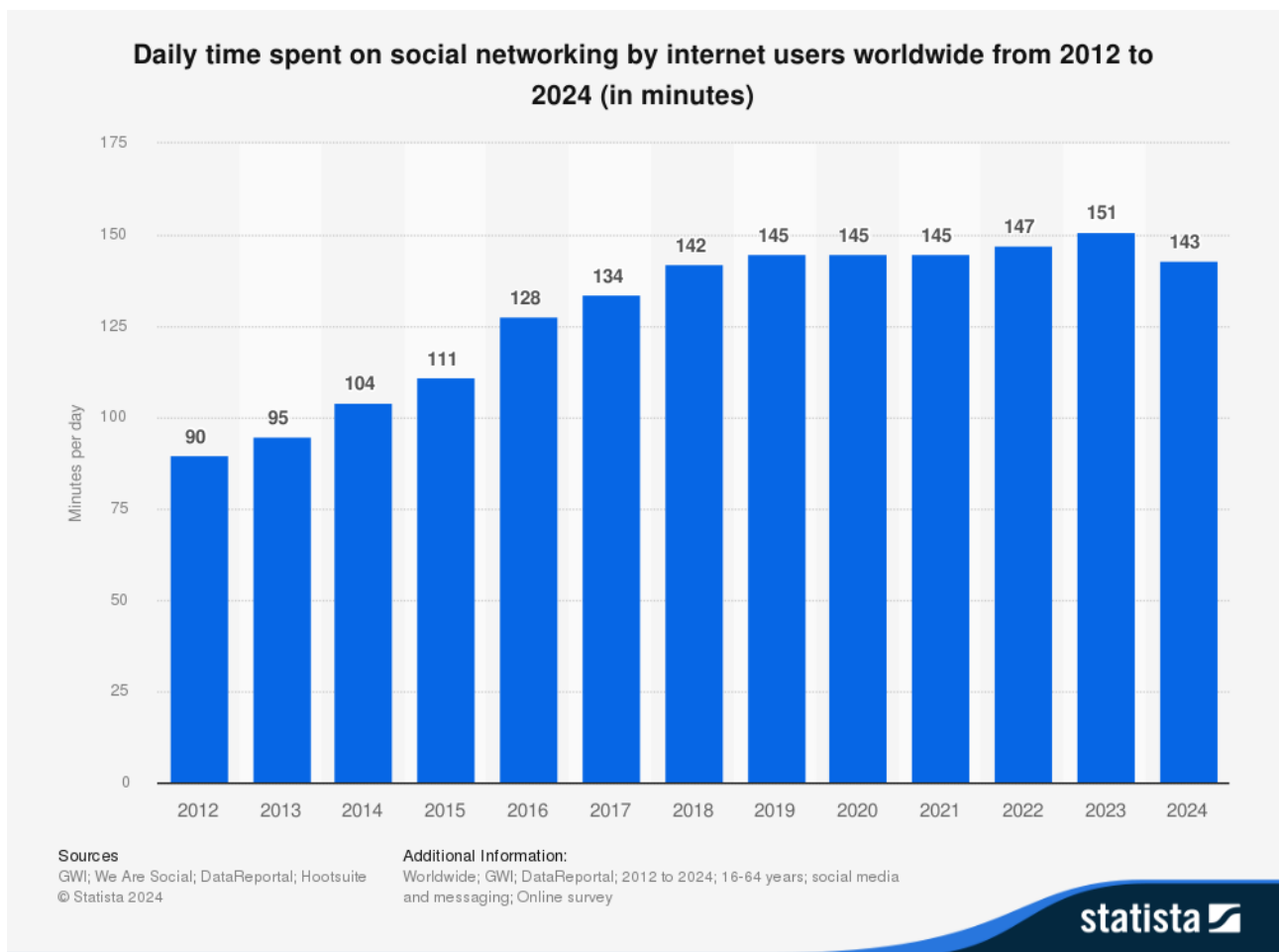
**Figure 2.2** Advantages and Disadvantages of social media for both individual users and business users

## 2.2 The rise of social media enables the shift of power to the customers and consumers

Social media is all about creating and sharing information and ideas through visual and written forms of content with the purpose of exchanging communication among users on the platforms. Content on social media has increased both in amount and attention, with a steady rise in social media users. When amateur content has risen to a considerable amount across the platforms, along with the fact that more and more users have turned from casual content consumers to

creative and professional creators, the trend has shifted from corporate types of media publications, such as websites and blog posts toward human-centric and user-friendly types of content on social media. As Philip Kotler, Hermawan Kartajaya, and Iwan Setiawan mentioned in *Marketing 4.0* (2016), the *human-centric* way of marketing means that brands behave more like humans and treat their customers like friends. (Quesenberry 2020, 21.)

Since 2012, the amount of daily time on social media has been rocketing, starting from 90 minutes per day (equivalent to one and a half hour) - all the way to 143 minutes per day (more than two hours) in 2024, according to Statista (2024). Within over a decade, people's use of social media – with the ubiquity of smartphones – increased by 58.8% between 2012 and 2024.



**Figure 2.3** Daily amount of time internet users aged between 16 and 64 spend on social media (in minutes) (Statista 2024)

### 2.3 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is the collaboration between brands and popular social media users to promote the brands' products and services to a wider audience, given the influencers' large

follower base. Using social media influencers are perceived to bring back positive ROIs because with each sponsored post of an influencer, companies can easily track the engagement rate such as likes, comments, shares, and also the traffic to the companies' product sites lead from the affiliated link attached in the sponsored post. (McKinsey 2023.)

There are two models often applied in an influencer marketing deal:

- An influencer was offered a flat rate, usually between three to five figures, per post featuring the product in the post. For a celebrity, charging six figures or more per post is comprehensible. For example, an influencer with over 10,000 followers can charge 100 US dollars per post, while one with over 100,000 followers can charge about 1,000 dollars per post. Some social media influencers consider charging 100 dollars for every 10,000 followers reasonable, since there are no rigid rules on how much to charge.
- An influencer made a post featuring the product or service, providing a link leading to the purchase gateway in, for example, the comment section or the 'link in bio' section on his or her profile's biography. Every time a consumer purchases the product by clicking the link or using the promotion code, the influencer receives an accordingly amount of commission from the company.

(McKinsey 2023.)

According to Sylvia Chan-Omsted and Hyejun Julia Kim (2022), the dynamics of influencer marketing is divided into four dimensions: Authenticity/Identity, Trust, Engagement, and Relationships (Alvarez-Monzoncillo 2022, 99-117).

## **2.4 Social Media influencers**

### **2.4.1 Influencers and being influential**

A person can be influential while being a non-celebrity, as scholars and psychologists have been debating over the character traits of being influential. Different scholars gave different names to these non-celebrity, influential people based on the large number of followers they have gained (Yesiloglu & Costello 2020, 8-9) such as "instafamous" (Marwick 2015), "micro-celebrity" (Khamis et al 2017), and "opinion leader" (McQuail & Windahl 1993; Northouse 2016; Lin et al 2018 & Álvarez-Monzoncillo 2022, 6).

According to Hesketh (2010), before one is able to influence someone, one first needs to be liked by that person. The same goes to a community – before influencing them, one should, at least, present oneself in a way that is likeable – respect their values and beliefs, understand and be

sincerely interested in themselves. People like people who agree with them, like the same thing, share the same values and beliefs, respect their opinions, values, and beliefs, and that they have good first impressions of. (Hesketh 2010.)

### **2.4.2 Social media influencers**

Social media influencers are individuals whose online profiles attract a great followers base and play a role of impacting the followers' decisions as a consumer (McKinsey 2023).

According to Yesiloglu & Costello's summary (2020), some individuals become influencers because they are perceived and trusted by many as a powerful information source (Gladwell 2000). Nowadays, with the booming growth of social media platforms, information is getting more democratized (Solis 2010), ordinary people can become online influencers – and even celebrities (Chae 2018) by being active and accumulate a large audience base on social media. Through textually and visually exchanging information about their daily lifestyle, personal interests and hobbies, they can feature some advertorial elements in their posts (Abidin & Ots 2015).

Also according to McKinsey (2023), based on the size of the follower base, influencers are divided into five groups in terms of size – nano influencer, micro influencer, medium influencer, macro influencer, and mega influencer.

- Nano influencers have below 10,000 followers.
- Micro influencers have between 10,000 and 50,000 followers
- Medium influencers own between 50,000 and 100,000 followers
- Macro influencers own more than 500,000 followers
- Mega influencers have more than a million followers.

Despite a prejudice that brands usually prefer collaborating with more macro influencers or bigger, in reality, brands may find smaller influencers more relatable and allow more accessibility to the audience from their content than the bigger counterparts. This is because for macro and mega influencers, especially celebrities, tend to post about luxurious lifestyles unattainable for most people. (McKinsey 2023.)

### **2.4.3 SMIs as a type of light entrepreneur**

According to Job Market Finland (2024), a social media influencer produces high quality and valuable content using different social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, Tiktok to their audience on the platforms. Content produced consists of photos, videos, texts, podcasts, and live broadcast (also known as live-streaming). Social media influencers (SMIs) may focus on

various areas such as fashion, food, beauty, health, well-being, or education, etc. They collaborate with companies and brands to promote the products and services in their content pieces and can sometimes be included in the display ads of those companies on social media.

In order to collaborate well with brands and companies, SMIs need to constantly learn new things and maintain their interest in and curiosity towards their area of focus. Marketing and entrepreneurial mindsets, proficient knowledge of the social platforms in use, the ability to analyze data, and audience-retention know-how are valuable assets SMIs should possess. A social media influencer must develop good communication and time management skills to keep up with the content production schedules. Most importantly, developing a thick skin to tolerate negative feedbacks and comments is an important element of success that keeps SMIs moving forward in their content creation journey. (Job Market Finland 2024.)

Because social media influencer has also become one's full-time or part-time career—due to its nature, it is considered as light entrepreneur. After collaborations with companies, a SMI should send an invoice to the client company, either by using an invoicing service or registering for a business ID – as a private trader – and send the invoice with one's own business ID. If the annual income from collaborate surpasses 5000€, one should consider register himself as a private trader. A median salary for an SMI is 3000€ per month. If one's annual salary exceeds 40 000€ as an SMI, one should consider establishing a limited liability company (LLC). Therefore, whatever a SMI receive in return for their service – such as salary and gifted products – are subject to tax. (Job Market Finland 2025.)

## **2.5 Consumer behaviors and purchase decisions**

### **2.5.1 Definition**

It is a process a consumer goes through in their mind before deciding whether to purchase a product or not.

The process contains five stages:

- Acknowledging the need for a product
- Researching the product
- Examining various alternative options
- Buying the product
- Post-purchase evaluation

### **Phase 1: Acknowledging the need**

The buying decision starts with figuring out the need or demand, and acknowledge its existence. Most purchasing decisions revolve around the consumer finding out he has a need. The reasons can come from both internal factors and external environment.

Finding out what customers need is the first and significant step to understand the target market and come up with suitable marketing strategies.

(QuestionPro 2024.)

### **Phase 2: Researching product**

After figuring out the need, the customer moved on to do some research to gather all the useful information, facts, benefits, and drawbacks of the product for further consideration. There are several ways for customers to get to know in advance the experience they could expect from the products.

- Reading information on the product site
- Going through reviews from the previous customers
- Listening to words of mouth from people around that they can access to, e.g, a friend, a family member, colleague, etc. (QuestionPro 2024.)
- Watching social media content from influencers or any users to review the products in their videos

As consumers have more power and education than ever, along with the ubiquity of technology that everyone can access the product online and leave a comment on it. As a result, it is more vital that brands and businesses need to work hard on keeping their customers happy. (Lucidchart 2024.)

### **Phase 3: Examining alternative options**

In this phase, the customer would form a list of criteria for what he looks for from the product based on their wants and needs. Besides the prospective choice he has in mind, he will weigh the alternative options against the primary one based on price, added benefits, personal taste such as colors and style. Brands should design their marketing materials geared towards competitive

advantages compared to alternative/competitors' options in order to attract customers to decide on buying their products. (Lucidchart 2024.)

These factors all stem from the customer's wanting to get the best and smartest deal for him- or herself based on the price, quality, quantity, possible discount, personal taste, and income. By making it possible to decide, the customer usually goes through various reviews from previous customers about each substitute in question and compares them against his criteria - what he needs and wants. (QuestionPro 2024.)

#### **Phase 4: Buying the product**

After finally getting the options examined against his criteria, the customer processes his final purchase and chooses the option that best meets his needs and wants, which possibly equates to meeting the most of his criteria. He will search for where to buy it, whether online or at a physical shop. (Lucidchart 2024, QuestionPro 2024 & Indeed 2024.)

#### **Phase 5: Post-purchase evaluation**

After purchasing the product, the customer will analyze the product during the usage to see if the product can truly meet their criteria. The customer would like to examine whether the product could meet his expectations compared to when he decided to buy, how much the product is worth the money paid for, and – most importantly, whether the product satisfies the customer's emotional needs and wants. (Lucidchart 2024 & QuestionPro 2024.)

If the customer is happy with his purchase, he will likely stick to the product for a while and would even give a positive review to the retailer or brand online (Indeed 2024.)

### **2.5.2 Social media influencers' impact on consumer purchase decisions**

To understand about how influencers can influence others, Cialdini (2009) has stated in his exploratory research report the six principles of compliance that are the "weapons of influence": consistency, social proof, authority, liking, scarcity, and reciprocity.

- **Consistency** refers to the state of committing to a routine. For example, an influencer, in order to maintain his or her follower base, commits to updating with the trend and posting everyday, or every two days, etc.
- **Social proof** refers to the things that people as individuals find right to do, upon seeing others also do those. For example, when some influencers reveal transparently that some of their posts are sponsored and feature brands' products or services. Other influencers, afterwards, also follow the practice as they think this is how it should be done.

- **Authority** means that consumers only follow the information sources that they trust or accept. If an influencer has some expertise in the products he or she is promoting, the followers are more persuaded by the influencer’s authority to come to the purchase decision.
- **Liking** suggests that people are more likely to comply with the requests from the individuals they like. For example, when a YouTuber we like tells us to like and comment on their videos, and subscribe to their channel, we tend to do it more naturally compared to other YouTubers.
- **Scarcity** refers to the limitness of an offer or deal (from an influencer) that makes it become more valuable to pursue.
- **Reciprocity** happens when one returns the favor to another individual who has previously given the favor. In the case of influencers, they like, comment, and share each other’s story or post as a way of returning each other’s favor.

(Yesiluglo & Costello 2020, 8-9.)

Compared to celebrities, who attract a large follower base mostly based upon their popularity—despite without the necessary expertise on any specific field or niche—SMIs build their followers from scratch by offering their knowledge, expertise, and experience in various niches that resonate with and deliver values to their audience. This more likely give SMIs 100% trust from the audience than to pure celebrities. (Moflicks n.d.) According to Kirke Viira (2024), about 61% consumers decide their purchase based on the recommendation from the influencers they follow.

## 2.6 The ethical aspect

The ethical aspect of social media influencers are the key to consumers’ well-being and purchase decisions, also the focus of this thesis.

### 2.6.1 How SMIs affect consumers’ well-being and purchase intention

According to a study about the impact of TikTokers on consumers’ well-being and purchase intention, there are three factors influencing consumers’ well-being – *argument quality*, *social credibility*, and influencers’ *kindness*. As a result, consumers’ well-being in turn has an impact on their purchase intention. Good argument quality, high social credibility, and genuine kindness affect positively on consumers’ well-being. When a consumer has less anxiety, is happy and more willing to commit and stay loyal, the possibility of more favorable intention can happen. (Jamil, Qayyum, Hassan & Khan 2023.)

In another similar study but with the Chinese version of TikTok – Douyin – one more factor is added, which is *parasocial interaction*. Today, social media influencers are considered as friends—or even close friends—for many social media users due to reasons such as their relatability, trustworthy advice and recommendations, as well as down-to-earth personality traits. They would even consider hanging out with their favorite influencers were they to meet each other in real life or live within the same neighborhood. Many followers consider their favorite influencers as some kinds of one-way friends out of trust in their opinions and liking. (Zhangchao, Ng & Soong 2024.)

### **2.6.2 The rights and responsibilities of SMIs**

Social media influencers (SMIs) have become an occupation of which the position lie somewhere between journalists and advertisers, according to Jenn Burleson Mackay (2021, 151-162). Mackay argues in his/her chapter that SMIs can be considered as “quasi-journalists”—getting paid to endorse a product or get free items from brands to write reviews for while maintaining an image of being “unbiased and honest”. They have both the rights to use their platforms to earn money through brand sponsorships with their content and responsibilities to stay honest and transparent to their audience and the brands they receive deals from. (Mackay 2021, 151-162.)

### **3 Research Methodology**

To build a good foundation of knowledge and background information for the thesis topic, this thesis report relies on the literature review revolving around social media marketing, influencer marketing, and social media influencers. It references numerous information sources such as books, articles, journals, peer-reviewed theses, and webpage news/blog articles.

With the help of Mendeley Reference Management software, all the references are well organized and sorted based on metadata such as author, publisher, publication year, and volume and issue number (for journal articles). This helps cut down on the hassle of manually sorting our references using other methods, increases efficiency and productivity, and lets the thesis writer focus on the research process, collect data, and analyze and present findings.

#### **3.1 Research method**

Without primary data – in other words, empirical data – this thesis will be carried out as a comparative case study. A comparative study analyzes phenomena and puts them together as benchmarks to discuss similarities and differences between them (MokhtarianPour 2016). Comparative research includes both qualitative and quantitative comparisons. Quantitative methods are variable-oriented, requiring as many cases as possible to find the relationship between the variables. Meanwhile, qualitative methods are case-oriented, which applies to a smaller number of cases that require a researcher to divide in-depth attention to each of them. (Sharokh & Miri 2019.)

This study is conducted with a qualitative comparative method – which is case-oriented – because the data revolves around the three controversial influencer marketing cases in Vietnam. The case-oriented comparative research applies to a small number of cases, where researchers use their in-depth knowledge of each case to find relevant information that answers the research questions. The case-oriented qualitative techniques can potentially develop new theory while only examining a small number of cases (Ragin 1994).

#### **3.2 Data collection**

The thesis writer uses secondary sources gathered from news articles, online videos, and other possible sources to back up the three cases under analysis.

#### **3.3 Limitations of the study**

The author decided to turn this thesis into a case study with mainly online sources, such as news articles, videos, and potentially social media posts – which serve as her database. It is anticipated

that the thesis will lack in some aspects here and there, whether in the theoretical framework and data collection and analysis.

The thesis writer is trying her utmost to use her study to back up her research interest, and potentially either confirm existing theories, develop – somehow – a new perspective, or share make some hypotheses for future research.

The limitations of qualitative comparative analysis in this thesis is that it only compares among three cases of influencers in the same country, therefore might not avoid the possibility of limited scale of conclusion, given the depth of each case's analysis and the comparison among them.

### **3.4 Validity and reliability**

The sources gathered are news articles posted mostly on articles from some mainstream news media websites and well-known channels on YouTube for online videos. As a result, it is certain that the data are reliable and valid.

## 4 Case studies

### 4.1 Case 1: KERA vegetable candy pills

#### 4.1.1 Summary of the case

In early 2025, news in Vietnam burst out that KERA vegetable pills/candies, a product sold by Chi Em Rọt Joint Stock Corporation (CER), were being accused of counterfeiting quality and nutrition claims in advertisements. Five stockholders of CER, including three young, famous social media influencers (in Vietnam usually addressed as ‘KOLS’ – key opinion leaders), were arrested and investigated. The influencers in question is *Miss Grand International 2021* – Nguyen Thuc Thuy Tien, Pham Quang Linh (also known as *Quang Linh Vlogs*), and Nguyen Thi Thai Hang (also known as *Hằng Du Mục*)—they were in charge of producing content on social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook to promote the products with ‘magical benefits’ as “one candy can replace a whole plate of greens”, thanks to the fiber-richness included in the ingredients. (VNExpress 2025.)



**Figure 4.1a.** Nguyen Thuc Thuy Tien (left), Nguyen Thi Thai Hang (center), and Pham Quang Linh (right) during a livestreaming session for KERA supergreen gummies on social media (Baomoi 2025)

According to the investigation conducted by the Ministry of Public Security Investigation Police Agency (C01) from Hochiminh City, KERA green candies were first promoted and sold through a livestreaming session on December 12, 2024 via Quang Linh and Hang's personal TikTok, gaining a grand total of 400 million VND (over 13 thousand EUR) in revenues for about 2 800 orders within a few hours. The livestreaming sessions continued for another 4 days until December 16, three of which Thuy Tien, whose social media gained a **2.6 million follower base** at the time—showed up. (VNExpress 2025 & VNEconomy 2025.)

KERA is a recent Vietnamese brand for a type of gummy candy made of vegetable powder, claimed by the founder to contain over ten different vegetables and be an ideal supply for those not favoring eating vegetables—with just one or two candies per day. However, investigating authority showed that—unlike what the influencers claimed, the vegetables powder accounted for 28% of the nutritional value—in reality, the input was only less than 1% (somewhere between 0.61% and 0.75%). Besides, the manufacturer, Asia Life Corporation, used *sorbitol* – a type of chemical sweetener, also known as sugar alcohol, to help with digestion. The sorbitol made up almost 35% in the product. (VNExpress 2025 & VNEconomy 2025.)



**Figure 4.1b.** Products of KERA Supergreens gummies (VNExpress 2025)

To serve the purpose of filming content and advertisement, the crew with the influencers decided to borrow a carrot garden and another farm in Đà Lạt city to film advertisements, claiming that

KERA green candies are made from a variety of fresh vegetables produced and processed in a modern, EU-certified chain of VietGAP farm.

In mid-February 2025, complaints about the product's quality started arising, by the time which almost 130 thousand boxes were sold for over 56 thousand consumers. A gross profit of 17.5 million VND (approximately 574,282 EUR), after deducting costs to the manufacturer, gave the CER company a net 12.9 billion VND (roughly 423,240 EUR) of illegal profit. (VNExpress 2025.)

So, how did the idea of KERA come about, and how have the influencers ended up in this situation? Let's dive into a brief history of KERA's promoters as influencers.

#### **4.1.2 Original idea of KERA green candies**

Back in July 2024, Quang Linh and Hang Du Muc had a talk about opening a business specialized in livestreaming commerce. They intended to contribute 5 billion VND of capital (165,000 EUR) to open the company along with Lê Thành Công and some other people.

Công is Quang Linh's friend and he got inspired by a green jelly product in Japan. He then developed an idea of producing green candies and wanted to send a sample as a gift to Thuy Tien because she "does not like eating vegetables". His idea was based on the observable growth of the domestic market for functional foods.

At the time, Thuy Tien and Quang Linh were also co-founders of an exclusive distribution agency for the French brand of perfume, Adopt, in Vietnam.

Công initially proposed green jelly inspired by a Japanese product containing elements of 80 types of vegetables. He sent the sample to Nguyễn Phong, president of Asia Life Corp, who produced KERA. Meanwhile, Hang Du Muc (one of the involved influencers) suggested gummy candies which were at the time popular in China.

After 21 times having adjusted the content of the ingredients, on December 5, 2024, Phong agreed to begin the procedure of making the first KERA batches. (VNExpress 2025.)

#### **4.1.3 Nguyen Thuc Thuy Tien**

Nguyễn Thúc Thùy Tiên, born in 1998, is a former Miss Grand International 2021. Tien is 170cm tall and had a 83-62-92 body measurement. She won the crown in the beauty pageant contest for her physical beauty and intelligent delivery during the on-stage questioning and answering part. She is talented in personal communication, public speaking, and languages in which she can

speak fluently and confidently: English, Thai, and French (Thuy Tien used to study French Literature at HCMC's University of Social Science and Humanities). (SKDS 2022.)



**Figure 4.1c.** Nguyen Thuc Thuy Tien won the crown at the Miss Grand International 2021 beauty pageant (SKDS 2022)

Before her crown, Thuy Tien used to sign up for and become the runner-up of the Miss Southern Vietnam 2017 contest. She then also ranked top 5 in the Miss Vietnam 2018. After becoming the Miss Grand International 2021, Thuy Tien constantly participated in various charitable activities, voluntary as well as showbiz events. (Lao Động 2025.)

Regarding the recent scandal with KERA, Thuy Tien joined the company as co-owner of the product. She invested 25% stock when the idea of KERA green candies was still under development. The other 4 people including Quang Linh and Thai Hang together invested 75%. When the gummies yielded great results from active promotion, mostly via livestreaming, Thuy Tien demanded a 5-10% increase in the profit. Eventually, she received 30% of the profit, a 5% increase from the original deal. (VNExpress 2025.)

#### 4.1.4 Phạm Quang Linh (Quang Linh Vlogs)

Phạm Quang Linh was born in 1997 at Nghi Lộc ward, Nghệ An province in the central area of Vietnam. He was well-known as a YouTuber recording his daily life in African countries, especially Angola. His journey began in 2016 when he left Vietnam for Angola to work in the construction sites. Even though met with challenges at the beginning, he managed to open a factory making iced water for extra income.

As he was working with the native colleagues, an idea of recording his daily work-life routine on YouTube came up his mind, never expected to become big in the future.

In 2018, Quang Linh created his official YouTube channel named “Quang Linh Vlogs”, making him stand out from the crowd who usually shared about their lives in Japan, South Korea, or Canada, etc. His channel quickly reached one million subscribers after two years of foundation, thanks to his refreshing content to his audience in Vietnam.



**Figure 4.1d.** Quang Linh with the local community in Africa (Đồng Hải Food 2025)

From only sharing videos of funny moments between himself and his Angolian friends, his turning point started after Quang Linh made videos about the hardships of life in Africa as well as his local charitable activities. Some of his content with highest views include:

- Drilling wells that provide locals with clean water,
- Organizing Vietnames-style weddings for Angolian friends,
- Cooking and introducing Vietnamese cuisine in Africa, and
- Building farms and supporting the local economic development

Statistics showed that his YouTube channel, Quang Linh Vlogs, gave Quang Linh an annual income ranging between 6,500 USD to 99,000 USD per month (about 5581 to 85000 EUR/month). Besides, his income also came from, e.g, selling online merchandise and dry food, collaboration with Thùy Tiên in perfume distribution, and donations from fans. He was also Vice President of an exclusive French perfume, A'Dor, distribution company. Most of his income was spent on:

- Investing in equipment and job-seeking services for the Angolian locals,
- Building projects of charity in Angola, and
- Expanding farms to help the African agricultural growth

Quang Linh was viewed as a great inspiration for the Vietnamese community, especially the young generation.

(Đồng Hải Food 2025.)

#### **4.1.5 Nguyen Thi Thai Hang (Hang Du Muc)**

Nguyễn Thị Thái Hằng, famously known as Hằng Du Mục ('du mục' means 'nomad' in English), was born in 1995 in Cà Mau city, southern Vietnam. She used to get married to a Chinese husband born in 1981 with two kids. Hang Du Muc was famous for sharing lots of videos about life, nature, as well as customs in many areas in China.



**Figure 4.1e.** Hang Du Muc used to share videos and stories about life in China (Photo by Facebook fanpage Hằng Du Mực) (Dân trí 2025)

By April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025, her TikTok channel received 4.8 million followers and Facebook fanpage 1.1 million likes and 2.2 followers.

After gaining a certain amount of follower base, she started her livestreaming sales career, selling Chinese Xinjiang red dates (also called 'jujube') at various places such as on the highlands in Xinjiang and Huoyan Mountain. She was also complimented by the audience for her sales communication talent after achieving successful sales deals for tons of red dates.



**Figure 4.1f.** Hang Du Muc selling Xinjiang red dates (beautylandbyemma 2022)

Hang Du Muc, besides the scandal about KERA green gummies, also met with accusations of overdelivering product quality. In a livestreaming session in late 2024, Hang Du Muc introduced a jar of steamed swiftlet nets claimed to be from organic sources. She advertised that a 70 ml jar contained 30 grams of fresh swiftlet nets, not by percentage but by how many actual grams of nets contained in each jar. According to experts in the business of selling such products, they find it skeptical for only a 70 ml jar to contain up to 30 grams of steamed nets. In the end, the famous Tik-Toker had to deliver an official public apology for making mistakes in delivering misinformation to consumers.

Since joining CER Corp., Hang Du Muc was delegated as the Chairman of the Board of Directors.

(Dân Trí 2025.)

#### 4.2 Case 2: Almost 600 counterfeited brands of milk powder

On April 12, 2025, the Ministry of Police in Vietnam exposed the entire chain of 573 fake milk brand production lines, arresting eight perpetrators involved in the case under the crimes of “producing counterfeited food products” and “violating the accounting rules, causing damage”. These violating acts had been in operation since August 2021 until the police figured them out. (VNExpress 2025.)



**Figure 4.2a.** Police exposed the entire chain of fake milk powder production (VTV 2025)

The products were claimed to contain highly nutritious ingredients such as swiftlet net extract, Cordyceps, macadamia powder, and walnut powder. They have been advertised towards the elderly, pregnant women, newborn babies, those with diabetes, and those with renal failure—successfully having generated 5 billion VND (165,000 EUR) of revenues. Two companies involved in the production of these products are Rance Pharma and Hacofood Group. Investigation shows that the milk powder products contain some ingredients with lower than 70% in quality measure index. (VNExpress 2025.)

HiUp, one of the brands, dubbed their product HiUP 27's sales price 7 times (546,000 VND) as much as the factory price (87,000 VND). On 19 June, Ministry of Public Security officially prosecuted and arrested the leader of Z-Holding, the producing company of HiUp, for two offenses: “manufacturing counterfeit food products” and “violating accounting regulations causing serious damage”. The product was claimed to consist of 37 nutritional ingredients, when in reality only contained 15-17 basic nutritional ingredients that were below the standard. Between 8 August 2024 and 5 March 2025, this product generated 6,700 billion VND of revenues (approximately 221 million EUR). (Kinh tế đô thị 2025.)

During the process of investigating the counterfeited products, the Vietnamese Ministry of Police made a list of 12 products fully identified as such and another 72 under continued investigation (VOV 2025).

Many celebrities joined in the hype of promotion on their social media fanpages or personal accounts. Celebrities who were involved in this scandal included *MC Thanh Vân Hugo*, *TV show editor Quang Minh*, *actor Doãn Đức Đàm*, *actresses Lê Khánh* and *Cát Tường*, and *MC Quỳnh Linh*. All of them advertised the products as though these could cure any disorder, illness, or disease the products claimed to be effective for. And quite often, these products are aimed at small children, elderly people, pregnant women, and also ill people.



**Figure 4.2b.** Editor Quang Minh (left) (Tiền Phong 2025) and MC Thanh Vân Hugo (right) (Vietnamnet 2025) got involved in the scandal

After the police had started the investigation into these fake brands of milk powder, the celebrities began mass apologies on their social accounts, admitting their lack of knowledge and stating their responsibility in such incidents of overestimating the nutritional values of their endorsements. For instance, Thanh Vân said that the milk product could help kids grow 1-2 cm taller after a month and

3-5 cm after three months. After facing backlash from the community, she had to apologize, saying that these products had worked on her children but that she should have been more aware that they could work differently on children based on their bodily conditions. (VOV 2025.)

However, their mere apologies, though seeming sincere, did not suffice to calm down consumers' anger and disappointment when their trust in those public figures was deeply lost after the incidents, along with deep concern about the effects of using these endorsed low-quality milk products on their family members' health. Many believe that these influencers should be held responsible and face due legal obligations for their deeds based on self-interest, so that others in the future would have good examples.

Doctor & Lawyer Đặng Văn Cường stated that deceptive advertisements and violation of the advertising law are considered an act of violating the law, based on the severity and the consequences that follow, which should determine whether the endorsers have committed an *administrative violation* or a *criminal offense* (Gia Đình & Xã Hội 2025).

Also regarding the issue, Lawyer Nguyễn Ngọc Hùng said that celebrities [or influencers] are not simply entertainers or inspiring individuals, but also ones who have an impact on the consumption behaviors of millions of their followers. That a famous person endorses a health-related product will bring about a great impact, especially on the group of elderly people, patients, or consumers who lack medical knowledge. Those behaviors not only breach the Consumer Protection Act, but also play a threatening role to the health of the community, resulting in a number of patients refusing to take medicine and starting to take functional food supplements instead, and serious medical consequences. He stated that abusing "social credit" to generate misleading and fraudulent promotions is unethical and dangerous in the context where advertising on social media is currently very prevalent yet not strictly supervised, and that consumer health rights and benefits are to be prioritized. Besides a strict and transparent legal system, he also propounded transparent ethical responsibilities and legal obligations to every single individual, especially those with influence. (VOV 2025.)

### **4.3 Case 3: Hanayuki accused of low-quality cosmetic products**

#### **4.3.1 Case summary**

On May 29, 2025, the police of Đồng Nai province prosecuted the EBC Đồng Nai Medical Factory JSC for manufacturing fake cosmetic products Hanayuki – distributed by a company founded by singer Đoàn Di Băng's husband. Nguyễn Quốc Vũ, Đoàn's husband, is the legal representative of VB Group LLC (Thanh Niên 2025).



**Figure 4.3a.** The businessman husband Nguyễn Quốc Vũ (left) and singer Đoàn Di Băng (right) (Dân Trí 2025)

An urgent meeting between the People’s Procuracy and the Health Department on 26 May morning came to a conclusion that two Hanayuki’s products – *Hanayuki Sunscreen Body* and *Hanayuki Shampoo* – were suspended from sales on the market and headed for complete disposal. *Hanayuki Sunscreen Body* was prosecuted for misleading effect claim of SPF 50 on the packaging while carrying, in fact, only SPF 2.4 – meeting only 4.8% of what was claimed. According to Point b, Clause 7, Article 3, Decree No. 98/2020/ND-CP announced 26 August, 2020 by the Vietnamese Government, sunscreen products whose quantitative determination of main substance (SPF), which creates the value of use and product’s effect, is under 70%—are identified as *counterfeit goods*. (VNExpress 2025.)



**Figure 4.3a.** Hanayuki Sunscreen Body tube, 7.80€ and 100g/tube (photo by T.L, Thanh Niên 2025)

According to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) and the Skin Cancer Foundation, the minimum index for SPF is 30 in order to protect the skin from sunburn. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) states that SPF under 6 provides almost no effect for skin protection. Also relevant to this issue, doctor Tran Nguyen Anh Tu – Executive Committee Member of Dermatology Association, said that SPF can protect skin from the UVB that causes sunburn, leading to DNA damage, which is the main source of skin cancer. (Thanh Niên 2025.)

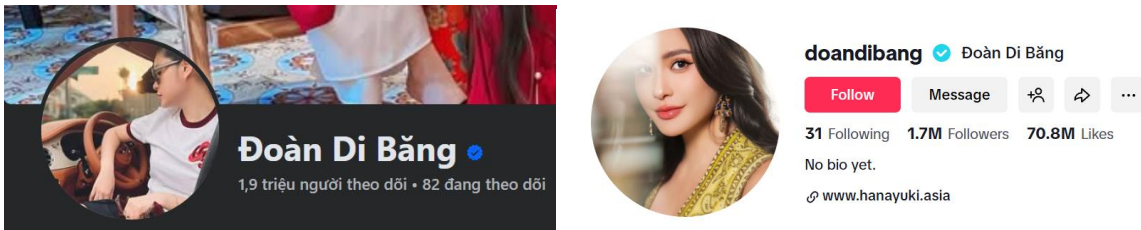
According to the investigation, a single tube just released from EB Đồng Nai (manufacturer of Hanayuki) costed only 99,000 VND (3.27 EUR), which would make a total of 163.5 million VND (5395.5 EUR) for the whole batch. However, Đoàn Di Băng publicly sold these on her social media for 235,000 to 240,000 VND (almost 8 EUR) per tube – claiming the product had “high” index of sun protection (SPF), “combining moisturizing, makeup, and sunscreen effects for half a day outdoor”. With 1,652 tubes sold, the revenue was estimated to fall between 388 million to 396.5 million vnd (12,804 to 13,084.5 EUR). Before subtracting the operating costs, it was estimated that the influencer couple could make 225 million to 233 million (7.425 to 7,689 EUR). (Saostar 2025.)

#### 4.3.2 The wealthiness of Đoàn Di Băng and her husband

Đoàn Di Băng, born in 1990, started her career in the early 2010s as a singer. She once earned a silver medal in Ho Chi Minh City’s 6<sup>th</sup> Golden Voice of Tourism contest. However, her singing

career was generally perceived as mediocre and short-lived when she decided to leave the entertainment world in 2012, got married, and moved on with her business career.

Băng has since been well-known for showing her extremely wealthy lifestyle on social media along with bold and controversial statements, attracting lots of negative opinions from social media users. Her Facebook page has 1.9 million followers and TikTok 1.7 million.



**Figure 4.3b.** Băng's social media pages

As a business woman, Băng has been doing business with her husband and both of them hold key positions at the VB Group. Specifically, she is the representative and a shareholder of the corporation.

Nguyễn Quốc Vũ, Băng's husband, is a wealthy businessman in the beauty and health industries, who founded the VB Group and holds a key position at the EBC Đồng Nai Medical Factory JSC – the manufacturer of Hanayuki brand's cosmetics. He is also well-known for being a loving husband who often buys pricey gifts for his wife, as shown on her social media.

(Lorca 2025 & Vietnamnet 2025)



**Figure 4.3c.** Đoàn Di Băng's current family villa (left) while waiting for her 400 billion VND (about 13 million EUR) villa (right) to be finished (Vietnamnet 2025)

## **5 Findings & Analysis**

### **5.1 Case comparisons**

In the first case – KERA green candies, each of the three influencers had already been successful as individuals. Thuy Tien was the former Miss Grand International 2021 with the talents in languages, modeling, and doing business; Quang Linh was a successful YouTube vlogger and an inspirational public figure for the Vietnamese young generation; and Thai Hang was also an admired social media influencer with good communication and sales skills that led to her success in online commerce. However, their dishonesty and overexaggeration in promoting their collaborative product caused them trouble and a significant loss of credibility. Their products have been seized by the authorities from circulating on the market.

The celebrities in the second case endorsing various counterfeiting brands of milk powder from Ha-cofood Group, are the ones who are already at senior levels in their careers and have built a strong credibility and public image for their audience. However, their participation in this promotion greatly disappointed and concerned many of their followers and consumers who bought and used the products. Each responsible person acted somewhat differently—some stated their apologies on social media and made an effort to give long explanations about their deeds, some admitted their lack of awareness about the products they promoted, some stayed silent and deleted their past endorsement social posts. In the end, none of those behaviors managed to reassure the user community. These products were confiscated and stopped being distributed to the market and faced strict legal action from the authorities.

And finally, the Hanayuki cosmetics case—the owner of the brand is a wealthy business-doing couple, they already own the most expensive and luxurious material belongings, businesses, and even a family. However, they decided to be dishonest in their products for profit, without respecting their customers. The consequence is that their prosecuted products have been confiscated and thoroughly destroyed.

### **5.2 The consequences on consumers' well-being and trust**

When a celebrity or social media influencer endorses a product online, this person usually uses his or her public image, reputation, and audience trust gained after a long time built online to create a certain perception of the product in the eyes of consumers. When consumers see the product being used and recommended by their favorite public figures, they tend to have a stronger willingness to look up information and buy those products for various reasons. While some can remain cold-headed before making a purchase, many others end up blindly following the influencers and make

not just one, but two or more purchases. But when it comes to buying fake products, consumers will not only suffer from losing trust but also financial loss and potential risks to their health when consuming such products.

After many cases of influencers' endorsement failures were exposed in 2025, many consumers stated their disappointment and loss of trust in influencers, and looked forward to much stricter penalties for deceptive behaviors and management of influencer endorsement practices in the future. Media crisis management specialist, Lê Ngọc Sơn, said that the rat race of celebrities endorsing and advertising fake or low-quality products online indeed posed both a moral and legal challenge. (Kinh tế đô thị 2025.)

### **5.3 Influencers' consequences and responsibilities**

Since early mid 2025, the Ministry of Public Security has been more determined in strictly dealing with counterfeiting product manufacturing and distribution, amid the rising exploration of celebrities' irresponsible fake product endorsements on social media (VNExpress 2025).

According to the Decree 55/2024 and the Law on Consumer Protection, influencers must be experts who have an impact on consumer behavior. However, it is common nowadays to encounter many influencers being artists, celebrities, models, and so on—who do not possess deep enough knowledge about the products they endorse but rather rely on their public image to draw attention from and influence their audience. (Kinh tế đô thị 2025.) This would bring about potential risks and cause potential damage to a wide range of consumers, who easily believe in influencers, and their family members.

During the National Assembly conference on May 10, various opinions from the delegates were discussed regarding adjusting the draft law on advertising. One delegate, Mrs. Huỳnh Thị Thu from the city of Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, proposed the increase in financial fines for influencers violating the law, creating a healthier and safer environment for advertising, and adjusting regulations to occupational ethics, responsibilities, as well as legal obligations for influencers. Another delegate, Mr. Trịnh Xuân An believed advertising to be a crucial part of the economic development; therefore, on one hand, people should facilitate the advantages of advertising while, on the other hand, having strict regulations towards who is allowed to advertise or endorse products. He also stated that only influencers who are experts or have the capabilities directly related to the products are allowed to implement advertising. (Kinh tế đô thị 2025.)

Regarding the legal obligations for influencers who have been involved in dishonest or deceptive product endorsement, there are two main levels: financial penalties and criminal penalties, depending on the severity of each case.

– **Financial penalties**

According to the Law on Advertising 2012 (amended 2018):

- Clause 9, article 8 of the law forbids the practice of misleading advertising.
- Clause 5, article 34, Decree 38/2021/ND-CP states that the financial penalties can reach up to 80 million VND (2,640 EUR) for violating individuals and 160 million VND (5,280 EUR) for businesses. In addition, it is required that content posts be deleted from the platforms, advertising licenses be confiscated, and guilty deeds be corrected.

If such behaviors are repeated after the penalty period, the offense will be determined under the Article 197 – Deceptive Advertisement (VOV 2025). The violating party will face a criminal penalty of up to a 5-year imprisonment (Kinh tế đô thị 2025).

In the second case, about 600 counterfeit milk powder brands, MC Hoàng Linh – who signed a contract to promote Cilonmum from April 2022 until 2022. In 2023, she also joined promoting for HiUp brand; but, as soon as she noticed some violations of advertising, she immediately ended the contract. On July 15, 2025, Hoàng Linh faced a penalty of 107.5 million VND (3547.5 EUR) and took full responsibility for her deeds. (Kinh tế đô thị 2025.)



**Figure 5.3.** MC Hoàng Linh promoting HiUp milk (Kinh tế đô thị 2025)

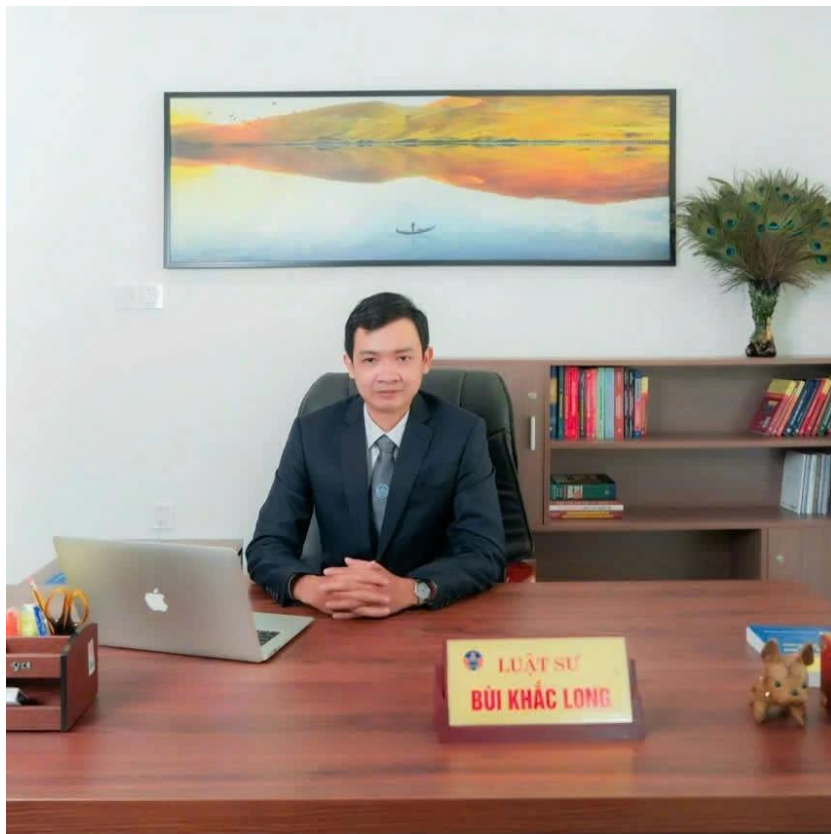
– **Criminal penalties**

In the case of an influencer having gone through discussions and having some connection with the violating businesses, take the second case as an example. There are two articles:

- Article 198: Deceiving consumers
- Article 317: Violation of Food Safety Regulations

The penalties for such crimes can result in up to 20 years' imprisonment or life imprisonment.

Lawyer Bùi Khắc Long from HCMC's Bar Association stated in an interview that influencers in the digital age can easily manipulate their audience with their unverified advertising posts, which attributes to a serious moral issue, can lead to high legal risks, and can cause damage to both the influencer's personal reputation as well as, if any, to society. He also stated that everyone is equal to the law, and that one's public reputation is not an exemption from one's legal obligations.



**Figure 5.3b.** Lawyer Bùi Khắc Long (VOV 2025)

Besides, if any consumer ended up buying low quality or counterfeit goods, he or she has the right to file a lawsuit against the organization or individual who had caused the damage, and requesting compensation according to the clause 5, article 4 of the Law on Consumer Protection.

(VOV 2025.)

#### 5.4 Responsibilities of authorities

The distribution of counterfeit products is not a new phenomenon in a market as Vietnam, where the laws on dealing with such issues are stated in detail but lack serious action from the responsible officials. However, not until early 2025 did the authoritative forces begin taking practical action on this matter. Goods related to health, such as food, medicine, and milk are of special concern when it comes to consumers' well-being—including their health, economic situations, and the quality of the labor force—according to Mr. Nguyễn Quốc Toàn, spokesperson for the Ministry of Public Security, in a regular governmental press conference on June 4. Nguyễn said that the determination and effort against counterfeit goods are now “carried out with a refreshing determination and perspective. (VNExpress 2025.)

Authorities should tighten up influencers' responsibilities in verifying the authenticity of their endorsed products and their willingness to provide official documents when requested to avoid abusing their credit and reputation to mislead the public. The next thing is to increase and tighten up the control of advertising content on various media platforms, especially social media and livestreaming platforms. Besides, authorities need to cooperate with the service/product providers to ensure any misleading or incorrect advertisement is identified and dealt with in a timely manner. Meanwhile, any agency or company using influencers or celebrities to advertise or endorse is also highly responsible for supervising and managing the advertising activities while maintaining the pressure for both parties to abide by the laws. (Eastern Sun Law Firm 2025.)

#### 5.5 Answering the research question

Back the original research question – *What are the ethics of social media influencers' product endorsements on online consumers?* – the answers to the investigative questions will be first answered.

#### **IQ 1: Who are social media influencers (SMIs) and what do they do for a living?**

Social media influencers are content creators on social platforms who have built a certain follower base (niche or large and, most importantly, loyal) and a brand image to start monetizing their channel. There are several levels of SMIs: *nano-influencers* (under 10k followers), *micro-influencers* (between 10k and 50k followers), *medium influencers* (between 50k and 100k followers), *macro-influencers* (between 500k and 1 million followers), and *mega-influencers* (above 1 million followers).

Social media influencers monetize their channels through engagement with their followers and the content (usually sponsored by brands) they post on social media. Their income per content post corresponds to the level of influence listed above.

**IQ 2: Why do consumers follow SMIs and believe in their product endorsements?**

Consumers follow SMIs for the values (knowledge, trends, education, etc.) they provide from their content. A successful influencer usually carries these six factors – authenticity, consistency, social proof, likability, scarcity, and reciprocity. By carrying these six factors, a social media influencer is perceived as trustworthy and knowledgeable of what they endorse, which is why using influencer marketing is a highly effective approach for most brands. Consumers easily trust their favorite influencers with their opinions, and are therefore highly likely to make a purchase based on what their influencers endorse.

**IQ 3: What are the drives for influencers to endorse a product?**

It depends on each influencer. Being an influencer in itself is not necessarily a profession, as the title can be born from one's reputation and expertise in a certain field—e.g, celebrities, scientists, business owners. However, for many others – especially social media content creators, being an influencer is their profession. Some work as a full-timer, while others are part-timers. As a result, income is one main reason for them to endorse/promote a product on their social platforms.

There are also influencers who make endorsements simply because they favor the products themselves are using, using their experience and a certain level of knowledge of their interested fields to raise awareness/share among their audience. They know the audience likes their authenticity and trusts their expertise, and therefore, their knowledge might be helpful and inspire their audience.

**IQ 4: How ought SMIs to take accountability for the products they promote/endorse?**

SMIs must be honest and transparent about their sponsored relationship with brands in their content to maintain the audience's trust.

It is against the law when SMIs endorse low-quality, counterfeit goods, or goods with misleading statements of their benefits. Violating SMIs who abuse their reputation and credibility to promote or endorse such products will face legal obligations, whether with financial or criminal penalties. Its level of severity corresponds with the level of harm caused in society by the misleading deeds of the influencers. Besides, all their misleading posts must be taken down.

**Research question: *What are the ethics of social media influencers' product endorsements on online consumers?***

Being an influencer in the era of social media is not only powerful, but also full of responsibilities to the public. As a social media influencer, anything presented to the public is consumed by internet users and will lead to influencing their lives to some extent. Given the public trust in SMIs for authenticity, consistency, likability, social proof, scarcity, and reciprocity—the responsibility is even higher in terms of words and deeds shown online. One needs to be authentic, trustworthy, and transparent about the promotion, whether it is their own products or sponsored.

An influencer should also be responsible for getting to know about a brand and its product well enough, and making sure to thoroughly inspect all the relevant information about a product and that it is trustworthy, transparent, and causes no harm to consumers. It is better that, in the future, only qualified influencers who are experts in the field to which the products aim are allowed to endorse a product.

## 6 Conclusion

The rise of social media and the number of users in this recent decade have led to an immense change in marketing approach, as well as in consumer behavior. There are pros and cons to every issue, including marketing on social media using influencers. Social media has given consumers more power than ever—the power to do research, benchmark, and decide their purchase behaviors.

The thesis has successfully discussed the ethics and negative effects of social media influencers' product endorsement on consumers' well-being, by providing a relevant theoretical framework and presenting three real case studies from Vietnam regarding influencers' product endorsement scandals that led them to lose social trust and reputation, while having to face financial penalties and legal judgment. The thesis has proved that money is the primary motivator for influencers' product endorsements and promotions, and greed is the reason that led the influencers to the scandals involving promotions of low-quality and counterfeit goods.

Being an influencer comes with both power and responsibility. The more authentic and well-known an influencer is, the more likely it is for the audience to put trust in the endorsement. Influencers are expected to be transparent about their relationships with the sponsored brands and the products they endorse and promote with due honesty and sincerity. If they are found to be misleading their audience with false claims of the products' benefits, promoting or endorsing low-quality or fake products, not only will they lose trust from the public and have their reputation ruined, but also have to face certain penalties depending on how severe the consequences caused. The lightest penalty is financial penalties up to almost 3,000 EUR for an individual and above 5,000 EUR for an organization that has violated the law. At the same time, they are to be given warnings not to repeat the deeds and have all the previous related posts deleted.

When endorsing and promoting a product online on social media, influencers are required to go through a thorough research process about the products and make sure it is reliable to the public and will not cause harm to consumers. In the future, it is recommended that only influencers who are themselves experts in the field are allowed to endorse the product.

## 7 Future Recommendations

Based on the findings of this thesis and the ethical complexities highlighted by the case studies (KERA, milk powder, and Hanayuki cosmetics), the following recommendations are suggested to foster a more ethical, transparent, and consumer-protective influencer marketing environment in Vietnam and globally:

### 1. For Regulators and Government Bodies:

- **Establish Legal Accountability:** Introduce clear, comprehensive legislation that moves beyond financial penalties to define personal legal accountability for SMIs who make false or misleading health, safety, or nutritional claims, particularly concerning vulnerable demographics like children (e.g., the fake milk powder and vegetable candy cases).
- **Standardized Disclosure Mandates:** Mandate a uniform, clearly visible disclosure mechanism (e.g., a specific banner or mandatory text preface like *“Paid Endorsement”*) that cannot be easily overlooked by consumers, exceeding the visibility of simple hashtags like #ad.

### 2. For Social Media Platforms (e.g., Facebook, TikTok):

- **Enforce Expert Vetting:** Formalize the existing recommendation by establishing a clear mechanism, tied to monetization features, that requires **proof of professional qualification or third-party certification** before an SMI can endorse products in regulated fields (e.g., health, finance, or clinical cosmetics).
- **Algorithmic Transparency and Sanctions:** Implement automated systems that actively detect and flag content that promotes products subject to public scrutiny (like the cases in this study). Platforms should enforce tiered sanctions, starting with demonetization and escalating to temporary content bans for repeat ethical violations.

### 3. For Brands and Businesses:

- **Mandatory Due Diligence Clauses:** All influencer contracts must include a clause requiring the influencer to demonstrate **first-hand use and independent verification** of the product's claims for a minimum period before promotion.
- **Shift from Reach to Ethics:** Prioritize collaborations with "ethical influencers" whose past content demonstrates transparency and consumer trust, rather than solely focusing on the highest follower counts (reach).

#### 4. For Consumers and Education:

- **Digital Literacy Campaigns:** Governments and educational bodies should fund national digital literacy campaigns focused on teaching consumers, particularly young people, how to critically evaluate sponsored content, recognize "authenticity theater," and understand the persuasion knowledge model.

This structured set of recommendations transforms the concluding chapter from a simple summary into a proposal for meaningful future action.

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