UNIVERSITY OF MODENA AND REGGIO EMILIA
Department of Studies on Language and Culture

Degree Programme: **Languages for communication in international enterprises and organizations - LACOM**

Building a Contemporary Beauty Brand through Digital Marketing: The Case of Darling

Supevisor:

Dott.ssa Pescio Antonella

Thesis of:

Matilde Conconi

Co-Supervisor

Dott.ssa Diani Giuliana

Academic Year 2025-2026

ABSTRACT

As a result of the growing importance of digital marketing, social media, influencer communication and evolving consumer behaviours in recent years the beauty industry has undergone significant changes. In this context, the present dissertation analyses the digital marketing strategies and brand positioning strategy of Darling, an Italian premium suncare brand founded in Reggio Emilia in 2018. The study aims at examining how Darling has developed a distinctive positioniting within the competitive beauty market by combining sun protection with skincare, aesthetics, lifestyle and digital communication.

The research adopts a qualitative case study approach. The analysis is based on academic literature, industry reports, internal company documents, materials coming from digital platforms and the author's observations gained during her internship within the company. In addition, a semi-structured interview with the company's founders provides a primary qualitative source and offers a further insight into the strategic choices behind the development and positioning of the brand. Particular attention is given to Darling's target consumer, brand identity, competitive positioning, digital ecosystem, Instagram communication, influencer marketing and customer journey.

The analysis shows that Darling's competitive positioning is based on the combination of a distinctive visual identity, premium product quality, aesthetic and lifestyle-oriented communication, selective distribution and a strong Italian and Mediterranean identity. Digital communication, particularly Instagram, plays a crucial role in building brand awareness, desirability and consumer engagement. At the same time, the analysis of the customer journey through Kotler et al.'s Five A's framework highlights the important role played by both digital and physical touchpoints across the different stages of the consumer experience.

Overall, the case of Darling illustrates how a contemporary and relatively young beauty brand can grow and differentiate itself by transforming a traditionally functional suncare category into a desirable beauty experience, while progressively also expanding its positioning towards a broader beauty and lifestyle universe.

A causa della crescente importanza del marketing digitale, dei social media, della comunicazione attraverso gli influencer e dell'evoluzione dei comportamenti dei consumatori negli ultimi anni, il settore della cosmetica ha subito significativi cambiamenti. In questo contesto, questa tesi analizza le strategie di marketing digitale e di posizionamento del brand Darling, un marchio italiano di prodotti solari di fascia alta fondato a Reggio Emilia nel 2018. Lo studio mira a esaminare come Darling abbia sviluppato un posizionamento distintivo all'interno del mercato della cosmetica, combinando la protezione solare con la cura della pelle, l'estetica e la comunicazione digitale.

La ricerca adotta un approccio qualitativo basato sullo studio di un caso specifico. L'analisi si basa sulla letteratura accademica, report di settore, documenti aziendali interni, materiali provenienti dalle piattaforme digitali e sulle osservazioni dell'autrice maturate durante il periodo di tirocinio svolto all'interno dell'azienda. La tesi contiene inoltre un'intervista svolta con i fondatori dell'azienda, che costituisce una fonte qualitativa primaria e offre ulteriori approfondimenti sulle scelte strategiche alla base dello sviluppo e del posizionamento del brand. Un'attenzione particolare è dedicata al target di consumatori di Darling, alla brand identity al posizionamento del marchio, all'ecosistema digitale, alla comunicazione su Instagram, all'influencer marketing e al customer journey di un potenziale cliente Darling.

L'analisi condotta mostra che il posizionamento di Darling si fonda sulla combinazione di diversi elementi, quali un'identità visiva molto distintiva, una qualità dei prodotti di fascia premium, una comunicazione orientata all'estetica, una distribuzione selettiva e una forte identità italiana e mediterranea. La comunicazione digitale, e in particolare Instagram, svolge un ruolo cruciale nella costruzione della brand awareness, della desiderabilità del marchio e del coinvolgimento dei consumatori. Al tempo stesso, l'analisi del customer journey attraverso il modello delle Cinque A di Kotler evidenzia l'importante ruolo svolto sia dai touchpoint digitali sia da quelli fisici nelle diverse fasi dell'esperienza del consumatore.

Il caso di Darling mostra quindi come un brand contemporaneo e relativamente giovane operante nel settore beauty possa essere in grado di crescere e differenziarsi trasformando una categoria tradizionalmente funzionale come quella della protezione solare in una vera e propria esperienza di bellezza a 360 gradi, ampliando progressivamente il proprio posizionamento verso un universo più ampio.

Aufgrund der zunehmenden Bedeutung des digitalen Marketings, der sozialen Medien, der Influencer-Kommunikation und des sich wandelnden Konsumentenverhaltens hat sich die Beauty-Branche in den vergangenen Jahren erheblich verändert. In diesem Rahmen untersucht die vorliegende Masterarbeit die Strategien des digitalen Marketings und der Markenpositionierung von Darling, einer 2018 in Reggio Emilia gegründeten italienischen Premium-Sonnenschutzmarke. Ziel der Arbeit ist es, zu untersuchen, wie Darling eine eigenständige Positionierung im wettbewerbsintensiven Beauty-Markt entwickelt hat, indem Sonnenschutz mit Hautpflege, Ästhetik, Lifestyle und digitaler Kommunikation verbunden wird.

Die Untersuchung folgt einem qualitativen Fallstudienansatz. Die Analyse basiert auf wissenschaftlicher Literatur, Branchenberichten, internen Unternehmensdokumenten, Materialien aus digitalen Plattformen sowie den Beobachtungen der Autorin, die während ihres Praktikums im Unternehmen gesammelt wurden. Besonders wichtig sind die Zielgruppe von Darling, die Markenidentität, die Wettbewerbspositionierung, das digitale Ökosystem, die Instagram-Kommunikation, das Influencer-Marketing und die Customer Journey.
Die Analyse zeigt, dass die Positionierung von Darling auf der Kombination einer unverwechselbaren visuellen Identität, einer hochwertigen Premium-Produktqualität, einer ästhetisch und lifestyle-orientierten Kommunikation, eines selektiven Vertriebs sowie einer starken italienischen und mediterranen Identität basiert. Die digitale Kommunikation, insbesondere Instagram, spielt eine zentrale Rolle beim Aufbau von Markenbekanntheit, Begehrlichkeit und Konsumentenengagement. Gleichzeitig verdeutlicht die Analyse der Customer Journey anhand des Five-A-Modells von Kotler et al. die wichtige Rolle sowohl digitaler als auch physischer Touchpoints in den verschiedenen Phasen der Konsumentenerfahrung.

Insgesamt zeigt der Fall von Darling, wie eine moderne und vergleichsweise junge Beauty-Marke wachsen und sich differenzieren kann, indem sie eine traditionell funktional ausgerichtete Kategorie wie Sonnenschutz in ein begehrenswertes Beauty-Erlebnis verwandelt und ihre Positionierung schrittweise auf ein umfassenderes Beauty- und Lifestyle-Universum ausweitet.

Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION 1
1.1 THE GLOBAL BEAUTY INDUSTRY AND ITS DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION 1
1.2 THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE BEAUTY SECTOR 2
1.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT: WHY DARLING? 4
1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES 5
1.5 METHODOLOGY 6
1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS 7
2.0 DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES AND BRAND BUILDING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY 9
2.1 DIGITAL MARKETING 9
2.2 DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY 11
2.2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY 11
2.2.2 INFLUENCER MARKETING AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY 14
2.2.3 CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND INTERACTION IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY 16
2.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF BRANDING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY 17
3.0 UNDERSTANDING THE BEAUTY CONSUMER JOURNEY 21
3.1 THE CONTEMPORARY BEAUTY CONSUMER 21
3.1.1 MACRO-TRENDS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR 21
3.1.2 THE ROLE OF AGE IN BEAUTY CONSUMPTION 25
3.2 MARKET SEGMENTATION AND TARGET CONSUMERS 27
3.3 THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY 28
3.3.1 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS 28
3.3.2 OMNICHANNEL AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION 30
3.3.3 BEAUTY CUSTOMER JOURNEY 32
3.3.4 EMERGING TRENDS: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE 33
4.0 INTRODUCING DARLING: BRAND PROFILE AND MARKET POSITIONING 36
4.1 COMPANY BACKGROUND AND HISTORY 36
4.2 MISSION, VISION AND BRAND VALUES 36
4.3 BRAND POSITIONING AND TARGET CONSUMER 37
4.4 VISUAL IDENTITY 41
4.5 COMPETITOR ANALYSIS 46
4.6 DARLING SWOT ANALYSIS 50

5.0 ANALYSIS OF DARLING'S DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY 52
5.1 OVERVIEW OF DARLING DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM 53
5.2 INSTAGRAM STRATEGY 56
5.2.1 VISUAL IDENTITY ON INSTAGRAM 56
5.2.2 CONTENT STRATEGY 59
5.2.3 TONE OF VOICE AND COMMUNICATION STYLE 63
5.2.4 INFLUENCER MARKETING ON INSTAGRAM 66
5.3 KEY FINDINGS FROM DARLING'S DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY 72
6.0 DARLING'S CUSTOMER JOURNEY IN THE DIGITAL BEAUTY LANDSCAPE 74
6.1 THE AWARENESS STAGE 77
6.2 THE APPEAL STAGE 79
6.3 THE ASK STAGE 81
6.4 THE ACT STAGE 84
6.5 THE ADVOCATE STAGE 85
6.6 KEY FINDINGS FROM THE DARLING CUSTOMER JOURNEY ANALYSIS 88
7.0 CONCLUSION 92
REFERENCES: 95

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE GLOBAL BEAUTY INDUSTRY AND ITS DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The global beauty market is typically structured around five key segments: skincare, haircare, colour cosmetics, fragrances, and toiletries. Together, these categories cover the main areas of the cosmetics industry and, thanks to their complementary nature, address a broad spectrum of consumer needs and preferences (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013 p.1080). According to Hemachandra and Kusuma (2024), the global beauty market is a vast and dynamic sector of worldwide consumption that, over the past two decades, has undergone significant transformations, reflecting the economic, social, and cultural changes taking place across different regions of the contemporary world. Due to its strong cultural relevance and global reach, this industry is widely regarded as an indicator of social trends and technological progress. In addition, beauty products and services attract consumers across different ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds, functioning as tools of self-expression and personal empowerment. Consequently, the industry not only generates substantial economic value, with billions in annual revenue, but also plays a role in shaping social norms (Hemachandra & Kusuma, 2024 p.65-66, drawing on Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013; Sahota, 2014; and Newkirk, 2019).

Over the years, this industry has undergone significant evolutions driven by evolving consumer preferences, technological progress and the increasing emphasis put on aesthetic enhancement. While in the past beauty products were mainly present in physical retail stores and traditional print magazines, today they have become a constant presence in digital environments, where consumers can be highly engaged through interactive and immersive online experiences (Hemachandra & Kusuma, 2024). As a result, beauty companies have increasingly adopted digital tools to engage consumers in more direct and personalised ways. This is particularly evident in the

growing use of social media platforms, beauty blogs, advisory websites, and mobile applications (In-cosmetics, 2010).

The growing adoption of these digital channels has fundamentally changed the way brands communicate with consumers. In this regard, Figueiredo (2018) believes the rapid evolution of digital communication technologies has profoundly reshaped both the business environment (which now knows no geographic boundaries) and the ways in which companies interact with businesses. In particular, the increasing centrality of social media has transformed the way in which beauty brands engage with their audiences, enabling not only greater visibility, but also more direct and continuous forms of interaction. In this context, it is essential for brands to be able to develop communication strategies able to create value and maintain long-term relationships with increasingly connected customers.

1.2 THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE BEAUTY SECTOR

Alongside the expansion of digital communication technologies, the rapid growth of Internet access and online platforms has fostered the development of digital marketing on a global scale. Over the past two decades, the substantial increase in the number of Internet users has created significant opportunities for online marketing activities. As a result, beauty brands have increasingly relied on digital channels to promote their image, advertise products, and drive sales, using online platforms as key tools to reach and engage consumers (Chen, 2024 p.2).

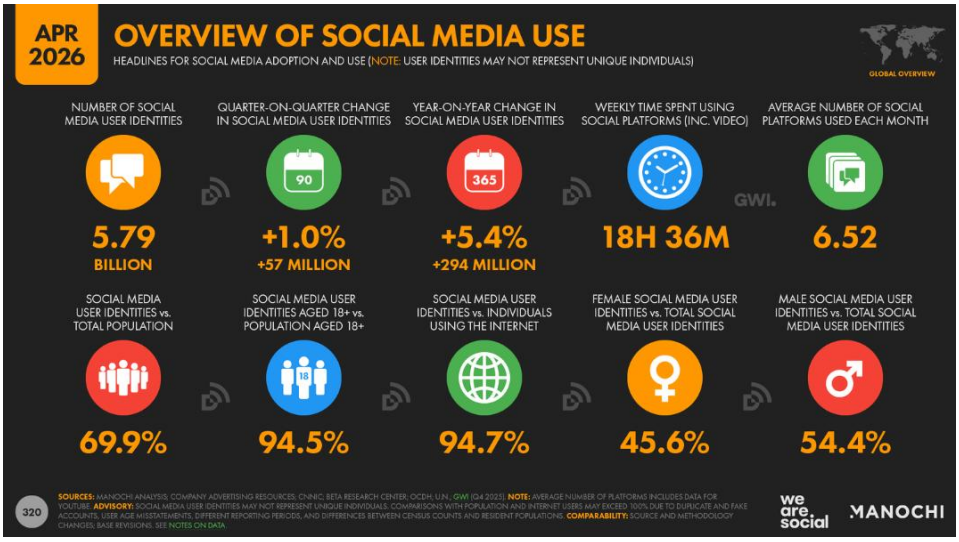


Figure 1:Global social media statistics

Source: DataReportal (2026), Social Media Users

As shown in Figure 1, social media platforms have become an integral part of people's daily lives on a global scale. According to DataReportal (2026), more than two-thirds of the world's population uses social media every month, and the number of users continues to grow steadily. This widespread adoption has significantly increased the importance of social media as a communication and marketing channel, enabling brands to reach large audiences, foster engagement, and build long-term relationships with consumers in an increasingly digital environment.

In this context, it is no wonder that online marketing plays a central role in the contemporary beauty industry, as it enables brands to communicate their identity, values, and products through highly interactive and targeted channels. Through digital content, social media, and brand storytelling, beauty companies can effectively engage consumers and build stronger emotional connections compared to traditional marketing channels. In addition, the rise of e-commerce and social media platforms has transformed the way beauty products are marketed and purchased, allowing brands to reach global audiences and diversify their distribution strategies. Overall, online marketing has become essential for beauty brands not only to increase visibility and sales, but also to strengthen consumer engagement and long-term brand loyalty in an increasingly digital and competitive environment (Chen, 2024 p.2).

In addition, the increasing integration of artificial intelligence within digital marketing practices is further contributing to the transformation of the beauty customer journey,

enhancing personalisation and reshaping consumer–brand interactions across multiple touchpoints, as will be further discussed in the following chapters.

1.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT: WHY DARLING?

The selection of Darling as the case study for this research is primarily motivated by its relatively recent foundation in 2018 and its positioning within a highly digitalised and competitive beauty market. As a contemporary brand, Darling operates in an environment in which digital communication and social media engagement are not only complementary tools but essential components for visibility, growth, and long-term competitiveness. For this reason, the brand represents a particularly relevant example for analysing how emerging beauty companies integrate technological and digital strategies in order to establish themselves and expand within the global market.

In this sense, Darling constitutes an interesting case for examining the ways in which modern beauty brands must continuously adapt to rapidly evolving digital dynamics. The increasing centrality of online platforms, influencer-driven communication, and data-driven marketing strategies highlights how survival and expansion in the contemporary beauty industry are closely linked to a brand's ability to effectively leverage digital ecosystems. Therefore, studying Darling allows for a more concrete understanding of how these mechanisms are implemented in practice and how they contribute to brand positioning and consumer engagement in today's market landscape.

Beyond these aspects, Darling also stands out for its ability to position itself within a niche yet highly competitive segment of the beauty industry, namely suncare and skincare. Within this category, the brand has managed to build a distinctive identity by combining aesthetic-driven communication with a strong emphasis on brand storytelling and lifestyle positioning. This has enabled Darling to move beyond the functional nature of its product offering and to establish a more emotional and aspirational connection with its consumers. In addition, despite operating in a product category traditionally seasonal, the brand has been able to find strategies that support continuous sales and consumer engagement throughout the whole year, contributing to a more stable and recognisable market presence.

The choice of this case study is furthermore supported by the author's internship experience within the company, which provided direct exposure to internal processes and operational dynamics. This experience contributed to a more informed and nuanced understanding of the industry, offering practical insights that complement the theoretical framework of the research. The timing of the internship, which coincided with the launch of new product lines by the brand, further enriched the research experience by providing direct exposure to real-time marketing activities and product communication strategies. This allowed for a more informed understanding of how digital campaigns and product launches are coordinated within a contemporary beauty brand environment.

As a result, the analysis benefits from a dual perspective, combining academic literature with observational knowledge acquired in a professional context, thus allowing for a more critical and grounded interpretation of the strategies adopted by the brand.

1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to analyse Darling's digital and social media marketing strategy within the contemporary beauty industry, while also examining how the brand positions itself in a highly competitive and increasingly digitalised market. Particular attention is given to consumer behaviour, the customer journey, and the role of different marketing and communication activities in building a distinctive and coherent brand identity.

The main objectives of this study are:

- To examine the development and background of Darling as a contemporary beauty brand in order to contextualise its current market positioning
- To analyse Darling's social media and digital marketing strategy, with particular attention to content creation and brand communication on Instagram
- To explore the role of influencer marketing in shaping brand awareness, engagement, and consumer perception
- To map the brand's consumer journey, focusing on the interaction between both physical and digital touchpoints

- To identify and evaluate the main target consumer segments addressed by the brand
- To conduct a competitor analysis in order to understand Darling's distinctive position within the contemporary beauty and suncare market
- To explore Darling's overall brand strategy and how its different elements contribute to differentiation, brand identity, and future development.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach in order to analyse Darling's digital and social media marketing strategies within the contemporary beauty industry. A qualitative methodology is considered particularly suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of brand communication, consumer behaviour, and digital marketing dynamics in a real-world context.

The analysis is primarily based on secondary data including academic literature, industry reports, company-related content, and digital platforms such as social media channels and company websites. These sources are used to examine the brand's communication strategies, consumer engagement practices, and overall market positioning.

In addition, the research is supported by observational insights gained through the author's internship experience within the company. This experience provided contextual understanding of internal marketing activities and specific product communication strategies, contributing to a more informed interpretation of the case study.

To complement the information collected through these sources and the internship experience, a brief interview was conducted with the brand's founders. The interview focused on the main strategic choices of the brand, including its target audience, positioning, visual identity, selective distribution, and the role of Instagram and influencer marketing. It also explored the factors that contributed to Darling's development and its future strategic direction. This interview was primarily used to compare the information and observations collected during the research with the perspective of someone directly involved in the company. This helped provide a

deeper understanding of Darling's strategy and to identify whether the choices observed in the analysis corresponded to the company's own intentions. The information collected through the interview was integrated into the relevant analytical chapters of the dissertation.

Despite these advantages, the study is limited by the absence of primary quantitative data and by the focus on a single case study, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Indeed, although the interview provides a primary qualitative source, the study does not include primary quantitative data on consumer perceptions, purchasing behaviour or customer journey. Therefore, the findings are mainly based on qualitative analysis, secondary sources, internship observations and the interview.

In addition, the research has been conducted in accordance with the company's internal guidelines regarding the use of information and data. All materials included in the analysis are non-sensitive and have been selected in accord with the company. Where applicable, the content has been reviewed and approved internally by the company in order to ensure the appropriate use of information within the scope of this academic research.

1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This dissertation is structured into five main chapters, in addition to the introduction and the conclusion. The study follows a progression starting from the theoretical foundations of digital marketing and consumer behaviour and then moving to the analysis of Darling as a case study, with the final chapters focusing on the brand's digital strategy and customer journey.

After this introduction, chapter two provides the theoretical framework of the research, focusing on the evolution of digital marketing and branding within the contemporary beauty industry. It introduces key concepts such as digital marketing, social media marketing, influencer marketing, user-generated content, customer engagement and brand interaction, clarifying the theoretical foundations for the analysis developed in the following chapters.

Chapter three then shifts the focus towards the consumer and examines the characteristics and evolving behaviours of contemporary beauty consumers. After

discussing relevant consumer trends, generational differences, market segmentation and target consumers, the chapter introduces the concept of the customer journey and examines the main touchpoints through which consumers interact with beauty brands. Particular attention is given to the Five A's framework proposed by Kotler et al. (2017), as well as to the role of digital and physical touchpoints and the emerging influence of artificial intelligence on the beauty customer journey.

Following this, chapter four introduces Darling as the case study of the research. It presents the brand's background, history, identity, values, target consumer, positioning, distribution strategy and competitive environment, providing the necessary context for understanding the analysis developed in the next chapters.

Chapter five focuses on Darling's digital and social media marketing strategy. Building on the theoretical concepts introduced in the previous chapters, it analyses the brand's digital ecosystem and the main digital touchpoints through which Darling communicates and interacts with consumers. Particular attention is given to its Instagram strategy concerning in particular the overall communication, visual identity, content types, social media presence, influencer marketing activities and the role of digital communication in supporting Darling's premium positioning.

Thereafter, chapter six brings together the theoretical framework and the analysis of Darling by examining the brand's potential customer journey through Kotler et al.'s (2017) Five A's framework. The chapter analyses how Darling's digital and physical touchpoints contribute to the different stages of the journey, from awareness and initial appeal to information search, purchase, and post-purchase advocacy. It concludes by identifying the main findings emerging from the analysis and highlighting both the strengths and the areas for development in Darling's current customer journey.

The dissertation then concludes by summarising the main findings of the research, reflecting on the extent to which the research objectives have been addressed and discussing the main limitations and possible directions for future development.

2.0 DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES AND BRAND BUILDING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

2.1 DIGITAL MARKETING

Digital marketing can be defined as “the marketing of products or services using digital technologies, mainly on the Internet, but also including mobile phones, display advertising, and any other digital medium” (Desai, 2019 p.196). Building on this definition, digital marketing encompasses a wide range of online channels and tools, such as websites, search engines, social media platforms, email, and digital advertising, which allow companies to communicate and engage with both current and potential consumers. As a result, organisations are increasingly able to reach audiences in a more direct and interactive way, overcoming the limitations of traditional marketing approaches (Desai, 2019 p.196).

Over the past two decades marketing has undergone a profound transformation driven by the rapid development of digital technologies. This process, commonly referred to as the *digital transformation* of marketing, has been widely recognised by both academics and practitioners. The emergence of digital advertising, e-commerce, mobile technologies, and online communication platforms has fundamentally changed the ways in which companies interact with consumers and deliver products and services, creating new opportunities for engagement, communication, and value creation (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022 p.30). This transformation became particularly evident during the 2000s and 2010s, when the widespread diffusion of devices connected to the Internet led to a sharp increase in online activity. The growing use of social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter further accelerated this shift, contributing to the expansion of digital marketing practices. This led consumers to rely more heavily on digital tools in their daily lives and to expect a smooth and consistent experience across different channels when looking for product information. By the early 2010s, digital marketing had therefore become a dominant approach in global communication and advertising strategies (Desai, 2019 p.2).

Desai (2019 p.196-198) argues that digital marketing encompasses a wide range of tools, channels, and communication strategies, such as social media marketing, content marketing, email marketing, search engine optimization and more. According to Basimakopoulou et al. (2022 p.31), the primary objective of marketing is to establish and maintain strong relationships between businesses and customers, creating value for both parties. Achieving this objective requires identifying the appropriate target market, understanding consumer needs and expectations, and fostering customer loyalty. These principles remain equally relevant in the context of digital marketing, although the digital environment introduces specific characteristics and requirements that influence the way organisations interact with consumers.

One of the main differences between traditional marketing and digital marketing is that digital marketing allows marketers to obtain accurate results in real time. Unlike traditional advertising, such as newspaper ads, where it is difficult to determine how many people actually viewed or engaged with the content, digital channels provide precise insights into audience reach and effectiveness. In fact, it is often impossible to assess whether a traditional advertisement directly contributes to sales. On the contrary, digital marketing allows companies to measure audience reach, track consumer engagement, access a global market, and deliver more personalized promotional messages (Desai 2019, p.199). From this perspective, data plays a central role in shaping marketing strategies, as it provides brands with valuable insights into consumer preferences, behaviours, and purchasing patterns. By leveraging big data analytics, companies in the beauty industry are able to refine their communication strategies and better align their offerings with consumer expectations. Moreover, the use of advanced technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence contributes to the development of personalization systems that deliver tailored content, product recommendations, and promotional messages across multiple digital channels (Hemachandra & Kusuma, 2024 p.66).

Despite its many advantages, it is also worth mentioning, as highlighted by Desai (2019, p.199), that digital marketing can present limitations. Notably, its effectiveness depends on internet access, which is not always available or reliable, and the high level of online content saturation makes it difficult for brands to stand out in a competitive environment. In addition, issues related to consumer trust may arise due

to the large presence of online advertising, some of which is perceived as unreliable or misleading. Finally, although digital marketing increases visibility and engagement, these do not always directly translate into sales, as not all users have immediate purchasing intent.

Nevertheless, the increasing availability of digital tools and consumer data has created new opportunities for a number of industries, including in the beauty sector.

2.2 DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

The beauty industry can be understood as a complex and dynamic market shaped by innovation, trends, and consumer demand. Beyond cosmetics and skincare, it represents a multibillion-dollar global industry that influences social standards, self-expression, and personal wellbeing. In recent years, it has undergone a significant transformation driven by the rapid development of digital technologies. As a result, traditional marketing approaches have progressively evolved into a digital landscape, fundamentally changing the way companies in this sector interact with consumers (Bakri, 2023 p.37-38).

Digital marketing has become a central element of contemporary business strategies. In the beauty industry, where trends change rapidly and consumer preferences are constantly evolving, digital channels offer brands a flexible and immediate way to connect with their target audiences. In particular, tools such as social media platforms, influencer partnerships, personalised content, and e-commerce channels have become key components of marketing strategies, allowing beauty brands to build engaged communities and expand their sales (Hemachandra & Kusuma, 2024 p.66). In this respect, digital marketing provides a wide range of sales channels for beauty brands. In addition to traditional offline retail, brands can directly reach consumers at both national and global level through e-commerce platforms, social media direct sales, and other digital channels, thereby expanding their distribution networks (Chen, 2024 p.2).

2.2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

The shift towards digital marketing in the beauty industry started with the widespread adoption of brand websites, which provided an online presence

beyond physical stores. These websites functioned as digital storefronts, offering information, product catalogues and opportunities for consumers to engage with brands. However, a more significant transformation occurred with the rise of social media platforms, which further reshaped the way brands communicate and interact with consumers (Bakri, 2023 p.38). According to Desai (2019 p.197), Social Media Marketing can be described as the promotion of a brand and its content through social media platforms in order to increase brand awareness, drive website traffic, and generate business leads. This form of marketing is implemented across various channels, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Google+.

Beauty brands make extensive use of such platforms to present products in a visually appealing way, share tutorials, and interact with consumers. By incorporating user-generated content, collaborating with influencers, and using interactive platform features, they aim to foster online communities, encourage dialogue, and strengthen brand loyalty (Bakri, 2023 p.39). This increasing level of engagement has also contributed to a shift in consumer behavior, as social media are now widely used as a primary source of product and service information, particularly among younger audiences who rely on these platforms for discovery, interaction, and social exchange (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022 p.32). These channels serve not only promotional purposes, but also allow brands to support inclusivity in beauty standards, promote self-expression, and provide informative and educational content to their audiences (Bakri, 2023 p.39). In this context, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become central spaces for interaction, where beauty consumers can discover new products, share reviews, and seek inspiration (Hemachandra & Kusuma, 2024, p. 66). This role is particularly important in the beauty industry, where consumer preferences are strongly influenced by online content and emerging trends. Products, routines, and beauty practices that gain visibility on social media can quickly attract the attention of large audiences and influence purchasing behaviour.

Indeed, social media platforms are characterized by a rapid and large-scale creation and sharing of content, which has significantly increased the amount of

information available online. In this highly competitive environment, users' attention is constantly divided among different types of content. Despite this complexity, certain topics manage to gain significant visibility and emerge as "trends," attracting widespread attention within a short period of time. These trending topics often arise due to factors such as novelty, user engagement, and the influence of highly connected users who help amplify and spread content. As a result, social media platforms act as both filters and amplifiers of information, contributing to the visibility and diffusion of content that captures collective attention (Asur et al., 2011). The increasing relevance of social media trends in shaping consumer behaviour is reflected in beauty product purchase decisions, particularly in the skincare segment, where online visibility and trend diffusion play a significant role among several other influencing factors.



Figure 2: Key factors influencing Skincare product choice
Source: Circana, Yougov: Mappe del beauty contemporaneo

Figure 2 shows that "trending on social media / recommendations from influencers" represents a driver in skincare product selection, especially among younger generations aged between 18 and 34.

2.2.2 INFLUENCER MARKETING AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

Lou and Yuan (2019, p.) point out that influencer marketing can be defined as a strategy that relies on the use of key individuals or opinion leaders to increase brand awareness and influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Those key individuals are the influencers, meaning online personalities who have built a substantial following across one or more platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or personal blogs, and who are able to influence their audience's opinions and behaviours. Unlike traditional celebrities or public figures known through mass media, influencers are often ordinary individuals who have gained visibility by producing and sharing content on social media, eventually becoming "online celebrities." Their influence is closely linked to their role as content creators, as they build their audience through continuous content production that attracts attention and engagement. They typically focus on specific areas of interest, including lifestyle, fitness, travel, food, fashion, or beauty, which helps them build credibility and attract a tailored audience.

The increasing prominence of those figures within the beauty industry has significantly reshaped marketing dynamics. Influencers and content creators have built large and loyal audiences by providing authentic reviews, tutorials, and personal experiences with beauty products. As a result, consumers often perceive their recommendations as more trustworthy, treating them as peer-like advice rather than traditional advertising (Bakri, 2023 p.38). For this reason, brands usually collaborate with online influencers, such as beauty bloggers, in order to increase brand visibility and reach a wider audience. This strategy is particularly effective when there is a clear match between the influencer, the product being promoted and the brand. In such cases, consumers tend to trust the message more and evaluate the recommendation more positively. Consequently, they are more likely to engage with the content and consider purchasing the promoted products (Chen, 2024 p.2).

This effect is clearly reflected in consumer behaviour data, which highlights the growing influence of social media creators on actual purchasing decisions in the beauty sector.



Figure 3: Share of consumers purchasing beauty products influenced by social media creators (2019–2025)
Source: Statista

The data displayed in figure 3 shows a significant share of consumers purchasing beauty products directly influenced by celebrities and influencers, with an observable

increase between 2019 and 2025 across different countries, confirming the growing commercial impact of influencer marketing.

This increasing influence of social media creators has also reshaped how brands approach content creation and distribution. While influencers contribute to the digital content ecosystem through content creation, brands can adopt content marketing strategies to distribute and amplify such content. Content marketing represents indeed a fundamental component of digital marketing strategies, as it focuses on the creation and distribution of valuable and relevant content designed to attract, engage, and retain a specific target audience. This type of content can take various forms, including blog articles, videos, infographics, podcasts, tutorials, and other digital materials. Besides promoting products or services, content marketing aims to provide useful information, entertainment, and inspiration, thereby increasing brand visibility, strengthening brand credibility, and fostering long-term relationships with consumers. Within the beauty industry, content plays a central role, as consumers often seek information, guidance, and inspiration before making purchasing decisions. For this reason, beauty brands invest heavily in the production of digital content such as skincare guides, makeup tutorials, product reviews, beauty tips, and behind-the-scenes material. By consistently offering informative and engaging content, brands can position themselves as reliable sources of expertise, strengthening consumer trust and enhancing their authority within the market (Bakri, 2023 p.39).

Aware of the importance of influencer marketing and user-generated content, beauty brands have increasingly used social media as a space for authentic storytelling, product presentation, and direct engagement with consumers (Hemachandra & Kusuma, 2024 p.66).

2.2.3 CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND INTERACTION IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

The shift towards a more digital approach to marketing has created new opportunities for real-time interaction between brands and consumers. In recent years, social media platforms have become an important channel through which companies can develop

closer relationships with consumers. By facilitating direct interaction and encouraging the sharing of experiences and opinions, these platforms help brands gain a better understanding of their audiences while increasing consumer engagement. In turn, greater engagement can enhance brand awareness, reinforce a positive brand image, and foster customer loyalty, generating benefits for the overall marketing strategy (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022 p.32).

2.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF BRANDING IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

The findings discussed above suggest that digital marketing influences not only sales and customer relationships, but also the way consumers perceive and interact with brands. For this reason, understanding the concept of brand and branding becomes essential for analysing how companies create value and build long-term competitive advantages.

Branding has long served as a mechanism for distinguishing the products of one producer from those of competitors. A brand can be understood as a combination of elements, such as a name, symbol, or other identifying features, that allows consumers to distinguish a product or service from competing alternatives. Beyond its role as an identifier, a brand represents a set of meanings, values, and associations that consumers develop through their experiences and interactions with a company. In this sense, brands create value for both consumers and firms: they help consumers recognise and evaluate products while at the same time enabling companies to build differentiation, trust, and long-term relationships. A successful brand therefore offers unique value that satisfies consumer needs and fosters stronger connections between consumers and the company (Latif, Islam and Noor, 2014 p.70-71).

While a brand can be understood as a set of meanings and associations linked to a product or company, branding refers to the process through which these meanings are created and communicated. As Keller (2013, p. 36) points out, branding involves giving a product an identity and a distinctive meaning in consumers' minds, helping them understand what the product represents and how it differs from competing alternatives. Through branding activities, companies create mental associations that enable consumers to recognise, evaluate, and remember a brand more easily. In this

way, branding contributes to shaping consumer perceptions and creating value for both consumers and firms. By communicating a clear identity and value proposition, branding helps consumers process information, recognise unique attributes, and make purchasing decisions more easily. Consequently, branding creates value for both consumers and firms by facilitating differentiation and strengthening brand recognition (Latif et al., 2014, p.71).

These theoretical considerations are also reflected in the beauty industry, with authors such as Mishra, Rath and Jena (2023) explaining that branding plays a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions and purchasing decisions, highlighting its relevance within the beauty sector.

In fact, the beauty industry is characterised by rapid growth and a highly competitive environment, where a large number of brands offer similar products in terms of functional attributes. As a result, differentiation is largely achieved through branding strategies that shape consumer perception and influence purchasing decisions. In this context, the development of a clear brand identity is essential for establishing market presence and ensuring long-term competitiveness. Digital platforms further amplify these dynamics by enabling continuous communication and engagement with consumers, thereby strengthening brand relationships and loyalty (Branded Agency, 2025). The importance of branding in the beauty industry is also reinforced by the symbolic nature of beauty products, because unlike purely functional goods, cosmetics are often associated with self-expression, identity construction, and emotional value (Hemachandra & Kusuma, 2024 p.65).

Furthermore, contemporary branding theory suggests a shift from traditional top-down models of brand communication, where firms fully controlled brand meanings, to more participatory approaches. In this perspective, consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages, but active contributors who interpret, reshape, and co-create brand meanings through their interactions, cultural contexts, and online communities. As a consequence, brand meaning becomes a dynamic and evolving process influenced not only by firms, but also by consumer-to-consumer interactions within digital environments (Rokka and Canniford, 2016 p.1789-1790)**.** This is particularly true in the beauty industry, where social media platforms have transformed brand communication into a more interactive and collaborative process. By sharing experiences, opinions, and recommendations, consumers contribute to the creation and circulation of brand-related meanings, making branding an increasingly dynamic

process shaped by both firms and online communities (Bakri, 2023 p. 38-41, Li, Larimo & Leonidou, 2021 p.53, Basimakopoulou et al., 2022 p.32).

The importance of branding in the beauty industry is reflected through several dimensions, including packaging design, brand positioning, and the symbolic meanings associated with products.

Srivastava et al., p.8 argue that within this sector, a particularly important role in the process of branding is played by the packaging. Beyond protecting the product, packaging communicates brand identity, conveys marketing messages, and influences consumers' perceptions. Elements such as colour, design, and labelling contribute to brand recognition and can significantly affect purchasing decisions, especially in highly competitive retail environments. Consequently, effective packaging not only strengthens the relationship between consumers and brands but also helps companies differentiate themselves and establish emotional connections with their target audience.

Remaining within the beauty industry, the importance of branding is also evident in the luxury beauty sector, where products often compete not only on functional attributes but also on symbolic and emotional value. In this context, brand positioning plays a crucial role, as companies seek to establish distinctive associations in consumers' minds through visual identity, packaging, brand values, and cultural meanings. As a result, consumers may develop strong emotional connections with brands and perceive benefits that extend beyond the physical characteristics of the product (Liu, Lu and Qi, 2022 p.791-792).

The relevance of branding within the cosmetic sector is also supported by empirical evidence. A meaningful insight into the understanding of branding in this industry is offered by the study conducted by Mishra, Rath and Jena (2023), which investigates the relationship between branding and consumer buying behaviour within the cosmetic sector. More specifically, in this study the authors investigate how branding strategies can affect consumers' purchasing decisions and how changes in branding may facilitate product adoption. Their research is based on primary data collected through a questionnaire administered to 58 respondents from different sectors.

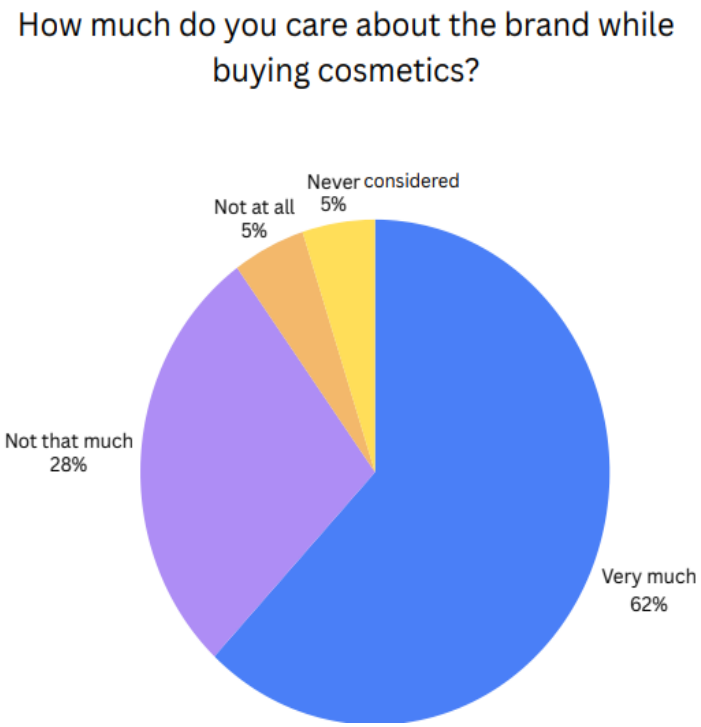


Figure 4: Importance of branding in cosmetic purchasing decisions
Source: Adapted from Mishra, Rath and Jena (2023)

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of respondents' perceptions regarding the importance of branding in cosmetic purchasing decisions. The results indicate that the vast majority of respondents (62%) consider the brand a highly important factor, while a smaller share attributes only limited or no relevance to it. Overall, these findings confirm that brand perception plays a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour within the cosmetic sector.

On the whole, the evidence presented highlights that branding plays a central role in the beauty industry by shaping consumer perceptions, reinforcing differentiation, and influencing purchasing behaviour through symbolic and experiential dimensions.

3.0 UNDERSTANDING THE BEAUTY CONSUMER JOURNEY

3.1 THE CONTEMPORARY BEAUTY CONSUMER

Before delving into the analysis of the customer journey, it is useful to examine the main characteristics of today's beauty consumer and the broader changes that have reshaped consumer behaviour in recent years. This is particularly relevant given the significant transformations in the beauty sector, mostly driven by digital technologies, social media, and evolving consumer values, which have led to increasingly informed, connected, and engaged consumers. These characteristics influence how consumers interact with brands and navigate their purchasing journey.

Włodarczyk (2020 p.40) argues that consumption and consumer behaviour are continuously evolving under the influence of political, economic, technological, social, and cultural changes. In a constantly changing environment, consumers adapt their needs, preferences, and spending decisions in response to external conditions. As a result, consumption patterns are in continuous transformation, reflecting broader shifts in the market and society. Building on this, the diffusion of the Internet and digital technologies has deeply transformed the balance of power between companies and consumers. Traditional communication models, in which brands largely controlled information and brand meanings, have gradually been replaced by more participatory and interconnected environments. In this context, consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages but active participants who create, share, and evaluate information through digital platforms and online communities (Kotler et al., 2017 p.5-7).

3.1.1 MACRO-TRENDS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

In light of these transformations, Włodarczyk (2020), in her paper *Trends of Evolution in Consumer Behavior in the Contemporary World*, identifies a number of megatrends shaping contemporary consumer behaviour. Drawing on consumer trend reports published by Euromonitor International and its researchers (Euromonitor International, 2015; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016, 2017;

Angus, 2018; Angus & Westbrook, 2019), the author highlights several emerging patterns that characterise today's consumers, some of which can also be observed within the beauty industry.

The first significant trend she identifies is the *use of modern technologies*. As a matter of fact, contemporary consumers are increasingly connected through digital technologies, which have transformed the way they search for information, interact with others, and make purchasing decisions. Shopping behaviours have become increasingly omnichannel, with consumers moving seamlessly between online and offline environments and using digital tools to evaluate products before purchase. At the same time, social media and online communities facilitate the exchange of opinions, experiences, and recommendations, allowing consumers to influence one another and participate actively in brand-related discussions. This results in consumers being more informed, connected, and empowered than ever before, relying on multiple digital sources throughout the decision-making process (Włodarczyk, 2020 p.44). This trend is particularly evident in the beauty industry, where technological developments have transformed the way consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products. The rapid growth of e-commerce and direct-to-consumer business models, further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has strengthened the role of digital channels within the purchasing process (see 2.2). Thanks to e-commerce, consumers now have access to a wider range of products and information, allowing them to compare prices and evaluate different alternatives before making a purchase. Online shopping has become increasingly popular, particularly among consumers who are already familiar with a product and seek more convenient purchasing options. At the same time, beauty brands are increasingly using digital channels such as social media, blogs, websites, and mobile applications to interact with consumers and provide beauty-related information (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013 p.1081).

Another significant macrotrend highlighted is the socalled *individualization of consumption***.** Indeed, contemporary consumers increasingly seek products and experiences that reflect their individuality and personal values. They show a growing preference for authenticity, personalisation, uniqueness, and self-

expression, while becoming more selective and critical towards mass-produced products and standardized marketing messages. At the same time, consumers place greater importance on privacy, post-purchase experiences, and meaningful consumption choices, favouring brands that can offer customized solutions and authentic value propositions (Włodarczyk, 2020 p.44-45). The latest developments in the beauty industry further confirm these trends, driven by the increasing adoption of beauty tech solutions. In particular, AI- and AR-based tools enable brands to offer tailored product recommendations, virtual try-ons, and digital skin diagnostics, allowing consumers to receive more targeted and individualized experiences throughout their customer journey (Perret & Schwientek, 2025 p.1-3).

Going on with her analysis, Włodarczyk underlines the consumer trends that go in the direction of a *simplified and time-efficient consumption*. On the one hand, consumers increasingly adopt more minimalist and restrained consumption patterns, guided by a preference for simplicity, moderation, and financial prudence. On the other hand, time is perceived as a valuable resource, leading individuals to prioritise convenience, speed, and efficiency in their purchasing processes. As a result, modern consumers tend to favour products and services that simplify decision-making, reduce effort, and provide immediate satisfaction (Włodarczyk, 2020 p.45). In the beauty industry, this trend is reflected in product innovations designed to increase efficiency and convenience. In recent years, a lot of time-saving products have been developed to simplify daily beauty routines, such as multifunctional cosmetics that combine skincare, make-up, and sun protection in a single product. At the same time, long-lasting products have become increasingly popular, as they are perceived as more cost-effective and reduce the need for frequent application. Examples include long-wear lipsticks, nail polishes, and skincare products designed to maintain their effects over time (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013 p.1081).

A further emerging trend concerns environmentally and socially conscious consumption. Consumers are increasingly inclined to support companies that contribute to social welfare and promote positive change, particularly in relation to environmental protection and the preservation of natural resources. This

includes greater attention to sustainable food choices, reduced food waste, and healthier eating habits. Moreover, consumers are becoming more aware of ethical issues related to animal welfare, with veganism gaining more and more relevance. Overall, this trend reflects a growing commitment to responsible consumption, including efforts to reduce plastic use and minimise environmental impact (Włodarczyk, 2020). This tendency is clearly reflected in the cosmetics industry, where sustainability has become a key dimension of market development. The rising demand for natural and environmentally friendly products highlights more consumer sensitivity towards the environmental impact of consumption, particularly in relation to plastic waste and its effects on ecosystems and human health. For this reason, many companies are investing in research and development to introduce greener and more sustainable product alternatives. At the same time, the cosmetics market continues to expand significantly, confirming sustainability as a key driver of both innovation and consumer demand (Acharya, Bali & Bhatia, 2021). In addition, this closely relates to the macro-trend concerning the increasing importance of health care and mental well-being in contemporary consumption (Włodarczyk, 2020).

Last but not least, *age* remains a relevant factor in shaping consumer behaviour. However, according to Włodarczyk (2020, p.46), traditional age-based distinctions are becoming less pronounced, as consumers across different life stages increasingly share similar lifestyles, interests, and consumption patterns. At the same time, important differences persist across generations, particularly in terms of purchasing autonomy, consumption priorities, and engagement with specific product categories. Older consumers tend to be more active and health-conscious, while younger generations acquire purchasing autonomy at an earlier stage of life. As a result, contemporary consumption is characterised by a combination of differences and similarities across age groups, with individuals showing both shared expectations and generation-specific behaviours.

Despite the emergence of a general convergence of behaviours across age groups, age-based distinctions remain relevant in the beauty industry, where generational differences continue to shape consumer needs, preferences, and product

expectations. Therefore, the following section will examine how age influences consumer behaviour in this specific sector.

3.1.2 THE ROLE OF AGE IN BEAUTY CONSUMPTION

Contrary to the idea suggested by Włodarczyk (2020), scholars such as Kotler believe that intergenerational differences represent a growing challenge for contemporary marketers, as consumers belonging to different ages often show distinct expectations, communication preferences, and attitudes towards marketing content. This can lead to a misalignment between how marketing messages are designed and how they are interpreted by different generations. Today, organisations are required to address multiple generational groups, including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Y, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha, each characterised by different levels of digital familiarity and consumer behaviour patterns (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021 p.19).

Kotler et al. (2021) identify five main generational groups that shape contemporary consumer markets, each characterised by distinct socio-cultural experiences and levels of technological exposure. Baby Boomers and Generation X are more traditional consumer groups, with the former still maintaining significant economic power and the latter holding many leadership roles in organisations. Millennials (also known as Generation Y) are strongly associated with digital and social media usage, peer influence, and a preference for experiences over material ownership. Generation Z, as the first fully digital native generation, is highly connected, pragmatic, and expects brands to deliver authentic, personalised, and constantly engaging experiences across multiple digital touchpoints. Finally, Generation Alpha, still in its early development stage, is growing up in an environment shaped by advanced technologies and already plays an indirect but significant role in consumption decisions through their influence on family purchasing behaviour. (Kotler et al., 2021 p.21-28).

Generational differences continue to play a significant role in the beauty industry, shaping consumers' preferences, purchasing behaviours, and engagement with brands. In this regard, Bautista et al. (2023) provide empirical evidence of differences between Generation X and Generation Z consumers in relation to sustainable cosmetic consumption, offering a specific insight into Gen X purchasing behaviour.

The authors find that Generation X consumers are strongly influenced by price sensitivity. Although they demonstrate awareness of sustainability-related issues, affordability remains the key factor determining their willingness to purchase sustainable cosmetic products, suggesting a more pragmatic and economically driven approach to consumption (Bautista et al., 2023, p.18). Nevertheless, Generation X remains a particularly valuable segment for the beauty industry. Indeed, the progressive aging of this generation has contributed to a growing interest in skincare. In addition, many consumers belonging to this generation generally have greater financial stability than younger people. They tend to favour products that demonstrate effectiveness, are supported by scientific research, and meet high quality standards (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013 p.1083).

A different generational perspective can be observed in Generation Y, whose beauty consumption habits differ in several aspects from those of the previous generation. According to Dalziel and Sharp (2023) generation Y consumers show a strong orientation towards beauty products, which are often associated with enjoyment, self-expression, and personal well-being. Compared to previous generations, Millennials tend to allocate a larger share of their disposable income to beauty consumption, using cosmetics not only for aesthetic enhancement but also to increase confidence and emotional satisfaction. This age group is generally more beauty-conscious and engaged with personal care routines, reflecting a tendency to integrate beauty products into their lifestyle and identity construction. In addition, Generation Y consumers are strongly influenced by peer approval and tend to be highly fashion- and appearance-conscious. They show a growing interest in fashion and trends, which leads them to seek and purchase products perceived as new, stylish, and socially desirable (Dalziel & Sharp, 2023 p.209-210).

While Generation Y has played a central role in shaping contemporary beauty consumption, increasing attention has recently shifted towards Generation Z. According to Mehta (2024 p.61), generation Z is characterised by a strong focus on individuality, authenticity, inclusivity, and social responsibility. Growing up in a digital environment, these consumers are highly influenced by social media and tend to favour beauty brands that align with their personal values, particularly in relation to diversity, sustainability, and self-expression. Within the beauty industry, products and

brands are often used as tools through which young consumers explore and communicate their identity. A study conducted by Sertori et al. (2023), which examines the main drivers of Generation Z's purchasing behaviour in the beauty and personal care sector, finds out that the key factors (classified as internal, external, and social) emerging in young consumers' responses are attitudes and values, personal health, environmental concern, price, quality, and convenience. In addition, individualism emerges as a key element, as consumers tend to prioritise personal needs and choices.

Finally, generation Alpha is the first fully digital generation. It is highly exposed to social media from an early age, an element which shapes their perceptions of beauty and encourages early consumption behaviours. Influencer culture, digital content and social media play a central role in their identity formation, while parental influence also remains significant. Some emerging patterns have been identified, such as an increasing interest in skincare at an early age and the adoption of premium beauty products traditionally targeted at adults (O'Brien, 2025 p.6).

Overall, this analysis suggests that beauty consumers cannot be considered to be a homogeneous group. Different generations display distinct motivations, values, purchasing behaviours and relationships with beauty brands. These differences have significant implications, as beauty brands need to develop different strategies capable of addressing the specific needs and expectations of different consumer groups.

3.2 MARKET SEGMENTATION AND TARGET CONSUMERS

Following the reflections done so far, it is essential for beauty brands to understand the differences between different consumer categories in order to effectively address their needs and preferences. In this framework, market segmentation represents a fundamental tool, as it allows companies to identify groups of consumers who share similar characteristics and behaviours. Therefore, the following section will briefly introduce the concepts of market segmentation and target consumer.
Kotler and Keller (2012) define market segmentation as the process of dividing a heterogeneous market into smaller groups of consumers (which they call segments)

who share similar characteristics, needs, or behaviours. By analysing demographic, psychographic, and behavioural variables, firms can identify different segments that may respond differently to marketing activities. Once these segments have been identified, companies select the most attractive ones to serve, defining their target consumers. This enables firms to develop offerings and marketing strategies that better match the expectations and preferences of specific consumer groups.

An interesting development that has emerged in recent years is the increasing use of artificial intelligence to support market segmentation within the beauty industry. As pointed out by Ganesh and Sannaki (2025 p.22), in recent years the increasing adoption of artificial intelligence is transforming the process of market segmentation within the beauty industry, where consumer preferences are often highly personalized. Unlike traditional segmentation methods, which rely on broad demographic categories, AI enables brands to analyse large volumes of consumer data and identify more specific customer profiles. This makes it possible for companies to develop personalised content, recommendations, and marketing communications. This aspect, together with the broader role of artificial intelligence in shaping the customer journey, will be further explored in Section 3.3.4.

3.3 THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

3.3.1 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Having analysed the characteristics of contemporary beauty consumers and the ways in which they can be segmented, it is now important to examine the steps that constitute what is called the customer journey. Before focusing specifically on the beauty industry, it is however necessary to understand the customer journey from a general perspective and outline the main stages through which consumers interact with brands before, during, and after a purchase.

Mapping and understanding the customer journey is essential for improving the customer experience, with the aim of increasing customer satisfaction and achieving more sales (adapted from course materials provided during the Marketing and digital communication course, 2025).

As noted by Kotler et al. (2017 p.60-61), one of the earliest models used to explain this journey is the AIDA framework by E. St. Elmo Lewis, which describes the consumer decision-making process through four stages: attention, interest, desire, and action. Later developments led to the Four A's model (aware, attitude, act, and act again), which conceptualises the customer journey as a funnel in which consumers progressively move from brand awareness to purchase and potential repurchase.

However, in today's digital and interconnected environment, the existing literature on the topic seems to agree that the traditional linear customer journey described by the Four A's model is no longer sufficient to explain consumer behaviour. To address this limitation, Court et al. (2009) developed a more advanced framework known as the *consumer decision journey*, a model which better reflects the non-linear and dynamic nature of modern purchasing processes across different global markets. According to their research, a new circular model is composed of four phases: initial consideration; active evaluation, or the process of researching potential purchases; closure, when consumers buy brands; and postpurchase, when consumers experience them. In the first stage, consumers form an initial set of brands based on their perceptions and previous exposure to various touchpoints. Then, they add or remove brands as they evaluate their preferences and needs. Ultimately, they make their final brand choice at the moment of purchase and after the purchase, consumers form expectations based on their experience, which influence their next decision journey (Court et al., 2009 p.3).

Kotler et al. 2017, on the other hand, propose a different updated model, which they call "the five A's: aware, appeal, ask, act and advocate". In the aware stage, consumers are passively exposed to a wide range of brands through marketing communications, previous experiences, and word-of-mouth, which contributes to the development of initial brand awareness. In the appeal stage, consumers begin to form a degree of attraction towards a limited number of brands that stand out due to their relevance, distinctiveness, or emotional connection. This is followed by the ask stage, in which consumers actively seek additional information about the brands they are interested in, relying on online reviews, social media, and personal recommendations to reduce uncertainty. In the act stage, consumers proceed not only with the purchase but also with product usage and post-purchase interactions, which shape the overall

consumption experience. Finally, in the advocate stage, satisfied consumers may develop loyalty towards the brand and actively recommend it to others, thereby influencing future purchasing decisions (Kotler et al. 2017 p. 63-64).

The two models present significant differences. While Court et al. (2009) describe the customer journey as a circular decision-making process moving from initial consideration to post-purchase experience, Kotler et al. (2017) expands this perspective by introducing a more socially driven model, in which consumer behaviour is shaped not only by individual evaluation but also by continuous interaction, peer influence, and the role of brand advocacy, where satisfied consumers actively recommend and promote brands within their personal and digital networks, influencing the decisions of other potential buyers.

3.3.2 OMNICHANNEL AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Nowadays technological progress has significantly transformed the way consumers interact with brands, blurring the boundaries between online and offline environments. This evolution has led to the emergence of omnichannel retailing, which aims to provide consumers with a seamless and integrated experience across multiple channels and touchpoints (Tueanrat et al., 2021 p.1-2). The concept of omnichannel differs from the concept of multichannel. Indeed, while multichannel strategies involve the presence of brands across different channels, omnichannel approaches aim to integrate these touchpoints to create a seamless and consistent customer experience (Lazaris and Vrechopoulos, 2014).

What is generally understood as touchpoint is widely discussed in the literature on customer journeys, where touchpoints are generally understood as the various points of contact between consumers and a brand throughout the purchasing process. These interactions can involve the company, its products or services, but also external influences such as other consumers or online communities. Generally speaking, touchpoints are considered a fundamental component of the customer journey, as they represent the concrete moments in which consumers experience and evaluate a brand (Towers & Towers, 2022). Marking a step forward, Lemon and Verhoef (2016 p.76-78) identify four main categories of customer experience touchpoints, mainly based on their level of ownership and control. *Brand-owned touchpoints* refer to all

interactions directly managed by the company, including advertising, websites, loyalty programmes, packaging, product characteristics, and customer service. *Partner-owned touchpoints* involve interactions that are jointly controlled by the company and external partners, such as distribution channels, retailers, or other business collaborators. *Customer-owned touchpoints* concern all those aspects of the journey that depend mainly on consumers themselves, such as personal needs, product usage, and individual experiences after purchase. To conclude, *social/external touchpoints* include interactions influenced by external actors, such as other consumers, online communities, reviews, and social media conversations. This kind of touchpoint is particularly relevant in today's digital environment, as consumers increasingly rely on peer opinions and user-generated content throughout their decision-making process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The following figure illustrates the main customer touchpoints, distinguishing between physical and digital interactions across the different stages of the customer journey. This representation of the customer journey can be seen as a combination of existing models, notably Kotler et al.'s (2017) 5A model and the Consumer Decision Journey proposed by Court et al. (2009).

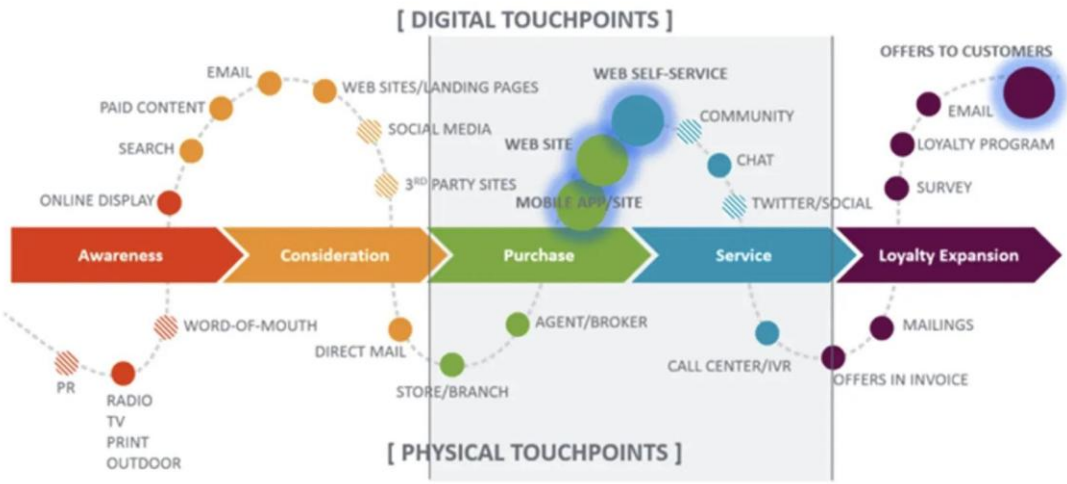


Figure 5: Overview of physical and digital customer touchpoints across the customer journey
Source: Adapted from course materials (Marketing and Digital Communication, 2025)

As previously mentioned, omnichannel approaches are designed to integrate these touchpoints in order to deliver a seamless and consistent customer experience across

channels. In this framework, consumers can move freely between social media, websites, e-commerce platforms, mobile applications, and physical stores while expecting consistent information, communication, and service quality throughout their journey. For this reason, companies increasingly adopt omnichannel strategies in order to integrate different channels and better respond to changing consumer expectations (Tueanrat et al., 2021 p.1-2).

3.3.3 BEAUTY CUSTOMER JOURNEY

Although Kotler et al. (2017 p.66) believe that the 5A framework provides a flexible approach to analysing customer behaviour across different industries, it is important to note that in industries characterised by strong hedonic and emotional components customer experience represents an even more important competitive advantage. The beauty and cosmetics sector is one of the industries most influenced by factors such as emotions, pleasure, satisfaction, and brand loyalty, which play a significant role in shaping consumers' purchasing decisions. In this context, customer experience has become an important differentiating factor for beauty brands, influencing not only store choice but also consumers' perceptions of the brand and their overall level of satisfaction (Theopilus et al., 2021 p.30).

The importance of customer journey in the beauty industry is strongly connected to the growing centrality of digital platforms in shaping the way in which consumers interact with beauty brands. Social media have become essential tools for beauty companies, as they make extensive use of these platforms to present products in a visually appealing way, share tutorials, and interact with consumers (See 2.2.1). This has major repercussions on the beauty customer journey, as existing research indicates that social media platforms play a significant role across all stages of the purchasing journey, from initial awareness to post-purchase evaluation and feedback. In particular, a large proportion of young consumers rely on social media to discover new products, with platforms such as Instagram and TikTok emerging as key channels for brand exposure and discovery (Singh, 2025).

In addition to their importance for product discovery, social media also greatly contributed to the availability of reviews, an element that is gaining more and more relevance within the beauty consumer journey. These forms of user-generated content

reflect individuals' evaluations and personal experiences with products and services and are now widely accessible through multiple online channels, such as e-commerce platforms, forums, blogs, social media, and dedicated review websites. Over time, they have become an important informational resource within the consumer decision-making process, helping individuals compare alternatives, reduce perceived risk, and make more informed purchase decisions. Empirical evidence also confirms their relevance, indicating that the majority of online consumers consult reviews before purchasing and consider them a significant factor influencing their final decision-making process (Zhang et al., 2014 p.78-79).

Overall, these elements highlight that the beauty customer journey is particularly influenced by digital interactions and user-generated content, which play a central role in shaping consumer perceptions and decisions. In the beauty industry, Kotler et al.'s (2017) model seems to be particularly relevant, as consumer behaviour is strongly influenced by social interactions, peer recommendations, and digital content shared across platforms.

3.3.4 EMERGING TRENDS: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

As customer journeys have become increasingly complex and characterised by multiple digital and physical touchpoints, beauty brands are facing the challenge of understanding and responding to increasingly personalised consumer expectations. In the last few years, artificial intelligence has emerged as an important technology capable of transforming the way companies manage customer interactions throughout the journey. Within the beauty industry, artificial intelligence is increasingly used to improve the customer journey by creating more personalised experiences. AI-powered tools can analyse consumers' characteristics (such as skin type or skin tone) and preferences to provide tailored product recommendations, virtual try-ons, and skin analysis. These technologies help consumers make more informed decisions, reduce uncertainty during the purchasing process, and strengthen their interaction with beauty brands (Chakraborty et al., 2024 p.1-2).

To better understand how artificial intelligence influences the beauty consumer journey, its impact can be examined across the five stages of the customer journey proposed by Kotler et al. (2017): aware, appeal, ask, act, and advocate.

In the awareness stage, consumers are first exposed to beauty brands through different digital and offline touchpoints (see 3.3.1). By analysing large volumes of consumer data, AI systems and Big Data enable marketers to identify highly specific audience segments and deliver personalised advertising content. This allows beauty brands to reach potential consumers more effectively through micro-targeted campaigns across digital platforms, increasing the likelihood of initial brand exposure and awareness (D'Arco, Lo Presti, Marino & Resciniti, 2019 p. 107). Going on, during the appeal stage consumers start forming an emotional connection and initial attraction towards specific brands. In this phase, AI contributes by offering visual and interactive experiences. Technologies such as augmented reality (AR) filters, virtual try-on tools and technologies able to analyse each individual's skin type and tone allow consumers to experience products in a more engaging and immersive way. This not only increases the attractiveness of beauty products but also strengthens emotional engagement, which is particularly relevant in a highly hedonic industry such as beauty (Chakraborty et al., 2024, Perret & Schwientek, 2025, Theopilus et al., 2021). At this point, the next A of the model is Ask. In that stage, consumers actively search for more information to reduce uncertainty before making a purchase (see 3.3.1). AI-powered tools such as intelligent conversational bots can facilitate interactions between firms and potential customers by providing real-time responses to queries and supporting information search. These systems can be integrated into corporate or e-commerce platforms to assist users in obtaining product-related information and clarifying doubts, thereby acting as virtual assistants or digital sales representatives (D'Arco et al., 2019 p. 109). The penultimate stage corresponds to the Act stage, which includes the purchase but also product usage and post-purchase interactions (see 3.3.1). In the Act stage, AI further supports and extends the benefits generated in the previous stages by accompanying consumers throughout the purchase, usage, and early post-purchase experience. In addition, in that stage AI can help companies gather very useful information, especially for customer profiling, demand forecasting, and profit optimization (D'Arco et al., 2019 p. 111). Finally, the last stage is reached, meaning the Advocate stage, in which satisfied consumers become loyal customers who actively recommend the brand to others (see 3.3.1). In today's digital landscape consumers often share their experiences with products and brands through word-of-mouth, online reviews, social media posts, and user-generated content such as pictures or videos. This generates a large amount of data that can provide valuable

insights into customer satisfaction, engagement, and attitudinal loyalty. In this context, AI and Big Data analytics can be used to monitor and analyse consumer sentiment across different digital platforms, allowing firms to better understand how customers perceive their products and services (D'Arco et al., 2019 p. 111-112).

Interestingly, this analysis suggests that artificial intelligence provides benefits for both consumers and firms throughout the customer journey, although its benefits may become more visible to different actors at different stages. In particular, AI appears to be particularly beneficial for consumers in the pre-purchase stages of the customer journey, where it supports information search, evaluation, and decision-making. In contrast, in the post-purchase phases, it becomes particularly useful for firms, as it contributes to data collection, customer insights, and performance optimization. Although this distinction is not explicitly established in the existing literature, it may offer a useful perspective on how AI supports different actors along the customer journey in the beauty industry.

Nevertheless, despite the numerous benefits associated with artificial intelligence, its possible drawbacks should not be overlooked. One of the most discussed problems related to AI is discussed by Georgievskaya and Tlyachev (2025), who highlight the issue of algorithmic bias in artificial intelligence systems. As they point out, AI systems can reproduce biases that are present in the data used to train them, leading to unfair or discriminatory outcomes. This issue is particularly relevant in the beauty industry, where AI may reinforce existing beauty standards. In their paper "*How artificial intelligence adopts human biases: the case of cosmetic skincare industry*", a notable example linked to the beauty industry is mentioned, namely the Beauty.AI competition held in 2016, in which an AI system was used to select the winners. The results attracted criticism because most of the selected participants had lighter skin tones, raising concerns about bias and inclusivity in AI-based beauty evaluations

To sum up, artificial intelligence is emerging as a precious tool for enhancing the beauty customer journey. However, some issues related to its usage, such as algorithmic bias, should also be taken into account, underlining the importance of a responsible use of AI technologies within the beauty industry.

4.0 INTRODUCING DARLING: BRAND PROFILE AND MARKET POSITIONING

The information presented in this chapter is based primarily on internal company documents provided by Darling during the internship period. Where appropriate, these data are complemented by the author's analysis and interpretation in order to provide a critical understanding of the brand's positioning and marketing strategy.

4.1 COMPANY BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Darling is an Italian premium suncare brand founded in 2018 in Reggio Emilia by entrepreneurs Alberto Giacobazzi and Ilenia Gebennini. According to the founders, the brand was created after identifying a clear gap in the sun protection market. Indeed, in 2018 suncare was still mainly perceived as a functional and seasonal category, with sunscreen often seen as a necessity rather than as a desirable part of beauty routines. The brand was established with the aim of introducing a new approach to sun protection within the beauty industry, combining elements such as skincare benefits, product effectiveness and a strong brand identity. The initial strategy was therefore not only to develop effective sun protection, but also to make SPF more desirable through formulations, textures, fragrances, packaging and a new communication (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). From its beginnings, Darling has tried to reposition sunscreen from a purely functional product to a desirable part of skincare and beauty routines. Through its focus on premium formulations, distinctive packaging, and contemporary branding, the company has contributed to the growing integration of sun protection into everyday beauty practices.

4.2 MISSION, VISION AND BRAND VALUES

Darling's mission is to transform the way consumers perceive sun protection by making SPF products more desirable and integrating them into everyday beauty and skincare routines. This objective is reflected in the brand's mantra, *"Wear SPF, Stay Pretty Forever"*, that emphasises the role of sunscreen as an essential component of skincare and long-term skin health. More generally, Darling's philosophy is built around

a few key principles, including scientific innovation, a distinctive brand identity, sustainability, and continuous adaptation to evolving consumer preferences. Together, these elements contribute to the brand's positioning within the premium beauty market and support its ambition to redefine sun protection as both a skincare necessity and a desirable beauty experience.

4.3 BRAND POSITIONING AND TARGET CONSUMER

Darling positions itself as a premium suncare brand operating at the intersection of sun protection, skincare, and beauty. As highlighted in 4.1, unlike traditional sunscreen brands often perceived primarily as functional products, Darling wants to elevate SPF into a desirable beauty essential by combining high-performance formulations with a strong aesthetic identity and a contemporary brand image. According to the company's founders, this approach was developed in response to the historically functional perception of sun protection and to the barriers associated with the regular use of SPF, such as the perception of sunscreen as an unpleasant product to apply. The company therefore deliberately decided to work not only on the functional value of sun protection, but also on its desirability, making SPF more aesthetically appealing, sensorially pleasant and generally easier to integrate into consumers' everyday routines (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026).

Although the brand was originally founded as a suncare company and SPF products continue to represent its core business, in recent years Darling has gradually expanded its offering beyond sun protection. In particular, the introduction of a bodycare line and the launch of its first scented mist for body and hair reflect the brand's growing presence within the broader skincare and fragrance categories. This evolution suggests an effort to position Darling not only as a sun protection brand, but as a more comprehensive beauty and lifestyle brand. This hypothesis is further validated by the founders themselves, who explain in the interview that while suncare remains at the core of the brand and continues to represent an important area of expertise and innovation, the company aims to progressively build a broader beauty universe through extensions such as bodycare and hybrid products. These new products are intended to remain consistent with Darling's core values of performance, sensoriality, design and innovation. However, the long-term ambition is to evolve into a broader beauty brand while maintaining strong authority in sun protection and

keeping SPF as one of the distinctive pillars of its identity (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026).

This strategic evolution is reflected in Darling's brand architecture, which illustrates the expansion of the brand beyond its original suncare focus and into adjacent beauty categories.

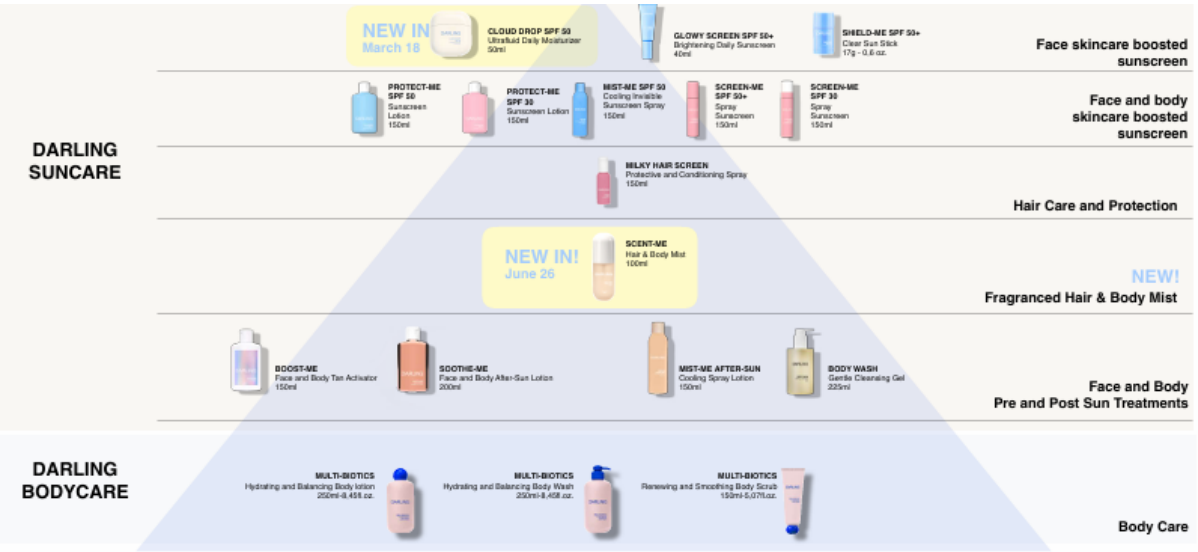


Figure 6: Darling Brand Architecture
Darling Brand Presentation (2024, internal company document)

Darling's exclusive positioning is supported by a number of different elements. To begin with, a first key element is the emphasis on Italian heritage, quality and lifestyle. By leveraging values associated with Made in Italy excellence, Darling presents itself as a brand characterised by craftsmanship, innovation, and attention to detail.

Then, the high-end positioning is reinforced by a highly selective distribution strategy. The brand is distributed in more than twenty countries (both European and non-European) through luxury department stores, high-end perfumeries, concept stores, premium hotels and spas and globally recognized Luxury and Premium Beauty e-tailers such as Cult Beauty, Niche Beauty, and Luisaviaroma. Interestingly, rather than pursuing a mass distribution strategy through large beauty retail chains such as Sephora, Darling opts for a more selective approach, favouring retail partners that are able to communicate the brand's values, aesthetic identity, and premium positioning. As explained by the company's founders, distribution is an important part of Darling's positioning. The aim of the brand is not simply to be present in as many stores as

possible, but to choose retailers and contexts that are consistent with the brand's premium, beauty and lifestyle identity. The presence in well-known retailers in different markets also helps the brand increase its visibility and credibility, particularly as it continues to expand internationally (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). This carefully curated distribution network contributes to reinforcing the brand's exclusivity and aspirational appeal while ensuring a consistent customer experience across different markets.

In addition, the brand's positioning is further supported by its pricing strategy, with individual products generally ranging between approximately €30 and €55 (Darling official website, accessed June 2026), while sets including merch and gift collections sometimes exceeding €100. Together with the selective distribution strategy and presence in luxury retail channels discussed above, this pricing structure contributes to a coherent premium positioning, reflecting a brand strategy which aims at underlining exclusivity and high perceived value.

Sustainability represents another key pillar of Darling's positioning and brand identity. The company integrates environmental responsibility into both product formulation and packaging choices, using for instance recyclable and FSC-certified materials for secondary packaging. In addition, many of its formulations are designed to be reef-safe, free from ingredients such as oxybenzone and octinoxate and compliant with environmental regulations such as the Hawaii Reef Act. This approach reflects a broader commitment to reducing environmental impact and protecting marine ecosystems. In this respect, Darling appears to be well aligned with one of the key consumer trends identified in the literature, namely the increasing importance of sustainability and responsible consumption practices in shaping purchasing behaviour (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013 p.1081).

In light of the theoretical framework on market segmentation outlined in chapter 3.2, which highlights the importance of specific variables in identifying consumer groups, Darling's target consumer can be identified as a beauty-conscious individual who actively follows skincare trends and seeks products that combine effectiveness, innovation, and aesthetic appeal. This interpretation is also consistent with the perspective of the brand's founders, who explain that Darling did not initially define its target primarily in terms of age, but rather by identifying a cluster of consumers sharing

similar interests, attitudes and purchasing behaviours. These consumers were identified as a group of beauty enthusiasts interested in discovering exclusive and niche brands, attentive both to product performance and to the ability of a brand to reflect their lifestyle. They were also considered well informed and digitally active consumers, sensitive to overall aesthetics and also willing to invest in a premium product when they perceived added value in terms of formulation, design, and overall experience (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). However, despite its premium positioning, Darling adopts a communication style that remains accessible and inclusive rather than elitist. Through a positive and desirable brand language, it seeks to appeal to a broad spectrum of beauty-conscious consumers, ranging from skincare enthusiasts and trend-driven younger audiences to more mature consumers. At the same time, its sustainability-oriented approach makes it particularly attractive also to environmentally aware consumers who prioritise ethical and responsible consumption.

As for age, although the founders explicitly state that Darling did not define its target primarily according to a specific age group, the characteristics of its current target consumer can still be interpreted in light of the generational differences discussed in Section 3.1.2. This perspective is particularly relevant given that eight years have passed since the brand was founded and that its consumer base has expanded. Today, Darling's positioning appears to align closely with several of the characteristics associated with Millennial and Generation Z beauty consumers, including a strong interest for skincare, self-expression, aesthetic consumption, sustainability, trend following and digitally mediated brand experiences. However, those generations do not exclude others. Generation X consumers, for instance, are often described as relatively price-sensitive, particularly in the context of sustainable cosmetic purchases (Bautista et al., 2023). However, they also represent an attractive segment for premium beauty brands, as they enjoy greater financial stability and tend to prioritise product quality, effectiveness, and scientifically supported formulations (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013 p.1081). In this respect, Darling's emphasis on high-performance products, premium positioning, and skincare benefits may appeal to the expectations of this consumer group. Furthermore, the brand's presence in high-end perfumeries is consistent with the purchasing habits of many Generation X consumers, who often continue to value physical retail environments and in-store product experiences.

The evolution of Darling's target consumer is an element that also emerges from the founders' perspective. According to them, while the brand's consumer profile has remained consistent in terms of values and attitudes, its customer base has progressively expanded as the brand has grown. In particular, the expansion of distribution, the entry into new markets and the development of the e-commerce channel have contributed to increasing the diversity of Darling's consumers, both in terms of age and geographical background (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). According to the founders, this evolution has also been influenced by changes in the suncare market itself. The growing awareness of the importance of daily SPF use and the increasing connection between sun protection and skincare have indeed broadened the range of consumers interested in the brand. At the same time, as underlined above at the beginning of this chapter, the expansion of Darling's portfolio into bodycare and other products allows the brand to reach consumers at different moments of their beauty routines and throughout the whole year (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026).

4.4 VISUAL IDENTITY

Another essential dimension of Darling's brand identity is its visual identity, which plays a crucial role in communicating the brand's premium and contemporary positioning.

The visual identity of Darling is primarily conveyed through its logo, which represents an essential element in ensuring brand recognisability and consistency across different touchpoints. The Darling logo is characterised by a minimalist and clean typographic design, based on the Helvetica Regular typeface, which contributes to its modern, simple and recognisable visual identity. The overall aesthetic is deliberately essential, avoiding overly decorative elements in favour of clarity and immediacy, in line with the brand's premium positioning within the beauty industry.

Consistency of the logo is preserved across different applications. In fact, the typographic structure remains unchanged regardless of the communication channel, ensuring visual coherence across physical and digital environments. The logo has also been designed to remain clearly legible at small print and screen sizes. While its colour may vary depending on the context of application, the brand generally adopts a white

version of the logo when used on coloured or dark backgrounds, further contributing to a coherent and recognisable visual system.



Figure 7: Overview of Darling's logotype on different backgrounds
Source: Darling Brand Manual (2024, internal company document)

Continuing with the analysis, the colour palette represents another key component of Darling's visual identity. According to the Darling Brand Manual (2024), the brand's visual identity is built around a contemporary, soft, and delicate colour palette. The core colours are Pure White, Pastel Pink, and Pastel Blue, which represent the foundation of the brand's visual system and are consistently used across communication materials and packagings. These are complemented by a set of supporting colours, including Black, Peach Bellini, Holographic tones, and additional shades of pink and blue, which provide flexibility while preserving overall visual coherence.

The use of different colours also contributes to differentiating product categories within the brand portfolio. While the suncare range is predominantly associated with pastel pink and pastel blue tones, the bodycare line adopts a distinct colour palette characterised by warmer nude and pink tones alongside darker shades of blue. This visual distinction allows the brand to differentiate product categories while maintaining a coherent overall identity.

It is also worth noting that the Brand Manual reflects the visual identity of Darling as of 2024. Looking at more recent product launches and communication materials, the brand appears to have gradually expanded its colour palette, introducing additional tones such as soft brown and beige nuances. This evolution suggests the will to enrich

the visual system while preserving the pastel aesthetic that remains at the core of the brand identity.

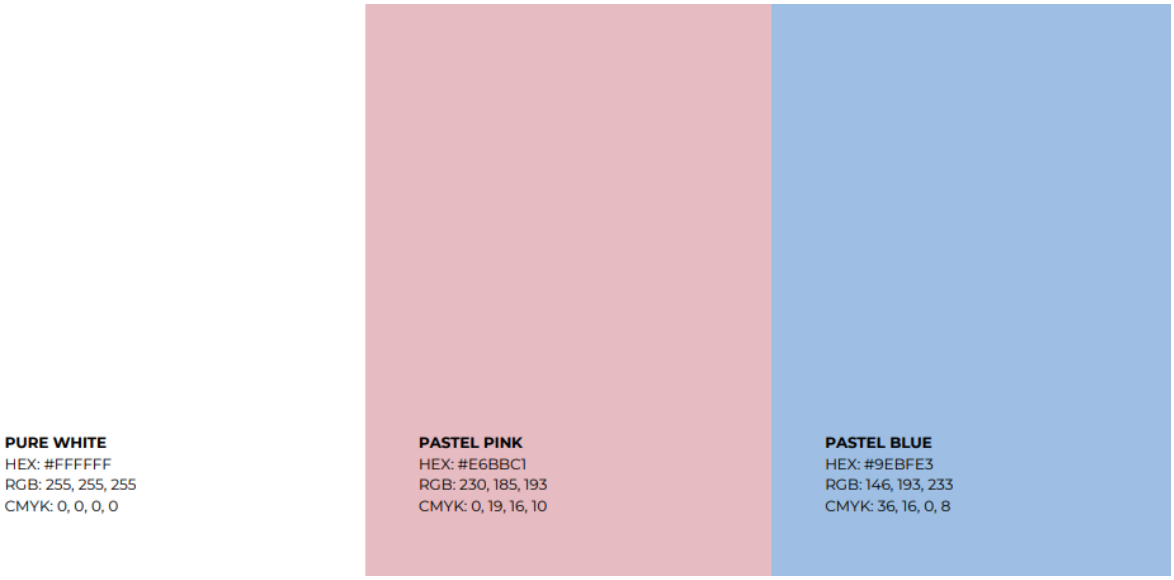


Figure 8: Darling core colours

Source: Darling Brand Manual (2024, internal company document)



Figure 9: Darling's bodyline distinct colour palette

Source: Darling Brand Manual (2024, internal company document)

In addition to its colour palette, Darling's visual identity is consistently reinforced through its packaging design, which represents a fundamental element of its visual identity and is structured across both primary and secondary packaging, each fulfilling a specific communicative and functional role.

The secondary packaging typically consists of cardboard boxes and the design follows a minimalist approach. The front side is normally characterised by a clean and structured layout, where the brand logo appears at the top, followed by the product name and its function. The same typeface used for the logo is consistently applied, reinforcing visual coherence across the packaging. The overall aesthetic is deliberately essential, with no decorative elements, illustrations, or visual distractions, in line with the brand's premium and contemporary positioning. The lateral sides of the packaging are dedicated to informational content. One side generally includes product descriptions translated into multiple languages, while the other provides usage tips in English, Italian, and French, followed by the full list of ingredients. It is important to note, however, that this structure is not always entirely uniform across all products, as variations in the product and packaging size influence the amount of information that can be included. Smaller formats require a more selective presentation of content, whereas larger products allow for more detailed information. All secondary packaging is made from FSC-certified paper, reflecting the brand's commitment to sustainable material sourcing.

In terms of colour usage, secondary packaging does not follow a strictly standardised system in which specific colours are systematically associated with specific products. Rather, colour is used flexibly to differentiate product categories while maintaining visual coherence. While most SPF products are associated with the brand's traditional pastel tones, some exceptions can be observed, such as Cloud Drop, whose packaging is white to reflect its positioning as a skincare-first product intended for everyday use. Similarly, the bodycare line adopts distinct colours that visually differentiate it from the suncare range.

The primary packaging, on the contrary, varies significantly depending on the product category and formulation. As a matter of fact, Darling develops packaging solutions that are tailored to each product's functional and sensory characteristics. For instance, the product Mist-Me SPF 50 is packaged in a non-aerosol bag-on-valve system with eco-friendly continuous spray technology, allowing application from any angle while reducing environmental impact. Similarly, the Glowy Screen SPF 50+ is packaged in Green PE, a bio-based

plastic derived from sugarcane with net-zero CO_2 emissions, further highlighting the brand's focus on sustainable innovation in packaging materials. Another interesting example is Cloud Drop, a product specifically designed for everyday urban use. Its compact packaging differs from the brand's traditional formats and adopts a sleek, portable design that recalls the aesthetics of contemporary technological devices.



Figure 10: Darling Cloud Drop Packaging
Source: Official Darling Website (accessed June 2026)

Overall, Darling's packaging strategy reflects a balance between aesthetic coherence at the level of secondary packaging and functional innovation at the level of primary packaging, ensuring consistency with both its positioning and a sustainable brand identity.

Finally, Darling's visual identity is also expressed through a well-curated visual style. Across its communication materials and channels, the brand adopts bright, clean, and aesthetically refined imagery that reinforces its high-end positioning. A recurring theme is the reference to the Italian and Mediterranean summer lifestyle, conveyed through bright coastal settings, sea views, natural light, and iconic elements of Italian culture such as lemons, ice creams and Vespa scooters. These visual cues contribute to creating a relaxed yet aspirational atmosphere that evokes leisure, travel, and the aesthetics of the Italian summer. This visual approach contributes to creating a distinctive brand universe that goes beyond product functionality, associating Darling

with ideas of leisure, beauty, travel, and wellbeing. This helps the brand communicate not only the practical benefits of sun protection, but also the lifestyle values that surround it.

4.5 COMPETITOR ANALYSIS

As mentioned in the chapters above, the beauty and suncare market is characterised by a high level of competition, with brands competing not only on product performance but also on branding, aesthetic identity, sustainability and customer experience. In order to better understand Darling's market positioning, it is useful to compare the brand with a selection of competitors operating within the suncare segment.

To provide a structured analysis of Darling's competitive environment, a selection of competitors identified in the internal company materials provided will be examined. These brands were selected because they are considered by Darling itself to be the most relevant competitors within the suncare and beauty market. The analysis will be conducted using a comparative table developed by selecting and adapting evaluation criteria introduced during the Marketing and Digital Communication course. The table has been tailored to the specific objectives of this study by including and allowing competitors to be evaluated across a number of key dimensions, facilitating a comparison of their positioning, target audience, product offering, distribution strategy, pricing and visual identity.

BRAND	PRODUCT LINE	TARGET CONSUMER	PRICE	DISTRIBUTION	PACKAGING
Darling	Suncare, After-sun, Tanning booster, Hair protection products, Bodycare, and Fragrance mists.	Beauty-savvy and beauty enthusiast individuals who seek the latest in skincare trends and demand the highest	Medium-High	Official website, Luxury department stores, high-end perfumeries, concept stores, premium hotels and	Minimalist, Premium, Sustainable, Pastel tones.

BRAND	PRODUCT LINE	TARGET CONSUMER	PRICE	DISTRIBUTION	PACKAGING
		quality.		spas, globally recognized Luxury and Premium Beauty e-tailers.	
Coola	Suncare, Skincare, Lip care, Self-tanning products,Skincare-SPF hybrid cosmetics.	Health-conscious and environmentally aware consumers seeking clean, organic, and everyday sun protection.	Medium-High	Amazon, big online beauty retailers, Perfumeries.	Bright, Nature-inspired, Light blue tones, Floral graphics, strong focus on sustainability and organic aesthetics.
Isdin	Dermocosmetic suncare and skincare products addressing specific skin concerns, SPF protection and After-sun treatments.	Consumers seeking clinically proven, dermatologically tested sun protection with a strong focus on skin health, efficacy, and medical reliability.	Medium-Low	Physical pharmacies, online pharmacies, selected e-commerce platforms.	Clinical and functional packaging design with a strong pharmaceutical aesthetic, minimal decorative elements and a focus on clarity, and scientific communication.
Lancaster	Suncare and skincare products, SPF protection, Anti-aging	Consumers seeking products with strong anti-aging benefits, high-	Medium-Low	Perfumeries, pharmacies and dermocosmetic retailers,	Clean and functional packaging with a simple design and frequent

BRAND	PRODUCT LINE	TARGET CONSUMER	PRICE	DISTRIBUTION	PACKAGING
	sun care, After-sun treatments, Tanning enhancement products and Fragrance Mists.	performance formulations, and a focus on skin protection and radiance.		travel retail, and major online beauty platforms.	use of monochromatic orange tones, premium but not highly decorative aesthetic.
Hello Sunday	Modern suncare and skincare-SPF hybrid products, including facial SPF, body SPF, lip protection, and daily-use sun protection.	Young, urban, and beauty-conscious consumers seeking easy-to-use, everyday SPF products with a focus on skincare, aesthetics, and convenience.	Low	Major beauty e-commerce platforms, fashion and lifestyle e-retailers, official website.	Playful and colourful with pastel pink and lilac tones, clean typography, information-rich design focused on everyday SPF use.

In order to provide a clearer and even more immediate representation of the competitive landscape, a positioning map has been developed by the brand itself based on price level and brand positioning. This representation complements the author's comparative table by illustrating the positioning of Darling and a broader set of competitors within the suncare market, including both the brands analysed in the table and other relevant market players.



Figure 11: Positioning map of suncare brands based on price level and brand positioning.
Source: Darling Brand Presentation (2024, internal company document)

Based on this graph, the table describing the competitive analysis and the internal company documents provided by Darling, it is possible to identify Darling's unique selling propositions, namely the distinctive elements that differentiate the brand within the suncare market (Majka, 2024).

- **SPF as a beauty object**: Darling transforms sun protection from a functional category into a desirable and aesthetic beauty essential.
- **Strong Italian lifestyle identity**: Darling is deeply rooted in Made in Italy values and contemporary Mediterranean summer imagery.
- **Positive and desirability-driven communication approach**: Darling redefines sun protection as a beauty-enhancing practice rather than a preventive or fear-based message. It adopts a playful and aspirational tone that encourages SPF usage through aesthetic and emotional appeal.

- **Sustainability-oriented approach**: Sustainability is integrated into the brand's practices but is not used as a primary communication pillar, being mainly conveyed through concrete formulation and packaging choices rather than explicit messaging.
- **Distinctive and recognizable visual identity**: Darling is based on a minimalist design and a cohesive pastel-based aesthetic system.
- **A complete sun care portfolio covering the entire sun exposure journey**: Unlike most of the competitors, Darling's offering ranges from tanning preparation and sun protection to after-sun care. The brand accompanies the consumer throughout the different stages of sun exposure, ensuring consistency in both sensorial experience and brand identity across face, body, hair, and after-sun products.

Overall, this analysis shows that the suncare market is competitive but highly diversified, with brands positioning themselves in different ways depending on their focus, ranging from clinical and functional approaches to more lifestyle-oriented and aesthetic ones. Within this context, Darling stands out for its hybrid positioning, as it does not fully belong to a single category but instead combines elements of different approaches.

Differently from dermocosmetic brands such as ISDIN, which focus mainly on efficacy and skin health, or heritage brands such as Lancaster, which emphasise performance and tradition, Darling places greater importance on aesthetics, emotion, sensorial experience and brand identity. At the same time, compared to more sustainability-focused brands such as Coola, Darling puts stronger emphasis on desirability and visual coherence. This analysis therefore suggests that the brand's competitive advantage does not lie in a single functional attribute, but rather in the combination of aesthetic desirability, sensorial innovation, and a brand universe that extends across multiple product categories and consumption occasions.

4.6 DARLING SWOT ANALYSIS

Having examined Darling's history, positioning, visual identity, target consumer, competitive landscape and unique selling propositions, it is now meaningful to conclude the chapter with a SWOT analysis, providing an overview of the brand's

strategic situation. The term SWOT analysis refers to “[t]he overall evaluation of a company’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats” (Kotler & Keller, 2012 p.48).

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
● Strong and distinctive visual identity ● Premium positioning within the suncare market ● High-quality formulations with skincare benefits ● Selective and curated distribution strategy ● Made in Italy brand identity	● Higher price compared to mass-market competitors ● Limited brand awareness compared to established global players ● Still strong dependence on the suncare category ● The highly selective distribution strategy, although consistent with the brand’s premium positioning, may limit brand awareness, potentially limiting market reach and sales potential
Opportunities	**Threats**
● Growing demand for daily SPF and skincare hybrid products ● Expansion into new beauty categories (fragrance) ● Increasing consumer interest in SPF sustainability ● Growth of digital and e-commerce channels	● Strong competition from dermocosmetic and traditional brands (ISDIN, Lancaster) ● Market saturation in the skincare and suncare segment ● Price sensitivity in certain consumer segments

Overall, this brief SWOT analysis confirms Darling’s strong and distinctive positioning as a high-end suncare brand. It benefits from a clear visual identity, a curated distribution strategy, and the ability to combine suncare, skincare, and lifestyle elements into a coherent brand experience. At the same time, some limitations also emerge, particularly in terms of brand awareness and market reach, which may be influenced by its selective distribution strategy. Future growth opportunities might therefore consist in a broader brand visibility, especially internationally, and in the further development of new product categories beyond the suncare segment.

5.0 ANALYSIS OF DARLING'S DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

As previously discussed in Chapter 2.0 and its subchapters, in the contemporary beauty industry digital communication plays a fundamental role in shaping brand perception and influencing consumer behaviour. In addition, as highlighted in 2.2.1, the rise of social media platforms has reshaped the way beauty brands engage with consumers, enabling the creation of participatory and community-based forms of communication. Within this context, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become central to brand visibility and consumer decision-making, particularly among younger audiences who heavily rely on digital content for product discovery and inspiration. Social media also plays a key role in accelerating trends and influencing purchasing behaviour, as demonstrated by the increasing impact of influencers, user-generated content and customer engagement.

The relevance of those platforms becomes even more pronounced when focusing on premium and luxury brands, as in the case of Darling. Although a potential contradiction exists between the exclusivity traditionally associated with high-end brands and the accessible nature of social media platforms, academic literature suggests that these channels play a crucial role in enhancing brand visibility and awareness. Rather than undermining brand prestige, social media can indeed contribute to building trust, strengthening emotional connections with consumers and fostering long-term engagement. In this sense, digital platforms have become an essential tool for luxury and premium brands too to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive and fast-paced market environment, where trends evolve rapidly and consumer attention continuously shifts (Vinerean & Opreana, 2019 p.145-146).

Starting from this background, this chapter aims at analyzing Darling's digital and social media strategy, focusing on how the brand builds its online presence and communicates its identity within the contemporary digital beauty landscape.

5.1 OVERVIEW OF DARLING DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

Before examining Darling's social media strategy in detail, it is useful to provide an overview of the brand's digital ecosystem, namely the set of digital touchpoints through which it interacts with consumers and communicates its identity.

Darling’s first essential digital touchpoint is its official website, which serves as both the brand’s primary e-commerce platform and a central hub for information about the company and its products. The website includes several sections that support different aspects of the brand’s online presence. In addition to the online shop, visitors can access a dedicated merchandise section, an interactive skincare quiz designed to recommend suitable products based on individual skin needs, a store locator and an editorial blog featuring articles related to skincare, sun protection and lifestyle topics. The website also contains an About section providing information about the brand, its sustainability initiatives and press coverage. Overall, it represents a key digital touchpoint through which Darling communicates its identity, presents its product portfolio, and connects with consumers.

Continuing with the analysis, among the various social media platforms used by the brand, Instagram plays without doubt an essential role. Indeed, this social media platform represents Darling’s primary communication channel and one of the most important touchpoints within its digital ecosystem. As of August 2026, the official Instagram account counts approximately 60,800 followers. The platform plays a central role in the brand’s online presence, serving as the main space through which Darling communicates with its audience and shares updates regarding products, campaigns, partnerships and brand initiatives. Instagram is also used to document events, collaborations, and promotional activities, while at the same time it amplifies user-generated content through the reposting of stories and posts created by consumers, influencers, celebrities and brand partners. As a result, the platform contributes not only to increasing the visibility of the brand but also to strengthening the sense of community surrounding it. Because of its strategic importance within Darling’s communication ecosystem, Instagram will constitute the primary focus of the social media analysis that will be developed in the following sections.

Darling is also present on LinkedIn, where the company maintains an active corporate profile with approximately 2,000 followers (as of June 2026). Compared to Instagram, LinkedIn serves a more institutional and business-oriented function within the brand's digital ecosystem. The platform is regularly used to share updates regarding new product launches, company achievements, partnerships, industry events and other corporate developments. As such, LinkedIn complements Darling's communication channels by addressing a more professional audience and reinforcing the brand's presence within the beauty and business communities.

TikTok represents a more recent addition to Darling's digital ecosystem. At the time of writing, the brand's presence on the platform remains very limited, with only approximately 260 followers. Most of the content currently available has generated a relatively modest number of views, generally ranging between 700 and 800 views per post, although one video has achieved significantly higher visibility, reaching approximately 14,600 views. These data suggest that the platform is still in an early stage of development within Darling's digital communication activities. It is interesting to note that, in addition to content creation, TikTok also serves as an additional sales channel through the platform's integrated shopping functionality. Differently from what happens on Instagram, consumers on TikTok can directly purchase a selection of Darling products, enjoying free shipping and a 30% off on the second product purchase.

In addition to its social media presence, Darling also employs email marketing through a newsletter subscription system available on the official website. The newsletter enables the brand to maintain direct communication with consumers by sharing updates regarding product launches, promotions, events and other brand-related news.

All things considered, Darling's digital ecosystem combines owned media, social media platforms and direct communication channels, allowing the brand to interact with consumers through multiple digital touchpoints. However, although the present chapter focuses primarily on Darling's digital strategy, it is important to consider it within the broader omnichannel context in which contemporary beauty brands operate. As discussed in Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2, the increasing integration of online and offline environments has made physical touchpoints an important component of the

overall customer experience. Therefore, the analysis of Darling's digital ecosystem should not be understood as excluding physical touchpoints. Among all channels, however, Instagram occupies without doubt a particularly prominent position and represents the core of Darling's digital communication strategy. For this reason, the following sections will focus primarily on the analysis of the brand's Instagram activities and communication practices.

5.2 INSTAGRAM STRATEGY

As anticipated in the previous section, Instagram represents Darling's most important social media platform and the core of its digital communication strategy. Through Instagram, the brand communicates its identity, values, product portfolio and lifestyle positioning while maintaining a direct relationship with its audience. The crucial importance of this platform was also underlined by the founders themselves during the interview, particularly referring to its strategic role in conveying the idea of a typical Darling's lifestyle (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026).

The following sections will therefore analyse the main elements that characterise Darling's Instagram strategy.

5.2.1 VISUAL IDENTITY ON INSTAGRAM

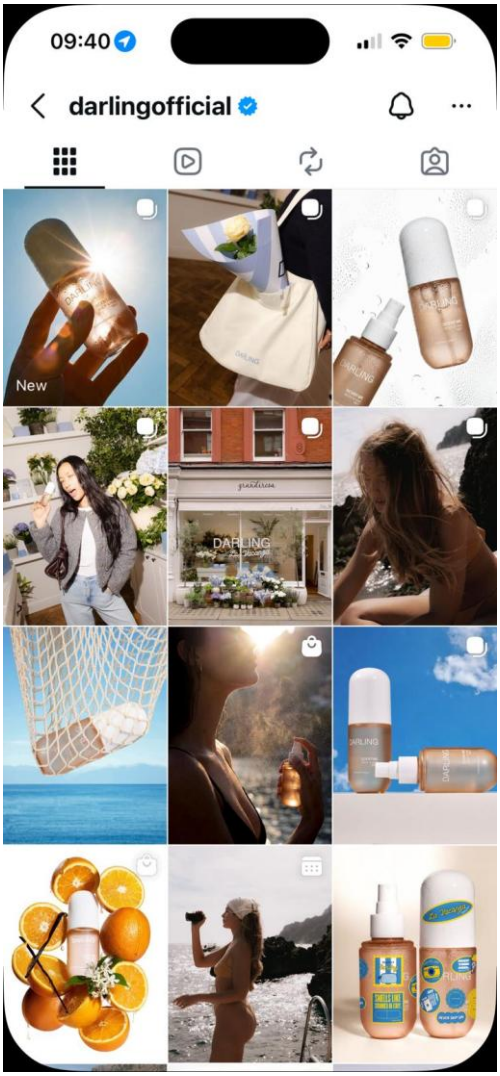


Figure 12: Overview of Darling’s Instagram feed

Source: Author’s screenshot from Darling’s official Instagram account, accessed June 2026.

At first glance, Darling’s Instagram feed appears very curated and aesthetically refined. The visual quality of the published content is consistently high, reflecting a strong attention to photography, composition and overall visual presentation. Colour also plays an important role within the feed. While the brand’s core colours discussed in Section 4.4 are frequently present, the visual communication is not limited to these shades. Rather than relying on monochromatic compositions, Darling integrates its colour palette into real-life settings, creating a visual identity that appears both distinctive and authentic. Furthermore, the feed consistently reflects the Mediterranean-inspired lifestyle that represents a central component of the brand’s positioning and a key differentiation factor from competitors. Even the limited selection of posts reported in Figure 12 reveals recurring visual elements such as the sea, coastal landscapes, flowers, oranges, natural light and scenes associated with a relaxed and enjoyable summer lifestyle. These elements contribute to the creation of a coherent visual universe that extends beyond the products themselves and reinforces the aspirational values associated with Darling. In addition, this special attention to creating a coherent visual universe is consistent with the founders’ view of Instagram as a space to communicate not only Darling’s products, but also the wider lifestyle surrounding the brand (Darling’s founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author’s interview, 2026).

The importance of the Italian summer within Darling’s brand identity is reflected not only in the visual content shared on Instagram, but also in the language used to communicate with consumers. An example can be observed below in Figure 13, featuring an image which promotes the launch of Darling's new hair and body scented mist through the claim "*Smells like summer in Italy*", directly linking the product to the sensory and emotional imagery of the Italian summer.

It is important to note, however, that according to the company’s founders, this strong association with the Italian and Mediterranean lifestyle was not part of Darling’s identity from the very beginning, but rather became more prominent over time. As a matter of fact, when Darling was first created, its visual and communication identity was more influenced by international, particularly American, beauty brands, as the founders

wanted to create a globally appealing image. As the brand grew, however, the company began to increasingly recognise the value of its Italian origins and began to incorporate them more explicitly into its communication. As the founders underlined during the interview, Darling's products already embodied characteristics associated with Made in Italy, such as quality, attention to detail, design and elegance. Over time, these elements became more significantly reflected in the brand's storytelling through a stronger focus on Italian lifestyle, Mediterranean summer and a contemporary Italian imagery. Therefore, it can be said that the brand's Italian identity evolved from being mainly an intrinsic characteristic of the brand to becoming an important narrative element in its communication, while still being expressed through an international and contemporary language (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026).



Figure 13: Darling's Instagram post
Source: Author's screenshot of an Instagram post promoting Darling's new scented mist.

While the Italian and Mediterranean lifestyle remains a particularly distinctive element of Darling's visual communication, similar themes can increasingly be observed in the communication strategies of some competitors. A notable example is Isdin. Although

traditionally associated with a more pharmaceutical and dermatological positioning, the brand's Instagram communication has evolved towards a more lifestyle-oriented approach. In particular, the Italian Instagram profile frequently makes use of visual elements such as seaside landscapes, striped beach umbrellas, lemons, and coastal scenery, all of which evoke the imagery of the Mediterranean summer. This evolution suggests an attempt to complement the brand's scientific credibility with more aspirational and emotionally engaging content. However, this accent on the Mediterranean lifestyle still remains a great factor of differentiation from other brands such as Coola. Indeed, Coola adopts a different visual universe on Instagram. Instead of drawing on Mediterranean imagery, its communication appears to be more associated with tropical and Californian aesthetics, characterised by elements such as palm trees, surfing culture, and exotic landscapes. This distinction may reflect the different cultural contexts and brand identities of the two companies: while Isdin and Darling are both rooted in Mediterranean countries, Coola's communication appears more closely aligned with the Californian lifestyle traditionally associated with the brand.

To conclude the investigation of Darling’s visual identity on Instagram it can be said that beyond aesthetic consistency, the brand’s visual identity also contributes to strengthening brand recognition. The recurrent use of similar visual codes, colour palettes and lifestyle references creates a coherent visual universe that allows consumers to easily identify Darling’s content while scrolling through their social media. This consistency reinforces the premium positioning of the brand and contributes to building a recognizable visual presence within the highly competitive beauty and suncare landscape.

5.2.2 CONTENT STRATEGY

Darling’s content strategy on Instagram can be described as a diversified mix of content types that combine product communication, lifestyle storytelling and posts related to the latest brand’s campaigns and events. This combination seems to allow the brand to maintain a balance between commercial objectives and emotional engagement, while also reinforcing its general positioning within the beauty industry.

One of the main content categories present on Darling's Instagram profile is product-focused communication. This type of content is primarily dedicated to the presentation of the different products and plays a key role in showcasing the product range while also supporting purchase intention through visual appeal. Within this category, different visual formats can be identified. A first type consists of simple product shots, where the packaging is displayed on neutral backgrounds in a clean and minimal composition, commonly referred to as "still life". A second format is represented by the so-called "creative still life", where the product is placed within more elaborate settings, designed to enhance the aesthetic value of the product and provide information while also maintaining its centrality. In addition, a significant part of product-focused content includes shots highlighting the texture of the product, which underline the sensory and functional characteristics of the formulations. These images play a very important role in providing consumers with a concrete impression of products' textures and finish, an element which appears to be central within the beauty and suncare industry. Finally, some content shows the product in use or includes models interacting with it, adding a human dimension that reinforces the connection between product functionality and lifestyle imagery.

Figure 14 below presents the three above-mentioned different types of content used by Darling on Instagram, illustrating the visual variety within this content category. Starting from the left, a still life composition shows the brand's latest launch, Scent-Me, placed on a neutral white background, emphasising its lightweight mist texture and maintaining a minimal and clean aesthetic. In the centre, a creative still life version of the same product is displayed, complemented with additional visual elements such as oranges and vanilla pods. These elements are directly connected to the fragrance notes of the mist, visually translating the fragrance notes of the product into a visual composition, thus also providing consumers with information about the product. On the right, the product is shown in use by a model applying the mist, highlighting its texture while also introducing a human dimension to the visual communication.



Figure 14: Examples of product-focused content on Darling's Instagram profile
Source: Adapted from Darling official Instagram profile, accessed June 2026

Another recurring content category consists of posts documenting events organised by the brand. These posts are generally published in the form of carousels, often containing a large number of images that provide an overview of the event. Usually, those images do not focus on a single moment, instead, these carousels seek to capture different aspects of the experience, including the venue, the atmosphere, the products, and the people involved. The aim of the present chapter is not to analyse the role of influencers or brand ambassadors participating in these events, as this aspect will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections. However, it is worth mentioning that Darling devotes considerable attention to sharing and documenting its events on Instagram. Through this content, followers are given access to moments that they may not have personally experienced, creating a sense of proximity to the brand and generating curiosity around its activities and initiatives. In this respect, event-related content contributes not only to increasing brand awareness but also to strengthening the aspirational and premium dimension of the brand.

A further aspect worth mentioning is the introduction of a new content format that appeared recently on Darling's Instagram profile. On 23 June 2026, the brand published what can be described as a press review post, collecting mentions of Darling products featured in leading international beauty magazines such as Vogue, Marie

Claire and Elle. Unlike previous content, the post is mostly dedicated to showcasing editorial recognitions rather than promoting a specific product or campaign. Although this is currently the first post of its kind, its introduction may suggest an intention to strengthen the brand's credibility and prestige by highlighting its presence in internationally recognised publications. Interestingly, the post mostly features mentions from international editions of these magazines, some which are left in their original language. This could reflect Darling's willingness to emphasise its growing international visibility and reinforce its positioning as a premium brand with an increasingly international reach.



Figure 15: Example of the press review format recently introduced on Darling's Instagram profile.
Source: Author's screenshot from Darling's official Instagram account, accessed June 2026

In addition to permanent feed posts, Instagram Stories also need to be taken into account, as they represent another key component of Darling's content strategy. Unlike feed content, which is normally characterised by highly curated visuals and a strong aesthetic focus, stories allow for a more immediate and dynamic form of communication. Due to their temporary nature, they enable the brand to share updates and content in a more spontaneous and frequent manner. Besides their higher

spontaneity, the communication conveyed through the stories also tends to be more informational. While feed posts often focus on visual storytelling and brand aesthetics, Stories are frequently used to provide additional details about products, events, launches and brand activities. In this respect, they complement the more “polished” and refined communication found on the main feed. It should be noted, however, that this distinction is not absolute. Feed posts also contain informational elements, mainly related to the products they showcase. Nevertheless, compared to Stories, they tend to place greater emphasis on visual storytelling and aesthetic communication, with the objective of conveying the overall atmosphere, values, and lifestyle associated with the brand. Moreover, Instagram stories are extensively used to repost content created by influencers, journalists, brand partners, and consumers. Through these reposts, Darling not only amplifies external content related to the brand but also actively acknowledges the individuals who interact with its products. This practice contributes to fostering a sense of participation and involvement, a key element in today’s digital marketing within the beauty industry, as mentioned in chapter 2.2.1.

5.2.3 TONE OF VOICE AND COMMUNICATION STYLE

Beyond its visual identity and content strategy, Darling is also characterised by a distinctive tone of voice that consistently reflects the brand's positioning. Indeed, while many skincare and suncare brands frequently rely on scientific explanations, dermatological information, or risk-prevention messages to encourage sunscreen usage, this approach appears to be less present in Darling’s Instagram communication. Although information regarding product benefits and SPF use is present, the brand rarely places scientific education at the centre of its content. This observation is consistent with one of the unique selling propositions identified in Section 4.5, namely Darling’s positive and desirability-oriented approach to sun protection. Indeed, the brand tends to illustrate sun protection as a pleasant and desirable part of everyday beauty routines rather than encouraging SPF consumption through fear-based narratives centred on skin damage or negative consequences of sun exposure. In this respect, it can be said that Instagram communication contributes to Darling’s declared mission, meaning presenting SPF not as an obligation, but rather as an aesthetic and enjoyable beauty product associated with self-care, wellbeing, and mediterranean lifestyle.

Another distinctive characteristic of Darling's communication style concerns the captions accompanying Instagram posts. Although they generally include essential information about the presented product, such as its function, texture, or key characteristics, similarly to what stated above their primary objective does not appear to be the delivery of technical or scientific information. Instead, captions adopt an evocative and emotionally engaging language that complements the visual content and reinforces the brand's premium positioning. Recurring expressions such as *"Smells like summer in Italy"*, *"Meet Scent-Me"*, *"Where will la vacanza take you next?"* or *"Press. Mist. Reapply."* illustrate this kind of communication style. Instead of focusing exclusively on ingredients, dermatological claims or scientific terminology, these captions seem to aim at evoking emotions, sensory experiences and the imagery of the Italian summer, encouraging consumers to associate Darling with a high-end experience.

However, it is worth mentioning that this communication style does not appear to be exclusive to Darling. A similar use of short and emotional captions can also be observed on the Instagram profiles of some competitors, such as Coola and Isdin. This suggests that the adoption of short, aspirational, and emotional captions may reflect a more general communication trend within the broad beauty and suncare industry, where Instagram is used primarily to create emotional appeal and reinforce brand identity rather than to provide extensive product information. This observation is also reinforced by existing studies on Instagram communication, which argue that captions (including emojis and hashtags) and images actually work together to convey meaning. As a consequence, they do not need to provide very extensive information, as much of the brand's message is communicated through the displayed visual content (Sultan & Ishfaq, 2026).

While the overall tone of voice adopted by Darling appears to be consistent with this broader communication trend, some differences can still be observed when comparing the brand with its competitors. For instance, Isdin's Italian Instagram profile frequently adopts a more interactive communication style. Several captions conclude with direct questions or explicit calls to action inviting followers to share their opinions in the comments, such as asking which newly launched product they would prefer. This approach seems to encourage a more active participation and stimulates

conversations within the community. This is usually not the case for Darling, which normally adopts a more subtle approach to audience interaction. Although the brand occasionally incorporates rhetorical questions or conversational expressions into its captions, it rarely includes explicit invitations to comment or participate in discussions. The brand appears therefore to rely more on the aspirational nature of its visual content and storytelling to engage its audience, maintaining a communication style that is consistent with its perceived premiumness.

A further relevant aspect concerns the use of emojis in Instagram communication. As highlighted in Sultan et al. (2026, p.18), emojis should not be interpreted merely as decorative elements, but rather as meaningful communicative tools that contribute to identity construction. In particular, they act as a form of non-verbal digital language that supports the overall meaning of captions and influences how messages are received by the audience (Sultan et al., 2026 p.18). Darling frequently uses emojis in its captions, even if not in all. They seem particularly common in posts featuring lists (e.g. ingredients or product properties). Their use does not follow a strict pattern, instead, emojis are often selected to reflect the product's ingredients or key features. An example of this can be observed in the caption of the following Instagram post, which highlights three reasons to fall in love with Darling's new fragrance making use of a few different emojis:

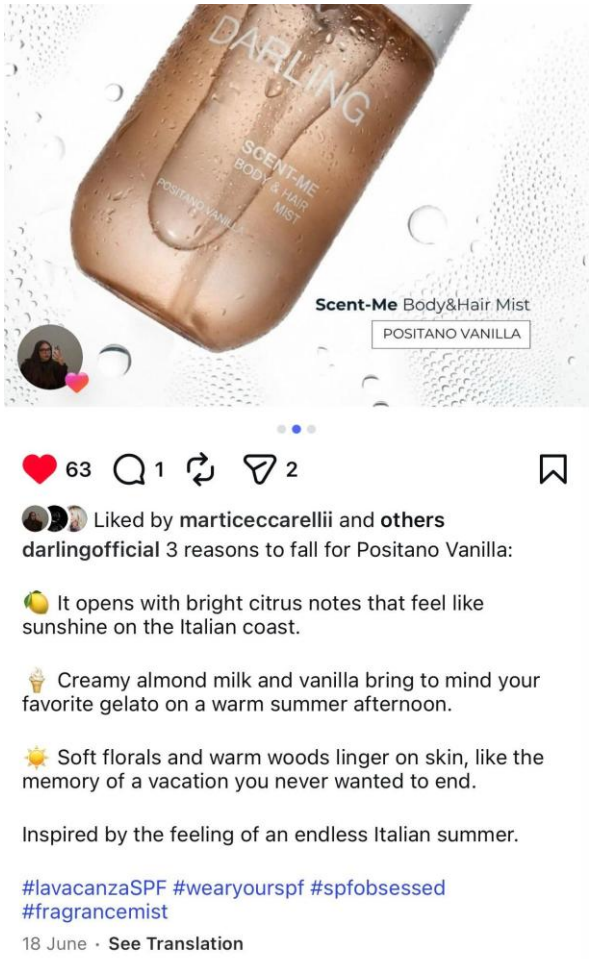


Figure 16: Example of a caption from Darling's Instagram profile.
Source: Author's screenshot from Darling's official Instagram account, accessed July 2026

The image clearly illustrates how emojis have a structuring function, acting as visual bullet points that organize captions including lists. Moreover, in line with the previous discussion, the caption displayed also represents an emblematic example of Darling's communicative style, which relies on a very evocative language to describe fragrances by associating each element with highly positive and familiar sensory experiences, particularly those connected to summer habits and experiences in Mediterranean countries.

5.2.4 INFLUENCER MARKETING ON INSTAGRAM

Among the different aspects that can be discussed within Darling's Instagram strategy, influencer marketing deserves a particular attention. As discussed in Chapter 2.2.2,

this kind of marketing has become increasingly relevant within the beauty industry, as consumers tend to devote considerable attention to the opinions and recommendations of influencers and content creators. For this reason, collaborations with influencers can represent an effective way for beauty brands to increase their visibility, reach new audiences and communicate their identity through personalities who already have an established relationship with their follower base. In the particular case of Darling, however, influencer marketing should be considered more as part of a broader communication ecosystem that also includes PR activities, retail activations, events, partnerships, gifting activities, content creation and organic communication, as highlighted by the founders in the interview (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). This broader perspective is particularly interesting for understanding Darling's overall approach, as influencer collaborations are not only used to generate reach, but also to communicate the brand's identity and lifestyle positioning.

In this context, the influencer event organised by Darling in Capri in May 2026 provides an interesting example of how the brand puts this strategy into practice. The event is also particularly relevant to the present analysis because the author had the opportunity to follow its organisation and development closely from within the company during her internship. This direct involvement provides a valuable perspective on the different activities behind an influencer marketing initiative, from the selection of influencers and the organization of the experience to the subsequent creation and publishing of digital content.

The event involved a carefully selected group of influencers and was organised around a series of activities designed to leverage their visibility and online reach, with the broader main objective of increasing Darling's brand awareness. Its timing was also very strategic, as May represents a key period for the suncare market, when the arrival of warm temperatures and more sun exposure typically encourages consumers to start looking for sun protection products. The following analysis therefore examines this initiative in greater detail, considering how its different elements contributed to communicating Darling's brand identity and reaching new potential consumers through influencer-generated content.

Starting with the influencer selection, all influencers invited for the event were Italian, indicating the brand's clear interest in reaching mostly Italian new consumers. In total, six influencers were invited to the event, including two well-known figures within the Italian digital landscape, namely Valentina Ferragni, with approximately 4.3 million followers, and Veronica Ferraro, with around 1.3 million followers. Alongside these macro-influencers, smaller content creators such as Beatrice Parozzi and Martina Maccherone were also invited, who have a relatively smaller audience. Overall, all participants are well-known within the fashion and beauty industries and maintain a strong presence in beauty and lifestyle digital communication. As highlighted by numerous studies on influencer marketing (see 2.2.2), the selection of influencers represents a crucial strategic decision, as it is essential for their image and content to be consistent with the brand's identity and values. In this case, the chosen influencers appear to be coherently aligned with Darling's positioning, particularly in terms of minimalism, elegance and perceived premiumness, which are recurring elements which can be easily recognized in their personal communication styles.

Similarly to the selection of influencers, much importance was also devoted to the choice of the main event location, namely the J.K. Place hotel in Capri, a highly luxurious property located on the island of Capri in the Gulf of Naples. The choice of Capri as the setting for the event is particularly significant in itself, as the island is widely recognised as one of the most exclusive destinations for Italian tourism and is strongly associated with luxury travel and high-end hospitality. Moreover, Capri is internationally recognised as an iconic Italian destination, meaning that content produced from the event could potentially reach new audiences even beyond the Italian market. In this sense, the location was not only consistent with Darling's premium positioning, it also contributed to reinforcing its aspirational identity and its connection to the Mediterranean luxury lifestyle, while potentially increasing the international visibility of the event.

Concerning the organization of the event, having followed the organisation of the initiative during the internship, the author was able to observe the considerable attention devoted to the planning and coordination of the entire experience. The entire event was carefully curated in every detail, taking into account the needs of the invited influencers and coordinating their different schedules and logistical requirements.

A carefully curated programme was then developed. Once the group gathered on the island, a series of activities was organised with the constant integration of Darling's products in a natural and strategic way. For instance, as the influencers first arrived in their rooms at the J.K. Place hotel, they found a selection of Darling products placed directly in their rooms as part of a welcome gift. The actual event's schedule then started at the hotel's pool area, where the invited influencers had the opportunity to test the brand's suncare products in a real-life context. For the occasion, customised embroidered beach towels were created in order to enhance the brand experience and reinforce the overall aesthetic of the event, an element considered particularly important given that images of the experience were constantly shared by the influencers through their instagram profiles. The experience then proceeded with a poolside quick lunch followed by a dinner on the hotel's panoramic terrace, where the whole setting was carefully designed to reflect the brand's colour palette and aesthetic universe through customized menus and elegant hand-painted Limoncello bottles in the brand's signature colours.

On the second day the influencer group was taken on a boat trip to the Faraglioni, an iconic landmark in Capri, followed by a swim at La Fontelina beach club and a traditional Italian lunch. Later in the evening, the experience continued with a dinner at a renowned local pizzeria, a location chosen to underline the Italian and Mediterranean identity of the brand. The event then concluded on the third day with a walk in the town centre, where the influencers had the opportunity to see a Darling-branded window display in collaboration with the local store Russocapri, followed by a gelato break.

Beyond the experience itself, particular attention was devoted to its digital communication, particularly through Instagram. The author was able to follow the development of the event's digital communication, observing how the experience was progressively transformed into content for Darling's social media channels. The whole experience was documented by a professional photographer who captured the most remarkable moments. The resulting content was then employed by Darling, allowing the brand to have enough material to extend the visibility of the event well beyond its actual duration. More specifically, the brand decided to narrate this experience day by

day through a series of carousel posts combining various photographs, while user-generated content produced by the participating influencers was daily reposted through the brand's Instagram Stories. The combination of professionally produced content and influencer-generated material was particularly useful to maintain the event visible on the platform for several weeks, reinforcing the experience's main objectives.

Overall, this event provides a relevant example of how even young beauty brands are increasingly recognising the value of influencer marketing and investing in collaborations with influencers and content creators. In this sense, it can be said that this initiative confirms the growing importance of this strategy within the beauty industry, as highlighted in the previous chapters. At the same time, this initiative also reflects another element mentioned by founders in the interview, meaning that the brand has progressively moved from a main focus on pure reach towards a greater attention to the affinity between creators and the brand, as well as content quality and credibility (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). According to this view, the value of a collaboration depends not only on the size of an influencer's audience, but also on their ability to communicate Darling's identity in an authentic and coherent way. In addition, the founders also highlight the importance of organic gifting, long-term relationships and spontaneous content along with paid collaborations, showing that in Darling's case influencer marketing is being increasingly used to build meaningful relationships rather than simply increase visibility (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026).

It is also worth noting the considerable amount of planning and coordination required behind this type of initiative. The author's direct involvement in some of the practical activities related to the organisation of the event provided a first-hand insight into the level of attention devoted to even the smallest details. For instance, the author was involved in coordinating the production of personalized Darling-branded water bottles, communicating directly with the suppliers responsible for their production. Although these activities may appear merely internal and operational, they contributed to creating a coherent brand experience, where even the smallest elements were designed to reflect Darling's visual identity and positioning.

What makes the initiative even more interesting, however, is that the event was not designed around the promotion of a single product, as it can usually be observed on

Instagram. Instead, its main objective appears to have been to immerse influencers in Darling's broader brand universe. In this sense, the event can be interpreted as a way to transform Darling's lifestyle idea and positioning into something tangible and shareable. The resulting content could therefore allow new audiences to encounter not only Darling's products but also the identity and values associated with the brand. This aspect also proves to be consistent with the founders' explanation that Instagram plays an important role in building a broader Darling universe rather than simply communicating individual products (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026).

5.3 KEY FINDINGS FROM DARLING'S DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

The analysis of Darling's social media strategy, especially concerning Instagram, shows that the brand's online communication is not primarily centred on communicating the scientific and functional benefits of sun protection, but rather on transforming sunscreen into a pleasant beauty experience. Through the combination of a curated aesthetic feed, emotional and aspirational communication, influencer collaborations and organized luxury experiences, Darling seeks to position itself within a specific territory: sun protection as a premium yet accessible expression of the Italian summer, beauty, pleasure and self-care.

A first key element emerging from the analysis concerns the role of digital communication in building a distinctive brand universe. Darling's communication does not really rely on scientific explanations or educational content, it is mostly built around the creation of emotions, sensations, and memories. The recurrent presence of Mediterranean landscapes, summer sceneries, natural elements and references to Italian lifestyle allows the brand to associate its products with a broader experience, in which sun protection becomes connected to moments of enjoyment and personal wellbeing. Darling does not simply communicate products, it translates its brand values into a coherent digital communication capable of differentiating it within the highly competitive suncare market.

A second relevant aspect concerns the way Darling uses Instagram to involve its audience. Although the platform mostly functions as a showcase for the brand's products and lifestyle, the brand also creates opportunities for consumers to participate through Stories, reposts, influencer collaborations and user-generated content. Compared with some competitors, the brand appears to adopt a less direct approach to audience interaction, as it rarely encourages followers to answer questions or actively participate in conversations. Nevertheless, it still seeks to involve its audience by giving visibility to the people who interact with the brand and by incorporating their content into its own communication. This reflects a broader transformation within contemporary beauty marketing outlined in chapter 2.2.2, where consumers are no longer only passive recipients of brand messages but actively

contribute to the circulation and interpretation of brand meanings through user-generated content and social interactions, especially within the beauty sector.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the important role of influencer marketing in communicating Darling's brand identity. The Capri event examined in Section 5.2.4 clearly shows how influencer collaborations are not only used to increase the brand's visibility and awareness, but also to communicate its lifestyle and positioning. The careful selection of influencers, the choice of the location and the attention devoted to every detail of the experience all contribute to creating content that is consistent with Darling's image. In this way, influencers become more than simple promoters of the products, as they also help communicate the lifestyle and values associated with the brand.

At the same time, the analysis seems to suggest that Darling's premium positioning is based on a subtle balance between exclusivity and accessibility. While the brand adopts several elements traditionally associated with premium beauty communication, such as a strong aesthetic refinement, curated experiences and a strong attention to its visual identity, its communication does not create distance from consumers or a feeling of superiority. Instead, Darling appears to build desirability by presenting luxury as an enjoyable and relatable experience, encouraging consumers to associate the brand with everyday moments of beauty and pleasure.

All things considered, Darling's digital and social media strategy can be understood as a sort of transformation: the brand does not simply promote sun protection products, it transforms them into representations of a desirable Italian and Mediterranean lifestyle. The effectiveness of this strategy, however, does not depend on individual communication channels considered separately. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between different physical touchpoints, digital touchpoints, including the website, social media platforms, influencer-generated content and experiential events. The following chapter therefore examines how these different touchpoints come together throughout the customer journey and contribute to shaping the consumer's overall experience with the brand.

6.0 DARLING'S CUSTOMER JOURNEY IN THE DIGITAL BEAUTY LANDSCAPE

Section 5.2 of the previous chapter analysed the individual digital touchpoints through which Darling builds its online presence and communicates its brand identity. However, these touchpoints should not be considered as isolated communication channels, as they interact throughout the consumer decision-making process and contribute to different stages of the customer journey. For this reason, the present chapter shifts the focus from individual digital channels to the way in which Darling's touchpoints interact to shape consumers' experiences before, during, and after purchase. Based on the theoretical framework presented in chapter 3.0 and the analysis of Darling's digital ecosystem developed in chapters 4.0 and 5.0, the following sections reconstruct a potential customer journey from the perspective of a consumer interacting with the brand, identifying the main touchpoints through which consumers may encounter, evaluate, purchase and eventually engage with Darling.

As discussed in Chapter 3, contemporary customer journeys are no longer characterised by a linear purchasing process. Consumers interact with multiple touchpoints, both online and offline, and may move back and forth between different stages before and after making a purchase. This is particularly relevant in the beauty industry, where digital platforms play an important role in product discovery, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase engagement. Among the different customer journey models discussed in Section 3.3.1, the Five A's framework proposed by Kotler et al. (2017) appears particularly suitable for analysing Darling's customer journey. In fact, compared with more traditional models, it also considers the post-purchase relationship between consumers and brands, including the possibility that positive experiences may encourage customers to share their opinions and recommend the brand to others. This aspect is particularly relevant to Darling, given its strong reliance on social media, influencer marketing and user-generated contents.

Although the previous chapter primarily focused on Darling's digital ecosystem, the customer journey cannot be understood exclusively from a digital perspective. Consumers may also encounter the brand through physical touchpoints such as retail

stores, magazines, events and other offline experiences. Therefore, the following analysis considers both digital and physical touchpoints and examines how they contribute to the different stages of the Five A's framework.

To facilitate the analysis developed in the following sections, the following table provides an overview of how Darling's main touchpoints can be associated with the different stages of the customer journey illustrated in the Five A's framework proposed by Kotler et al. (2017). The table serves as a framework for the subsequent discussion, which will discuss the role that each touchpoint plays throughout the consumer journey.

STAGE	CONSUMER ACTIVITY	DARLING TOUCHPOINT
Aware	Becoming aware of the brand through different sources	Instagram posts, influencer content, articles on both physical and online magazines, physical retail stores (mostly parfumeries), word of mouth, Blog articles, articles on LinkedIn, TikTok posts
Appeal	Developing interest and emotional attraction towards the brand	Instagram feed, visual identity, influencer content, product packagings, images from brand events, colour palette
Ask	Actively searching for information, comparing alternatives and evaluating whether Darling products meet their needs	Official website, blog articles, editorial contents, Instagram content, influencer reviews, TikTok content, contents in general with reviews from previous customers
Act	Proceeding with the purchase and begin their product experience	Official website, physical retailers (parfumeries, luxury department stores etc), TikTok store
Advocate	In case of a positive brand experience, developing loyalty towards the brand	Instagram stories, user-generated content in general, influencer and

	and sharing their experiences, becoming active participants in brand communication.	journalists reposts, newsletter

This overview illustrates how Darling's digital and physical touchpoints contribute to the different stages of the customer journey. However, these touchpoints do not operate independently, as each one can support different stages depending on the consumer's interaction with the brand. Therefore, the following sections will examine each stage of the Five A's framework in greater detail, analysing how Darling's touchpoints contribute to creating a coherent and integrated customer experience throughout the whole journey.

6.1 THE AWARENESS STAGE

Kotler et al. (2017) begin their description of the customer journey in the connectivity era with the aware stage. According to their model, it represents the first step of the customer journey, where consumers are first exposed to brands through previous experiences, marketing communications and the influence of other people.

In the case of Darling, the awareness stage assumes a particular relevance, as the brand operates in an extremely competitive market, where winning consumers' attention among a large number of competitors represents the first fundamental step towards building a relationship with them.

Rather than relying on a single source of visibility, Darling seems to combine many different digital and physical touchpoints to make potential customers aware of the brand across multiple contexts. At the same time, these touchpoints consistently communicate similar visual and lifestyle contents, contributing both to increasing brand awareness and to making Darling immediately recognisable to potential consumers.

Darling's awareness strategy relies on social media content, influencer collaborations, articles on both digital and printed magazines, physical retail presence and consumer-driven forms of communication, such as the repost of Instagram stories posted by satisfied customers all over the world. Therefore, among the digital touchpoints supporting this stage, Instagram represents one of the main channels through which consumers can first get to know Darling. As discussed in the previous chapters, on Instagram the brand relies on a consistent Mediterranean visual identity and lifestyle-oriented communication. This is particularly relevant in the awareness stage, as a repeated exposure to similar colours, settings, products and lifestyle references can help consumers recognise the brand and associate it with a distinctive universe. The same can also be said for TikTok, where short videos reproduce several of the themes and visual elements already present on Instagram.

Closely connected to the use of Instagram and TikTok, influencer collaborations represent another key way through which Darling seeks to increase awareness among potential customers, as discussed in Section 5.2.4. By involving well-known personalities with large and established audiences, the brand can reach consumers who may not have encountered Darling through its own channels. In this sense, influencers extend the visibility of the brand beyond its own media, introducing Darling to new audiences through personalities they already follow and trust.

Beyond social media, editorial content published on both online and physical magazines also represent a precious element for the aware stage of potential Darling consumers. As a matter of fact, the brand is frequently featured in articles published by both Italian and international magazines, particularly within the beauty and wellness sectors. These publications often introduce Darling's products by describing their characteristics, highlighting their benefits, or including them among lists of recommended beauty products. From the perspective of the aware stage, this type of exposure is particularly relevant because it allows potential consumers to discover the brand while reading editorial content, even if they were not actively searching for Darling.

Finally, physical retail stores also contribute to the awareness stage by allowing consumers to physically encounter Darling's products. For some potential customers, the first contact with the brand may occur while visiting beauty retailers rather than through digital channels. When this is the case, the retail environment itself plays an important role in shaping the first impression on the brand. As mentioned in chapter 4.0 and its subchapters, Darling is mainly distributed in niche parfumeries and luxury department stores. This contributes to making this touchpoint particularly relevant during the awareness stage, because it allows Darling to reach consumers who are already interested in premium beauty products and are actively exploring this product category. Therefore, it can be said that physical retail environments function not only as a point of sale but also as a strategic point of discovery.

Overall, the analysis suggests that Darling's awareness stage is based on the combination of different touchpoints. Although these channels show considerable differences, they contribute to exposing consumers to the same recognisable brand universe. Social media provide broad and repeated exposure, influencers extend the brand's reach to new audiences, editorial content offers more visibility while physical retail stores create the opportunity to physically discover the brand. Other touchpoints, such as LinkedIn and word-of-mouth communication may also contribute to brand visibility, but appear to play a secondary role with respect to the above mentioned touchpoints.

6.2 THE APPEAL STAGE

Following the awareness stage, Kotler et al. (2017) identify the appeal stage as the phase in which consumers begin to develop an initial attraction towards a restricted number of brands. In the case of Darling, this stage appears to be strongly connected to the brand's ability to communicate an aspirational lifestyle rather than simply promoting the functional benefits of its sunscreens. In fact, as discussed in the previous chapters, Darling consistently associates its products with the concepts of summer, Italian lifestyle, well-being and premium aesthetics, creating a brand image that extends beyond sun protection itself and contributes to the brand standing out among the various competitors.

In this stage social media play once again an essential role. In particular, the Instagram feed seems to be very relevant in the appeal stage by presenting carefully curated images, lifestyle shots and consistent compositions that contribute to creating a desirable brand impression capable of attracting consumers on an emotional level. Indeed, as analysed in chapter 5.0, Darling's Instagram communication is characterised by a coherent visual identity based on recurring elements such as pastel colours, Mediterranean references, lifestyle and aspirational content. Within the appeal stage, these elements become central because they allow consumers not only to recognise the brand, but also to engage with the meanings associated with it.

Influencer-generated content as well is once again a crucial element for enhancing the brand's appeal. While influencers contribute to the aware stage by increasing visibility, their role becomes different in the appeal stage, where they help transform recognition into desirability. The content resulting from influencer events portrays Darling as a "cool", desiderable and contemporary brand by presenting the brand in real-life yet very aspirational contexts. Through influential personalities, exclusive locations and carefully curated aesthetics, Darling emerges as more than a sunscreen brand, thus becoming part of a dream lifestyle and allowing the brand to stand out within the beauty market.

Another element that should not be underestimated is the role of physical retail stores, where Darling's products can easily attract consumers' attention thanks to the features of their distinctive packaging (see chapter 4.4). Characterised by pastel colour palettes and a minimalist design, it reinforces the brand's visual identity and enhances its appeal, helping Darling to differentiate itself in highly competitive retail environments.

Overall, this suggests that Darling's appeal stage is not primarily built around the rational evaluation of product characteristics and formulations, but rather around the creation of an emotional and aspirational connection with consumers. Through the integration of social media, influencer collaborations and physical touchpoints the brand succeeds in making sunscreen more appealing.

6.3 THE ASK STAGE

The customer journey then continues with the ask stage. According to Kotler et al. (2017), once consumers have developed a first initial interest in a brand, they tend to actively seek more information through different sources, such as friends and family, the media or the brand itself. While in the past stages consumers were more passive, namely they were mostly exposed to a wide variety of information, in this stage the perspective shifts and they move to active information search in order to evaluate the brand more in depth before eventually making a purchase decision. This behaviour is also consistent with the characteristics of the contemporary beauty consumer discussed in Chapter 3.1. As a matter of fact, instead of simply relying on promotional messages, consumers nowadays actively search for detailed information before making a purchase decision.

In the case of Darling, the brand's official website represents the main touchpoint supporting consumers during this stage. Once potential customers become interested in the brand, the website provides comprehensive information about the entire product range, allowing them to explore the characteristics, ingredients, benefits, and recommended uses of each product.



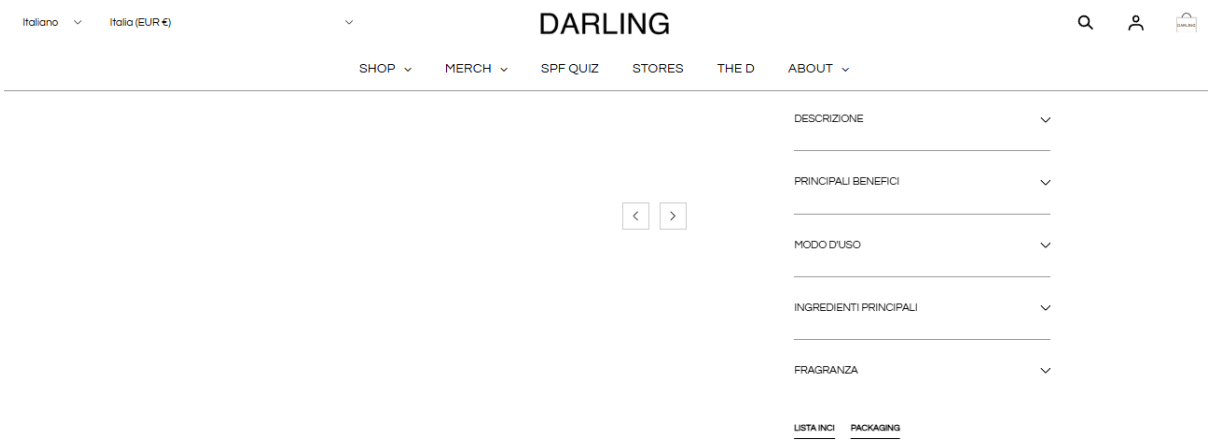


Figure 16: Product page on Darling's official website

Source: Author’s screenshot from Darling Official Website, accessed July 2026

As illustrated in the images above, the official website provides a dedicated product page for each item part of Darling's portfolio. These pages gather the key information that potential consumers normally seek during the evaluation process, presenting it in a simple and clear way. In particular, the main product information is organised into five main sections, including the product description, key benefits, way of use, main ingredients, and fragrance. In addition, as shown in the small underlined sections below, consumers can also access the full INCI list as well as information regarding the product packaging.

Besides the product pages, Darling's website also features an SPF Quiz designed to help interested users in identifying the products that best suit their skin needs. By answering a series of questions related to their skin type and habits, users can indeed receive personalized product recommendations among Darling’s product range, together with a 10% off discount code. This SPF Quiz clearly reflects another consumer trend discussed in chapter 3.1, namely the growing demand for personalised consumption experiences. By guiding consumers towards the products that best match their individual needs and habits, this tool simplifies the decision-making process while offering a more tailored-made customer experience that aligns with today’s customer expectations.

By providing such comprehensive and easily accessible information, the website supports consumers in comparing products and identifying the solution that best fits their needs. For this reason, it is undeniable that the website plays a crucial

role during the ask stage, facilitating a more informed evaluation of the products before the purchase decision is made.

However, although it probably represents the primary touchpoint supporting consumers during this stage, the website is not the only source through which information can be obtained. Among other factors, this is due to the fact that the Ask stage should not be interpreted as a purely individual information-search process. Indeed, as highlighted by Kotler et al. (2017), at this point the customer journey becomes increasingly social, as consumers seek confirmations through conversations and opinions shared by others. In other words, the initial appeal generated by the brand needs to be reinforced by external sources before consumers can progress further along the customer journey. This aspect seems particularly relevant in the beauty industry, where consumers usually rely on reviews, influencer opinions, user-generated content, and recommendations from other consumers when evaluating products. This is the reason why other touchpoints, such as editorial articles, blog articles, Instagram content, TikTok videos, and other social media content remain relevant, as they may provide consumers with some useful insights into Darling's products, such as information about ingredients, product benefits, or personal experiences.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the primary purpose of these channels seems to remain the creation of engagement and the communication of the brand's identity rather than the provision of exhaustive product information. Therefore, it can be said that they support the information search process, while the official website remains the main source of detailed and more technical product information.

6.4 THE ACT STAGE

Once consumers have gathered sufficient information and the brand has met their expectations, the customer journey moves towards the Act stage. At this point, the initial awareness and interest developed during the previous stages are translated into action. In the case of Darling, this stage primarily corresponds to the moment in which consumers actually decide to purchase one or more products, moving from product evaluation and information seeking to actual purchase.

As illustrated above in 5.2 and 6.0, consumers can complete their purchase through different channels, both online and offline. They include the brand's own e-commerce platform, the TikTok shop, a network of selected online beauty retailers (such as Niche Beauty and 50Ml), and the partner physical stores, mostly niche parfumeries and luxury department stores. The coexistence of these channels allows consumers to complete their journey according to different purchasing preferences, while also contributing to the positioning of the brand, as highlighted in 4.3.

It is interesting to note that physical retail stores represent a very relevant touchpoint within the Act stage, as they may provide an additional advantage compared with competitors that solely rely on digital or online distribution. Indeed, in the beauty industry, the possibility of accessing products in a physical environment can be particularly valuable, as consumers can see, test, and experience the products before making a purchase decision. This experiential dimension is particularly relevant in the cosmetics industry, where customer experience and hedonic aspects such as pleasure and emotion can represent important elements of differentiation and advantage (Theopilus et al., 2021 p.30). The presence of physical stores therefore allows Darling to reduce the distance between the digital discovery and evaluation of the brand and the actual product experience, potentially facilitating the transition to purchase.

Overall, the Act stage illustrates how Darling's strategy goes beyond the simple availability of an online purchase option. In fact, the brand combines e-commerce with selective retail distribution, creating more opportunities for conversion while also maintaining consistency with its premium positioning. In this sense, the purchase occurring during the act stage represents not only the final outcome of the information and evaluation processes, but also another point at which consumers have the possibility to encounter and experience Darling's core brand identity.

6.5 THE ADVOCATE STAGE

Following the act stage, the customer journey moves into the last stage illustrated by Kotler's five A's model, meaning the advocate stage. As highlighted by Kotler et al. (2017), the customer journey does not end with the purchase itself, as customers continue to interact with the brand even after it. When these interactions are positive, they can contribute to the development of customer loyalty, which may ultimately lead consumers to recommend the brand to others. Advocacy therefore represents the final stage of the customer journey, in which customers move from being buyers to becoming active supporters of the brand. In the case of Darling, this stage becomes even more interesting because the brand operates in the beauty industry, namely a highly social and visually driven sector, where consumers' experiences can easily be shared with others through digital platforms.

Applied to Darling, the advocate stage can take place through several touchpoints, many of which were also present in the previous stages. However, it is interesting to note how their role changes substantially compared with the earlier stages of the customer journey. Indeed, rather than introducing consumers to the brand or attracting initial attention, these touchpoints now allow existing customers to share their positive experiences and contribute to the circulation of Darling's brand content.

A notable example are Instagram Stories, which represent one of the most relevant touchpoints of this stage.



Figure 17: Repost of a customer’s Story on Darling's official Instagram profile

Source: Author’s screenshot from Darling Official Instagram profile, accessed August 2026

As shown in the image above, Darling frequently reposts content created by consumers and other individuals who interact with the brand, often featuring their personal opinions and experiences with its products. While these reposts also contribute to initial awareness by exposing new audiences to Darling, within the advocate stage they can be interpreted as a form of consumer advocacy. By reposting this content, Darling further amplifies these personal endorsements and allows them to become part of the brand’s broader communication.

A similar mechanism can be observed in the content produced by influencers and journalists who have been exposed to the brand’s products. In particular, journalists may publish articles or reviews after receiving and testing Darling products provided by the brand, rather than purchasing them independently. Although these individuals cannot therefore be considered customers in the strict sense, their first-hand experiences and opinions can nevertheless function as a form of endorsement, contributing to the credibility and wider resonance of the brand among their audiences. Interestingly, Instagram appears to be the platform most frequently used by Darling to amplify this type of third-party content. While user- and third-party-generated content

is regularly reposted through Instagram Stories, the brand's TikTok profile appears to focus almost exclusively on content produced directly by Darling, with no posts containing consumer reviews or other forms of advocacy. This reinforces the idea that, at least within the current digital strategy, Instagram plays a more prominent role also in facilitating the circulation of consumer experiences and third-party endorsements.

Another element that should not be overlooked is the brand's newsletter, which contributes to maintaining the relationship with existing customers after purchase by providing updates on new products, launches, campaigns or other brand activities. In this sense, its role within the advocate stage appears to be less directly related to advocacy and more focused on maintaining the relationship with existing customers. By regularly communicating with people who have already interacted with the brand, the newsletter helps keep Darling present in their minds and encourages continued engagement with the brand over time.

Another interesting observation emerged from the author's internship experience, during which the absence of customer reviews on Darling's website was also discussed. This may indeed represent a limitation, particularly in relation to the advocate stage, as customers who have had a positive experience with a product currently appear not to have the possibility of sharing their feedback directly on the website. Allowing customers to leave reviews could provide them with an opportunity to share their satisfaction, while at the same time making these experiences available to other consumers considering the products and gathering information. It is worth noting that the team is aware of this limitation and has been considering possible solutions to address the absence of customer reviews.

Overall, this analysis of the advocate stage during Darling's customer journey shows how the brand seeks to maintain relationships with existing customers while encouraging the online circulation of positive experiences and opinions around the brand. Instagram appears once again to play a particularly important role in this process, especially through the reposting of consumer, influencer, and journalist reviews. At the same time, the absence of customer reviews on the website represents a potential area for improvement, as these could further facilitate the sharing of post-purchase experiences and strengthen the connection between existing and potential customers.

6.6 KEY FINDINGS FROM THE DARLING CUSTOMER JOURNEY ANALYSIS

The analysis of Darling's customer journey through Kotler's Five A's framework highlights several interesting aspects of the brand's current strategy.

A first observation concerns the type of communication used by Darling, an element that was also underlined in chapter 5.0 when discussing Darling's digital communication strategy. It appears that Darling's potential customer journey is strongly driven by emotional and aspirational communication. Across the different stages, the brand rarely relies on the functional characteristics of its products, it rather associates them with broader familiar concepts such as the Italian summer, beauty, well-being and a desirable lifestyle.

A second key consideration concerns the role of the different touchpoints. Rather than being associated with a single stage, many different touchpoints contribute to multiple stages of the journey, even if their function obviously changes according to the consumer's position within it. Instagram represents the clearest example of this dynamic: its content can initially create awareness, its visual identity can generate appeal, while user-generated and third-party content can support both information search and advocacy. This highlights the interconnected nature of the customer journey outlined in 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 and confirms that the different stages should not be considered as completely separate.

Connected to that, the analysis also shows the importance of integrating digital and physical touchpoints. While social media, the online website, influencers, and editorial content nowadays play a central role in attracting consumers and supporting their evaluation of the brand, physical retail stores still provide the opportunity to experience the products more directly. The combination of these different touchpoints therefore allows Darling to accompany consumers from the initial discovery of the brand to the actual product experience, while maintaining consistency with its premium positioning.

A final observation concerns the role of personalisation within Darling's digital customer journey. As discussed in section 3.3.4, artificial intelligence can contribute to the beauty customer journey by analysing consumers' individual characteristics and preferences and providing tailored product recommendations. As mentioned above, Darling's website already incorporates a skin-type quiz through which consumers can receive product recommendations based on their individual characteristics. Although

there is not sufficient evidence to establish that this tool relies on artificial intelligence, its presence nevertheless shows that a degree of digital personalisation is already incorporated into the brand's customer journey. In the future, more advanced AI-powered recommendations or skin-analysis technologies could represent a potential area for development, particularly because they could personalise the consumer experience even more and support decision-making during the pre-purchase stages of the journey.

To better summarise the main findings of the present customer journey analysis, the following table evaluates Darling's performance across the different stages of the Five A's framework, highlighting the main strengths, weaknesses and possible opportunities for improvement.

STAGE	STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES
Awareness stage	Introduce Darling to new potential customers and increase brand awareness	Very consistent visual identity, combination of different social media, influencers, press coverage and physical retail	Awareness mainly relies on digital media and selective physical stores, which may limit Darling's exposure to a wider audience.	Further expand reach through other communication channels while maintaining a consistent brand identity
Appeal stage	Turn awareness into actual interest in the brand	Strong lifestyle-oriented communication, distinctive visual identity, effective use of influencers and premium settings, attractive packaging	Communication is mainly emotional and aspirational, which may be less effective for consumers who seek functional product information when evaluating suncare	Further balance emotional communication with functional information to strengthen consumers' interest

			products	
Ask Stage	Provide consumers with enough information to make an informed purchasing decision	Detailed product pages, transparent INCI information, SPF Quiz providing personalised recommendations, additional information available through social media	Customer reviews not available on the website, social media content is not designed to provide detailed product information	Add customer reviews on the website and further develop personalised AI-driven tools to support product evaluation
Act stage	Facilitate the transition from product evaluation to purchase	Multiple purchasing channels, combination of e-commerce and physical distribution, physical stores allowing consumers to experience the products.	Selective physical distribution may reduce product accessibility and purchase	Expand the brand's presence in retail and online stores while maintaining its premium positioning
Advocate stage	Encourage satisfied customers to share their positive evaluation of the product	Frequent reposting user-generated content, Instagram supporting the circulation of third-party experiences, newsletter maintains contact with existing customers	Absence of customer reviews on the website	Introduce website reviews

To conclude, the analysis suggests that Darling is particularly strong in the early and middle stages of the customer journey, where visual communication, influencer

marketing and product information effectively support awareness, appeal and interest. The main area for improvement appears to be the Advocate stage, particularly due to the absence of customer reviews on the website, which makes it harder for customers to share their experiences after purchase. The Ask stage could also be further developed by providing consumers with more personalised support during the product evaluation process.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This thesis has analysed Darling's digital marketing and social media strategy in order to understand how the brand has been able to develop a distinctive position in the premium suncare market and how it can continue to grow while maintaining its identity. The analysis shows that Darling's strategy cannot be explained by a single marketing strategy. Rather, its growth and development is based on the combination of different elements that consistently communicate the same brand positioning.

The first main finding of this work is that Darling's differentiation does not depend on a single marketing activity or communication channel, but on the consistency with which different elements contribute to the same brand positioning. Indeed, the brand has built its strategy around the idea of transforming sun protection from a mainly functional and seasonal product into a desirable part of the beauty and lifestyle routine. Product quality and design, visual identity, selective distribution, Instagram and social media content, influencer marketing activities and the Mediterranean lifestyle associated with the brand all contribute to this positioning.

The founders' point of view expressed in the author's interview further supports this interpretation. Indeed, when discussing the choices they consider most important for Darling's development, they identify the creation of a strongly recognisable identity from the beginning as one of the key factors behind the brand's success. They also emphasise the importance of maintaining a premium positioning, investing in formulation quality and continuous product innovation while keeping performance and overall aesthetics closely connected (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). These elements reinforce the first finding of the analysis, meaning that Darling's positioning is based on the combination of performance, aesthetics and identity rather than on one single element.

The second main finding of this thesis concerns the role of Instagram. As a matter of fact, this plays a particularly important role within Darling's strategy. It allows Darling to communicate not only its products, but also the lifestyle surrounding them. Its consistent visual identity, carefully selected colours and content, collaborations with creators and the presence of press, events and user-generated content all contribute to making the brand recognisable and strengthening its relationship with its audience.

However, Instagram should not be considered the reason for Darling's differentiation on its own. Its effectiveness also depends on its connection with the wider brand strategy, including product and packaging design, positioning, distribution and the other digital and offline touchpoints.

This coherence can also be observed in the customer journey analysed in Chapter 6, suggesting that Darling's main strategic strength lies not in one individual activity, but once again in the consistency with which different touchpoints contribute to the same brand experience.

Although the analysis mostly highlights the factors that have positively contributed to the brand's development, the founders acknowledge that not every initiative produces the same results. In the beauty industry, which as mentioned in the first chapters consists of a very difficult and competitive market, experimentation is necessary, and some channels, collaborations or activations may not produce the expected results. Rather than considering these experiences simply as failures, Darling uses feedback to identify what works better and to progressively understand where to allocate investments and resources (Darling's founders Giacobazzi & Gebennini, author's interview, 2026). This aspect adds an important consideration to the analysis conducted, meaning that the brand's strategy is not static and involves continuous experimentation, evaluation and adaptation.

Looking at the future, the main challenge for Darling will be to continue growing without losing the coherence that currently characterises the brand. The analysis conducted in this thesis identifies three main areas that could support this development. First, the brand can continue to expand its product portfolio and progressively develop a broader beauty universe while keeping suncare and SPF at the core of its identity. Then, international expansion and the development of new retail partnerships can create further opportunities for growth, but the brand should remain consistent with the elements that make it immediatly recognisable. Future product extensions and market expansion should therefore be careful to continue reflecting the brand's core values of performance, aesthetics, design and innovation. Lastly, the digital customer journey could be further strengthened. The absence of customer reviews on the e-commerce platform, for instance, represents an opportunity to support consumers during the decision-making process. Similarly, AI-driven tools could be further developed to

provide consumers with more personalised support when choosing the most suitable products for their needs.

Overall, Darling's case study suggests that its development cannot be attributed to a single successful marketing strategy or channel. Instagram, influencer marketing, product design, selective distribution and the Italian lifestyle narrative are effective because they are part of a wider and coherent strategy. The central finding of this thesis is therefore that Darling's main competitive differentiation lies in the consistency with which these elements work together to communicate the same positioning and create a recognisable experience across the whole customer journey. This coherence allows the brand to move beyond the traditional functional perception of suncare and to position sun protection within a broader beauty and lifestyle context.

As Darling continues to grow, the challenge will be to preserve this coherence while adapting to new markets, changing consumer expectations and an expanding product portfolio. The future of the brand will therefore depend not simply on reaching more consumers or entering new categories, but on continuing to make each new product, channel and touchpoint coherent and recognisably part of the same Darling universe.

REFERENCES:

- Acharya, S., Bali, S. and Bhatia, B. S. (2021) 'Exploring Consumer Behavior towards Sustainability of Green Cosmetics', *2021 International Conference on Advances in Electrical, Computing, Communication and Sustainable Technologies (ICAECT)*, Bhilai, India, pp. 1–6.
- Agnihotri, V. and Shroff, N. (2025) 'Deciphering the shift: Exploring key factors influencing contemporary D2C beauty products buying preferences through online channel', *European Economic Letters*, 15(1), pp. 3255–3262.
- Asur, S., Huberman, B. A., Szabo, G. and Wang, C. (2011) 'Trends in social media: Persistence and decay', *Proceedings of the Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM)*.
- Bakri, Z. F. (2023) 'Analyzing the influence of digital marketing strategies on business performance in the beauty industry: A comprehensive analysis of social media engagement and influencer collaborations', *Journal on Economics, Management and Business Technology*, 2(1), pp. 37–48.
- Basimakopoulou, M., Theologou, K. and Tzavaras, P. (2022) 'A literature review on digital marketing: The evolution of a revolution', *Journal of Social Media Marketing*, 1(1), pp. 30–40.
- Bautista, N. I., Palmiano, J. S., Reyes, A. R., San Juan, Y. M. L. and Etrata, A. Jr. (2023) 'Beauty Goes Green: Determinants of Sustainable Purchasing Behavior Among Gen X and Z Filipino Consumers', *MEC-J (Management and Economics Journal)*, 7(2), pp. 127–146.
- Blaszczyk, R. L. (2000). Imagining consumers: design and innovation from Wedgwood to Corning (Vol. 16). JHU Press.
- Branded Agency (2025) 'The ultimate guide to cosmetics branding: makeup and beauty'. Available at: https://www.brandedagency.com/blog/makeup-cosmetic-branding
- Chakraborty, D., Polisetty, A., Sowmya, G., Rana, N. P. and Khorana, S. (2024) 'Unlocking the potential of AI: Enhancing consumer engagement in the beauty and cosmetic product purchases', *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 79, 103842.

- Chen, X. (2024) ‘Exploring current trends and strategies in online marketing for national beauty brands: A case study of Perfect Diary’, *SHS Web of Conferences*, 188, 03010.
- Chen Lou, Y. and Yuan, S. (2019) ‘Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media’, *Journal of Interactive Advertising*.
- Cioppi, M., Curina, I., Francioni, B. and Savelli, E. (2023) ‘Digital transformation and marketing: A systematic and thematic literature review’, *Journal of Business Economics*, pp. 207–288.
- Circana and YouGov (2024) *Mappe del beauty contemporaneo*. Available at: https://www.cosmeticaitalia.it/documenti/a_centrostudi/Atti_convegni/Mappe-del-Beauty-Contemporaneo_-Circana_YouGov-27-marzo.pdf
- Court, D., Elzinga, D., Mulder, S. and Vetvik, O. J. (2009) ‘The consumer decision journey’, *McKinsey & Company*.
- D’Arco, M., Lo Presti, L., Marino, V. and Resciniti, R. (2019) ‘Embracing AI and Big Data in customer journey mapping: From literature review to a theoretical framework’, *Innovative Marketing*, 15(4), pp. 102–115.
- Darling (n.d.) *Official website*. Available at: [https://www.darlingsun.com/it?awaid=102009&gclid=Cj0KCQjw5bjVBhCiARIsAJzMVnRnUXaibGFzsLgvzQYX7RdqmO0u52tscEtc3OAGcksLdr47klf7vOQaAvxgEALw_wcB&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22419335406&gbraid=0AAAAACYLPedVgf1mDV3PCm6SxMpVdDD6C].
- Darling (n.d.) *Official Instagram profile*. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/darlingofficial].
- Darling (n.d.) *Official LinkedIn profile*. Available at: [https://it.linkedin.com/company/darlingsun].
- Darling (n.d.) *Official TikTok profile*. Available at: [https://www.google.com/search?q=darling+tiktok&oq=darling+tiktok&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIJCAEQABgTGIAEMgkIAhAAGBMYgAQyCggDEAAYExgWGB4yCggEEAAYExgWGB4yDAgFEAAYChgTGBYYHjIKCAYQABgTGBYYHjIKCAcQABgTGBYYHjIKCAgQABgTGBYYHjIKCAkQABgTGBYYHtIBCDYwMTIqMGo0qAIAsAIA&sourceid=chrome&source=chrome.ob&ie=UTF-8].

- Darling (2024) *Darling Brand Manual*. Unpublished internal company document.
- Darling (2024) *Darling Brand Presentation*. Unpublished internal company document.
- Darling's Founders (2026) *Author's interview on Darling's marketing and strategic activities*. Personal interview.
- Dalziel, R. C. and Sharp, K.-L. (2023) 'The effect of variety seeking and status consumption on Generation Y consumers' attitude toward beauty products: The mediating role of innovativeness', *Innovative Marketing*, 19(1), pp. 208–219.
- DataReportal (2026) *Social Media Users*. Available at: https://datareportal.com/social-media-users.
- Desai, V. (2019) 'Digital marketing: A review', *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, Special Issue: *Fostering Innovation, Integration and Inclusion Through Interdisciplinary Practices in Management*, pp. 196–200.
- Figueiredo, S. L. de C. (2018) *Content Marketing and Beauty and Cosmetic Brands' Strategy*.
- Ganesh, S. R. and Sannaki, A. (2025) 'The Impact of AI-driven Customer Segmentation on Customer Value in the Cosmetic Products Industry', *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 51(12), pp. 21–30.
- Georgievskaya, A., Tlyachev, T., Danko, D. et al. (2025) 'How artificial intelligence adopts human biases: The case of cosmetic skincare industry', *AI Ethics*, 5, pp. 105–115.
- Hemachandra, & Kusuma, A. (2024). *Unveiling the impact digital marketing strategies and business performance in the beauty industry*. Journal on Economics, Management and Business Technology, 2(2), 65–72.
- In-cosmetics Marketing Trends (2010) 'In-cosmetics marketing trends – a time for recovery', *Cosmetics Business*, 11 June. Available at: https://cosmeticsbusiness.com/in-cosmetics-marketing-trends-a-time-for-recovery-55120.
- Keller, K. L. (2013) *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*. 4th edn. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Kotler, P. and Keller, K. L. (2012) *Marketing Management*. 14th edn. Pearson.

- Kotler, P., Kartajaya, H. and Setiawan, I. (2017) *Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital*. Wiley.
- Lazaris, C. and Vrechopoulos, A. (2014) 'From multichannel to "omnichannel" retailing: Review of the literature and calls for research', *2nd International Conference on Contemporary Marketing Issues (ICCMI)*.
- Latif, W. B., Islam, M. A. and Noor, I. M. (2014) 'Building brand awareness in the modern marketing environment: A conceptual model', *International Journal of Business and Technopreneurship*, 4(1), pp. 69–82.
- Lemon, K. N. and Verhoef, P. C. (2016) 'Understanding Customer Experience Throughout the Customer Journey', *Journal of Marketing*, 80(6), pp. 69–96.
- Li, F., Larimo, J. and Leonidou, L. C. (2021) 'Social media marketing strategy: Definition, conceptualization, taxonomy, validation, and future agenda', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 49(1), pp. 51–70.
- Liu, Y., Lu, J. and Qi, G. (2022) 'A Summary of the Marketing Strategies of Luxury Cosmetics Brands', in *Proceedings of the 2021 3rd International Conference on Economic Management and Cultural Industry (ICEMCI 2021)*. Paris: Atlantis Press.
- Łopaciuk, A., & Łoboda, M. (2013). Global beauty industry trends in the 21st century. Management, Knowledge and Learning International Conference, pp. 19–21.
- Majka, M. (2024) 'Unique Selling Proposition in Marketing', *Journal of Unique Selling Proposition in Marketing*, November.
- *Marketing and Digital Communication* (2025) *Course materials*. Unpublished course materials.
- Mehta, A. (2024) 'Gen Z and Soft Masculinity: Exploring Perceptions and Consumer Behavior in Fashion & Beauty Industry', *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(ICETDA24), pp. 60–65.
- Mishra, Rath and Jena (2023) 'Impact of Branding on Consumer Buying Behaviour: A Case Study on Cosmetic Industry'.
- Newkirk, P. (2019) *Diversity, Inc.: The Failed Promise of a Billion-Dollar Business*. Hachette UK.
- Nida Sultan, Benish and Afshan Ishfaq (2026) 'Instagram Captions as Identity Performance: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis', *AL-HAYAT Research Journal (AHRJ)*, 3(2), pp. 9–21.

- O'Brien, M. (2025) *Social Media's Impact on Female Generation Alpha's Beauty Standards and Consumer Habits*. Master's thesis. Lindenwood University.
- Pascucci, F., Savelli, E. and Gistri, G. (2023) 'How digital technologies reshape marketing: Evidence from a qualitative investigation', *Italian Journal of Marketing*, 2023, pp. 27–58.
- Perret, J. K. and Schwientek, J. (2025) 'Beauty Tech—Customer Experience and Loyalty of Augmented Reality- and Artificial Intelligence-Driven Cosmetics', *Digital*, 5(2), 21.
- Rokka, J. and Canniford, R. (2016) 'Heterotopian selfies: How social media destabilizes brand assemblages', *European Journal of Marketing*, 50(9/10), pp. 1789–1813.
- Sahota, A. (2014) *Sustainability: How the Cosmetics Industry Is Greening Up*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Sertori, B. R. P., Bagatini, F. Z. and Perin, M. G. (2023) 'Generation Z and Sustainable Consumption: Motivators to Purchase Beauty and Personal Care Products', *Revista Gestão e Desenvolvimento*, 20(1), pp. 3–27.
- Singh, K. S. (2025) *Impact of Social Media on Consumer Buying Behaviour*. ResearchGate.
- Srivastava, P., Ramakanth, D., Akhila, K. and Gaikwad, K. K. (2022) 'Package design as a branding tool in the cosmetic industry: Consumers' perception vs. reality', *SN Business & Economics*, 2, 58.
- Statista (2025) 'Share of respondents saying they purchased something because of influencers'. Available at: https://www.statista.com/chart/24933/share-of-respondents-saying-they-purchased-something-because-of-influencers/.
- Theopilus, Y., Yogasara, T., Theresia, C. and Ardine, D. (2021) 'Customer experience analysis of cosmetics retail store on millennial women', *Engineering Management in Production and Services*, 13(2), pp. 29–45.
- Towers, A. and Towers, N. (2022) 'Framing the customer journey: Touchpoint categories and decision-making process stages', *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 50(3), pp. 317–341.

- Tueanrat, Y., Papagiannidis, S. and Alamanos, E. (2021) ‘A conceptual framework of the antecedents of customer journey satisfaction in omnichannel retailing’, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 61, 102550.
- Vinerean, S. and Opreana, A. (2019) ‘Social media marketing efforts of luxury brands on Instagram’, *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 7(2), pp. 144–152.
- Włodarczyk, K. (2020) *Trends of Evolution in Consumer Behavior in the Contemporary World*. University of Szczecin.
- Zhang, K. Z. K., Zhao, S. J., Cheung, C. M. K. and Lee, M. K. O. (2014) ‘Examining the influence of online reviews on consumers’ decision-making: A heuristic–systematic model’, *Decision Support Systems*, 67, pp. 78–89.