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## The Social Media Influencer Reigns Supreme

*An exploratory study on the influencer concept within social media and the interplay of consumers, influencers, and brands on Instagram*

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Written by: Simisola Ololade Ojuri

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Supervisor: Karin Tollin  
Student Number: 113808

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## **Abstract**

In an ever-changing digital landscape, influencer marketing has proven to be one of the most popular marketing strategies of this day and age. Though a popular method of reaching consumers, brands and marketers struggle to have a full understanding of influencer marketing and how to best use it their advantage.

This exploratory study seeks to better understand the influencer concept on social media from a consumer perspective. The study focuses on the consumers' understandings of and interactions with influencers on Instagram, and it investigates the nature of the relationships between consumers and influencers, between influencers and brands, and then amongst consumers, influencers, and brands. The study also aims to provide brands with suggestions and guidelines on how they can use influencers to best connect with their target consumers.

The qualitative study covers nine in-depth interviews conducted with female consumers from 22-28 years old in order to understand and dissect their interactions, as well as relationships with influencers. The results of this study provide insight into: (1) the key characteristics and aspects consumers consider in regards to influencers they choose to follow; (2) the nature of relationships between consumers and influencers; and (3) how brands can approach their relationships and interactions with influencers to ultimately increase their brand equity. The thesis then discusses how these findings compare to existing knowledge in the field of influencer marketing. It concludes with implications for brand and marketers based on the findings of this research and future research recommendations.

The thesis contributes to the little explored field of influencer marketing on social media with an emphasis on the consumer. As this thesis provides points of considerations for brands and brand marketers, it can be used as a helpful resource for companies seeking to understand consumers' perspectives on social media influencers or for companies seeking to create, implement, or alter their influencer marketing strategies.

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*(Source: Brown & Fiorella, 2013)*

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## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Major advancements in technology, the rise of digital and social media, and consumers' adoptions of new online social behaviors, have given way to an age of the most informed consumers that companies have ever had to face. Traditional ways of reaching and connecting to consumers have proven to be less effective. Consumers are constantly challenging brands to impress them and to deliver on their constantly shifting demands to meet them at the right time with the right messages on the right medium. Additionally, consumers have become increasingly skeptical of traditional marketing and often use methods, such as ad blocking software, to block marketing messages. (Ashley & Leonard, 2009; Solis, 2016). Thus, marketers have had to search for alternative ways to reach consumers. An avenue that has proven popular for social media, across companies and industries, is influencer marketing.

### **1.1 Background**

Brands have begun to use influencers in their marketing strategy, often as a replacement for traditional advertising, to reach and connect with their consumers and potential customers. Marketers across industries have continuously adopted influencer marketing into the marketing strategy for their brands. Launchmetrics reported that 84% of brands planned to utilize influencer marketing in 2015, while Linqia's report shows that 86% of marketers surveyed had used influencer marketing in 2017. While these results show brands have adopted influencer marketing into their strategy, one of the largest downfalls of brands is not understanding the relationship consumers have with influencers and how to leverage that relationship to be most effective for their bottom line. *"Influencer marketing is no longer an option, it's a reality."* (TalkPR, Traackr & Sermo, 2017, p. 6)

In the science of social media marketing, and by extension influencer marketing, an emphasis has been placed on how brands can measure the return on investment (ROI) of marketing activities (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). As a result, there has been heavy investment in research resulting in a variety of models, technologies, and tools created to quantify influencers and effectively measure influencer marketing strategies (More & Lingam, 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017). Brands have looked to number-based answers as the solution to their influencer marketing queries. While numbers and metrics are important for a company's overall success, brands cannot discount that a significant power of influencer

marketing is in the quality of connection influencers can build with consumers not only the number of connections influencers can generate (Freberg, Graham, Mcgaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

In sum, influencer marketing, if utilized correctly, provides a tremendous opportunity for brands to connect with consumers. Consumers use of social media and abhorrence for traditional marketing presents an opportunity for brands to capitalize on. Existing research focuses heavily on the number-oriented results that emphasize the quantity and reach of influencers. This intense focus motivated the research objective to look into what other aspects, beyond the numbers that help brands quantify their value, actually make influencers most effective in the eyes of consumers.

## **1.2 Research Aim and Questions**

The main purpose of this is to explore and understand how consumers are interpreting influencers on social media, and the connections to the brands they may represent. The paper will seek to contribute to the limited information around this emerging field. Another purpose of this paper is to provide brands with general guidelines and advice they can consider when building their influencer marketing strategy.

This thesis is primarily concerned with the consumer's point of view, focusing their understandings of and feelings towards influencers. It then discusses the consumer relationship with the influencers followed by a shift of focus to discuss influencers relationships with brands. Finally, it looks at those points together by considering the interplay of the consumer, the influencer, and brand (see Figure 1). This leads to the proposition of my research question for this thesis:

***How do consumers conceptualize, perceive and select influencers they follow on Instagram?***

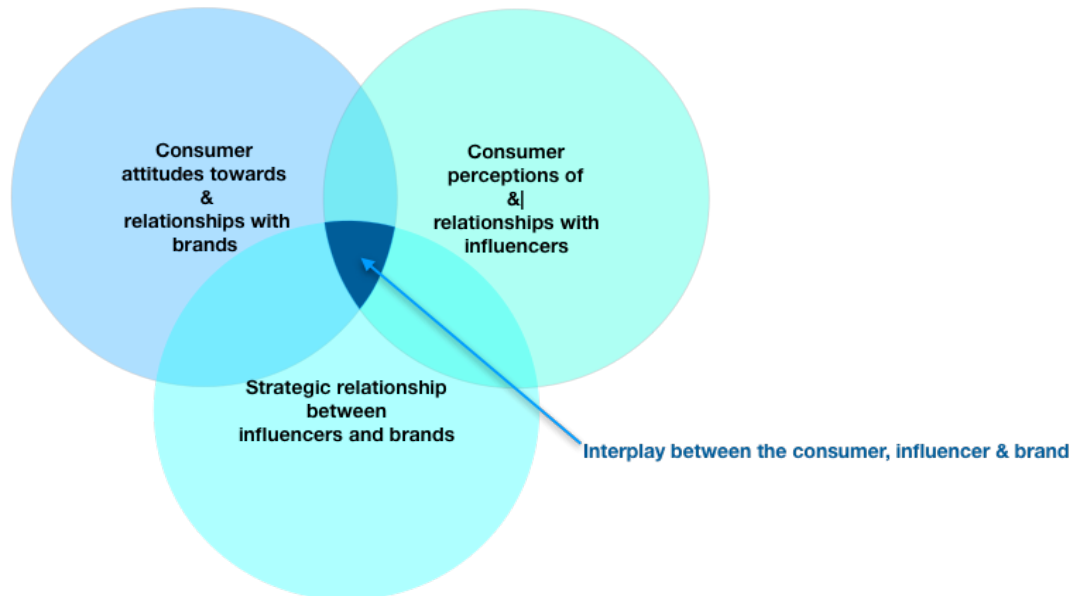
Related sub-questions will help delve deeper into this research area by focusing on two relationships. Taking into account the consumer-influencer relationship, this thesis poses the sub-question:

- *What relationships can exist between consumers and influencers they choose to follow?*

Taking into account the influencer-brand relationship, this thesis poses the sub-question:

- *How can brands best utilize influencers to connect with consumers?*

*Figure 1: Interplay between the brand, consumer, and influencer*



(Source: own creation)

### **1.3 Delimitations**

*Below are the delimitations of this thesis:*

- The thesis will focus on influencer marketing and how consumers use it from the perspective of the social media platform, Instagram. The focus on Instagram is due to its popularity with consumers as it concerns influencer marketing, the influx of brands using Instagram due to features such as increase shopping functionality. The literature review will address social media as a whole, but the thesis will then narrow to Instagram only. Selection of Instagram is elaborated on in the Literature Review.
- The population of interest has been limited to women within a particular age range. The population of interest is for this study are women in the millennial range, specifically between 20-30, since gender and age may affect consumption patterns and social media usage. Including only participants that align with these factors allows the thesis more focus, rather than having to account for the varying ways in which consumers in different age groups use social media. This topic is a worthwhile expansion for future research.

- Limited theory exists specific to influencer marketing. Related concepts were explored that speak the nature of influencer marketing, such as eWOM communication theory, were used.



## Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **2.1 Influence, Influencers, and Influencer Marketing**

Brown & Hayes (2008) provide a modern overview of the concept of influence and of influencers, defining influence as “the power to affect a person, thing or course of events” (p. 49) and an influencer as “a third party who significantly shapes the customer’s purchasing decision, but may never be accountable for it” (p. 50). An influencer benefits from the megaphone effect, where an ordinary consumer can use the web to can access and capture a mass audience through posting about their acts of consumption (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013).

Influencer marketing involves companies using influencers to reach consumers in order to raise their awareness and knowledge of a company (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Influencers help brands deliver and amplify their marketing messages to an audience of consumers, and if successful can influence consumers to take an action such as making a purchase or sharing the message with their network (Brown & Fiorella, 2013).

#### *2.1.1 What does an influencer do, why and for whom? And how?*

The ability to influence does not lie in popularity, but rather “the ability to cause effect or change behavior” (Solis, 2016, pg. 4) and “ability to elicit peer-to-peer action” (p. 17). In other words, influencers are not influencers because they have a following or because they are popular, but rather because they have the ability to move consumers to act. An important distinction between traditional marketing and influencer marketing is an influencer’s ability to mimic consumers’ peers. “Influencers can carry the same weight as peers or “people like me,” which is among the highest forms of influence cited among consumers in study after study” (Solis, 2016, pg. 1). A Nielsen (2015) study shows that known trusted networks are the most reliable source of advertising, but it is key to note that consumers also view online consumer opinions as reliable sources.

### **2.2 WOM and Influencer Marketing**

The process and mechanisms that enable influencer marketing have roots in word of mouth (WOM) marketing, though they are not the same. Traditional WOM occurs offline when consumers share information, such as product recommendations, with their network (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Within environments, there are those who are opinion leaders, which are

people with the likelihood to influence the purchasing decisions of other people in their close and broad networks (Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018).

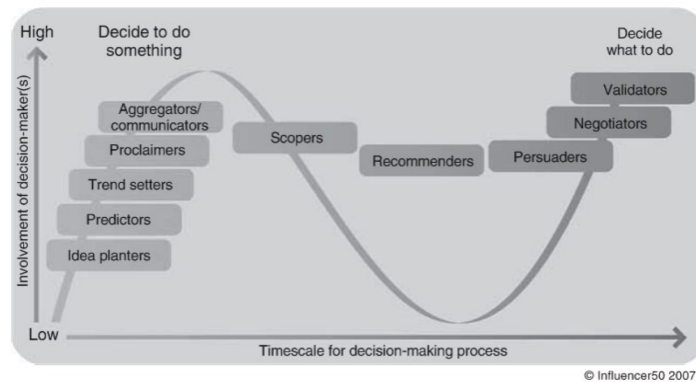
The introduction of social media into consumers spaces has changed the way WOM has traditionally been viewed by marketers. More than ever before, consumers have more people in their networks, and the increased access social media provides has transformed the consistency and degree of interaction consumers have with the people in their network (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Consumers have also become more public and are using social media to facilitate this change, sharing their ideas and thoughts online for the broader public to consume (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Social media and social media platforms have also given way to eWOM, which is essentially the same as WOM, but it occurs in an online environment. eWOM communication is defined by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 39). With eWOM, for brands to get reach prospects they often work with online opinion leaders to send their marketing messages throughout the broad and varied networks of the leaders (Lin et al., 2018).

## **2.3 Influencer classification**

### *2.3.1 Who gets the label of an influencer?*

Labeling influencers can be done in a variety of ways. Brown & Hayes (2008) developed a taxonomy of influencers that reflects the different roles that an influencer can play throughout the decision-making process of a consumer. In their taxonomy, an influencer can play some or all of these roles in a non-linear manner, and often more than one role can be adopted at a time. The role that influencers adopt is dependent on the decision-making process which is unpredictable.

Figure 2: Influencer roles in the decision process



(Source: Brown & Hayes, 2008, p. 40)

Considering their taxonomy of influencer roles, perhaps the roles most relevant to the field of digital marketing are: Trendsetters, who act as early adopters while setting a direction for the market all while sharing what they are doing to their circles; Aggregators/communications - who gather and spread information; Recommenders, who take on the passive role of an advisor to consumers; and Persuaders, who take an active role in the decision-making process of consumers and help them to make a firm decision (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

Another perspective on labeling influencers comes from Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, who uses a simpler model for influencer classification (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Gladwell describes three types of influencers – connectors, mavens, and salespeople (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Connectors are extreme networkers that use WOM to spread their message. Mavens are extremely knowledgeable people who enjoy sharing all they know. Salesmen are skilled negotiators that are experts in a subconscious type of influence.

### 2.3.2 The rise of the Social Media Influencer

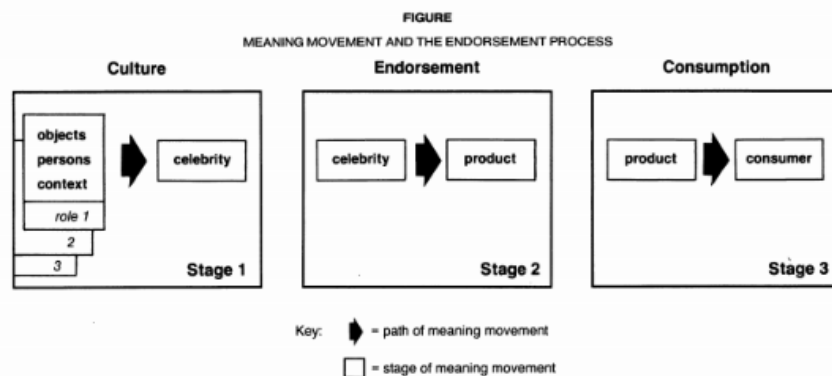
Within the sphere of influence and influencer marketing, the key type of influencer is the kind that utilizes social media as a means for communication to their audience or following. This type of influencer, also known as the social media influencer (SMI), is “a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). Social Media influencers are essentially online opinion leaders. (Henceforth, this definition of will refer to any appearance of ‘influencers’ or ‘influencers on social media’).

De Veirman et al. (2017) describe influencers on social media as people with a considerable network of followers that trust them in regards to a particular niche or multiple niches. Influencers can be crucial to the decision-making process for consumers, and they use social media and social networking as platforms and methods to exert their influence through the decision-making process (More & Lingam, 2017). Influencers can also be described as “one form of microcelebrity who accumulate a following on blogs and social media through textual and visual narrations of their personal, everyday lives, upon which advertorials for products and services are premised” (Abidin, 2016, p. 1).

### 2.3.3 Influencers vs. celebrity ambassadors

When classifying influencers – distinctions should be made between celebrities and influencers. While many parallels can be drawn between celebrity ambassadors and influencers, the practices are not quite the same. Similar to a celebrity ambassador, influencers act as credible sources for consumers in relation to a brand. (Kirmani & Ferraro, 2016). Influencers also are used to transfer meanings to consumers.

Figure 3: Meaning Movement and The Endorsement Process



(Source: McCracken, 1989)

Considering the Celebrity Endorser’s role in the Meaning Transfer model (Figure 3) as researched by Kirmani & Ferraro (2016), when a celebrity endorses a product, the meanings of a celebrity and any cultural associations, well as meanings of the product are transferred to the consumer. This can be applied to influencers if we consider them a type of microcelebrity as Abidin (2016) defines them. However, because influencers can create their own content,

they are more than just distribution channels but they also act as production channels (Carter, 2016). “Brands look to these individuals to produce compelling text, images, and videos and also to distribute that content to a network of followers.” (Carter, 2016, p. 2).

Social media also plays role in the growing distinction between influencers and celebrities. While a celebrity can be considered an influencer, an influencer does not have to be a celebrity. Social media, particularly, has given rise to influencers that do not fall into the realm of celebrity. “Social [media] is a great equalizer and it shifts the balance of power on almost every front away from any one entity to anyone with the ability to share” (Solis, 2016, p. 3). Influencers can be experts in their industry, well-known figures such as celebrities, or any person with the ability to influence a following; Influencers can essentially be any person that has acquired the following and ability to influence others. The power of influencers, versus celebrities, lies in their ability to be perceived as more “accessible, believable, intimate” (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 801).

#### **2.4 The ubiquity of Instagram**

Consumers are increasingly spending their time on social media and increasing their use on social media platforms. This shift towards social media platforms has given consumers access to create their own content, known as user-generated content, and it has also provided new ways for consumers to interact with brands and for consumers to reach their fellow consumers - including influencers (Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, & Zahid, 2018). One of the most popular apps among consumers and brands alike is Instagram.

In June of 2018, Instagram had over 1 billion active monthly users (Constine, 2018). As of 2017, users less than 25 years olds spent 32+ minutes a day on the app while users older than 25 years old spent 24 minutes a day on the app (Instagram, 2017).

Instagram’s internal data shows that over 200 million users visit a Business Profile at least once every day, and over 2 million advertisers globally use Instagram for their business (Instagram, n.d.). In 2015, 60% of users found new products through Instagram (Instagram, n.d.).

Of the social media platforms, influencers report that Instagram is one of their strongest sources of engagement with consumers (#HASHOFF, 2017; Solis, 2016; TalkPR, Traackr &

Sermo, 2017). Though it's common for most influencers to use a variety of social media such as Facebook and YouTube, #HASHOFF (2017) report around Influencer Marketing showed Instagram was the primary platform in the year prior to the study, the year of the study, and it was the projected primary platform for the year following. Influencers polled from the #HASHOFF (2017) report cited the sense of immediacy and community as the key drivers for using Instagram to connect with their following.

The constantly evolving landscape that is social media means that nothing is set indefinitely. New rules and regulations around sponsorships and endorsements have changed and will continue to change, the way that influencers do business with brands and how they communicate with their following on social media platforms like Instagram. A global standard does not exist, but various countries have taken actions specifically addressing new, emerging practices such as influencer marketing on social media. For example, in the United States, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) published Endorsement Guides in order to give more transparency to the consumer (Mediakix, 2016). Among other rules, the Endorsement Guides requires for any connection between marketer and endorser to be clearly highlighted and disclosed to not run the risk of being misleading (Federal Trade Commission, 2017). In practice, it could look like an influencer using indicators such as 'Paid Promotion with' or '#ad' to accompany a sponsored Instagram post (Mediakix, 2016).

## **2.5 Brand selection and evaluation of influencers**

Influencers essentially operate as another format for brands to get their message across to consumers. They help brands connect with consumers, increase awareness and consideration, and even help to drive sales (#HASHOFF, 2017). For brands to identify which influencers to select in their influencer strategy, they need parameters by which to measure and evaluate them. This section will describe more about the current information brands consider when selecting influencers.

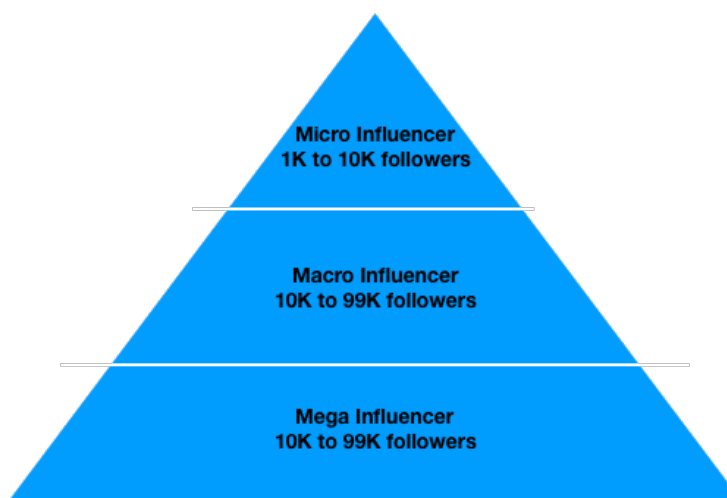
### *2.5.1 Influencer evaluation*

When evaluating influencers, brands should consider the 3 R's, as defined by Traackr, an influencer relationship management platform, Reach, Resonance and Relevance. Reach is the size of following of an influencer; Resonance is the level of engagement an influencer has with their following; and Relevance how relevant the influencer is to the brand (TalkPR, Traackr & Sermo, 2017).

### 2.5.2 Tiers of Influencers

One method brands have utilized to evaluate influencers is the size of their following or reach (De Veirman et al., 2017). Influicity (2018) identifies 3 types of influencers categorized into different tiers based on the sizes of their following (Figure 4): Micro Influencers ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 followers; Macro Influencers ranging from 10,000 to 99,000 followers; and Mega Influencers with more than 1,000,000 followers. Companies are tasked with choosing the right influencers for their brands, and the three tiers of influencers pose a various range of advantages.

*Figure 4: Three Tiers of Influencers*



*Source: own production, based on Influicity (2018)*

Micro influencers, though they have smaller audiences, are less expensive, tend to be easier for consumers to trust, and boast high engagement rates in regards to their followers (Influicity, 2018). According to Brown & Fiorella (2013), micro influencers are those “with whom prospective customers are more closely engaged at the time a purchase decision is being made” (p. 83).

Macro influencers have the ability to effectively reach a niche target audience and have a loyal following. They tend to have a produce higher quality content than micro influencers while being easier to contact than mega-influencers (Influicity, 2018).

A mega influencer is what is typically referred to as a celebrity, where their endorsement attracts major brand awareness and requires minimal effort from the brand to convince consumers about the product or service they are promoting (Influicity, 2018). These types of

influencers are often managed by an agency, which means collaborating with mega influencers requires brands to negotiate through a third party. With the surge in the number of influencers flocking to social media, many agencies have made it their mission to manage the relationship between the brand and influencer (Influicity, 2018), adding another layer of complexity around how brands can work to utilize influencers.

### *2.5.3 Impact of influencer's following size on consumers' brand perceptions*

Going beyond placing influencers on a certain tier level based on their following size, other research has also looked at the impact the size of influencers following have on the brand and product being promoted. The experimental studies done by De Veirman et al. (2017) look at how an influencer's following size impacts consumers' attitudes towards a brand. Their first study found that an influencer having more followers led consumers to have positive attitudes about the influencer. The positive attitudes were primarily due to the fact that the influencers were perceived as more likable because consumers perceived influencers with a larger following as more popular than other influencers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Though consumers found influencers with large followings to be more popular, having a large following did not automatically translate to influencers being perceived by consumers as opinion leaders.

The second study found that having an influencer with many followers promoting a product with divergent design led to a diminished perception of a brand's uniqueness and less positive attitudes towards the brand versus an influencer with a moderately-sized following.

De Veirman et al. (2017) also considered the ratio of an influencer's followers to people an influencer is following in their influencer assessment. Their study found that when an influencer has a high number of followers but a low number of people they are following, the likeability of the influencer is negatively impacted.

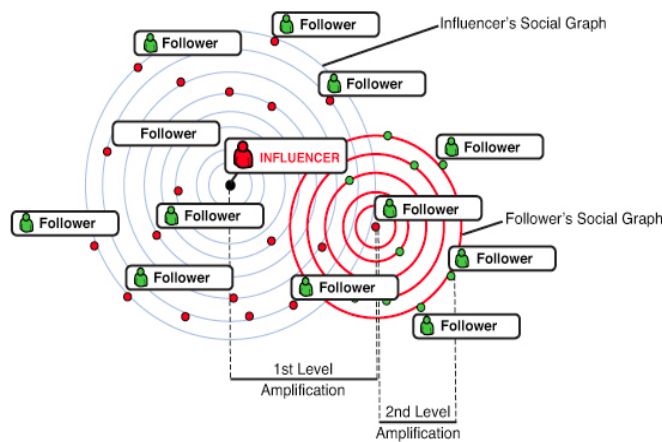
### *2.5.4 Influencer models*

Brown & Fiorella (2013) provide a different take on how to evaluate influencers. Brown & Fiorella (2013) discuss the need for rethinking the strategies around influencer marketing in order for it to ultimately be a more effective strategy for marketers. They highlight two models that address the current state of how brands and marketers are approaching influencer marketing today.



The first is the Fisherman's Influencer Marketing Model as can be seen in Figure 5 below.

*Figure 5: Fisherman's Influence Marketing Model*

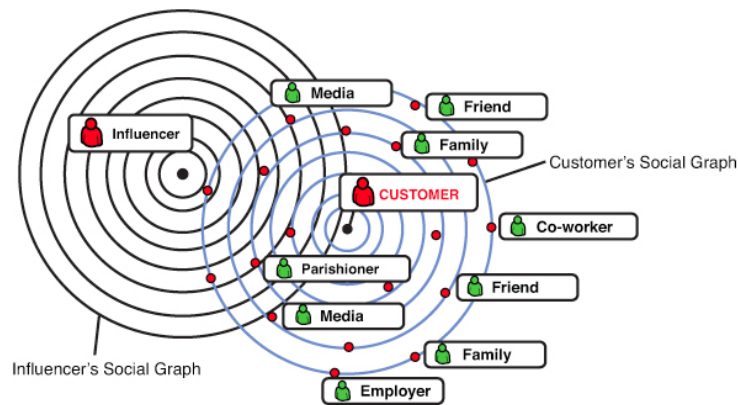


*(Source: Brown & Fiorella, 2013)*

The basis for this model is as follows, “Identify the fish you’re trying to catch; choose the right body of water, and then cast the widest net possible and hope for the best” (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p. 77 ). With the Fisherman's Influence Marketing model, the influencer is central. So, marketers first identify the influencer with a suitably sized following, try to understand that influencer's community as well as the influencer's role in it, then create messages that the influencers attempt to share and amplify to their following (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Essentially, they choose influencers with large followings in hopes of reaching a large pool of potential prospects. Though Brown & Fiorella (2013) do not quantify the followings of these influencers as the Influidity (2018) does, they similarly define these kinds of influencers as macro influencers. Brown & Fiorella (2013) critique this model, accepting it as a suitable starting point for brands to raise awareness and have a potential impact on consumer purchase decisions, but recognizing that the fundamental basis of the model is misguided because it focuses on the influencer as the central character.

The second model is the Customer-Centric Influencer Marketing Model as can be seen below in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Customer-Centric Influence Marketing Model



(Source: Brown & Fiorella, 2013)

“Influencers, along with business brands and their marketing messages, are simply planets circling the customer, vying for his attention” (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p 77). In this model, the customer is the central character with external factors that could affect the customer’s decision to purchase surrounding. With the customer-centric focus, the decisions the customer makes, the people that interact with the customer, and how those two connect are what marketers have to consider. In the Fisherman’s Influence Marketing Model, the influencer is primarily seen as the avenue to broadcast the message to consumers, but in the Customer-Centric Influence Marketing Model, the relationship the influencer has with the customer, its context, and ultimately the level of impact an influencer has on the customer are the most important aspects along with how other players in the customer’s social graph impact the flow of influence (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Using this model, marketers would choose micro influencers, who customers are more closely linked to, and who Brown & Fiorella (2013) found most effective in delivering the type of influence that actually changes a consumers purchase decision. Marketers can use either model, but the choice of the model impacts the type of influencer they would focus on.

## **2.6 Consumer perception of influencers**

One aspect of this research seeks to understand how influencers connect with consumers and the influence that influencers can have on consumers’ perspective of brands. So, it is relevant to explore what has traditionally been successful in influencing consumers. Thus, this section summarizes models that attempt to explore the influencers’ effectiveness in delivering marketing messages to consumers.

In discussing how consumers perceive influencers, it is important to first consider how consumers perceive attempts that brands take to communicate, and ultimately market, to them. Research shows that persuasion, credibility, and attractiveness are all key elements in how consumers perceive marketing messages that brands are attempting to deliver through other sources (Kirmani & Ferraro, 2016; Martensen et al., 2018; McCracken, 1989).

The Persuasion Knowledge Model presents the idea of persuasion targets and persuasion agents, as well as what roles consumers play (Kirmani & Ferraro, 2016). As the persuasion agent, consumers think and theorize about how marketers try to influence them; as the persuasion target, consumers think and theorize about how they, in turn, influence and persuade marketers (Kirmani & Ferraro, 2016). The model proposes that consumers vacillate often from persuasion target to persuasion agent. Consumers also develop strategies to resist persuasion that they detect, thus a marketer's job becomes how to navigate around the persuasion resistance strategies.

Source characteristics have been used to explain social influence and what qualities people must possess in order to have the ability to influence others. Thus, the qualities of the message sender are important to consider when looking into consumer behavior and consumer reactions to messages. The Source Credibility Model proposes that the elements of the message sender - particularly trustworthiness and expertise - are what give the sender credibility (Martensen et al., 2018; McCracken, 1989). When the sender possesses both characteristics of trustworthiness and expertise, consumers have a more positive perspective on the brand and more positive behaviors in regards to a brand (Martensen et al., 2018). "Expertness is defined as the perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions" (McCracken, 1989, p. 311), while "trustworthiness is defined as the perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions" (p. 311). A fallback of using this model is understanding what explicitly constitutes expertise and trustworthiness from the perspective of a modern consumer.

The Source Attractiveness Model proposes that the source attractiveness of the sender - which is comprised of the elements likability, familiarity, and similarity - increases the persuasiveness of the source in the eyes of consumers (Martensen et al., 2018). "Familiarity is defined as knowledge of the source through exposure, likability as affection for the source as a result of the source's physical appearance and behavior, and similarity as a supposed

resemblance between the source and receiver of the message” (McCracken, 1989, p. 311). A fallback of using this model is defining what explicitly constitute likability, familiarity, and similarity from the perspective of a modern consumer.

### *2.6.1 Perceived Consumer Value and the role influencers play*

Value is a key point in examining how consumers perceive influencers. If products or services deliver the value consumers are searching for, they may be motivated to make a purchase (Lin et al., 2018), so it is important to consider if and how influencers help brands to deliver the value consumers are searching for.

The study of Lin et al. (2018) explains online opinion leadership and the role that these leaders play in driving value to consumers. Lin et al. (2018) argue that online opinion leaders “can influence consumers’ perceptions of the utilitarian and hedonic value of a particular product or service” (p. 433). Considering their definition and description of online opinion leadership we can consider influencers on social media as filling the role of online opinion leaders. Their study focuses on two value types: utilitarian value, which is derived from tangible and functional aspects of product or service such as benefits; and hedonic value, which is derived from more intangible, symbolic aspects of a product or service such as a nice experience.

Opinion leaders use appeal leadership to help consumers derive utilitarian values by being timely source of a breadth of useful information surrounding the product or service; and they use knowledge leadership to help consumers derive hedonic values by using their personal appeal and endorsement to create personal and psychological attachments a brand’s product or service (Lin et al., 2018). In addition to providing the appeal leadership and knowledge leadership role, the study explains online opinion leaders can hold other various roles such as experts, with specialized experience, or early adopters, who are first to use a product.

## **2.7 Consumer relationships with brands**

The above sections discussed existing knowledge based on interactions between consumers and influencers and interactions between influencers and brands. However, to understand the full impact influencers can have on consumers and their perceptions towards brands, it is important to consider the relationship between the consumer and the brand. The consumer-brand relationship can exist with or without the influencer present. While this research overall

seeks to understand how the influencer plays into the consumer-brand relationship, this particular section explores solely consumer relationships with brands.

### *2.7.1 What relevance do brands have for consumers?*

Consumers can use brands as a means for deriving functional benefits; but they also buy brands for their brand meanings, using them as a way to define themselves and add meaning to their lives (Veloutsou, 2007). Through buying brands, consumers build and develop relationships with brands whether or not they are aware of doing so (Veloutsou, 2007). The companies behind these brands work to build relationships in such a way so that they can reach the consumer on an emotional or personal level, and so a consumer will have a preference for their brand over other brands (Management Association, 2018).

In discussing consumer brand-relationships, there are a variety of relevant aspects to consider. One important aspect is the ability of brands to provide brand value to consumers. Aaker (1991) presents three stages of the brand relationship building process: (1) consumers have to be aware of the brand; (2) the brand needs to fit a consumer's fit lifestyle, personality or values; (3) a brand's assets - such as their relationships with brand representatives like influencers - need to be continuously developed and maintained. This brand relationship building process generates brand value for consumers (Management Association, 2018). Other important aspects are brand credibility and trustworthiness which are integral to building successful, deep relationships with consumers (Management Association, 2018). Credibility and trustworthiness are difficult and time-consuming to generate with consumers and are also aspects very easy for brands to lose (Management Association, 2018). Potential benefits of strong consumer-brand relationships include customer loyalty, customer advocacy, and customer's reduced risk towards new adopting new products (Management Association, 2018).

### *2.7.2 Relationship Theory: consumer-brand relationship model*

Perhaps one of the most popular takes on consumer-brand relationships in marketing literature is from Fournier (1998) who provides a consumer-brand relationship model.

Fournier (1998) asserts 4 key points:

- (1) Brands serve as a relationship partner to consumers through performing certain brand behaviors. The daily marketing activities of a brand by those that manage it serves as the brand's contribution to the relationship with the consumer. Additionally,

brands often take animistic forms through spokespeople who represent the brand, personal brand associations held in the minds of consumers, or anthropomorphized brand characters which helps to facilitate the relationship.

(2) Relationships provide psychological, sociocultural, and relational meanings for those that engage in them.

(3) As multiplex phenomena, relationships have a range of forms and a range of benefits for those that engage them.

(4) Relationships are dynamic processes changing over time with regard to the surrounding contextual environment and interactions.

Fournier (1998) proposes that relationships consumers have with brands take a variety of forms and also can be similar to the relationships that occur between people. The study resulted in a typology of fifteen relationships forms which can be seen in Figure 7 below. The fifteen relationships forms vary in regards to the benefits consumers derive from each relationship type, the impact each relationship type has on consumers personality development, and the time and maintenance required for each relationship type (Fournier, 1998).

Figure 7: A Typology of Consumer-Brand Relationship Forms

A TYPOLOGY OF CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP FORMS		
Relationship form	Definition	Case examples
Arranged marriages	Nonvoluntary union imposed by preferences of third party. Intended for long-term, exclusive commitment, although at low levels of affective attachment.	Karen's adoption of her ex-husband's preferred brands (e.g., Mop 'n Glo, Palmolive, Hellman's); Jean's use of Murphy's Oil soap as per manufacturer recommendation.
Casual friends/buddies	Friendship low in affect and intimacy, characterized by infrequent or sporadic engagement, and few expectations for reciprocity or reward.	Karen and her household cleaning brands.
Marriages of convenience	Long-term, committed relationship precipitated by environmental influence versus deliberate choice, and governed by satisficing rules.	Vicki's switch to southern regional Friend's Baked Beans brand from favored B&M brand left behind in the northeast.
Committed partnerships	Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected.	Jean and virtually all her cooking, cleaning, and household appliance brands; Karen and Gatorade.
Best friendships	Voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards. Characterized by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy. Congruity in partner images and personal interests common.	Karen and Reebok running shoes; Karen and Coke Classic; Vicki and Ivory.
Compartmentalized friendships	Highly specialized, situationally confined, enduring friendships characterized by lower intimacy than other friendship forms but higher socioemotional rewards and interdependence. Easy entry and exit attained.	Vicki and her stable of perfumes.
Kinships	Nonvoluntary union with lineage ties.	Vicki's brand preference for Tetley tea or Karen's for Ban, Joy, and Miracle Whip, all of which were inherited from their mothers.
Rebounds/avoidance-driven relationships	Union precipitated by desire to move away from prior or available partner, as opposed to attraction to chosen partner per se.	Karen's use of Comet, Gateway, and Success Rice.
Childhood friendships	Infrequently engaged, affectively laden relation reminiscent of earlier times. Yields comfort and security of past self.	Vicki's Nestle's Quik and Friendly's ice cream; Jean's use of Estée Lauder, which evokes memories of her mother.
Courtships	Interim relationship state on the road to committed partnership contract.	Vicki and her Musk scent brands during initial trial period.
Dependencies	Obsessive, highly emotional, selfish attractions cemented by feeling that the other is irreplaceable. Separation from other yields anxiety. High tolerance of other's transgressions results.	Karen and Mary Kay; Vicki and Soft 'n Dry.
Flings	Short-term, time-bounded engagements of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands.	Vicki's trial size shampoo brands.
Enmities	Intensely involving relationship characterized by negative affect and desire to avoid or inflict pain on the other.	Karen and her husband's brands, post-divorce; Karen and Diet Coke; Jean and her other-recommended-but-rejected brands (e.g., Jif peanut butter, Kohler stainless steel sinks).
Secret affairs	Highly emotive, privately held relationship considered risky if exposed to others.	Karen and the Tootsie Pops she sneaks at work.
Enslavements	Nonvoluntary union governed entirely by desires of the relationship partner. Involves negative feelings but persists because of circumstances.	Karen uses Southern Bell and Cable Vision because she has no other choice.

(Source: Fournier, 1998)

The study also resulted in two models addressing causes of relationship deterioration. The Entropy model asserts that lack of maintenance is the source relationship deterioration, while the Stress model asserts that the interference of outside factors is the source relationship deterioration (Fournier, 1998).

### 2.7.3 Other factors that impact consumer-brand relationships

What marketers intend to communicate to consumers through brands can be different than the meaning consumers actually create and attach to brands (Management Association, 2018). Technology has exacerbated this issue by transforming the way consumers interact with brands and with other consumers. As a result, companies face increased difficulty in managing the relationship with consumers due to their decreased control over the brand's image and the messages they intend to communicate (Management Association, 2018).

Advances and constant changes to technology also mean that consumers relationships with brands are constantly changing and evolving, meaning brands must continuously adapt (Management Association, 2018).

Past literature has focused on processes required for brands to create and manage relationships with consumers with a focus on the scope of said relationships, but there has not been a strong focus on the characteristics or nature of consumer-brand relationships (Veloutsou, 2007). In addition to understanding the nature of consumer-brand relationships, the intended result of this research is to contribute to understanding how exactly consumers use influencers to construct new or additional brand meanings.



## Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the scientific and methodological approaches - which guided the research process and served as the foundation of this thesis. This chapter also outlines the research method and design.

### **3.1 Theory of Science**

The mission of research is to develop new knowledge, and the concept of the research philosophy involves not only the development of knowledge but the nature of knowledge itself (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). The philosophy a researcher chooses to adopt is impacted by the assumptions they make about the world and the practical considerations they take into account (Saunders et al., 2012). Having an understanding of the researcher's philosophical position helps to understand their point of view and assumptions, which both have an effect on their approach and execution of research. Research philosophy can be thought of in two ways: ontology and epistemology.

#### *3.1.1 Ontology*

Ontology, the study which addresses the nature of being and reality, can be divided into two perspectives: objectivism and subjectivism (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015; Saunders et al., 2012). In the objectivist view, reality is objective and exists regardless of how humans perceive and comprehend it (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). In the subjectivist view, perceptions and actions of humans that are living are what shape reality and cultural and historical contexts play into this reality (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). Subjectivism, though not exactly the same, is also closely linked to constructivism which asserts that social constructs are what shape reality (Saunders et al., 2012). While the two views both have validity and are not mutually exclusive, for this thesis I leaned towards a subjectivist view. The main research question takes the point of the consumer and how they perceive and interact with influencers. Thus, I believe it is the consumers' realities, their individual ways of experiencing life, and their subjective opinions that sit at the core of this research. Considering the nature of the subjectivist approach, I must also take into account that my own perceptions of reality, not only those of the consumers studied, impacted how I shaped, designed, interpreted this research.

### *3.1.2 Epistemology*

Epistemology, the study that deals with the nature of acquiring valid knowledge, can be divided into three perspectives: positivism, realism, and interpretivism. The positivist position, which often aligns with objectivist views, focuses on facts, and the reality that can be observed and quantified, while the realist position focuses on a reality that is separate from the mind (Saunders et al., 2012). The interpretivist approach, often used in accordance with a qualitative methodology, focuses on understanding meanings and relationships.

Interpretivism takes the viewpoint that as humans “we interpret our everyday social roles in accordance with the meaning we give to these roles...We interpret the roles of others in accordance with our own set meanings” (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 137). As a researcher taking this viewpoint, I must understand the interpretive paradigm takes into account multiple realities including the consumers studied, the context of influencer marketing phenomenon itself, and my own understandings, interpretations, and validation of the knowledge acquired (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015).

### *3.1.3 Axiological Considerations*

Axiology, the study that concerns value judgments, addresses how a researcher’s values affect each stage of the research process (Saunders et al., 2012). For the sake of the credibility of my research, I must acknowledge that my personal values have guided and impacted the decisions and interpretations made throughout the entirety of the research process. Considering these points, it is suggested that researchers present their own value statement to provide clarity on the researcher’s value position, for the sake of the researcher and any potential reader (Saunders et al., 2012).

### *3.1.4 Researcher’s Statement of Value*

As a millennial, born 1993, I grew up with the Internet, and as a result, social media seems inherent and deeply ingrained both in my personal life as well as in the lives of those around me. In the recent years, I increasingly noticed the pervasiveness of influencers and Instagram through peer interactions and increase in brands trending towards influencers. Thus, as a follower of influencers myself, I had a personal interest in this researching this subject area. As a business student exposed to many academic courses surrounding marketing and as a practitioner within the field of marketing, the emerging concept of influencer marketing was

also of particular interest from an academic standpoint, as well as from a practical application standpoint.

### *3.1.5 Research approach*

With the ontological and epistemological approaches defined, it becomes necessary to decide on a research approach. The research approach can help to inform the research strategy and design. The three potential approaches are deduction, induction, and abduction. With the inductive approach, the researcher looks for meanings within data and meanings attached to humans events then attempts to build a theory out of that (Saunders et al., 2012). Inductive approach is also linked to the interpretivism research philosophy and qualitative data collection, and it is often used when knowledge about the chosen area is limited (Saunders et al., 2012).

## **3.2 Research method & design**

Choosing a methodology should be linked to the overall objective and purpose of research. The objective of this research is to explore the influencer concept and how brands are part of that, in order to understand this particular questions: *How do consumers conceptualize, perceive and select influencers they follow on Instagram? What relationships can exist between consumers and influencers they choose to follow? How can brands best utilize influencers to connect with consumers?*

Considering the objective, the nature of this research is exploratory. According to Saunders et al., (2012), exploratory studies serve as opportunities to “ask open questions to discover what is happening and gain insights about a topic of interest” (p. 171).

Influencer marketing is an emerging area for which extensive studies have not been conducted. Considering the interpretivist philosophical approach taken to this thesis, a qualitative research method was a suitable choice as qualitative methods focus on studying participants meanings and relationships that exist between meanings versus quantitative research which focuses on quantification of data (Saunders et al., 2012). The nature of this topic has the potential to be embarrassing or sensitive, so qualitative research was a preferable method as it allows for a rapport to be built between the researcher and consumer studied which may lead to further disclosure of information on behalf of the consumer. Qualitative research has been praised for its flexibility allowing the researcher to quickly shift in order to explore new avenues as they arise and for the holistic view often taken through

addressing multiple variables (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). Qualitative research has also been critiqued for being too subjective and virtually irreplicable (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015).

### **3.3 Data Collection**

#### *3.3.1 Secondary data collection*

Malhotra et al., (2013) define secondary data as “data collected for some other purpose than the problem at hand” (p. 61) and argue that researchers can collect secondary data prior to collecting primary data. As a starting point, secondary data on relevant theories and literature around the phenomenon of influencer marketing and associated topics were collected. Secondary data collection came from a variety of sources including academic articles, academic books, company reports and white papers, articles, and company surveys.

#### *3.3.2 Primary data collection*

Malhotra et al., (2013) define primary data as “data originated by a researcher for the specific purpose of addressing the problem at hand” (p. 61). For this research, the form of qualitative research chosen was semi-structured interviews. Interviews seek to “uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings on a topic” (Malhotra, Birks, & Wills, 2013). In-depth interviews allow for insightful depth into a topic and remove the social pressure that may occur from groups in a format such as a focus group (Malhotra et al., 2013). Semi-structured interviews call for the use of an interview guide to the conversation and ensure similar topics were covered, although not in the same style (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted over the course of four weeks in-person and through online video using the app, FaceTime. The average interview was 38 minutes, with the range going from 39 minutes to 58 minutes in length. Each interview was recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Prior to each interview's start, interviewees were briefly introduced to the research area. Interviewees were asked to think of their favorite influencer or few favorite influencers in responding to interview questions. An interview guide (see Appendix A) was used to ensure coverage of the same topics per interview, but interviewees were allowed to elaborate where they felt appropriate. Additionally, the researcher could ask additional questions as was appropriate in order to have an interviewee elaborate further. The topics covered through the interviews were as follows: how engaged consumers are with their favorite influencers, the consumer perception of influencer specific strategies, what degree of

impact influencers can have on consumers purchasing habits, the type of content consumers like to see influencers produce, and the connection or relationship between influencers and consumers. To close the interviews, the researcher provided contact information in the case that the interviewees had additional information to share around the topic or reflections. Two of the nine interviewees did follow up and these comments were also considered. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for the ease of analysis.

### **3.4 Sampling**

Ambiguity exists around the ideal sample size for non-probability sampling, but sampling techniques should be based on the purpose of the research. For semi-structured interviews, the minimum sample size is between 5-25 according to Saunders et al., (2012). The chosen method of sampling is purposive sampling, which is suitable for small sample sizes (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). “With purposive sampling, you need to use your judgment to select cases that will best enable you to answer your research question(s) and to meet your objectives” (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 287). Purposive sampling, however, does not represent the whole population from a statistical standpoint.

“A homogeneous sample consists of individuals who belong to the same subculture or group and have similar characteristics” (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 161). With homogenous sampling, the samples can be homogeneous with regard to only one or many variables.

“Some research texts recommend six to eight data units when the sample consists of a homogenous group” (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 163). To create the homogenous sample for this research, the selection criteria were: women between the ages of 20-30 who: (a) were active or semi-active users of social media and Instagram, (b) followed influencers, and (c) were not influencers themselves.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The chosen method of analysis was thematic analysis, which is an inductive approach common among qualitative types of research. The outcome of the thematic analysis is to identify themes within in data. Coding and categorizing, key elements in the analysis process, help to reduce data into a manageable form. While a thematic analysis was used, a grounded theory approach, or analysis processes often associated with grounded theory, were also applied. The similarity to the grounded approach is visible only in the type of coding used - open, selective, and axial codes, - and due to the fact that the codes came from the data itself

(O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). While often confused, grounded theory objective is to extract a theory while thematic analysis is meant to analyze the data to reveal what interesting aspects or hidden relationships in the data (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). The coding for this analysis can be found in Appendix C. The Findings chapter serves as the interpretation of the thematical analysis.

### **3.6 Research quality**

Research quality can be assessed through two forms: reliability and validity. Reliability and validity, however, are objective measurements which stand in contrast with the ontological view of this research and of qualitative approaches in general (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). To account for this discrepancy, qualitative researchers use specific definitions for reliability and validity if they choose to utilize these terms to evaluate their research quality.

#### *3.6.1 Reliability*

In the context of qualitative research, Daymon & Holloway (2002) define reliability as “the extent to which a research instrument...will reproduce the same results or answer” (p. 90). In reality, identical reproduction is not possible, but recording your choices and methods would allow another to some extent follow your processes and understand your decisions (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

To account for this, I have taken steps to make my research as reliable as possible. I put effort into documenting my processes, decisions, and considerations which can be reflected in each section of this thesis. I have also crafted the research questions and sub-questions in an easily understandable manner. For the secondary data, I gathered academic articles and excerpts from well-known academic journals and books, and I gathered company-produced secondary data from respected companies or companies specialized in consumer research and influencer marketing fields. Each concept, theory, or figure addressed is accompanied with an overview or explanation. Though not provided in this thesis, transcriptions from each interview, along with the audio files, have been stored should access to those become necessary at any point in the future.

#### *3.6.2 Validity*

In the context of qualitative research, Daymon & Holloway (2002) define validity as “whether the methods, approaches, and techniques actually relate to, or measure, the issues

you wish to explore” (p. 90). Validity has three aspects: (1) internal validity which is if the findings reflect the research aim and social reality of interviewees; (2) generalizability which is if the research findings and conclusions translate to similar situations; (3) relevance which is if the research meaningfulness and usefulness to its readers (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

I have taken steps to make my research as valid as possible. Throughout the interviews, I asked clarifying questions to ensure my interpretation closely matched what the interviewees actually said. However, I fall short on the internal validity area as no member checks as described by Daymon & Holloway (2002) were conducted with the findings. Through the study and analysis, I shed light on how the interplay of consumers, influencers, and brands relationships which can be applied elsewhere. In the conclusion, I have provided guidelines for brands marketers in the field to consider when developing their influencer strategies.

## Chapter 4: FINDINGS

As discussed in the Methodology section, nine consumer interviews were conducted and this section serves as interpretations of those findings. The research questions and sub-questions are addressed throughout this chapter. The chapter is further structured in accordance with the key themes that were uncovered from the interviews. The key themes include: Drivers & Arguments to use influencers, Selecting Influencers and what makes consumers stay, Consumer-Influencer Relationship Dynamics, and the Influencer-Brand Relationship.

This chapter also makes use of The Elements of Value pyramid as designed by Almquist, Bloch, and Senior (2016) to explain which value elements businesses can provide to consumers. For the context of this research, the Elements of Value are applied to the consumer-influencer relationship, focusing on what value brands can provide to consumers through their strategic use of influencers. The origins and key components of The Elements of Value will be discussed later in this section.

### **4.1 Two categories of interviewees**

The analysis of the consumers interviewed uncovered two distinct groups of consumers: consumers with overall positive attitudes towards influencers and consumers with overall negative attitudes towards influencers. Consumers with overall positive attitudes towards influencers will be referred to as ‘Positives’ and consumers with overall negative attitudes towards influencers will be referred to as ‘Negatives.’ While the smaller segment, the Negatives was comprised of the oldest ages of interviewees. For each key category, an analysis is made to reflect Positives, Negatives, and shared perspectives between the two groups.

In order to support the findings and provide additional context for the reader, quotes from these interviews have been included in the discussion, particularly when the quote helps to explain the phenomenon. Interviewees from the Positives groups are denoted as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 and interviewees from the Negative group are denoted as N1, N2, and N3. An overview of the interviewees can be found in Appendix B



## **4.2 PART 1: How do consumers conceptualize, perceive and select influencers they follow on Instagram?**

To address this research question, we look at two areas uncovered during the interview process from the consumer perspective: drivers and arguments to use influencers and selecting influencers and what makes consumers stay.

### **4.2.1 Drivers & Arguments to use influencers**

#### *4.2.1a Consumer perceptions: Influencers vs. celebrities*

The idea of how to conceptualize influencers was an area of uncertainty for most consumers interviewed. Though all interviewees followed influencers and had their own definition of what an influencer was to them, many had trouble expressing exactly who - or even what - should qualify as an influencer.

Most interviewees agreed influencers were not celebrities outright. N2 said, *“An influencer is not a celebrity. It’s kind of hard to explain, I never thought of these differences even though I know they differ.”* Though not automatically celebrities, an understanding did exist that an influencer may eventually obtain celebrity status through growing their following to a size comparable to the following size of a celebrity. Two interviewees mention the growth of influencers has led to more melding between influencers and celebrities: *“The line is blurring a lot now - because prior to the influencer explosion there was a lot of brands working with celebrities to raise awareness. With the rise of influencers, brand moved more towards influencers and using them”* (N3). Some consumers believed influencers could reach a point of status and recognition they were no longer considered an influencer but instead a celebrity.

The Positives being an influencer required more effort than being a celebrity. They described a celebrity’s audience as automatic, whereas influencers have to work to create and maintain their audience. P3 elaborated:

*“Celebrities already have a base following because they’re already in the public eye - people just follow them because they have so many followers already...An influencer puts in more effort, really appreciates their followers more and cares more about the following and strives for two-way communication.”*

Conversely, the Negatives perceived influencers as having an easy job or possibly being less qualified in their respective fields compared to celebrities as showcased here: *“Influencers are lay people who are just pretty and popular. I don’t know that influencers necessarily have other talents, but they do have a great Instagram”* (N1).

#### *4.2.1b Influencer marketing is not covert*

While exactly what constitutes an influencer was unclear, there was a shared understanding of the role an influencer. Influencers are trendsetters that are paid to either create content, set trends, or promote trends. The majority of interviewees had a realistic view of the business behind influencers, understanding that brands were choosing influencers in order to reach them and essentially viewing being an influencer as the equivalent to any other job. P4 explained, *“The reality is people need to make money - they’re curating content for people and it’s a job.”* The Positives and Negatives both understood influencers as completing a marketing function. The Positives spoke of emotional messages influencers delivered on behalf of brands, while the Negatives took a less emotional approach by narrowing the job descriptions of influencers to helping brands deliver functional information.

#### *4.2.1c Transparency*

Consumers expressed that transparency - despite the promotional and monetary motivations influencers and brands hold - is the key to making influencers resonate with them personally. Sponsored posts and promoted products were deemed acceptable by all interviewees, but for most an emphasis was placed on proper disclosure. Indicators such as *#ad* increased awareness of sponsored and promotional content for consumers making them more closely question influencers’ motivations, even going as far as to specifically seek out promotional indicators as P1 describes:

*“I actively look for that because I find it very interesting to see which posts they’re being paid for and not. It’s for my awareness...I don’t want to be just another follower they get money from.”*

Some Positives felt the credibility of influencers diminished as their number of sponsored posts increased. Compared to the Positives, the Negatives took a less emotional approach to the topic of transparency, caring less about why a particular post was sponsored and rather what the sponsored post was about. The Negatives had less tolerance for unclarity around how influencers approached sponsorships and their execution of sponsorship. N2 says, if

influencers “*are trying to be sneaky about it, it makes me really annoyed and makes me want to unfollow the brand or influencer.*”

#### **4.2.2 Selecting influencers and what makes consumer stay**

##### *4.2.2a Ideal characteristics and traits of an influencer*

When it comes to choosing influencers, both groups agreed an ideal characteristic of an influencer was knowing how to strike a balance between organic and paid posts. Influencers with the capability to be critical of some products, registered as more believable to interviewees because they were not praising every product or service given to them.

While credibility was an ideal characteristic among both groups, there were differences in what registered as credibility. For Positives, influencers showcasing realistic views of their life was important in order for them to recognize influencers as credible. Positives making the active choice to follow a specific influencer meant that they controlled what they saw, rather a brand choosing what they saw, which made influencers feel more credible to them. P1 described this line of thinking:

*“Influencers are more credible because you choose which ones you want to follow. I wouldn’t follow them if I didn’t think they were credible. If I didn’t believe in what they were selling or thought they were doing it for the money, I wouldn’t follow them,”*

For the Negatives, influencers credibility of influencers was showcased by hard facts such as the size of the influencer’s following or their knowledge in a particular area.

##### *4.2.2b Drivers behind choosing and following influencers*

The Negatives were primarily driven to select influencers based on their ability to derive value from influencer’s content, as opposed to the Positives that were motivated by personal characteristics of the influencers themselves.

The Positives were driven by the individual makeup of influencers. An influencer’s ability to be real and create a truthful space with their followers was a key point for Positives. An emphasis was placed on the importance of influencers refraining from product promotion for the sake of money without regard for the product quality, as that was seen as a form of lying to loyal following. Positives were also driven to select influencers that showcased a lifestyle that was to some extent anchored in reality or what felt realistic to the average consumer.

Half of the Positives mentioned 'reachable' as a reason they choose to follow influencers -- *"You feel 'she's not perfect, she's more mortal and it's reachable"* (P1). Accessibility was not fully agreed upon by the Positives. While some wanted what felt accessible, a few looked to influencers to showcase a lifestyle they could not attain themselves.

Positives also identified with influencers rise to leadership and the effort they put in to reach their current status, as described by P3, *"she started from the bottom and now has her own jewelry line, workout line, and clothing line...She works really hard."*

Positives and Negatives found alignment to be a driver for influencer selection. For both groups, alignment with influencers provided consumers assurance that content they were exposed to would be in harmony with their interests. N3 says, *"I like to follow influencers that I'm aligned with. That way when brands pop up in their posts, I know it's a brand I'll likely be interested in."* Some wanted to be aligned with influencers particularly because of influencer's work achievements and approach to their career. *"I want to do and some of the things that she's done since they're in line with my interests professionally"* (N1).

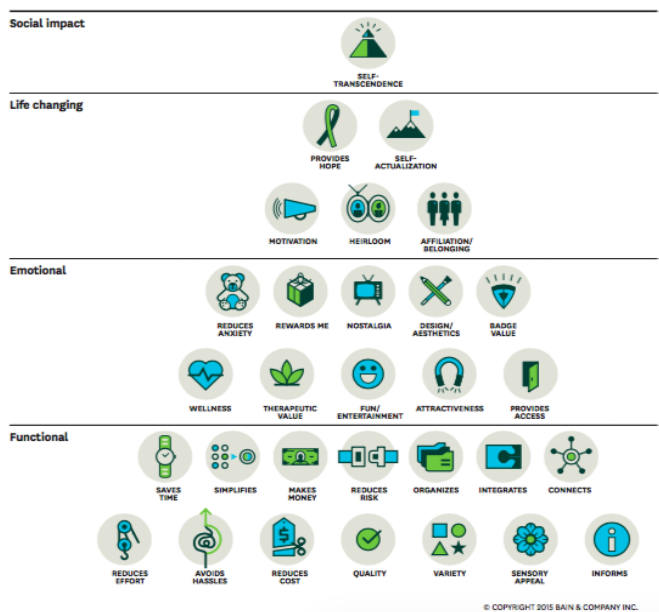
Positives and Negatives both found trust to be a driver for influencer selection. It was essential for an influencer to be trustworthy for consumers to choose to follow them. Trust was described as something an influencer could increasingly build with consumers over time. For most interviewees, trust in the influencer translated to trust in the brands, products, or people the influencer promoted. That power is particularly important for brands, especially considering the interviewees whose willingness to try new products was increased by influencer displaying trust for a brand. Some interviewees also described the aspect of trust that existed between themselves and the influencers, equating listening to an influencer to talking to a consumer. These sentiments around trust were strong for the Positives. While these sentiments were also true for the Negatives, they were balanced with more skepticism around the extent to which their trust extended. The Negatives expressed opinions such as *"I don't want to follow blindly or trust too much - you don't always know the motivation behind the post"* or *"I wouldn't trust one person's opinion, and I don't think just having one opinion is reliable"*(N2). Additionally, for the Negatives trust was fleeting. N1 explains, *"There's threshold for when you stop becoming authentic enough - it's almost like it's hard to trust your opinion anymore once you're too big."*

#### 4.2.2c Values derived from influencers: functional, emotional, life changing, self-actualization

For interviewees, the selecting which influencer to follow was grounded heavily in the value they received from the influencer.

To analyze the value that consumers derived from influencers, it is helpful to utilize the model, The Elements of Value Pyramid (Almquist et al., 2016). This model, with roots in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, identifies 30 elements of value in 4 categories: functional, emotional, life changing, and social impact. These identified elements are what brands can deliver to consumers in order for consumers to find value. Almquist et al., 2016 found customer loyalty was linked to a company’s ability to provide multiple elements of value, compared to its competitors. A brand’s strong performance on the value elements was linked to sustained revenue growth for the brand and greater potential for consumers to try the brand. The Elements of Value Pyramid was designed with the consumer and a brand’s product or service as focus. However, as highlighted in the article, “The amount and nature of value in a particular product or service always lie in the eye of the beholder, of course. Yet universal building blocks of value do exist (Almquist et al., 2016, p. 48). With that context, we can consider The Elements of Value Pyramid with the consumer and influencer in mind, but with the influencer taking place of brand. Then, we can apply that to the responses from consumers interviewed.

Figure 8: The Elements of Value Pyramid



(Source: Almquist, Bloch & Senior, 2016)

**FUNCTIONAL** Starting from the base of the pyramid, we can evaluate the value elements (italicized and bolded) that influencers provided for consumers. The value elements derived from the functional category existed across the Positives and Negatives.

***Informs*** and ***quality*** were values achieved by influencers doing reviews on products or services. Performing research for the benefit of the consumers was a service influencers were providing and consumers expected high quality reviews in order to inform their decisions. Interviewees also expressed they would perform their own additional research such as internet searches and reading customer reviews. Thus, influencers served as valuable first step or additional step for consumers to get informed on offerings. Influencers content style helped deliver additional value by showing consumers the effects of the products and services. For example, a beauty brand might advertise its blush with a photo or 30-second video advertisement. Influencers would promote this same blush, but the nature of their content would be mean consumers could see the actual effect of the product such as how it looked worn from different angles or how the product wore over the course of a full day. ***Variety*** was provided through influencers producing a myriad of content for consumers from video to pictures to storytelling. Interviewees noted that the variety that an influencer could show was distinctly different than the variety a brand could potentially deliver. A quote from one consumer elaborates:

*“I don’t really follow brands, mainly because I don’t like how brands promote on instagram. They put really polished pictures and those don’t provide any value for me. Whereas for influencers, the stuff that they’re promoting is part of their life, they tend to be presented in a more natural and applicable way for me”* (N2).

Consumers also appreciated that influencers could provide variety through exposing influencers to niche and interesting brands they would struggle to find on their own. ***Reduces risk*** was a value element relevant for both groups primarily because influencers could show the real product impact meaning consumers may avoid making unnecessary purchases. For example, N1 explained with an influencer she can see how a makeup product looks over the course of one day without having to buy it herself, whereas a brand would only show a stylized picture.

***Reduces effort, saves time, avoids hassle,*** and ***simplifies*** were values achieved through influencers showing consumers tips, tricks, and hacks that made their lives easier. Interviewees appreciated that influencers eliminated the work typically required for information gathering. Interviewees explain how this applies to their trip planning

*“Influencers are how I do all my research when I travel - to find out where to go and specifically hotels. When I book a trip somewhere and I know a few influencers who’ve been there, I’ll go and look where they stayed” (N3).*

*“When I was moving here, I found some Copenhagen-based influencers on my explore page. It’s a nice way to get to know brands from here or even nice places for a coffee. It’s a new way to look at a city, instead of going to buy a guidebook for a city” (P6).*

For some interviewees **connects** was a value element provided because influencers’ network enabled them to find other people they were interested in following.

**EMOTIONAL** Values derived in this level primarily address the Positives, however, **provides access** was a key value element for both groups. Influencers offered behind the scenes looks in instances such as exclusive events, photoshoots, and runway shows, where the interviewee would not have had access. They also gave consumers additional access to brands through early access previews or sneak peeks of products and services. Beyond influencers providing access to brands, influencers also provided access to themselves, such as details about their personal lives or insights into their work processes. The access to the influencer themselves was of particular importance for the Positives as the Negatives did not derive value from this, P3 explains, *“It makes her feel more genuine and like you’re closer to her when she includes her personal life as well. I like to follow influencers that show the business side and personal side too.”*

**Therapeutic value** and **wellness** were delivered by influencers providing recommendations to interviewees on how they take care of themselves such as improving their mental health or developing wellness practices. Some interviewees had a set routine to check in on influencers for daily, and that process itself provided some therapeutic benefits. P3 describe this process *“You do go onto their platform to check up and see how they are, what they’re doing, and what advice they have to give for that day.”* Therapeutic value and wellness were values derived only for the Positives.

**Design/aesthetics** was a value derived for both groups that was fundamental to influencer’s ability to be successful, specifically on Instagram where all the interviewees followed

influencers. Design/aesthetics was also how many consumers are initially attracted to following an influencer. The value is especially relevant for the Negatives, considering they derive a lower number of value elements from influencers compared to Positives.

*“I follow people for basically their aesthetic. I like to look at nice images - whether it includes branded content or whether it’s just a nice photo of their living room with no sponsored content”*

**Nostalgia**, though less mentioned, was another value element applicable for consumers who followed influencers somehow connected to their past. As an example, for C8, one of her favorite influencer evokes nostalgic elements -- *“She’s from Manchester and she’s a similar age so sometimes I watch her if I feel a bit homesick...it’s more relatable.”*

The **rewards me** value element was specific to the Positives where consumers received something in return for their engagement with the consumer. This was highlighted by consumers as they explained their experiences with direct interactions with influencers. When influencers responded to consumers directly, they were rewarded with positive feelings and encouragement. P3 explains, *“When someone responds, it does make you feel like they’re an actual person and not just a robot. I’m actually speaking to the person I’ve been following. It makes you feel like ‘Wow, they care about the fans.’”* Interviewees with positive experiences interacting directly with influencers had increased loyalty and sustained interest in the influencer.

**LIFE CHANGING** The next level of the pyramid deals with value elements in the category, life changing. Influencers delivered value elements in this category primarily to the Positives. Influencers delivered the value of **affiliation and belonging** by enabling consumers to identify with them. Interviewees expressed the ability to feeling a sense of closeness to influencers, as well as identifying with their favorite influencers or people their influencers often showcase. Motivation was a value element expressed by the Positives and Negatives. Through watching influencers consumers could be motivated to take steps towards achieving their personal goals. **Provides hope** is a value element around providing optimism to consumers. Interviewees received this element primarily through influencer inspiration. Consumers were inspired by what the influencer achieved -- *“Seeing people live out their passions is inspirational”*(C4). They used this as fuel for their own endeavors, *“If I like the life she’s leading, I get inspiration and I use it to get ideas for my own life...Some*



*[influencers] I look up to while others just inspire me to be a better person on some level - maybe it's to eat better, live better, style myself nicer, join better causes"* (N2). While consumers communicated that they were inspired by influencers, and some looked up to them, they did not aspire to become them - which is an important distinction.

**SOCIAL IMPACT** The sole value element at the top level of the pyramid is *self-transcendence* which is focused around serving people or society. Interviewees did not express any values derived from influencers as fitting within this category.

From these interviews, brands have successfully used influencers to deliver value to consumers within the functional, emotional, and life changing categories. Applying the same reasoning as Almquist et al., (2016) and considering consumers response, brands should focus on choosing influencers that deliver a mix of functional and emotional value elements - the categories most heavily mentioned by consumers - and if possible, one or two life changing or social impact elements.

#### *Desirable and Undesirable aspects of influencers*

For the Positives, some influencer attributes were seen as desirable while for the Negatives they were seen as undesirable. This section discusses the dichotomy of those attributes.

First, there was an idea and general sentiment amongst the Negatives that influencers and the emerging culture being built around them is negative. Consumers commented on culture created by influencers on social media as being unrealistic and unrepresentative of the average person. These negative sentiments around the culture as a whole had an impact on their views of individual influencers. At times, interviewees were attributing negative aspects of influencer culture to an individual influencer, as opposed to society as a whole. The concept that social media requires influencers to portray a specific version of themselves and that influencers are not showing an authentic version of who they are is what the Negatives focused on. N1 talks about an influencer she knows personally, and explains her reasoning for negative sentiments towards what influencer culture requires of an influencer,

*"I understand that there's a team behind how her instagram looks, so it's a full on production that maybe the average consumer doesn't get. When I look to other influencers, I have that in the back of my mind. I don't want the lives of the*

*influencers that I follow because I don't know what it really is. I'm not fooled by how influencers are presenting themselves."*

While Positives mentioned some negative aspects of individual influencers, they did not express similar sentiments that Negatives did around the overall culture that created them.

Second, content and its utilization was one of the most important subjects throughout the interviewees. Positives enjoyed influencers that personalized their content through tactics such as sharing details about their personal lives, telling stories about who they were, or asking consumers for advice on how to tackle issues they were dealing with. For some Positives, the personal sharing aspect was the most important reason for continuing to follow or for prioritizing certain influencers. Negatives were collectively on the other extreme. They viewed personal content from influencers as oversharing and found it particularly frustrating when influencers they followed on a regular basis began introducing personal details into their content. For negatives, the feeling of knowing influencers personally was not needed in order to follow or engage with them. The quotes below showcase these extremes from the Positives and Negatives.

*"I have more engagement with her posts because she talks about feelings and all the aspects of her life life" (P2).*

*"Sometimes I have the same feeling on specific stuff or the same opinion on an issue. I feel empathy for them even if I'm not going through the same difficulties as they are" (P2).*

*"I don't follow her because of who she is, I follow her because of what she does. I don't want to read about how impressive you are, I want practical advice" (N2) .*

*"I'm 100% about only the product...so product reviews, tips, and what works for them is why I'm there. I hate reading about their lives" (N1).*

**4.3 PART 2:** *What relationships can exist between consumers and influencers they choose to follow?*

### **4.3.1 Consumer-Influencer Relationship dynamics**

#### *4.3.1a Influencers and consumers: an elusive relationship*

One component of the interviews was to explore the types of relationships that exist and the components of relationships between influencers and consumers in order to better understand the emerging influencer culture. This research was unable to yield a clear typology of relationships, but it clarified consumers current stance on their relationship with influencers.

A small number of interviewees did not feel they dynamic that existed between themselves and the influencer warranted a label of relationship, though they did acknowledge a connection of some sort. Around her relationship with her favorite influencers P4 says, *“it’s not a relationship per se, but I am invested in that person.”*

However, the majority of interviewees in both the Positives and Negatives, did perceive a relationship between themselves and the influence though they faced extreme difficulty in summarizing, defining, or categorizing these relationships. The best articulation interviewees could provide was to highlight how bizarre and often times, irrational, their relationships with influencers were. The root of the bizarreness described was due to the fact that influencer relationships often felt one-sided. Interviewees knew a wealth of information about the influencer, both personal and generic, while the influencer did not know any specific information about the consumer. P1 describes this peculiarity:

*“You spend so much time following them, knowing everything about them, and they absolutely nothing about you. It makes you feel a bit weird that you know everything about them. It’s weird spending so much time following someone’s life and you’re never actually going to know them.”*

As a result of amount of information being shared and the time consumers spent investing in the connection, feelings expressed were most similar to those occurring with friendships or acquaintances however there was a natural distance experienced by interviewees which caused them to feel uneasy about the relationship. Additionally, the consumer-influencer relationship never translated from online to offline, which is the opposite case with many of the consumers’ friendships and acquaintanceships. N2 addresses this disconnect:

*“I don’t feel very close to them, but I almost feel like their your acquaintances even though the influencers don’t know you. It’s kind of weird when you think about it. I*

*know a lot about them and they don't even know me - I'm like a stalker almost. At least with your friends, it's more of a back and forth and you may talk about what they post online in real life".*

A few in the Positives solidly described their relationship with the influencer as a friendship, and in this acknowledged friendship, the consumer reacts based on how the influencer feels. P2 says, *"It's kind of like seeing your friend post, if she feels happy then you feel happy."* This friendship was strengthened for consumers by direct interactions with the influencer, such as a one-to-one message conversations or an influencer replying or reacting to their comment. The friendship also entailed going through different life stages with the influencer or seeing the progression of the influencer from less popular to more popular.

Lastly, all consumers strategically utilized a variety of influencers, rather than following only one, to fulfill varying relationship or connection needs.

*"I have different relationships with each of them. They have different influence on me - it's important for me that there's a variety of subjects that the influencer I follow talks about and and exposes me to" (N2).*

#### *4.3.1b Relationship shifts*

A big area of uncertainty for interviewees was around the shifting nature of their relationship or connection with influencers. One caption or one styling choice could instantly shift how the consumer perceived the influencer, and as a result cause them to question their overall relationship with the influencer.

Consumers realized that small things an influencer did could cause temporary changes to their relationship. For the Positives and Negatives, interviewees had an inclination to go against reason and continue to follow an influencer, even after they had established they no longer like them as an individual. Interviewees often felt vacillated on their feelings towards the influencer, actually unfollowing then refollowing the influencer on numerous occasions. The difficulty for consumers often lied in the fact while the influencer themselves had undesirable aspects, the content they created was still relevant to the consumer. N1 explains this dilemma, *"There's one who I constantly follow and unfollow. I find her annoying but still like her posts."* The confusion around liking or not liking the influencer could also create

confusion around the brand, especially if the consumer also has negative feelings towards the brand a consumer is promoting. P2 discusses this constantly fluctuating relationship:

*“When you think about influencers, it’s weird to think about how your mind works. I can have the feeling ‘I don’t like her’ but I still follow her and I hate the brand. But then because of her, now I trust the brand. So there’s a lot of conflicting views sometimes.”*

Consumers also realized that some natural progressions in life could cause a relationship with an influencer to change more permanently. The moment that interviewees were unable to relate to the influencer, their affinity towards the influencer declined. These changes were often brought on by the influencer growing in popularity or success. The relationship shift is important as it highlights the influencers need to strike the balance between new success and staying relatable as they’re growing to maintain fanbase that helped them grow.

P5 talked the disconnect she felt from one of her longtime favorite influencers who became very successful:

*“Obviously her lifestyle had gone up, so it makes sense should reflect that, but at the same time, I don’t want to watch people that are buying all the expensive things - it has to be something I can still relate to in someway. I’ll eventually unfollow - I give you a chance but then enough is enough.”*

#### *4.3.1c Relationship deterioration*

Negative interactions with influencers caused relationships to deteriorate and often the relationship was lost completely. Interviewees responses emphasized that a difference existed between a consumer being irritated or annoyed with an influencer versus a consumer losing all trust with an influencer. Irritation or annoyance on behalf of the consumer may lead to the unfollow and refollow pattern as discussed in the Relationship Shifts section. However, a complete lost of trust in an influencer lead the consumer choice to unfollow the influencer permanently.

Lying to consumers about a product’s quality was a large source of frustration for interviewees. They also expressed irritation with influencers that were operating out of alignment with their personal brand, such as an influencer with a focus on wholesomeness and health getting plastic surgery. For these offenses, relationship rebuilding may have been possible, especially when considering consumers in the Positives. P1 explained that an

influencer should *“Be honest about it so that it’s all transparent”* to start to rebuild trust while P3 thought *“F2F apologies to their fans or explaining why they did what they did”* could help restore. However, once trust is lost it’s difficult to gain back, and in some situations it was not possible. The Negatives were less likely to look for opportunities to rebuild a relationship with influencers where trust was lost. For the Negatives, the fact that social media offers so many influencers to choose from equated to low levels of loyalty given to each one. Unless it was an all-time favorite influencer, once they unfollowed an influencer they usually forgot about them all together.

Offensive, racist, or politically incorrect comments or actions by influencers were seen as unforgivable in the eyes of interviewees in the Positives and Negatives. For these instances, no opportunity to rebuild the relationship existed. N1 put it simply, *“If they said something offensive – I’m over it.”* N3 shared a specific experience around an influencer who she unfollowed due to her offensive behavior:

*“The day after the terrorist attack on London Bridge, she posted a photo on the London bridge. I thought in the caption she’d be commemorating the people who died but the caption was just ‘Love London.’ I wanted to DM her and tell her that that was the most insensitive thing I’d ever seen, but I just unfollowed her and vowed not to follow her again. I really liked her style, but that to me just shows she’s so unaware of what’s happening in the world and that’s such a turn off and I don’t want to follow anymore. That matters to me when I decided who to follow.”*

#### **4.4 PART 3:** *How can brands best utilize influencers to connect with consumers?*

##### **4.4.1 The Influencer-Brand Relationship**

This section explores the influencer-brand relationship, specifically how consumers see the relationship currently working and how they wish to see the relationship work in the future. This section summarizes consumers’ opinions as a whole grouping the Positives and Negatives together.

##### *4.4.1a Where influencers beat brand marketing*

Influencers can help brands raise awareness for their products, services, or causes in the mind of consumers. Brands can raise awareness without the use of influencers as well, but because consumers trust or somewhat trust influencers, there was an added degree of credibility to the message.

Interviewees were overwhelmed by the amount of brands, people, and causes on social media. Influencers that consumers know and like acted as a filter, only delivering to consumers a select number of brands to digest. If done effectively, influencers delivered brands that were most relevant to their following. Interviewees were still able to get variety in terms of learning about new products, services, and causes but do not have to manage finding them or evaluating them on their own. N2 explains, *“when you follow influencers it’s not about just one brand - it’s not narrow. For example, I can’t follow three different car brands all the time. I don’t really like following brands themselves.”*

Influencers are also great tools for brands to bridge geographic distance while getting their message to consumers. In talking about an influencer from another country, P3 says *“I’m in Australia and she’s in UK - it’s like other side of the world - but you feel like she connects personally with her followers.”*

While brands can communicate their brand voice and show a variety of ads, they are not a person. Influencers can show a lifestyle, making ads or brand integrations appear more natural and seamless. For the lifestyle showcasing ability, interviewees found brands using influencers tactics for marketing to be more effective than traditional marketing and advertising tactics such as email or banner ads. Additionally, there was a contagious component around influencer marketing. The more influencers that had a product, the more often consumers saw it and the more they wanted to buy it and felt they had to have it. Brands alone do not have that ability.

#### *4.4.1b Balance is key*

As discussed throughout the previous sections, balance is key to an influencer being successful in consumers’ eyes. They need to have a balance between: organic versus promoted content, realistic self-presentation versus polished self-presentation, and being a rising versus and staying relatable to their followers. Another aspect not mentioned concerns the number of followers that influencers had. About half of the interviewees did not care about the following size of the influencer and that component did not weight into whether or not they chose to follow or not follow an influencer. The other half discussed the tension between influencers having too many followers or not having enough followers. Too far in either direction could have an negative impact on how consumers perceived the influencer.

With not enough followers, consumer questioned the credibility of the influencer and with too many followers, consumers questioned the motivations behind the influencer content. P1 breaks down her assessment of the size of an influencer's following:

*“If they don't have enough followers I'm like 'oh, what's the point?' If they have too many followers I think now they have a big head, now they won't post genuine things, or they're posting just for money because they have so many followers.”*

Brands have to consider these nuances and details such as how consumers perceive influencer's following size when selecting who to associate with their brand.

#### *4.4.1c Brand power*

To understand the degree of brand power that exists when using influencers, interviewees were asked about to the extent to which influencer recommendations changed the course of their consumer evaluation processes.

Positive review from influencers influenced consumers to buy or more seriously consider a product. Negative reviews were reported as rare, but added to the credibility of an influencer. Negative reviews from influencers did not mean consumers cease to consider the brand or its offering when the review addressed the quality. Negative reviews from influencers addressing quality resulted in consumers doing more research on the brand's product or service in order to decide on whether to make a purchase. However, negative reviews addressing the brand's values, such as unethical treatment of workers, was taken more seriously and were enough for a consumer to cease use or consideration of a brand.

Interviewees were asked about the brands where the influencer chosen to represent the brand resulted in strong reactions, either positive or negative. Consumers respected brands that took a stand or made a statement through their use of influencers. As an example, N1 talked about a beauty brand that made a statement through their use of influencers. The brand itself made a statement by creating a diverse product, but they also made a statement through their influencers who were diverse in body size and skin tone to market their product. She explains how seeing a brand use influencers in this way impacted her:

*“I'm sad it didn't exist when I was growing up – I used to really care about marketing and how people were represented, but it wasn't developed to this point yet. So, now I feel it's just really beautiful” (N1).*



The brand using influencers to connect with her also shifted the way she felt towards purchasing their products:

*“It makes me want to buy them more. I feel like this a brand the cares about people. Because of they way they’re connecting to me, I can tell that they have diverse people working at the companies - it comes through in the way the right their captions, the photos and people in the photos, etc.” (N1).*

Brand loyalty or strong brand associations can overcome brand mistakes. Consumers shared stories of brands they loved chose the wrong influencer that either did not fit in their conception of the brand or offended them in some way. For brands where consumers were extremely loyal to the product, the influencer’s mistakes did not stop them from using the brand. Consumer explained reasons for loyalty ranging from cultural to historical. Additionally, a brand that was a good quality made brand loyalty easier to maintain as the interviewee could not imagine life without the product, despite their momentary anger towards the brand. P4 discussed a brand where their use of influencer *“was just really weird and inappropriate and it totally missed the mark.”* However, she explained that did stop her from using the brand, as she had attached childhood memories to it.

*“My grandmother loved it and it was a thing to share it together so I have memories connected to it. I would still drink a it over another brand” (P4).*

#### *4.4.1d Drawbacks of using influencers*

The relationship between influencers and brands can go awry which will ultimately impact how influencers view both the brand and the influencer.

Interviewees expected that brands were strategic in their choice of influencer to represent them. They wanted to see alignment between the type of influencer chosen and the type of brand. In the age of social media, consumers are less forgiving to brands that do not understand their consumer and to brands that are not hiring people who understand the consumer base to shape how messages are being communicated to them. Interviewees viewed brands that chose the right influencer to represent them as brands took time to care and understand their followers. The wrong influencer choice can make or break a consumer’s perception of the brand. P3 explains how a misstep in this area could have detrimental effects:

*“I’ve definitely looked at brands and thought ‘Ew, why did they choose that person as the face or to promote them?... If I like the brand but don’t like the influencer and the brands puts them together then it can ruin the face value of the brand.’”*

Influencers personal life can affect the brand. If an influencer acts poorly this not only affect the influencers personal brand and makes consumers less inclined to follow the influencer, but it affects the image of the brand that chose to collaborate with the influencer. Some influencers force consumers to make a choice, *“She’s a controversial influencer – you either love her or you hate her”* (P1). Thus, brands need to take into account the influencers’ personal brand and life, not only what the influencer chooses to show, when choosing who they want to represent or be officially affiliated with their brand.

The huge number of influencers in the social media space contributes to lack of loyalty that consumers have to specific influencers. This means that a brand’s investment in an influencer is sometimes meaningless or less impactful than they hoped it would be. Brands must be resilient in and find that strategy and right mix of influencers that work for them. The increasing amount of influencers also means brands should consider if their chosen influencers are actually successfully in communicating their desired message. N3 points out, *“Now there’s a movement towards using micro influencers because a lot of the macro influencers are oversaturated and they promote a lot of brands so they don’t have brand loyalty, whereas micro influencers might have more of an impact because they have more of a niche or a more dedicated/engaged following.”* Consumers are aware and feel the oversaturation of influencers in the market, so brands have to be strategic and be prepared to execute on alternative.

#### *4.4.1e Influencers can’t fix everything*

While influencers are powerful in many ways, brands cannot use influencers to reach all their goals and objectives. Interviewees shared that for some products or services, influencers simply are not the right fit. Some products need to be tested by the consumer itself. An influencer may not have negative impact on a consumer’s perception, but their promotion enough is not sufficient due to the nature of the product or service a brand is offering.

Not all brands are suitable to be connected to influencers. Particularly, large brands that are household names or have virtually universal levels of awareness are not necessary to pair

with influencers. N2 talks about a brand she has known forever and still uses today trying to advertise through influencer marketing. The brand's well known popularity meant that it would never need to be explained to a consumer -- *"It was so awkward and ridiculous. It's the kind of content I don't need. It just seems really weird to talk about, because you'd never talk about in real life. Tampax seems out of touch. Some brands are just not suitable to be promoted so much."*

Lastly, interviewees universally would not look to influencer for high involvement purchases. For discretionary spending, making a purchase motivated by an influencer is fine, but for purchases such as a house or a car they would look for experts and they do not consider their favorite influencers as experts in those areas. Additionally, for a purchase of that size, consumers would look for more than one opinion.

#### *Personal connections overpower influencers*

Overall, influencers and their recommendations were parts of what consumers took into consideration when evaluating brand's products or services. Consumers, however, often consulted other sources before actually making a purchase. Though consumers spent lots of times reading and evaluating influencer's content, friends, family, and personal references were the most reliable source for recommendations on products or services.

## Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter analyzes the results this research has developed in answering the main and sub-research questions. It will also discuss the main findings revealed in the previous chapter in conjunction with the past research and studies highlighted in the literature review. These findings contribute to the evolving area of influencer marketing.

### ***RQ: How do consumers conceptualize, perceive and select influencers they follow on Instagram?***

Trustworthiness is a key driver in how consumers perceive and choose influencers, but expertise is not as important as past research suggested by the Source Credibility Model (Martensen et al., 2018; McCracken, 1989). For unknown brands, particularly, trust is important. For interviewees, trust enhanced the credibility of influencers. In certain cases trust in the influencer translated to trust in or credibility of unknown brands or unknown brand causes that the influencer promoted.

Familiarity, likeability, and similarity were all put forth in The Source Attractiveness Model as important characteristics for message sources (Martensen et al., 2018; McCracken, 1989). The interviews supported familiarity and likeability are still important characteristics, with familiarity being easy to achieve for influencers and likeability being a necessity for interviewees to have to maintain a positive relationship with an influencer. Negative relationships are maintained even when they go against the reasoning of the interviewees. Similarity with the influencer is a helpful characteristic for some interviewees, but having alignment with the influencer is key.

Interviewees do not want to feel like ‘one of many,’ thus appreciate influencers with a reasonable, but not too large following and value interactions that feel personalized. As trust is a key point, as mentioned above, interviewees showed that they find micro influencers easier to trust.

Findings show that influencers also serve a key purpose by acting funnel. They cut out unnecessary noise and clutter and ideally deliver only what is of interest to the consumer.

***SQ: What relationships can exist between consumers and influencers they choose to follow?***

The consumer-influencer relationship is the at core of this sub-question. Interviews show that friendships, or relationships similar to friendship, can exist between consumers and influencers, but they have to be open to this relationship first. Primarily, what consumers get of relationships with influencers are specific values that they are searching for whether, consciously or unconsciously.

Lin et al. (2018) findings about online opinion leaders using appeal leadership and knowledge leadership to help consumers derive value from brands' products or services are supported by the interview findings. However, interviews uncovered that the type of value derived from influencers depends on the type of consumer considered. Interviewees with overall positive attitudes towards influencers are likely to derive hedonic value from while consumers with negative attitudes towards influence are likely to derive utilitarian value from consumers.

***SQ: How can brands best utilize influencers to connect with consumers?***

The influencer-brand relationship is the at core of this sub-question.

Influencers' strength lies in their ability to connect and impress their ideas and lifestyle on consumers. Though marketers try to have brands take animistic forms (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998), interviews shows that nothing can compare to consumer interactions with actual humans. Interacting with influencers can help consumers build stronger connections to the brands that influencers endorse. The potential strength of connection wouldn't be able to be built with just the brand alone.

Interviewees did not spend time thinking of the roles as persuasion agents as suggested by Kirmani & Ferraro (2016), but they were highly aware of being persuasion targets. Interviewees are informed of marketing tactics and are cognizant of influencers being another means of persuasion. As a result they were quick to be angered or annoyed which supports existing theory around the tactfulness needed to manage relationships with consumers (Fournier, 1998; Management Association, 2018).

Answers regarding how brands can practically apply findings that address this research question appear are revealed in the Conclusion where Managerial Implications are discussed.

### *Interplay between brands, consumers and influencers*

While not a research question, exploring the influencer concept entails not only understanding the consumer-influencer relationship and brand-influencer relationship in silos, but also understanding how the relationships between the three parties come together. Perhaps the most interesting insights from this research are those regarding the intersection of these three parties.

The interplay between consumer, brands, and influencers is complex and involves dynamic relationships that constantly fluctuate. The interviews reveal that the consumer stands at the core of influencer-consumer-brand relationships, setting the tone for how influencers act and react, and in turn how brands act and react. This finding is supported by the Customer-Centric Influence Marketing Model which promotes consumers, rather than influencers, being the central focus (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). The interviews highlight the use of micro-influencers for forming close relationships with consumers with those that are open to relationships, which Brown & Fiorella (2013) also established as an optimal method.

Another key finding in the interplay of three parties is that influencers can cause sudden shifts in consumers' relationships with brands. Missteps on behalf of influencers can lead to negative attitudes towards brands they represent, even resulting in relationship deterioration or dissolution (Fournier, 1998). This idea also works in reverse with interviewees feeling more deeply connected or feeling the consumer-brand relationship being escalated after positive interactions with an influencer.

How influencers impact consumers relationships with brands also depends on the type of consumer being dealt with. Interviewees with positive attitudes towards influencers appreciate and prioritize the consumer-influencer relationship as well as the emotional values derived from influencers at the forefront. Consumers with negative attitudes towards influencers prioritize the consumer-brand relationship or utilitarian, functional value derived from influencers.

## Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

This study attempted to explore the influencer concept on social media by examining how consumers understand and connect with influencers, and how brands play into these interactions. Research on relevant theories and concepts was combined with qualitative study. The findings from the study shed light on the ties between consumers and influencers, as well as the interplay of consumers, influencers, and brands while providing valuable information with which marketers can evaluate influencer marketing for their brand.

### **6.1 Managerial Implications**

The research findings have several implications for marketers who are managing a brand. This section takes a strategic brand management point of view of Keller (2013) to discuss these implications.

Firstly, this research implies that influencers are important factors for brands to consider. Past research already shows that influencers can help brands build awareness, but this study shows influencers can create and help to cultivate positive brand associations in consumers minds, and ultimately build brand equity.

Today, influencers on social media are intertwined into the lives of consumers, and because of this intertwinement, they are the perfect avenue to deliver brand's messages. Additionally, consumers are aware of brands trying to reach them and they accept this fact. However, consumers look for alignment. Consumers align themselves with influencers that deliver the content or value they want. If brands would align strategically with correct influencers for their brands, in theory, they should be able to reach their target consumer to build brand relationships through to a brand resonance level. The ability to align properly with influencers requires brands to understand their perceived, not only desired, brand identity and brand image. Additionally, this research reveals the importance of micro influencers in connecting with consumers, generating loyalty, and moving consumers them to make a purchase. When brands consider which influencers to align themselves with, they should take into consideration the power of micro influencers, who may have smaller audience but have the potential to deliver content and value to consumers that resonates better and is more relevant.

Keller (2013) says “Ideally marketers would be able to construct detailed ‘mental maps’ to understand exactly what exists in consumers’ minds -- all their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, beliefs, and attitudes towards different brands (Keller, 2013, p. 325). Brands need to understand that influencers have the ability to extract the type of information Keller (2013) address from some consumers. Interviewees with overall positive attitudes towards influencers described some exchanges that happened between themselves and influencers and likened their relationships to friendships or near friendships. Even some interviewees with overall negative attitudes towards influencers have had positive direct interactions with influencers. This shows the the tremendous power and inside access influencers have to consumers that brands can take advantage of. Brands should understand influencers not only as resources to amplify their message but also as an avenue to listen, understand, and gain insights on their consumers to they can use to eventually deliver value. Brands should also consider that the listening process is not a one-time occurrence. It should be done continuously because it is a dynamic phenomena. The way consumers feel and perceive brands people changes rapidly, and external factors such as technologies also impact their thoughts.

This research also reveals the delicate nature of the consumer-influencer-brand relationship. Missteps by influencers or simply changes in consumer perceptions towards influencers could potentially affect consumers perceptions of brands if influencers are somehow linked to the brand. While interviews showed that consumers’ strong personal associations with brands could overpower potentially negative associations brought about by negative interactions with influencers, it is still a point for brands to consider. That said, while brands should collaborate with influencers, the construction of the brand and what it stands for should be independent of the influencer. Due to the constantly fluctuating consumer perceptions, the brand should also be able to stand alone.

## **6.2 Limitations and Future Research**

While this research provided a source of useful information, limitations exist that should be addressed. Some limitations were addressed in other areas of the thesis, and the remainder are discussed here. One limitation that exists is due to the nature of the qualitative study. I chose to conduct a qualitative study in order to have the ability to explore the influencer phenomenon get rich insights from consumers. However, qualitative studies pose their own



problems in regards to research quality. A complementary quantitative study could have perhaps been done to further elaborate on the some of the findings of the qualitative study in order to improve the research quality. Another limitation has to do with the size of the sample. Research texts are not definitive on what constitutes a prime sample size for qualitative methods. As discussed in the Sampling section, 5-25 units (Saunders et al., 2012). and 6-8 units (Daymon & Holloway, 2002) were both sample sizes that could have been applicable to this research. The sampling size finally achieved was one that was higher than the minimum of the suggested ranges, but it could have been extended to the maximum of these ranges. As a solo researcher, I also had to factor in my resource capacity to effectively conduct, execute, and interpret the research.

This research can serve as a starting point for future researchers on the influencer marketing concept. As the field of influencer marketing has not been extensively studied, many areas for research exist. This research aimed to explore how consumers understand and interact with influencers today. Throughout interviews, interviewees lightly touched experiences they had of making purchases due to being swayed by influencers. Going forward, future research could be a study that looks into influencers' effect on buying habits and more particularly how influencers can impact the purchasing process of consumers.

The study conducted limited the social platform of consideration to Instagram and sampled women within the same age bracket. I found through interviews that interviewees had thoughts on how younger generations differ in regards to their desired social media platform of choice and style of usage. Since technology would have played a different role in the lives of the generation below the interviewees, it would be worth conducting a similar research with a younger age bracket. This research was limited to women, but future research could explore these same areas with a male population. This research focused on the social media platform Instagram. Communication, relationships, and engagement levels among others can differ from platform to platform, so it could also be worthwhile to explore the influencer concept on other social media platforms.

### **6.3 Outlook**

The future of influencer marketing seems bright. It is clear that whatever comes next comes will be dictated by the consumer. Brands that understand the consumer deepest will be able to utilize influencers to their advantage best. As more and more influencers get added to the

market , influencers will have to create a strategy to maintain their consumer connections - focusing on delivering transparency and maintaining a continuous understanding of the values their followers look for in them.

The dynamic nature of influencer marketing and relationships means brands, and marketers behind brands, need to keep a close eye on the movement of the market. Technology changes and consumers change, and it can happen rapidly and simultaneously. Companies should continuously surveil this situation and craft marketing research practices around continuously getting usable insights from their consumers in order to know how to adjust and tailor their influencer marketing strategy.

As technology continues to evolve, the field of influencer marketing surely will as well. A few years from now, it is possible that nothing is the same.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Interview Guide

#### Interview Guide

##### Introduction

*Hello! My name is Simi Ojuri and I am a Masters student at Copenhagen Business School. My thesis is focused around influencer marketing and interactions between influencers, consumers, and brands. My goal is to find about more your relationships with influencers and perceptions of digital and social media. I have a list of questions that I will ask you to guide our talk, but please imagine this as an open conversation - feel free to elaborate as much as you would like in your responses or add in additional details as you see fit. With your consent, I will also be recording this interview for further analysis later.*

##### Demographic questions

- What is your name? What is your age?
- Where are you from?
- What is your profession/what are studying?

##### Introductory Questions

Question to Interviewee	Empirical Research Question	Theoretical base/inspiration
What types of social media do you utilize? How often do you use it/them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use Instagram? How often? <i>(If no, conclude interview)</i></li> </ul>	-	Understanding the interviewee's usage habits to further frame the interview
Do you know what an influencer is? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does the word influencer mean to you?</li> <li>• How would you describe an influencer in your own words?</li> </ul>	How do consumers define influencers?	Understanding the interviewee's current knowledge level in regards to influencers to further frame the interview
In your view, how does an influencer compare to a celebrity ambassador?	How do consumers perceive influencers?	McCracken (1989)

##### Engagement & Awareness

<b>Question to Interviewee</b>	<b>Empirical Research Question</b>	<b>Theoretical base/inspiration</b>
Do you follow any influencers? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approximately, how many?</li> <li>• What kinds of influencers? What industries do they cover?</li> <li>• On what types of social media do you tend to follow them?</li> </ul>	How engaged are consumers with regard to influencers?	
Which influencer (s) do you follow on a regular/daily basis (name and channel)? Why do you follow him/her/them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long have you followed them for?</li> <li>• How do you choose which influencers to follow?</li> </ul>	How intertwined (if it all) are influencers with the life of consumers?	
Do you share influencer posts with your friends (privately) or your network (publicly)?	How comfortable are consumers with sharing their opinions on influencers?	
When you think about your favorite influencers, what type of content do you like to see from them? ( <i>i.e. product reviews, general life updates</i> ) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If yes, did you follow this brand on social media or visit their website?</li> </ul>	How do / How can influencers effectively reach their audience of consumers?	

### **Authenticity & Perception**

<b>Question to Interviewee</b>	<b>Empirical Research Question</b>	<b>Theoretical base/inspiration</b>
Are you aware of the size of the following your favorite influencers have? ( <i>For context, micro = 1 to 10K, Macro = 10K to 99K; and Mega Influencers 1 million+</i> )	What factors, about influencers, affect how consumers perceive them?	De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017)
Have you ever made a purchase based of an influencer's suggestion? (or would you?) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you (or would you) rely solely on the recommendation on influencer to? Do you (or would you) use other aids?</li> </ul>	What impact can influencers have on consumers' purchasing processes and/or decisions?	
When you read a positive or negative a review from an influencer, what do you think? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does this inspire you to buy/not buy a product or service?</li> <li>• How does an influencer's feedback</li> </ul>	What impact can influencers have on consumers' purchasing processes and/or decisions?	

compare to customer feedback (i.e. customer reviews?)		
When you're looking to try a new product, at what point do you value an influencer's opinion the most?	What impact can influencers have on consumers' purchasing processes and/or decisions?	
How do you feel about traditional marketing and advertising tactics (i.e. advertisements, email campaigns) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does influencer content feel more real to you?</li> </ul>	What value do consumers derive from influencer content?	
Do you ever notice disclaimers in the influencer content you view? How does this impact your social media browsing experience? ( <i>paid promotion with...</i> , <i>#sponsored</i> , <i>#ad</i> , or even influencers saying "I'm not a sponsor for this product, I just love it") <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does it feel like an advertisement?</li> <li>If yes, does this matter? Does the change your response to how view the brand?</li> <li>Does this affect how you view the influencer?</li> </ul>	What impact can influencer marketing have on consumers' relationships with brands and brand perception?	
Do you find value in specific influencer tactics that don't appear as readily in traditional advertising (such as unboxing, real time looks into insider events, etc.)?	What value do consumers derive from influencer content? In what ways are brands implementing influencer marketing?	Smith & Colgate (2007)



<p>Think about your favorite influencer(s) (maybe one that you follow daily), how would describe the connection or relationship you have with them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you describe the kind of relationship you have with them?</li> <li>• How important is this relationship to your daily life? What is the greatest value you get out of your relationship with them?</li> <li>• Do they have an impact on how you feel?</li> <li>• What does the influencer represent to you?</li> <li>• Do you look up to them at all?</li> <li>• Do you respect their opinion?</li> <li>• Do you perceive them as experts in their respective fields?</li> </ul>	<p>How can we understand the types of relationships consumers have with influencers?</p>	<p>Fournier (1998)</p>
<p>Do you watch the Instagram stories, chat directly, or comment on influencer posts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If yes, how often?</li> <li>• If yes to chatting, can you describe your direct interaction(s) with the influencer?</li> </ul>	<p>How connected to consumers feel to influencers?</p>	
<p>Do you ever have negative interactions with influencers (<i>i.e. don't like their posts, don't agree with their content, lose your trust, etc.</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If yes, do you unfollow them?</li> <li>• What can they do to earn back your trust?</li> </ul>	<p>How connected to consumers feel to influencers? What value to they derive from these connections?</p>	<p>Fournier (1998) Smith &amp; Colgate (2007)</p>
<p>How many brands do your favorite influencers endorse?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this too little or too many for you? Does the number of brands they endorse matter to you?</li> </ul>	<p>How are brands being impacted by the actions of influencers?</p>	
<p>What types of purchases do you typically look to influencers for guidance on?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For larger life decisions (such as buying a house, buying a car, etc.), do you look to influencers for advice on what they suggest?</li> </ul>	<p>What level of impact can an influencer have on consumers' opinions?</p>	
<p>Have there been any brands where you</p>	<p>What impact can</p>	

<p>haven't agreed with the selected choice of influencer?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did it make you feel about the brand when you found out?</li> <li>• Conversely, have there been any brands where you really liked their choice of influencer(s)? How did it make you feel about the brand when you found out?</li> </ul>	<p>influencers have on brands and brand value? How are brands utilizing influencers to reach consumers?</p>	
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**Appendix B: Interviewee Overview**

	<b>Identifier</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Instagram Usage</b>	<b>Facebook Usage</b>	<b>Snapchat Usage</b>	<b>YouTube Uage</b>	<b>Twitter Usage</b>	<b>Pinterest Usage</b>	<b>Other Usage</b>
<b>Saoirse</b>	P1	23	Daily	Daily	Daily	-	-	-	
<b>Judy</b>	P2	22	Daily	Daily	-		-	-	Line
<b>Allie</b>	P3	24	Daily	Daily	Daily	Daily	-	-	Vibe
<b>Chasidy</b>	P4	26	Daily	Weekly	-	-	Have but don't use	-	
<b>Cara</b>	N1	26	Daily	Have but don't use	Deleted		Weekly		
<b>Dalia</b>	N2	28	Daily	Daily	-	Occasionally	-	-	LinkedIn
<b>Kate</b>	N3	25	Daily	Occasionally	Have but don't use	-	Have but don't use	-	
<b>Phoebe</b>	P5	25	Daily	Daily	Occasionally	Occasionally	Have but don't use	Weekly	
<b>Silke</b>	P6	24	Daily	Weekly	Daily	-	-	Daily	

## Appendix C: Interview Coding

<b>Open Codes</b>	<b>Axial Codes</b>	<b>Selective Codes</b>
<p>what qualifies as an influencer</p> <p>From influencer to celebrity</p> <p>Influencer is not a celebrity</p>	<p>perception of influencers (vs. celebrities)</p>	<p>conceptualization of influencer marketing in the minds of consumers</p>
<p>Choice on what they choose to show</p> <p>Realistic about influencers – here to make money</p> <p>influencer marketing isn't secretive, I'm very aware</p> <p>Essentially professional content creators</p>	<p>influencer marketing as legitimate function/not covert</p>	
<p>I know it's sponsored</p> <p>what exactly do you get paid for?</p> <p>Question it but more informed</p> <p>Extra Research</p> <p>Transparence is good</p> <p>Sneakiness is annoying</p>	<p>Transparency</p>	
<p>Be real</p> <p>Make it credible</p> <p>Personalization is important</p> <p>Create a truthful space</p> <p>Feels real when you get a response from influencer</p> <p>Should Balance between sponsored and organic posts</p> <p>Being more critical makes you more believable</p> <p>Should show they're not focused only on money</p>	<p>ideal characteristics of an influencer</p>	<p>consumer selection of influencers</p>
<p>Value in reviews</p> <p>Behind the scenes</p> <p>Sneak peek</p> <p>Aesthetics are important</p> <p>Tips &amp; Tricks, hacks, things i can use in my own life</p> <p>Influencers do the research for you</p> <p>Influencers provide another perspective</p> <p>I like nice images on my feed</p> <p>Getting responses from influencers is nice/cool</p> <p>New brand exposure</p> <p>Niche content from small influencers</p>	<p>value consumers derive from influencers</p>	

Avenue to explore cities		
Real Authentic Not perfect Mortal Reachable Trust Similar values	<b>drivers behind following influencers</b>	
Personal life desirable for positives Oversharing (amongst older interviewees) Talks about her feelings I follow because of what you do not who you are Product focused, don't care about influencer Negative culture	<b>non-desirable aspects of influencers</b>	
Bizarre process Bizarre relationship Confused because I know I don't know them I know you, you don't know me	<b>bizarre, irrational relationship</b>	<b>relationship types/components and dynamics</b>
Lifestyle gap between myself and influencer When unrelated, relationship changes	<b>relationship shifts</b>	
Lies Trust is hard to regain Easily annoyed Genuine Apologies	<b>relationship deterioration</b>	
Following influencers = variety; brands = narrow Influencers feel more natural than brands Influencers show a lifestyle, brands can't	<b>brand benefits from using influencers</b>	<b>ideal brand use of influencers from consumer perspective</b>
Not too polished, not too sloppy Fine line between too many and not enough followers Too big = less trustworthy Balance between new success/popularity and staying relatable Aware of number of followers	<b>balance is key</b>	
Negative reviews aren't the end Brand loyalty > influencer recommendation strong brand associations can overcome brand mistakes	<b>brand power</b>	<b>brand considerations for their influencer strategy</b>

Brands that make a statement/take a stand quality products> brand mistakes		
right influencers means brands care/understand followers Some brands get it, others don't Micro influencers have more of an impact be strategic about the influencers they choose alignment with the type of brand and type of influencer	<b>consumer expectations of brand-influencer selection</b>	
Scandal, controversy Ruin personal brand/image with bad things Wrong influencer can make or break perceptions of brand So many influencers means you don't have to be loyal Bad, racist, out of touch things Overwhelming amount of influencers/brands, oversaturated	<b>drawbacks of using influencers</b>	
Some products just need to be tested Certain things just feel fake Certain brands don't need influencers Influencers for life challenges not big purchases	<b>influencers can't fix everything</b>	
Consult other sources Friends and family recommendations	<b>personal connections overpower influencers</b>	