

# SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND CONSUMPTION

*THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AS SEEN  
FROM THE CONSUMER'S PERSPECTIVE*

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Emilie Rosenørn  
101348

Sophia Rachel Bella  
Kormind 101731

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Janssen

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# Resumé

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Forbrugerlandskabet har de seneste år oplevet store forandringer som følge af sociale medier. Dette skyldes især fremkomsten af *influencere*, som i stigende grad udgør en vigtig komponent, når det kommer til forbrugeres eksponering for produktorienteret indhold. Som følge af denne udvikling har flere forskere undersøgt om brugen af sociale medier påvirker forbrugere. Forskningsområdet er dog meget nyt og derfor er det begrænset, hvor meget litteratur, der er tilgængeligt og hvor nuanceret et billede det giver på forholdet mellem *influencere* og forbrugere. Med særligt fokus på *influencere*, der promoverer skønheds- og modeprodukter undersøger dette speciale derfor, *hvordan* eksponeringen af produktpromovering på sociale medier påvirker forbrugeres købsproces.

Med henblik på at undersøge denne problemstilling valgte vi at strukturere specialet ud fra ønsket om at besvare tre forskningsspørgsmål. Disse spørgsmål søgte svar på, hvordan forbrugeres identifikation af købsbehov påvirkes af at følge skønheds- og modeinfluencere, hvordan forbrugere forholder sig til influenceres indflydelse på deres køb samt hvordan forbrugere gør brug af deres forhold til *influencere* som led i købsprocessen. Ud fra en socialkonstruktivistisk videnskabsteoretisk tilgang og den kvalitative metode undersøgte vi problemformuleringen og de tilhørende forskningsspørgsmål. Vi foretog en række dybdegående interviews med forbrugere, der aktivt benytter *influencere* i deres købsproces. På baggrund af disse interview lavede vi en tematisk analyse og identificerede temaer i interviewene, der gav indsigt i forbrugernes købsadfærd som følge af brugen af sociale medier.

Ud fra den tematiske analyse fandt vi frem til, at købsbehov opstår som følge af eksponering til *influencere*. Fælles for forbrugerne gjaldt det, at de har et forhold til *influencere*, der i forbrugernes øjne er baseret på autenticitet og ønsket om inspiration eller fascination. Derudover udviste forbrugerne i høj grad bevidsthed om, hvordan deres købsvaner påvirkes af *influencere*. Det stod også klart, at forbrugerne er meget selvbevidste om mængden af deres forbrug, og at de ønsker at købe mindre. Til trods for ønsket om at minimere deres forbrug fandt vi, at dette ønske primært kom til udtryk i forbrugernes refleksioner forud for købet.

På baggrund af resultaterne holdt op imod litteraturen kom vi frem til en række konklusioner. Først og fremmest tillægger vi os opfattelsen af, at influencere i høj grad påvirker købsprocessen for forbrugere. Mere præcist kunne vi udlede, at influencere påvirker behovserkendelsen og informationssøgningen i købsprocessen. Ud fra vores research kunne vi ydermere konkludere, at forbrugerne ikke kun er passive modtagere af påvirkning fra influencere, men at de derimod aktivt opsøger indhold på sociale medier i forbindelse med specifikke behov, og i den forbindelse reflekterer over det, de møder. Desuden har de mange tanker om, hvordan indholdet påvirker dem. I den forbindelse modsætter vi os forestillingen om forbrugerne som ukritiske modtagere af indhold. Dertil konkluderede vi, at det digitale forhold mellem influencere og forbrugere i høj grad er præget af kompleksitet. Forholdet frembringer nemlig også forbehold for forbrugeren, der forsøger at minimere sit forbrug, men konstant bliver fristet til at købe. Den høje eksponering for produkter på sociale medier kan desuden vise sig at have den modsatte effekt på forbrugerne, hvis købslyst minimeres af overeksponeringen for produktorienteret indhold. På baggrund heraf opfordrer vi til videre undersøgelse af emnet.

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# 1. Introduction

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Between 2004 and 2010, three of the world's largest social media platforms were created (McFadden, 2018). Known today as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, these platforms have not only transformed how people communicate and interact, but also redefined how consumer goods are viewed and purchased (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). Social media platforms have had significant consequences across society that no one could have predicted, including how the corporate world uses social media as a new outlet for product promotion (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). As a result, a significant part of today's marketing activities is focused on advertisements on social media and brand deals with influencers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). In this regard, Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) define an *influencer* as:

*“(...) any popular Instagram character with a high number of followers, who has a high taste in fashion and lifestyle, which enables them to monetize their appearance” (p. 569)*

Using influencers for product promotion has become such a prominent part of companies' marketing efforts that marketing scholars have coined the term *influencer marketing* (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). As users of social media platforms and consumers of beauty and fashion products, we have witnessed the development in which social media influencers have become a phenomenon as well as how influencers' content has become increasingly product-oriented. As reflected in Jin et al.'s (2019) definition, fashion and lifestyle may be considered key proponents of influencers. This is subsequently reflected in the content that influencers share and the types of products that they promote as these are particularly focused on beauty and fashion (Gerdeman, 2019; Preuss, 2019).

The fashion industry is considered one of the early adopters of social media influencers, while Forbes has argued that influencers are changing the face of the beauty industry (Gerdeman, 2019; Jepma, 2019). The impact of influencers is also reflected in the global spending on influencer marketing, which has grown tremendously in recent years with an estimated increase from \$2 billion in 2017 to \$8 billion in 2019 (Gerdeman, 2019). Although these numbers reflect spending on influencer marketing within all product categories, the numbers speak to the scope of influencer

marketing. Moreover, the spending underlines the impact that social media has on consumption with social media becoming more of a retail platform and influencers playing an increasingly prominent role with regard to consumers' purchasing decisions (Preuss, 2019).

Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials represent the youngest generation of adults and named "the world's most powerful consumers", millennials may be viewed as the main drivers of the shifting dynamics in consumption (Bialik & Fry, 2019; Gapper, 2018). These shifting dynamics are closely related to social media, which has become the most important contributor to fueling growth in the beauty and fashion industry (Gapper, 2018). As a part of this, global millennial spending power has reached an all-time high and has surpassed the spending power of generation X (Gapper, 2018). Millennials have thus become one of the largest consumer groups and as a result, their consumer behavior in relation to social media has become a new research area of interest for marketing scholars.

Following the rise of social media and the subsequent role that influencers have come to play with regard to sharing and promoting product-oriented content, more scholars have started to study the effect of social media on consumption. Several academic papers have, therefore, been published examining social media's effect on consumption. This includes Berryman and Kavka (2017) who argue that social media is one of the key contributors when it comes to shaping consumer behavior and decisions. In addition, Halvorsen, Hoffmann, Coste-Manière, and Stankeviciute (2013) argue that fashion bloggers have the ability to affect purchase decisions among the blogs' followers. Despite these findings, very little research is available about the wider effects that influencers have on their followers in terms of how the followers' ways of consuming are affected by viewing product-oriented content on social media.

Based on the key role that social media platforms have come to play in promoting and marketing products and the limited research on the topic, this thesis sets out to examine how social media influencers affect the decision-making process among millennials living in Denmark when purchasing beauty and fashion products. This will be done through an analysis of millennials' consumption patterns and their relationship with and perception of social media influencers. With this thesis, we, therefore, hope to address an area of the marketing literature where we have

identified a lack of research, while also providing insight into the effects that social media influencers have on the consumption of beauty and fashion products.

## 1.1 Research Question

An assessment of the existing research and theory on the topic of social media and consumption (presented in chapter 2) served as guidance to pinpoint areas yet to be explored. We found that the existing literature is somewhat superficial in relation to the notion of consumer behavior as seen in light of social media. This research, therefore, seeks to provide details and understandings of specific processes in the minds of the consumers. Hence, this is the gap in the literature that this research seeks to contribute to.

Solomon (2013) presents the three stages of the consumption process, acting as a summarization of the decision-making process, which will be used throughout this thesis. The three stages are prepurchase issues, purchase issues, and postpurchase issues (Solomon, 2013). The three stages and the decision-making process are closely related to what we sought out to research, and will, therefore, serve as a framework for the sub-questions. The theory itself will be elaborated in section 2.1.1. Using the consumption process as a framework, encapsulating the discovered research gap, and narrowing down the focus of our research, the following research question has been formulated:

***RQ:*** *In what way is the decision-making process affected by consumers' usage of digital beauty and fashion content?*

In the research question, the focus on beauty and fashion influencers and viewers has been outlined and the emphasis on beauty and fashion indicates that these are the product categories that the thesis focuses on. By using the phrasing of “in what way”, the exploratory nature of this research is enhanced. Furthermore, the phrasing indicates that we do not exclude the possibility of other “ways” existing. This relates to the abductive approach to knowledge creation, which will be elaborated in section 3.2.1.

This thesis deals with the first two stages of the consumption process, which are the stages of prepurchase and purchase issues (Solomon, 2013). Having this focus in the research entails



exploring pre-purchase influences, categories, consumption levels, and information search. The research furthermore explores how social media influencers affect decision-making in the purchase situation. Using Solomon's (2013) model of consumption stages as a framework for the research, we seek to answer some of the questions Solomon (2013) presents regarding the first two steps, which are:

- How does the consumer decide that she needs a product?
- What are the best sources of information to learn more about choices?
- What does the purchase say about the consumer?

As the questions above are guiding to how one should research the decision-making process, we have, in addition to the research question, devised three sub-questions inspired by Solomon's (2013) questions. The three sub-questions are stated below:

***SQ1:** How are problem recognition and information searches affected by following beauty and fashion influencers?*

With this sub-question to guide the research, we seek to understand if and how problem recognition, the first step of the decision-making process, occurs for consumers who follow influencers and how social media affects the consumers' "problems". Furthermore, the term "information searches" should be understood as the exploring of how influencers are sharing information with their followers and how the followers perceive and use this information.

***SQ2:** How does the consumer reflect on being influenced and purchasing beauty and fashion products?*

The second sub-question guides the research to a meta-level of understanding how the consumers understand themselves and their steps in the decision-making. It allows for reflections from the consumers on the decision-making process leading to a purchase. Furthermore, it encourages reflection and discussion of how the consumers' views are related to theory and previous research.

***SQ3:** How does the consumer use the relationships with influencers as part of the decision-making process?*

The third sub-question delves into the digital relationship and how the consumer uses this relationship when considering a purchase within the category of beauty and fashion. This question, therefore, guides the research to dive further into the consumer's experiences with social media influencers and allows for the research to consider the consumers as active, willing participants in the influencing process.

Aside from being used as topics in the entire research, the three sub-questions will be explicitly used in the discussion chapter (chapter 5) where we will discuss how our findings either confirm, disprove or add nuances to existing theory and research and how these contribute to answering the research question and sub-questions.

## **1.2 Delimitation**

With the above-mentioned scope of the research area, there are naturally corresponding delimitations, which are intentional restrictions applied to the research that help narrow down the focus (Price & Murnan, 2004).

In relation to the research question and sub-questions, it is important to note that this thesis only focuses on the first two stages of Solomon's (2013) consumption stages, thereby excluding the third stage of postpurchase. This thesis does, therefore, not account for how the consumer uses or disposes of the product after purchase. This is due to the nature of the influence that this research is focused on, namely the consumption aspect. Furthermore, the research's focus on the purchase issues does not delve into the exact purchase situation, yet it considers the thought processes affecting the situation.

The decision-making process is a complicated process with many contributions, considerations, and influences (Solomon, 2013). We, therefore, find it worth noting that this research only focuses on how social media influencers affect the process. Additionally, the emphasis on beauty and fashion means that we do not account for the consumers' entire consumption repertoire. The choice of not

including the entire consumption repertoire also means that we are unable to account for a complete assessment of the individuals as consumers.

This thesis focuses on how the use of social media affects consumption. Specifically, Instagram and YouTube are of focus. This is due to the more personal blog-style content, either in video or picture format that the platforms afford. This research does, therefore, not focus on social media as technical platforms or media of content from a business perspective. In line with this, the focus of this thesis is user-oriented, and as a result, the findings are not set out to bring forth any recommendations for influencer marketing from a company or brand perspective but rather to provide perspectives on consumer behaviors.

### 1.3 Clarification of Concepts

Following the introduction to the research question, we will provide clarification of some of the main concepts relating to the thesis topic of social media influencers and consumption. As social media is still somewhat of a new research area within the academic field of marketing, we find it beneficial to define some of the concepts and terms that we will be using throughout the thesis to ensure a common understanding going forward.

Starting with *social media*, this is a central concept within the thesis topic and it may be defined as “(...) *digital media that encourage audience participation, interaction and sharing*” (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), social media is typically understood through the lens of the main social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This is the same perspective we will be applying when referring to social media and social media platforms although the main focus is on Instagram and YouTube, as previously mentioned. A more elaborate description of social media will furthermore be presented as part of the literature review.

*Social media influencer* is another concept at the core of our research topic and paraphrasing the definition presented in the introduction, an influencer may be viewed as an Instagram user with many followers and a fashionable sense of style making it possible for the influencer to profit off their appearance (Jin et al., 2019). The definition is, in our view, not restrictive to Instagram, but may be used to describe influencers across major social media platforms. An influencer is thus a

“normal” person, in contrast to brands or companies, who shares content on one or more social media platforms. It is furthermore worth noting that we when referring to influencers, are referring to social media influencers whose content is focused on beauty and fashion. Throughout the thesis, we may also be referring to influencers as YouTubers or content creators. A more detailed description of social media influencers will also be provided in the literature review.

Following this, *content* is overall a very broad term and in the context of social media and influencers, content may take many different forms across platforms and the term may thus be interpreted differently (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Inspired by Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick’s (2019) definition of content marketing, we define content as text, photo, audio, and video published on social media either through web or mobile platforms. Content may thus take many forms, but common for the content is that it is meant to be interactive and engaging with the influencer’s followers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). This leads us to another concept, namely *follower*, by which we are referring to the consumers or social media users who follow an influencer’s account on a social media platform and in some way engages with the influencer and their content on social media. In addition to follower, we may also use the terms viewer or user but the meaning remains the same.

## 2. Literature Review

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In the literature review, we will establish the theoretical ground from which our research will take its offset. The theories presented will thus serve as guidance in the process of answering the research question. Following this, it is worth noting that there are certain limitations associated with the state of the theoretical field. Little to no theory on influencers can be found in academic articles and in classical marketing books such as the one by Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, & Hansen (2012). Based on an extensive review of the marketing literature, we would thus argue that the literature is lacking research on the topic of social media influencers and that it may, therefore, be considered somewhat of a novel research area.

Due to the novel nature of our research area, we intend to establish a theoretical foundation by examining theoretical fields that show similarities with, or where we can draw parallels to, our novel research. We will thus present relevant theories and research within the fields of consumer behavior, social media, and influencer marketing, among others. By doing so, we establish a breeding ground for discovering and presenting a new theoretical perspective on social media influencers and how the viewing of these may affect the decision-making process.

Solomon's (2013) three stages of consumption model briefly presented in chapter 1 is one of the key aspects in his book on consumer behavior. This research and the decision-making process model thereby fall under the category of consumer behavior, which we will start by elaborating.

### 2.1 Consumer Behavior

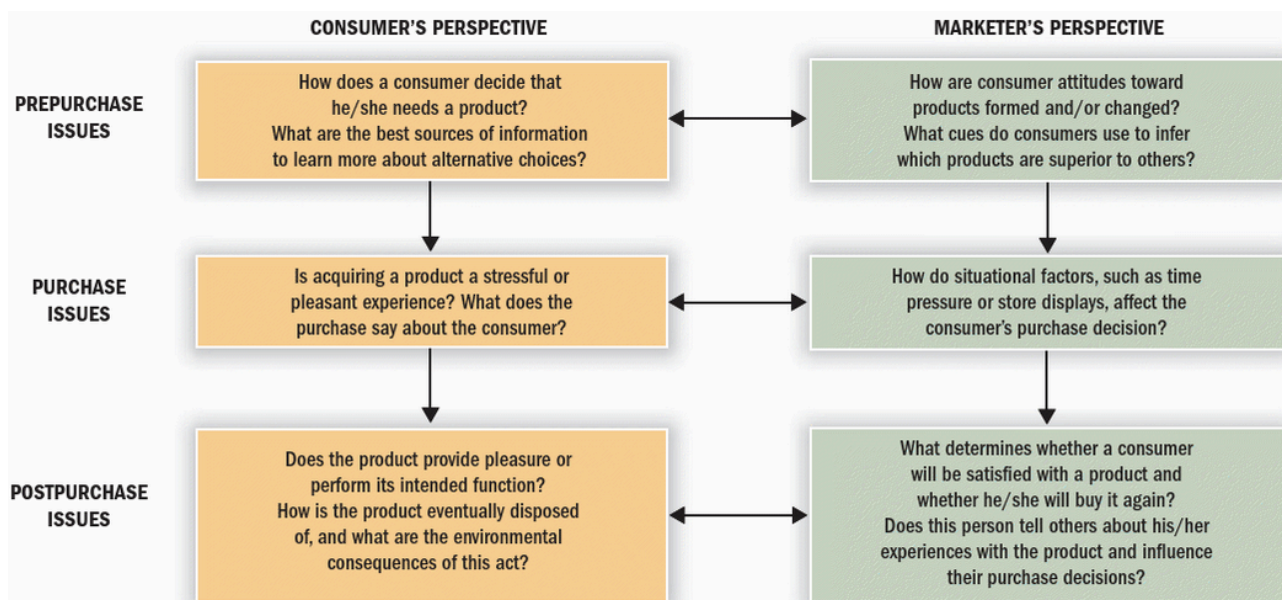
From a theoretical standpoint, the area of consumer behavior is fundamental to examine the research question. Consumer behavior furthermore represents a predominant research area within marketing as the ability to understand consumers' needs is a crucial strategic proponent of any business (Solomon, 2013). With this being said, consumer behavior may also be characterized as a complex and dynamic research area relevant for a wide range of academic disciplines, including social sciences, physical sciences, and arts (Solomon, 2013). Because of this, the field of *consumer behavior* is quite broad with Solomon (2013) defining it as the study of:

*“(...) the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires” (p. 31)*

Based on the definition above, one may assume that the study of consumer behavior is primarily focused on the point of consumption where the exchange takes place. This is furthermore supported by the fact that research on consumer behavior was previously referred to as *buyer behavior* (Solomon, 2013). In spite of this, Solomon’s (2013) perspective on consumer behavior differs from this as he argues that consumer behavior is about much more than simply buying things:

*“(...) it also embraces the study of how having (or not having) things affects our lives and how our possessions influence the way we feel about ourselves and about each other (...)” (p. 17)*

Following this, Solomon (2013) argues that consumers make purchases based on what products mean and not what they do thus implying that *“(...) the roles products play in our lives extend well beyond the tasks they perform”* (p. 40). Moreover, Solomon (2013) describes consumer behavior as an ongoing process thus encapsulating the expanded view on the consumption process, which today is recognized by most marketers. The expanded view also includes issues influencing consumers before, during, and after a purchase. In the figure below, Solomon (2013) presents his version of the expanded consumption process showcasing the three stages of the consumption process, as this research is based on, in which the consumer *“(...) identifies a need or desire, makes a purchase, and then disposes of the product (...)”* (p. 32):



In Solomon's (2013) depiction of the consumption process, the marketer's perspective is also included, but due to the delimitation of our research question (section 1.2), we will be focusing on the consumer's perspective, as this is central to the thesis. Specifically, we are interested in examining the *prepurchase issues* with regard to how the consumers' consumption needs arise and which sources of information consumers seek out before the point of purchase (Solomon, 2013). As part of our thesis, we will also look at *purchase issues* by reflecting on what consumption means to consumers emotionally (Solomon, 2013). This thesis will, therefore, not include the consumers' considerations following the point of purchase.

The various issues depicted in Solomon's (2013) stages in the consumption process relates to the decision-making process, which describes all elements of consumption in great detail (Kotler et al., 2012). By understanding the entire decision-making process, we may be able to better understand the role that social media plays for the consumers' ways of consuming. Our thesis may, therefore, be used to shed new light on how social media influencers affect elements within a fundamental consumer behavior model.

In relation to this, Solomon (2013) also argues that access to online sources is changing the way consumers decide what to buy. One example of such changes is the creation of online *consumption communities* where consumers share opinions and recommendations about all kinds of products (Solomon, 2013). Within these communities, there may be a strong sense of peer pressure making a group member buy things to meet the approval of the group (Solomon, 2013). This may be seen as an example of technology affecting the decision-making process, which we shall now take a closer look at.

### **2.1.1 Decision-Making Process**

As previously mentioned, the decision-making process represents one of the main theoretical models within consumer behavior describing five stages that most consumers go through although some may skip or reverse certain stages (Kotler et al., 2012). This also relates to the fact that not all decision-making is rational since some buying behaviors do not serve logical purposes (Solomon, 2013). Despite this, common for the majority of consumers' decision-making process is that the process starts long before the point of purchase and has consequences for a long time following the purchase (Kotler et al., 2012). The stages are:

1. Problem recognition
2. Information search
3. Evaluation of alternatives
4. Purchase decision
5. Post-purchase behavior

Starting with *problem recognition*, the decision-making process starts when the consumer identifies a problem or need. This stage is triggered by internal stimuli such as hunger or external stimuli such as seeing an ad for a new product, which may spark thoughts about wanting to make a purchase (Kotler et al., 2012). The first stage may also be seen in relation to a purchase being viewed as a response to a problem since the first stage occurs when the consumer experiences a significant difference between their *actual state* and the *ideal state* that they desire (Solomon, 2013). To get to the ideal state of affairs, the consumer must, therefore, solve a problem, which can either be simple or complex (Solomon, 2013). In this regard, a problem may arise in different ways depending on whether the consumer experiences a decline in their actual state, which results in *need recognition* (Solomon, 2013). Alternatively, the consumer may decide that they want a newer, better product thus moving their ideal state upward, which is an example of *opportunity recognition* (Solomon, 2013).

Following problem recognition, the consumer performs an *information search*. This stage accounts for the process where the consumer takes part in surveying the environment for relevant information and data that can help them make a decision on how to solve the problem (Solomon, 2013). Depending on the perceived relevance of the purchase, the required involvement in the decision-making may be either high or low affecting the degree to which the consumer actively or passively seeks out information (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). As previously mentioned, not all decision-making is rational. The notion of *bounded rationality* may affect the stage of information search as a lack of time and resources may result in consumers settling for a solution that is just good enough (Solomon, 2013).

Based on the information search, an *evaluation of alternatives* must take place for the consumer to process information about competitive brands and make a final judgment (Kotler et al., 2012). The



evaluation process will naturally vary between consumers. The process will be determined by the need the consumer is looking to satisfy, the product benefits preferred by the consumer, as well as the bundle of attributes that will most likely deliver the sought-after benefits (Kotler et al., 2012). Another way to understand how consumers arrive at a decision is through the *expectancy-value model*. The model suggests that consumers evaluate alternatives by combining their positive and negative brand beliefs according to importance thus choosing the product with the highest perceived value (Kotler et al., 2012).

The fourth stage in the decision-making process is the *purchase decision* in which the consumer makes a purchase based on the evaluation of alternative options (Kotler et al., 2012). In theory, the decision would, therefore, result in a purchase of the preferred product as determined through the expectancy-value model (Kotler et al., 2012). In practice, however, the decision might differ from the evaluation process due to the fact that consumers often fall back on mental rules-of-thumb. This is known as *heuristics* and is used to simplify the options and make a quick decision (Solomon, 2013).

After the point of purchase follows the *post-purchase behavior*, which accounts for the consumer's satisfaction, actions, and product uses following the purchase (Kotler et al., 2012). The last stage of the model is, therefore, of great relevance to marketers as it can help the consumer feel confident about their choice of brand (Kotler et al., 2012). In cases where consumers are either satisfied or dissatisfied with their purchase, consumers may choose to communicate their purchase experience either privately to friends and family or publicly through social media, which has proven to be a powerful force for consumers seeking feedback from companies (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015, pp. 96–97). As stated, this thesis will not focus on this stage.

In conclusion, the decision-making process provides an extensive understanding of the process of consumption and the external factors influencing consumption choices (Kotler et al., 2012). By understanding the fundamentals of consumer behavior and the process of how consumers decide to make a purchase, we may thus be able to analyze the impact that social media and technology have on the modern consumer.

## 2.2 Excessive Consumerism

Following the introduction to theory on consumer behavior, we find it relevant to look at theoretical perspectives reflecting on excessive consumerism. We would argue that theory on excessive consumerism is relevant to the research question in terms of better understanding the consumption process following the emergence of social media influencers who promote consumerism, as touched upon in the introduction.

In his book from 2010, Ritzer reflects on excessive consumerism and discusses the ways in which the nature of consumption has been dramatically transformed by looking at the settings that “(...) *allow, encourage, and even compel us to consume so many of those goods and services*” (p. 2). Following this, Ritzer (Ritzer, 2010) introduces the term *new means of consumption* as a way of describing the settings and structures that enable a high level of consumption, including a broader set of phenomena such as advertising, branding, and fashion.

Taking its offset in the increasing consumption levels prevailing in society, Ritzer (2010) focuses on the process leading up to the actual point of consumption. The process may be long involving the perception of a want, desire created by an advertisement, and a comparison of the available options. In continuation of this, Ritzer (2010) has coined the term *cathedrals of consumption* to describe how the new means of consumption often have a religious character offering customers a magical and enchanted setting to consume in.

In continuation of Ritzer (2010), Pérez and Esposito (2010) argue that insatiable consumption has become a global addiction as a result of the values and habits promoted by capitalism and the neoliberal market ideology where economic growth is the main objective. Specifically, Pérez and Esposito (2010) argue that it is the neo-liberal advancing of “(...) *particular understandings of freedom and human nature that normalize excessive consumption*” (p. 87). Based on this view, Pérez and Esposito (2010) present various perspectives on the increasing consumption that has been observed in the last decades, including Ritzer’s *patterns of hyper-consumption*. Here, Ritzer argues that Americans consume more of everything compared to consumers of any other country to which one could assume that other similar, larger Western countries are nearing the consumption levels of North America.

Looking at the motives related to excessive consumerism, Schor argued in 1998 that consumerism is influenced by patterns of *competitive acquisition* in which consumers compare their material possessions with people they want to be like (Pérez & Esposito, 2010, p. 90). Half a century ago, one's neighbors would set the consumption standard, but this has drastically changed as the standard is now set by celebrities and people from the elite class as they are viewed as the *pinnacle of human development* (Pérez & Esposito, 2010, p. 90).

Based on Pérez and Esposito's (2010) discussion of the role of insatiable consumerism in society, it is evident that their perspective is somewhat anti-market as they argue that the global addiction to consuming may only be treated through a paradigmatic shift from the current market system that "(...) *normalize the link between consumerism, freedom, and human satisfaction/fulfillment*" (p. 87). Reflecting on the future, Ritzer (2010) furthermore predicts that the use of the internet and new, advanced technology will shape consumption patterns and create virtual realities where consumers can immerse themselves.

## 2.3 Social Media and Technology

With consumer behavior undergoing drastic changes in the last few decades, as accounted for above, we find it relevant to review the literature on social media. The technological revolution has opened a new world for consumers thus providing many new outlets for consumption (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). With this being said, the social media literature is characterized by the fact that the technological developments driving social media may still be considered fairly recent meaning that a unified approach to studying the social media discipline has yet to be formed (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). Studying social media in relation to various marketing disciplines is further complicated by the fact that the field of social media platforms is constantly changing. It is thus difficult to examine a static version of the social media landscape.

As previously mentioned, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) define social media as sites that encourage "(...) *audience participation, interaction and sharing*" (pp. 237-238). Following this, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019) argue that social media may also be understood through the aspects of customer communities and user-generated content, including product reviews and ratings. In relation to this, Kotler et al. (2012) describe how the creation of

user-generated content has enabled online social networks to form, which has subsequently become the fabric of many people's lives. One may, therefore, argue that there is agreement among scholars with regard to social media and technology influencing consumer behavior.

As this thesis is set out to examine how consumers use social media content, we find it relevant to include theory on media usage. In this regard, *uses and gratifications theory* may be used to explain how and why individuals use media to satisfy various needs (Ruggiero, 2000). Uses and gratifications theory differs from traditional media theory in the sense that it views media users as being active and in control of how they choose to use media (Ruggiero, 2000). In relation to the creation of the internet, Ruggiero (2000) argues that digital technology is enabling community building and enrichment through which users can create online relationships. From the perspective of uses and gratifications theory, the internet may thus be viewed as:

*“(...) a medium with the capability to empower the individual in terms of both the information he or she seeks and the information he or she creates”* (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 20)

Following this, Ruggiero (2000) predicts that the internet will transform media users' personal and social habits and roles. Focusing on the usage of the internet, scholars will thus have to take a new look at examining why media users become involved in a particular type of mediated communication and which gratifications they receive as a result (Ruggiero, 2000).

### **2.3.1 Social Media and Consumption**

As social media involves participating in online discussions and sharing content, social media has in many ways changed how consumers interact as technology has enabled new forms of communication in terms of how consumers *“(...) comment on, complain about, and recommend brands”* (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015, p. 61). Moreover, Kotler et al. (Kotler et al., 2012) argue that the internet influences industry structures by increasing the bargaining power of end consumers and reducing switching costs, among others. Companies must, therefore, acknowledge that their relationship to consumers is changing due to the scope of social networking affecting consumer behavior in ways that companies have little control over (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015).

As a result of companies having little control over consumers' behavior online, brands may choose to take part in the social networks to get a better understanding of what their customers are doing and discussing amongst each other (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). Following this, companies have increasingly created a presence on social media as a way of interacting with current and potential customers (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). One may also argue that this allows the companies to take back some of the control lost to social networks. The discipline of *social media marketing* has subsequently been created describing how companies can use interactions among consumers to increase the awareness of their brand, while also minimizing negative mentions (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Showcasing the influence of social media on consumer behavior, Querriere (2015) examines how social media marketing impacts consumers' decision-making processes when buying running shoes. Specifically, Querriere (2015) focused on consumers' decision-making when buying running shoes by examining the social media accounts of Nike and Adidas. The study concludes that social media marketing affects consumer preferences prior to the final choice in addition to also influencing consumers to seek dialogue and interaction on social media brand accounts regarding their purchase. Querriere's (2015) findings may, therefore, serve as an example of the power of social media and its ability to affect consumers' decisions.

With indicators of technology being able to influence consumption, we now take a closer look at one of the main online platforms of content creation, namely YouTube. As of early 2020, YouTube represents the largest video sharing site and has subsequently become a leading marketing tool when it comes to product promotion and social media influencers (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). In spite of the apparent magnitude of the social media platform, little research has been conducted on YouTube and its influence (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). A similar assessment may be made with regard to other social media sites such as Instagram and most recently TikTok thus underlining the observation made earlier with regard to the limited amount of research that may be applied broadly to all social networking sites (Herrman, 2019).

Wishing to understand the role of product promotion on YouTube, Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) conducted a study of nearly 140,000 videos by German Youtubers and found that the share of product promotion has grown drastically on the platform within the last decade. The growth in

product promotion on YouTube was furthermore found to be particularly evident within the beauty and fashion community where the monetization of influencer content now plays an increasing role. Based on this, Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) argue that their findings *"(...) fuel concerns regarding the social and economic impact of influencers (...)"* (p. 1). In continuation, Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) argue that content creators on YouTube *"(...) strongly influence children and teenagers in their perceptions as well as decisions"* (pp. 10-11). Schwemmer and Ziewiecki's (2018) study may thus be seen as support for Querriere's (2015) findings on social media's ability to influence consumer preferences with Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) providing further insights to the scope of beauty and fashion content and its impact on consumerism among female teenagers.

Looking at the extensive growth of product promotion on YouTube, it is worth noting that Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) touch on the development of German YouTubers in terms of how the first videos uploaded to YouTube had no commercial purposes. What has now become drivers of consumer purchasing decisions thereby originally started as consumer-to-consumer recommendations uploaded by amateurs who were considered very trustworthy (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Reflecting on this, it is interesting to observe the developmental change to which content creators are now recognized as social media influencers (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). One may thus question how the nature of the content, as well as the relationship between creators and viewers, have been able to change in such drastic ways in a rather short period of time. The factors enabling this development may be explained through the theory of technology affordances, which will be presented in the following section.

### **2.3.2 Technology and Consumption**

To get a better understanding of the ways in which consumers use technological platforms such as social media and how these may change over time, we look to the theory of technology affordances (Majchrzak & Markus, 2012). The framework *Technology Affordances and Constraints Theory* (hereafter TACT) is used to describe how people use information systems and how this use affects individuals (Majchrzak & Markus, 2012). It is a management theory used to optimize the use and integration of information systems in organizations (Majchrzak & Markus, 2012) although we would argue that it is very much applicable to this thesis due to the thesis' focus on the power of social media and technology.

Taking a closer look at the TACT framework, *technology affordance* describes the action potential of a technology depending on the particular purpose of an individual or organization, while *technology constraint* describes how an individual or organization may fail to reach their goals when using a technology (Majchrzak & Markus, 2012). The two concepts are relational as they refer to interactions between people and technology and in this regard, Majchrzak and Markus (2012) argue that technology affordance and constraint can be used to explain two common empirical observations. The first observation is that individuals may not always realize the full potential of a technology they are using, in addition to the second observation being that individuals sometimes manage to use a technology in a way in which it was never intended by the designers (Majchrzak & Markus, 2012).

As mentioned, technology affordances and constraints are viewed as relational concepts. In this regard, Majchrzak and Markus (2012) argue that the theory explains how an individual with a given set of capabilities may be able to accomplish one thing with a technology, while another individual's ability to use the same technology may be very different thus resulting in a different type of usage. The TACT framework may, therefore, be used to explain the unintentional development examined by Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) in which content creators on YouTube went from being amateur creators to professional product promoters.

Taking a closer look at the ways in which social media technologies may be used to influence consumption, Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman (2017) argue that technology increases the passion to consume. Specifically, Kozinets et al.'s (2017) findings show that technology enhances consumer desire. Kozinets et al. (2017) describe the passionate online universes affecting consumption as *networks of desire* thus encapsulating the complex system of technologies that create interest for consumption.

Following the introduction to networks of desire, Kozinets et al. (2017) present three forms in which people participate in the networks with one of them being *professional network participation*. This includes professional and publicly accessible messages shared on, for example, YouTube channels and WordPress blogs with the professionals seeking to find, build, and maintain an audience. One may argue that this form of participation is the form that social media influencers represent when they engage with consumers through their channels. In relation to networks of

desire, technology, and, therefore, social media influencers enable connections to arise between consumers, which prompts them to consume more (Kozinets et al., 2017).

Following this, Kozinets et al.'s (2017) theory may be viewed in relation to the notion of *brand publics* where it is argued that direct interaction between members of a network is not necessary for the increased consumption to take place. Instead, the only requirement is a connection such as the viewing of an online picture (Kozinets et al., 2017). Kozinets et al. (2017) expand on the idea of brand publics as they tie it together with social networks and communities as they argue that desire flows through and within technology. This may furthermore be viewed in relation to the broader changes enabled by technology, which has fundamentally changed the relationship between consumers as described earlier. In this regard, Solomon (2013) argues that the new digital world has resulted in a radical redefinition of the meaning of a community.

### **2.3.3 The Power of Social Media**

Encapsulating the views presented in the social media and technology section, Berryman and Kavka (2017) highlight the power of social media and new media technologies by arguing that these “(...) *play key roles in shaping consumer behaviors and decisions (...)*” (pp. 307-308). Specifically, Berryman and Kavka (2017) argue that the growth of the YouTube influencer economy can be attributed to processes of commodification through intimacy. This is exemplified through a study of the British YouTube celebrity Zoe ‘Zoella’ Sugg and her YouTube channel where she successfully adopts a ‘big sister’ persona that encourages intimacy between Zoella and her audience as well as between Zoella’s audience and the commodities she is associated with (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Berryman and Kavka’s (2017) study thus summarize the perspectives and findings of the literature in the social media and technology section. They do so by highlighting the power that social media has on consumption, while also showcasing how new media technologies are able to “(...) *grand, and facilitate, fame (...) through ‘the commercialization of amateur content’*” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).



## 2.4 Influencers

Following the review of literature on social media and technology's ability to develop and drive new and more excessive forms of consumption, it becomes relevant to review the literature on the online personalities born out of the digital revolution, namely influencers. As previously mentioned, social media is a rather new phenomenon and the theory on social media influencers is, therefore, somewhat limited as we would argue that scholars are only beginning to understand the scope of influencers and their ability to shape culture and consumers. With that being said, the concept of individuals asserting influence over others is very much present in other marketing disciplines and we will, therefore, be reviewing theories and concepts relating to influencers.

Due to the novelty of influencers, there is a lot of terminology associated with online personalities (Jin et al., 2019). One definition that we would argue represents the phenomenon well is presented in Stubb, Nyström, and Colliander's (2019) article where they describe *social media influencers* as users who have established credibility by being active on a given social media platform. In addition, an essential part of social media influencers is the fact that:

*“They have access to a large audience of consumers who follow their social media activity regularly and are generally perceived as trustworthy by other users (...)”* (Stubb et al., 2019, p. 109)

Social media influencers may furthermore be viewed as a new type of “(...) *independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes (...)*” through various forms of social media (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011, p. 90). With this in mind, Freberg et al. (2011) argue that the literature on public relations has identified characteristics of effective spokespersons, but that not much is known about the ways in which audiences perceive social media influencers. Despite Freberg et al.'s (2011) article being nearly a decade old, we would argue that this assessment still holds true as the literature on influencers and their ability to effect change is still limited.

Although the concept of social media influencers is relatively new, the ability of individuals to influence others is not. Online technologies are simply accelerating the impact of word-of-mouth communication (Solomon, 2013). As mentioned by Freberg et al. (2011), the public relations discipline, among others, may be argued to have led the way for what we know has influencers

today. In relation to this, Solomon (2013) argues that humans are social animals and that the desire to fit in among desired individuals constitutes one of the primary motivators for consumption behaviors. As a result, *reference groups* play an important role within the theory of consumer behavior as they help explain the impact that groups have on influencing an individual's evaluations, aspirations, or behavior (Solomon, 2013). Social power may thus be viewed as an important factor when trying to understand how an individual can be persuaded to make a purchase (Solomon, 2013).

Other examples of individuals being able to influence others include *opinions leaders*, which are “(...) individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others” (Solomon, 2013, p. 282). Opinion leaders are comprised of a small group of influential people with the power to accelerate or stop the adoption of a product or idea (Solomon, 2013). Moreover, one could argue that *celebrity branding* may be viewed as the most direct comparison to today's social media influencers as companies use popular and credible celebrities to endorse their products in order to enhance the company's image and increase sales (Kotler et al., 2012).

Based on the terms presented above, one could argue that there are many well-known concepts within the mature marketing literature exhibiting vastly similar characteristics to those of social media influencers. Due to the emergence of social media, new forms of opinion leaders and celebrities are now observed with the same or perhaps greater social power to influence others. As determined earlier, technology has given regular people a voice thus enabling them to achieve fame similar to that of traditional celebrities (Jin et al., 2019). The phenomenon of being *instafamous* has subsequently become a common phrase used to describe individuals who become famous as a result of their social media presence (Jin et al., 2019, p. 568). With regard to this, Jin et al. (2019) found that consumers view social media celebrities as more authentic and real compared to traditional celebrities. This, in turn, creates a deeper feeling of connectedness, which results in higher purchase intentions of the products that they endorse as “(...) consumers personally identify with them and try to imitate them (...)” (Jin et al., 2019, p. 568). We, therefore, argue that, although there are similarities to well-known concepts, the notion of social media influencers is vastly different and poses new challenges, opportunities, and influences due to the nature of the *social* platform.

### 2.4.1 Influencers' Ability to Affect Consumption

Looking at the theory on influencers' ability to affect consumption, it is evident that social media influencers such as fashion bloggers and YouTubers influence consumer behavior through their presence on social media platforms (Halvorsen et al., 2013). Studying the influential power of Norwegian fashion blogs, Halvorsen et al. (2013) found that fashion blogs function as a marketing tool as all readers interviewed admitted that they had been directly influenced to make a purchase because of something they had seen on a blog. Considering the literature on influencer marketing, this may be viewed as a general finding as the literature as a whole agrees that social media influencers affect consumer behavior and purchase decisions. Despite this, we would argue that there is a gap in the literature when it comes to providing a more detailed understanding of how and why social media influencers affect consumers' ways of making purchase decisions, which this thesis addresses.

Halvorsen et al. (2013) furthermore argue that influencers are able to affect consumer behavior as they have “(...) *a unique ability to create a strong relationship between the blog and its readers* (...)” (p. 211), which results in the promotional efforts of the influencer being perceived as personal and non-intrusive. These findings may be seen in relation to Berryman and Kavka's (2017) study of the British YouTuber Zoella and her ability to create a close and intimate relationship with her viewers. Following this, Halvorsen et al. (2013) explain the influential impact of bloggers as being due to their unique position as being both a fashion idol and an online friend sharing personal information about everyday life. Halvorsen et al. (2013) furthermore conclude that fashion bloggers create value mainly through their ability to “(...) *create and maintain a close relationship with an active group of consumers* (...)” thus creating an influential position incomparable to those involved in traditional media (p. 223).

In continuation of Halvorsen et al. (2013), Lee and Watkins (2016) explore the relationship between YouTubers in the luxury fashion segment and their viewers concluding that YouTubers had a positive influence on viewers' brand perceptions as these increased significantly after watching YouTube videos. Although Lee and Watkins' (2016) study focuses on a niche segment in the form of luxury goods, we would argue that their findings are still relevant to this thesis due to it having a similar theoretical focus.

Taking a closer look at the relationship between influencers and their viewers, Lee and Watkins (2016) use social comparison theory to argue that consumers view themselves as having similar beliefs to those of the influencer, which results in the viewer most likely giving a positive review of a luxury brand if the influencer has previously given a positive review of the same brand. Following this, Lee and Watkins (2016) argue that consumers compare their own consumption with that of admirable YouTubers to such a degree that consumers will purchase luxury brand products in an attempt to reach the same status. The interactions between luxury fashion YouTubers and their viewers may thus be used to explain how influencers affect consumption.

To sum up, a social media influencer is someone who has a large following online, engages actively with their followers, and promotes products or brands (Jin et al., 2019, p. 569). The limited research on influencer marketing clearly shows that social media influencers possess a strong social power with the ability to affect the purchase decisions of their followers due to the personal relationship that influencers have with their followers (Halvorsen et al., 2013). Following the section on influencers, we have now concluded the literature review thus establishing a theoretical framework for which our analysis will be based.

## 3. Methodology

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This chapter covers the approach to knowledge production for this thesis. The methodology chapter is divided into three sections starting with the theory of science, which will be covered, including how it affects the approach of the research, namely the methodology. Then, the research approach and study design will be reviewed and lastly, the method used to analyze the data will be presented.

### 3.1 Theory of Science

The theory of science determines the type of research conducted and the methodology used (Nygaard, 2013). Overall, researchers distinguish between natural, physical sciences, and social sciences (Nygaard, 2013), where our research falls under the latter category as this thesis examines a social occurrence. In continuation of this, this thesis takes a postmodern, social constructivist approach to science. Philosophers following the *social constructivism* paradigm believe that people create *social artifacts* in conversation with one another (Nygaard, 2013). Within this paradigm, there are two different views: The *ontological* or *epistemological* constructivism, differing between viewing the world as a social construct or simply viewing our knowledge of the world as a social construct. With this in mind, we will undertake an epistemological constructivist approach (Nygaard, 2013). This means that we acknowledge that a real, physical world exists, yet our understanding of the world is affected by our surroundings, thereby the term social construction (Nygaard, 2013).

Within the paradigm of social constructionism, there are different perspectives depending on what is studied (Nygaard, 2013). We believe that social realities are constructions created in the interaction and negotiation with other individuals, hence the notion of artifacts. We furthermore believe that reality will appear differently to each individual and that in the interaction with other individuals we express and discuss our perceived realities with one another to which we affect each other's realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, in Nygaard, 2013). Consequently, smaller groups of people may share very similar social constructions.

For a social constructivist, both oneself and the structures examined are constructions resulting from linguistic narratives forming our culture (Bird, 2006). Therefore, one must also acknowledge not only the target field's societal structures but also the societal structures surrounding oneself that can result in a certain interpretation of the target. Within social sciences where this thesis delves, the key is, therefore, to seek to interpret in order to reach an understanding as opposed to natural sciences that seek to explain (Bird, 2006).

The scientific approach furthermore affects the research that is conducted. In order to investigate how the decision-making process is affected by consuming influencers' beauty and fashion content, we must research the viewers' of this content by examining their perspective on consumption and social media influencers. As researchers, we must, therefore, try to understand the processes that occur from the viewing of content and relationship-building on social media. The methodology and research approach will now be elaborated.

### 3.1.1 Methodology

The methodological approach is determined by the scientific approach that researchers undertake and the methodological approach will consequently permeate the research methods as well as the analytical approach (Nygaard, 2013). As social constructivists, we are interested in analyzing social discourses as this may get us closer to understanding the underlying, infiltrating constructs of individuals and smaller communities (Nygaard, 2013). Interpreting is thus at the core of the approach for constructivists, which is why the qualitative method will be used to examine social phenomena and contexts (Nygaard, 2013).

Within the qualitative approach, there are different ways of studying the target field (Kvale, 2007). According to Kvale (2007), interviews are a way of inter-changing views with one another, and more specifically, the *semi-structured interview* allows for the interviewer to obtain insights into the interviewees' view of the target field. By using a semi-structured technique, the interviewer can ask more direct questions to the topic without it being a closed questionnaire (Kvale, 2007). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview allows for questions on factual and meaning levels as the interviewer can ask questions to statements made by the interviewee and, therefore, get closer to understanding the views of the interviewee (Kvale, 2007). With this approach, researchers must seek to understand, analyze, and reflect on the target field to get as close to understanding what is

true for the studied group. This is done by approaching the target and the world as it is, in its own setting, seeking to extract experiences and views of the individuals (Kvale, 2007).

### 3.1.2 Limitations of the Scientific Approach

It is important to note that there are limitations to all methodologies. In this section, we will, therefore, go through the limitations of the qualitative method and furthermore account for the reliability and validity of the nature of the research. It is in this regard important to note that the methodology surrounding a constructionists' approach is centered on qualitative knowledge and the intention is, therefore, not to quantify (Kvale, 2007). Within the qualitative methodology, there are limitations that are important to note, and this section thus explains how validity and reliability have been ensured for the research.

One of the key limitations of qualitative studies is the notion of objectivity (Kvale, 2007). As with the constructivist view, this thesis does not seek a greater definite truth. Instead, the aim is to cover all aspects related to the target field, which in itself is enough of a conclusion although we will also see if dialogical intersubjectivity occurs. According to Kvale (2007), *dialogical intersubjectivity* is an aspect of objectivity, where there is a convincing discursive agreement from those delving into a phenomenon (the interviewees) and those interpreting a phenomenon (the interviewer). For this thesis, this means that it is possible to obtain a degree of objectivity when there is a substantial common thread between the interviewees in their views and that other research or theory on the matter supports this (Kvale, 2007). The arguments in the thesis must, therefore, be based on valid and reliable research, which will impact the conclusion of this thesis.

When working to make research reliable, this entails being consistent and transparent and to investigate the object correctly in accordance with tested methods in relation to what the research is aimed to achieve (Kvale, 2007). Several measures that ensure reliability have thus been taken in the research, which is presented in the methods, section 3.2. In this regard, the research strives to not only present reliable findings but also to ensure validity, which is the measurement of how the findings in the research compare to the real world (Kvale, 2007). It is, therefore, also important to relate and respond to the findings of the research and assess these in relation to previous peer research as found in chapter 2. The notion of validity will furthermore be assessed in section 3.4.

## 3.2 Research Approach and Study Design

In this section, the reader will be guided through the research approach and study design. First, the methods of scientific discoveries will be considered in relation to how this research was built. Following this, the sampling method will be covered, and subsequently, the study design will be assessed following Kvale's (2007) seven stages of an interview inquiry.

### 3.2.1 Method of Scientific Discovery

This thesis uses the *abductive* approach to knowledge creation. Abductive reasoning can be described as a mix between *inductive* and *deductive* inference (Rasborg, Bitsch Olsen & Fuglsang, 2013). As Rodrigues (2011) states, abduction seeks to “(...) *understand new facts creating general conceptions based upon what we already know*“ (p. 135) meaning that one uses both theory and observations as the foundation for the research in order to explore a new phenomenon. This stands in contrast to inductive reasoning where one infers from the particular to the general and deductive reasoning, where one infers from the general to the particular (Rodrigues, 2011).

Abduction is, furthermore, distinct from induction and deduction as it is the only inference where one can “increase our knowledge of facts” (Rodrigues, 2011, p. 130). Rodrigues (2011) describes how inductive research, in its essence, is generalization between observations to a general theory, while deduction-based knowledge confirms a general rule by affirming the particular. These two categories of inference, therefore, only extend or develop on the existing where abduction introduces new ideas (Rodrigues, 2011). Abduction tries to understand the observation through general rules without providing definite conclusions (Rodrigues, 2011). The abductive way, therefore, seeks a plausible inference, the best possible explanation given the context (Rodrigues, 2011).

Our research was formed based on the observed tendency of product-oriented content on social media and increased spending by millennials, as mentioned in the introduction. Additionally, studies on how social media affects consumption and excessive consumption as a result of new shopping options, among others, created an interest in exploring the topic further. This thesis thereby researches the cause and effect relationship between the decision-making process and consumers' engagement with influencer content. As the research is abductive, the process between



empiricism and theory is circular. The general, theoretical background led the search for data and the particular, and later in the process, the data led to a generalization.

### 3.2.2 Sampling

To collect the empirical data, *non-probability sampling* has been used, which is where the individuals researched are deliberately chosen on the basis of specific features (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This means that the interviewees represent a group that has a specific relation to the research. For this study, it was thus important that the interviewees had a current or past relationship with influencers on social media. In continuation, this sampling type is typical for qualitative research where it is not intended for the sampling to be statistically representative although the individuals act as a symbolic representation of the group of people whose behavior is the subject of interest (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

The group researched in this thesis share many of the same demographic characteristics of being a female, urban millennial acquainted with influencers. More specifically, the average interviewee is a young, female student living in Copenhagen who stays active in her free time by socializing with friends, partaking in physical activity, and being creative in terms of either reading, cooking, or enjoying the arts (appendix 1). This description may, therefore, be used to encapsulate the common identity markers of the interviewees. Our approach to the sampling thus falls into the *homogeneous* category where people who have similar characteristics share their views of a phenomenon (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Following this, the sampling size of qualitative research is often small due to three reasons (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). First, as a phenomenon only needs to appear once for it to be part of the analysis and the researcher will reach a saturation point where no new aspects will appear from the interviews. Second, as qualitative research does not aim at proving statistical significance, the frequency of a phenomenon is, in principle, subordinate. Third, qualitative interviews are resource-heavy, meaning that this type of research can only be managed on a smaller scale.

When beginning the pursuit of interviewees, it became clear that it was difficult to reach people who have or had a relationship with influencers specifically. Therefore, it was necessary to use *snowball sampling*, a method where one finds a few people who fit the criteria and then they

provide references to others with similar characteristics (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This was also a result of there not being a way to approach multiple possible interviewees with these characteristics at the same time, and therefore each potential interviewee had to be specifically referred to by someone with knowledge on their social media activities, and then they were contacted directly. The pitfall of this sampling approach is having very little diversity among the sample (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). To attempt to limit this, two different “snowballs” have been utilized, one from each researcher, as we do not share social circles. As so, each researcher has started with one interviewee and snowballed from there in an attempt to ensure more diversity among the sampled interviewees.

The snowball sampling, along with the circumstantial limitations (explained in section 3.4), led us to 11 interviewees familiar with social media influencers. Initially, more interviews had been planned, but the before-mentioned circumstantial issues prohibited the continuing of the research. According to Braun and Clarke in Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun (2017), the sample size of 11 is within the recommended size for qualitative interviews in a master’s thesis. When initially reviewing the transcripts of the 11 interviews, it was clear that many aspects had been covered and a slight consensus was forming. This will be accounted for properly later on (chapters 4 and 5). Based on this, the sampling should, therefore, be viewed as sufficient for research purposes.

### **3.2.3 Framework for Study Design**

For this study, Kvale’s (2007) *seven stages of an interview inquiry* have been used as a framework. The seven stages are *thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting*, and they, therefore, cover all aspects of the interview. In this thesis, we have included the elements of the seven stages that are suitable for the reporting. Here, it is important to note that our report is not the equivalent to Kvale’s (2007) reporting, which is instead similar to the findings, chapter 4.

The findings from the analysis will be communicated by presenting the most prominent aspects aligned with our research area and subsequently by highlighting elements of the transcripts to further guide the understanding for the reader. Moreover, the findings will be related to the theory and previous research on the topic in order to validate the findings along with assessing the novelty value of the research.

This section 3.2.3 includes the thematizing and designing of the interview inquiry before the interviews are done and the analysis is commenced. The methods supporting the stages of analyzing, verifying, and reporting are covered in section 3.3.

#### 3.2.3.1 Thematizing

The basis for conducting the interviews is the state of the theoretical knowledge on the topic introduced in chapter 2. From this, we were able to conclude that there is a lack of knowledge about how the decision-making process is affected by consumers engaging with social media influencers.

The target field, in this case, is the decision-making and consumption patterns that arise as a result of consumers being exposed to social media influencers. This will be studied by enquiring about attitudes and intentions from consumers who engage with social media influencers in the sub-category of influencers focusing on beauty and fashion. The original inspiration for the research came from observing YouTube videos of influencers showcasing their shopping and products sent to them by companies. As social media platforms have grown, we furthermore noticed how the platforms now enable content of different kinds, and, therefore, both influencers and consumers use many platforms simultaneously. Thus, we would argue that the distinction between the platforms has become ambiguous. We, therefore, seek to understand how consumers following fashion and beauty influencers on any social media platform construct the world around them in relation to consumption and social media and how the decision-making process is affected by this.

To research the target field, different elements must be covered in the interviews. However, simply asking the consumers how following influencers affects the decision-making would not be beneficial or sufficient, as this would be too direct and subjective to ask and analyze alone. Instead, the interviews must cover more about the individual in order to better understand their frame of reference in terms of who they are, how they talk, and their references related to social media and consumption. It is, therefore, important to gain an understanding of when the influence takes place, how it manifests, and what actions it leads to. To do this, it is important to know the consumers and their consumption, to know their current and past level of engagement with social media influencers, and to know how they construct the consumer society as this may change their perception regarding consuming.

### 3.2.3.2 Designing

This research uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews, as previously mentioned, which is one of the main data collection methods in qualitative research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The choice of conducting semi-structured interviews is based on the notion that “(...) *knowledge is not given but is created and negotiated*” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 139). The semi-structured interview is also explained by Kvale (1996 in Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) in his traveler metaphor. Here, he says that the interviewer should be seen as a traveler and the stories of the interviewee should be seen as the journey that develops and evolves as the interviewer interprets the story.

This method demands that the interviewer has quick, intellectual abilities in order to comprehend what the interviewee has said and is subsequently able to ask the relevant follow-up questions (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Still, with semi-structured interviews, there are certain questions that the interviewer seeks to answer, and this is how the method refrains from a casual conversation. The interviewer must make sure to not only capture the essence of the interviewee’s views and dive into these but also make sure to have covered every element that was set out to be covered beforehand (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This, therefore, requires an interview guide.

#### 3.2.3.2.1 Interview Guide

The interview guide, or *script* as Kvale (2007) calls it, is the structure of the interview. It is thus the guidance that the interviewer can refer to as a way of ensuring that the interview is on track and that every aspect is covered. The interview guide should follow overall research themes relating to the topics that the researcher wishes to explore (Kvale, 2007). From the gathered knowledge of the topic presented in chapter 2, five overarching *research themes* have been developed that we seek to cover in the interviews:

1. Persona: Who is the consumer?
2. Consumption patterns: How and what do they consume?
3. Influence: How are they influenced to consume?
4. Digital relationships: How do they view their relationships with social media influencers?
5. Critical reflections: How do they view consumption displayed on social media?

When designing the interviews, there are different precautionary measures to take that have been incorporated into the research. As the interviews were conducted with regular people, it was important to avoid academic language, and instead use indirect and spoken language to ensure that the interviewees were met at eye level (Kvale, 2007). Consequently, the questions were formulated so that they, in different ways, helped to answer the five overarching themes. The themes are all related to each other, and some questions within the themes are more difficult to answer, which is why the “easy” questions were presented to the interviewee first. The interviews do, therefore, not completely follow the order of the five themes. In the following sections, we will go through each theme and our choices related to the interview guide using Kvale’s (2007) interview question categorization.

#### 3.2.3.2.1.1 Persona

Starting the interview with *introductory* questions, this allowed us to collect selected information that is useful for the general assessment of the individual. In addition, this enabled us to place the interviewees in relation to the studied field, and others, while simultaneously warming up the interviewee (Kvale, 2007; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Therefore, demographic questions were asked along with questions on the interviewees’ relationship with beauty and fashion influencers.

#### 3.2.3.2.1.2 Consumption Patterns

To understand how, how much, and what the interviewees consume, inquiries about specific details on their consumption were made. We chose to ask *direct* questions in order to get the needed information about their ways of consuming, but also because it was easier for the interviewee to relate to something tangible, which also helped them warm-up for the interview.

We furthermore chose to include two *indirect* questions. In the first question, the interviewees were asked if they have ever purchased something that turned out to be a “mistake”. Here, we used the Danish word “fejlkøb”, which does not have a direct English translation, but captures many aspects in just one word and is, therefore, fairly broad and subject to interpretation. Generally, “fejlkøb” is the notion of buying a product and later regretting the purchase for various reasons. Here, the intention was to get a sense of how much thought the interviewees put behind their consumption, their general satisfaction, and how they, in certain cases, dispose of their purchases. Since the

question could seem negatively charged, it was decided to lead with an explanation of how many people find themselves purchasing something that they regret in order to soften the question for the interviewees.

In the second *indirect* question, we asked the interviewee how they view their consumption in relation to their peers in order to get a better understanding of their consumption levels. Here, it is important to note that the Danish word for consumption, “forbrug”, is very commonly used in everyday language and encapsulates all types of shopping and use of products. We would, therefore, argue that it is not as charged as the English word consumption.

#### 3.2.3.2.1.3 Persuasion

To get a sense of how the interviewees are influenced to consume, *indirect* questions were asked about whether they are inspired by anything in relation to the things they purchase. Here, it was important to ask indirectly in order to stay open towards any perception of inspiration that the interviewees may have. We furthermore had to ask openly before moving on to the next theme of digital relationships as we could otherwise have tampered with the interviewees’ associations regarding inspiration.

#### 3.2.3.2.1.4 Digital Relationships

For this theme, we aimed to cover the interviewees’ digital relationships on social media. Here, we started with a *structuring* question to change the topic and steer the conversation. It took the form of an *introductory* question to get the interviewees to open up about the topic. Following this, we asked *direct follow-up* questions about the digital relationship in order to get answers to some factual questions and also to get the interviewees to elaborate on the relationship. Furthermore, we asked the interviewees directly about purchases inspired by social media influencers.

#### 3.2.3.2.1.5 Critical Reflections

Lastly, we wanted the interviewees to reflect on how consumption is portrayed on social media by asking them an *indirect* question about their opinion. We did this to get closer to the interviewees’ construction on the specific area that we are researching and to let them comment on this directly.

#### 3.2.2.1.6 Other Considerations for the Interview Guide

It is important to note that the interview guide is not exhaustive as it is merely an overall structure of topics and the final interview guide can be found in appendix 2. The questions in parenthesis in the interview guide are follow-up questions. These were asked if the interviewee was unsure about what to answer to the main question or if they after answering did not comment on some aspect that we wanted answers to.

#### 3.2.3.3 Interview Process

For all interviews, the general topic of the interview was introduced when first contacting the interviewees, as we needed certainty on their familiarity with beauty and fashion influencers. Some of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewees, while others were conducted on the phone. There are undoubtedly pros and cons of conducting both types of interviews. Being in the security of their own territory may increase the sense of security for the interviewees, but the interviewee may also become shy from being face to face with a person that they do not know. At the same time, it is harder for the interviewer to pick up on clues with phone interviews, as they cannot see the interviewee's face.

Due to the snowball sampling, we both knew our first interviewees, which made the atmosphere more relaxed. Nevertheless, as the interview situation is uncommon and sometimes uncomfortable for the interviewee, we started with a few, easy warm-up questions. Depending on how talkative the interviewees were and how precisely they answered the questions, the interviews lasted between 20-45 minutes. The interviews were mainly conducted in Danish, which is our and almost all of the interviewees' native language with the exception of one interviewee being from Germany with whom the interview was conducted in English.

### 3.3 Methods for Analysis

This section covers the method for the fifth stage of Kvale's (2007) seven stages, namely *analyzing*. The transcripts can be found in appendix 1, and these provide the basis for the analysis. In this section, the reader will first be presented to the overall approach of the thematic analysis (hereafter TA) and subsequently the six phases of the TA.

There are different ways to analyze qualitative data. When working as a group it can be beneficial to proceed systematically in order to collaborate using the same approach. TA is in this regard used to analyze qualitative data, often in the social sciences, and through a TA, the qualitative data is *coded* into different *themes* (Terry et al., 2017). We approach the analysis using Terry et al.'s (2017) *qualitative version* of TA where the coding is dependent on the submersion into the data. The codes are created through the appearance of tendencies in the data and are thereby created inductively. We as researchers are an integral part of the analysis as there is no “correct answer” waiting to be found but only our systematic, methodologically correct approach to the data (Terry et al., 2017). We furthermore approach the TA using *latent, interpretive coding*, meaning that our codes contain overall ideas, meanings, and concepts and, therefore, need further, deeper analysis to fully unfold (Terry et al., 2017).

### 3.3.1 Six Phases of the TA Process

Terry et al. (2017) identify six phases of the TA process. These are: Familiarization with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The first phase consists of reading and re-reading the data in order to fully emerge oneself into the interviews and be able to pick up on clues (Terry et al., 2017). These clues should be written down as notes to assist the next step (Terry et al., 2017). Here, we put extra focus on emerging ourselves in each other's interviews, so the two of us were completely aligned.

Coding is the second phase and this phase consists of the researcher capturing the meaning of statements made in the interviews (Terry et al., 2017). While familiarizing ourselves with the data, we wrote comments labeling segments from the data into codes, which occurred inductively. The majority of these codes naturally fit into our research themes, as these were the overall structure used for the interviews. Thereby, one could argue that the codes could also be considered somewhat deductive. The codes can be found in appendix 3.

The third stage consists of constructing themes where we identify general thematic patterns from the interviews and codes (Terry et al., 2017). These TA themes are not to be mistaken for the previously mentioned research themes that frame the interview guide in section 3.2.3.2.1. In the fourth and fifth phases, we reviewed the themes with each other, settled on the most relevant



themes for answering the research question, and subsequently defined them by giving them names. When naming the themes, it is important that they encompass all aspects within the theme while still being distinct from each other. It is furthermore important to only include TA themes that have enough depth to act as a key section of the analysis (Terry et al., 2017). These chosen TA themes will be introduced in our findings, chapter 4, along with the sixth phase of writing the report.

### **3.4 Research Limitations**

As part of writing this thesis, we find it important to note the limitations of the research conducted. The limitations are constraints out of the researcher's hands that can negatively affect the outcome of the research (Price & Murnan, 2004). The limitations can either affect internal or external validity, where internal validity means that the research measures what it set out to measure, and external validity is the notion of generalizability from sample to population (Price & Murnan, 2004). It is important to note that the constructivist approach deems that no finite social truths exist among entire populations. Nevertheless, the purpose of the research is to be able to understand red threads between people within the target population and explore dialogical intersubjectivity between the sample in order to highlight the social constructions.

The sample is crucial for the validity of the research. It was noted that the sampling size is appropriate for a master's thesis, however, in order for the research to extend beyond a thesis and weigh heavier in the research field, a larger sample would be preferred. In this regard, a larger sample would not only have provided more insights but also have enabled us to determine a more impactful degree of dialogical intersubjectivity. Additionally, we had sought out to find interviewees of all ages within the millennial group, but our snowball sampling primarily led us to younger millennials, which weakens the internal validity.

Furthermore, when going through the data, it became evident that there are a lot of similarities between the sample not only with regard to their background but also their interests and relationship with consumption. As reflected upon, this may be due to the choice of using snowball sampling as a way of finding interviewees since one could argue that people who know each other may be more likely to have common interests. In addition, the interviewees were chosen due to their familiarity with fashion and beauty influencers meaning that a certain degree of homogeneity is to be expected.

Additionally, we, the researchers, belong to the same demographic group as the target population. The target population consists of young, urban millennial women in Denmark, and all except one of them are in the midst of a higher degree. As we as researchers share these characteristics, it is important to note that it is highly likely that we also share some similar social constructs as the interviewees. By using the correct methods for analyzing the data and explicitly stating how we draw conclusions, we are able to disregard this limitation. Nevertheless, we find this important to note in terms of transparency for the reader.

Another limitation important to note is related to circumstantial events that could not have been controlled or foreseen. This thesis was written in the winter and spring of 2020 where there was a pandemic outbreak of the virus COVID-19. The virus spread to Denmark in February 2020 and, as a result of the pandemic, the Danish government shut down most parts of Denmark in March 2020 (Stephensen Klinker & Stærmose Hansen, 2020) when we were in the midst of conducting our qualitative interviews. This affected our research, as many of our planned interviews were canceled after the government urged everyone to self-isolate. We managed to carry out a few interviews over the phone, however, our interviewees' thoughts were deeply affected by the surrounding situation. Not only were people concerned about the virus outbreak, but the shutdown of the country also warned great economic consequences. As a result, this was not an appropriate time to talk to people about consumption as they were affected by the circumstances.

## 4. Findings

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This chapter contains the findings of our qualitative research. The analysis of our interviews was approached thematically and the methods for this have been reviewed in section 3.3. As mentioned, the analysis will follow the structure of the research themes, but it is worth noting that we have changed the order of ‘influence’ and ‘digital relationships’. While it was best to ask questions in this order, we believe it makes for a more logical structure of the findings when we start by diving into the digital relationships and then follow by highlighting how these relationships influence the consumer. The findings of our research are, therefore, presented in the order of persona, consumption patterns, digital relationships, influence, and critical reflections.

With regard to the above-mentioned *research themes*, we find it important to note that these are different than the notion of *themes* in a TA. *Themes* in a TA refer to the headlines given to prominent, recurring views and perceptions that have come to light from the analysis. In the following analysis, each research theme will be introduced, hereunder what it entails, how it correlates to the research question, and thereby why it is relevant to analyze. Under each research theme, we will introduce TA themes that we have gathered from coding and analyzing our interviews. These TA themes have been created from finding underlying patterns within the subject of each research theme. These patterns occur from us finding common discourses among the interviewees on a particular subject. Moreover, the TA themes can be defined from finding contradictory or conflicting opinions where the interviewees differ from each other.

The creation of TA themes was approached by analyzing the transcripts jointly and categorizing these into codes. The analysis, therefore, happened through dialogue between the both of us. This was to ensure that the research was not bound to one of our constructs. Following Terry et al.’s (2017) approach to TA, only the themes that have depth and are directly related to our research question are presented in this chapter. There are, therefore, aspects of the interviews that are not relevant to our research, which we will not cover in our findings.

Throughout this chapter, extracts from the transcripts will be highlighted. The extracts serve two purposes, acting as either *illustrative* or *analytical* aids. Illustrative extracts are used for providing

examples of the analytical narrative, while analytical quotes are for discussing extracts of the transcripts and are used to analyze (Terry et al., 2017). Furthermore, the quotes have all been translated from Danish into English. This has been done as directly as possible in order to stay as true to the interviews. However, in some cases where there are implicit meanings, phrases, or wordings not available in English, we have rephrased to the best of our abilities while staying as true to the tone of the interview as possible.

## **4.1 Persona**

To provide context for the analysis as a whole, we have chosen to start the analysis with the identification of a theme relating to who the interviewees are as persons. We find it important to start with an introduction to who the interviewees are as people to better understand who they are as consumers. Understanding the individuals' constructed identity is, therefore, a necessary frame of reference for fully comprehending the consumer's ways of consuming as well as the motives related to this. In addition, the interviewees constitute the users of digital beauty and fashion content in our research question and we would thus argue that this underlines the importance of understanding the interviewees and their constructed self-perception.

Our desire to understand the interviewees' self-perceptions furthermore ties together with our social constructionist's approach to research, as explained in the methodology section, since we are interested in examining the interviewees' versions of reality (Terry et al., 2017). We, therefore, find it essential to understand the interviewees' constructed versions of themselves and their reality as the starting point for all of their other statements in relation to both themselves and their consumption. We would thus argue that the context is important for understanding and subsequently thematizing the interviewees' ways of consuming.

### **4.1.1 Beauty and Fashion as a Hobby**

A clear commonality for the interviewees is the fact that they have an interest in beauty and fashion, which to varying degrees play a part in their lives. As a result, several of the interviewees are very dedicated to staying updated on the current trends and news within fashion, design, and skincare. Being knowledgeable of the fashion and beauty world is something that these interviewees take

pride in and a part of their day may be dedicated to making sure that they are informed on the newest developments in relation to the fashion and beauty world. For some interviewees, it furthermore became clear that beauty and fashion take up such a large part of their free time that we have identified a TA theme that we refer to as “beauty and fashion as a hobby”. As an example, when introducing herself, interviewee 5 says the following:

*“In my free time, I do yoga and I care a lot about skincare. Like so much that you wouldn’t want to tell people from outside of your close social circle about it”* (line 451-453)

Providing a similar account when introducing herself, interviewee 7 mentions online shopping as an activity that is a regular part of her free time, while at the same time implying that being online takes up a significant amount of her time:

*“In my free time, I spend a lot of time on my computer mostly on movies and tv shows, but also on online shopping. That is one of my guilty pleasures. And like any other young person, I look at a lot of content on social media”* (line 944-947)

The quotes above thus exemplify the theme of “beauty and fashion as a hobby” where beauty and fashion as both concepts and activities are such integrated parts of these interviewees’ everyday life. At the same time, it may be argued that beauty and fashion are somewhat defining elements of these interviewees’ identities since they mention skincare and online shopping as one of the first things when introducing themselves. Moreover, these interviewees overall ascribe beauty and fashion a lot of value throughout the interviews thus underlining the importance that beauty and fashion have on their understanding of who they are.

In continuation of some interviewees being expressive about having beauty and fashion-related interests and activities as a prominent part of their everyday life, they also provide a very direct and precise construction of their *self* by identifying as aesthetes with one example being:

*“I am very interested in interior design and I am a bit of a creative soul. I would probably describe myself as an aesthete as it is the ultimate thing”* (Interview 5, line 453-454)

Other interviewees also reflect on being mindful of aesthetics and how this connects to their consumption habits. For a few of the interviewees, aesthetics may, therefore, be viewed as the primary driver of their purchase choices as they believe that “(...) *the world becomes more beautiful when you dress nicely*” (Interview 7, line 1006-1007). The desire for consumption to result in aesthetically-pleasing surroundings may subsequently be viewed as an inherent part of some of the interviewees’ identities.

For the remaining interviewees, beauty and fashion do play a role in their lives, as previously mentioned, although this role is less prominent and more so something that they engage in from time to time. Whereas the interviewees quoted above represent one end of the spectrum where beauty and fashion consumption constitute a prominent part of their identity and free time, there is also the opposite end of the spectrum, which some of the interviewees occupy. At this end, the interviewees may not use a lot of makeup or buy a lot of clothing although they still show some interest in beauty and fashion. An example of this is interviewee 6 who says the following when asked about the role that beauty and fashion play in her life:

*“Interior design does not take up a lot of my time although I try to pay attention to what my room looks like. Beauty is probably quite important to me. Not that I buy a lot of makeup, but I really enjoy watching other people do their makeup because I am very fascinated by it”* (line 777-779)

By “watching other people do their makeup”, the interviewee is referring to the act of watching, for example, YouTube videos of amateur makeup artists doing their makeup. The quote above may thus be used to show that not all interviewees are committed to beauty and fashion to such a degree that it may constitute a hobby. Beauty and fashion-related activities are still a part of their world in some way but are not necessarily applied to all aspects of their lives.

#### **4.1.2 Self-conscious Identity**

In continuation of the fact that the interviewees present themselves as being interested in fashion and beauty to varying degrees and with some of them being overly appreciative of aesthetically-pleasing items, we would argue that a second TA theme under the research theme “Persona” is “self-conscious identity”. This TA theme is based on the fact that in addition to some interviewees labeling themselves as, for example, an aesthete, most of the interviewees seem to overall have a

very clearly-defined idea of not only who they are but also who they are not. Although they may not all explicitly articulate the type of person and consumer that they are, there is a common thread of the interviewees actively having an opinion on how their lifestyle and habits are similar to or differ from others.

The self-conscious identity becomes apparent in relation to how the interviewees discuss their peers as well as specific influencers where the interviewees seem very aware of how factors such as their style, makeup routine, and consumption habits compare to others. Moreover, we would argue that some of the interviewees in particular also have a clear understanding of how and when the different aspects of their identities were formed with interviewee 5, for example, saying that her “sense of aesthetics” comes from her mother (line 553).

As a result of the self-conscious identity, the interviewees, as mentioned, compare themselves a lot to their peers and the influencers they follow or used to follow. These comparisons are of course to some extent prompted by the interview questions directly asking the interviewees to reflect on themselves in relation to others. With that being said, we did observe a general tendency on top of these reflections wherein the interviewees continuously took part in a constant process of evaluation. This evaluation can be synthesized by the following reflective question, which we would argue is representative of the interviewees’ self-consciousness: “Who am I in relation to others and how does that affect how I view myself and subsequently how and what I choose to consume?”

Based on this constant evaluation observed in the interviews, we would argue that the interviewees’ identities are simultaneously deconstructed and constructed in the discussion of how the interviewees view and describe themselves both irrespective of and in relation to their peers and social media influencers in particular. Additionally, the identities presented in the interviews may be viewed as a snapshot of the interviewees’ realities as these are negotiated through the interaction between the two of us and the interviewee in the interview situation (Nygaard, 2013).

Following the identified TA themes and subsequent findings, we find it worth reflecting on the type of information that the interviewees provided us with and the specific descriptions that the interviewees chose to use about themselves. We would, with regard to this, argue that the

descriptions may not be a complete description of who the interviewees are, yet it indicates how they view themselves and thus what their construction is of their *self*. This perspective applies not only to the research theme “Persona”, but also for all other research themes going forward.

With the above considerations in mind, Terry et al. (2017) argue that there is no single truth in the qualitative paradigm and because of this the outcome of the analytical process cannot be right or wrong from an objective standpoint. This is, therefore, important to keep in mind as we know some of the interviewees personally and we may thus have a different construction of who they are compared to the construction that is created in the interview. Irrespective of this, their articulated identity and subsequent consumption habits shall be viewed as reality.

## **4.2 Consumption Patterns**

Following the findings on the personas, this section presents the findings within the research theme of consumption patterns. Several aspects of consumption were highlighted in the interviews by the interviewees. This section focuses on the parts of the interviews related to how the interviewees consume, as this is a central theme of the research question.

Understanding the interviewees’ consumption patterns and views on consumption enable us to identify how, what, and why the interviewees consume. This is essential to understanding the significance of consuming and of beauty and fashion in the lives of the interviewees. As learned in section 4.1.1, the topics of beauty and fashion play a big role in all interviewees’ lives. One could, therefore, presume that this notion will carry on into their consumption, and this section will assess to what extent that is true. Additionally, when later discussing the degree to which social media influences the consumption process (chapter 5), we find it important to understand the interviewees’ relationship with consumption in general.

### **4.2.1 Needing or Wanting to Purchase**

When analyzing consumption, an array of characteristics was common throughout the interviews, which related to the overall consumption. For example, products relating to beauty and fashion are the most popular in terms of mentions as these were the first in mind when asking the interviewees



about shopping. All of the interviewees furthermore stated that they go shopping at least once a month. The product category differs yet the most common product type is clothing where most interviewees buy one or two items once a month. Shopping monthly is, therefore, not uncommon for any of the interviewees but it is more so the subject of consumption that differs. Our research showed that the discourse regarding purchasing beauty products clearly differs from the discourse of purchasing clothing. Where the interviewees were able to identify the exact, calculated reason for purchasing all beauty products, the purchasing of clothes appears much more simple. This distinction can be summed up to “needing or wanting to purchase”, which is the title of this theme.

When it comes to beauty products, many of the interviewees refer to a purchase in relation to them running out of something and, therefore, buying something new. The items purchased may be exactly the same or something else within the same category, such as another eyeliner but from a different brand. It seems that the notion of running out is specific to the beauty category where bottles, pallets, and containers may be used up and emptied to which the consumer is left in “need” for something new. In continuation of this, interviewee 5 says the following with regard to buying new beauty products: *“I try to tell myself that I need to finish this before I can buy something new”* (line 519-520). It, therefore, seems that with beauty products, our interviewees are, to some extent, satiated as long as they have something left of one of each product category that they use.

With the choice of the words “I try to tell myself”, it seems that purchasing beauty products is an impulse that lures the interviewee at times when there is no apparent need and that she attempts to fight the urge. The impulse is not only evident for interviewee 5 but something that is seen throughout all interviews. Variations within one product category, such as different colors or the addition of glitter, in the example of eye shadows, thus creates a temptation within the interviewees to have more than one item within a category. Additionally, the interviewees highlight how the marketing of beauty products promises different, better, and improved results from the variations of products, which also lures them to buy more. Consequently, a sense of internal dilemma occurs for the interviewees:

*“So even though you hear about a new eye shadow in another shade than the one you have at home, or a new exciting brand, I really try to hold back. I really have to be very vigilant of not falling for the temptation”* (interview 1, line 107-109)

It becomes clear that wanting the additional eye shadow does not comply with the interviewee's rational view of only *needing* one, a principle widely expressed by all interviewees. Nevertheless, the promises of what you can do with another shade of eye shadow tempt the interviewee to break the "rule" and buy a product they do not *need*. Interviewee 5 furthermore reflects: "*You kind of make up different needs*" (Interview 5, line 727). The wanting of additional products is, therefore, seen as a result. This view stands as an explanation for the forces tempting them to purchase more. We would, therefore, argue, that within the beauty product category, there are clear indications that every additional product purchased is seen as excessive the eyes of the interviewees.

Following the considerations associated with purchasing beauty products, the notion of having to need a product to justify a purchase does not account for clothing in the same capacity. For most interviewees, purchasing clothes was mentioned as just that – the purchasing of clothes. The act of purchasing clothes is repeatedly referred to without an explanation. In some cases, it is due to a *want*, something that the interviewees were inspired to buy or simply thought looked good, and not because they needed it or ran out. This difference is apparent from interview 9:

*"I probably spend the most on clothes – like every other week. And then probably things for my home. And last is skincare because it lasts longer. I buy maybe like one thing and then I use it up and then I buy one new thing"* (Interview 9, line 1294-1295)

Exemplified in the quote above, it is common for more words or explanations to be attached when buying beauty products compared to when purchasing clothes. Hence, clothes are not commented on as something one *needs*. On the contrary, it seems as though clothes are viewed more as something that the interviewees collect meaning that there is no apparent limit on the number of clothes that may be considered acceptable to buy. An explanation of this may be the economic factor where clothes are not seen as a necessity in most developed countries. It is a matter of course, as people own multiple items within each category, build wardrobes filled with different clothes for different occasions, and sometimes follow fashion trends.

From the findings presented as the TA theme "needing or wanting to purchase", we can gather that buying clothes does not require the same mental justification as with beauty products. In contrast, one very quickly moves into perceived excessive consumption within beauty products, whereas for

clothing the mental limit for what may be justified does not seem to exist. In the interviews, this finding appears as a discourse distinction between simply buying because of a want and buying due to a, perhaps, made up need.

#### 4.2.2 Conscious Consumption is In

From the findings presented above in section 4.2.1, it could seem as though the interviewees only consider their purchases when it comes to consuming beauty products. However, another prominent discourse found when analyzing the interviews is the notion of conscious consumption. A red thread in the interviews is thus the awareness of the excessive consumption in society, which was commented on by all interviewees in different ways. To encapsulate all of the aspects arising from this awareness, we will now present the findings of the TA theme “conscious consumption is in”.

As part of the theme of “conscious consumption is in”, it seems as though many of the interviewees are mindful of cutting down on their consumption in terms of the amounts of products that they purchase. As a result, the interviewees are becoming what can be characterized as conscious consumers. Unknowingly describing how this discourse forms, interviewee 8 states:

*“I think many of my friends have shifted a bit in relation to the climate and environment. It’s verbalized much more this consumption thing amongst my friends”* (interview 8, line 1194-1195)

Reflecting on the quote above, it seems as though climate change and cutting down on consumption is something that the interviewees are becoming increasingly aware of. From this, we may assume that there is a trend arising from the dialogue between friends and that this specific construct forms in groups that then transfers to the next group through socializing.

This conscious consumerism identified in the interviews is depicted in different ways for many of the interviewees. For some, it simply means buying less, while it for others means buying more secondhand, or up-cycling products, which is the making of something new from something old. The action itself differs, yet the consciousness of not over-consuming is present for all interviewees in some capacity.

The most prominent conscious consumption action depicted in the interviews is the awareness related to buying less. One interviewee says that her consumption has drastically changed and that she buys much fewer clothes now than when she lived with her parents (interview 6). When asked why that is, she replied: *“I also want to consume less”* (interview 6, line 763). From this, we infer that consuming less is the ultimate goal of conscious consumption.

Consuming less is, however, not the only conscious initiative implemented by the interviewees. Interviewee 6 also states that *“I try to buy fewer clothes, or else I try to buy secondhand”* (line 757-758). This quote shows that buying secondhand can act as a substitute for consuming less. By buying secondhand, one minimizes the purchase of new products, which will ultimately decrease the number of new products produced. We understand this to be the motive behind buying secondhand. Furthermore, we can tell by her wording - that she *tries* to do those things - that it does not appear natural for her but that it is, nonetheless, something she puts thought and effort into. Another interviewee simply states: *“(...) my favorite place to shop is probably secondhand”* (interview 9, line 1282). There is, therefore, not one specific store, but she generally prefers secondhand shopping over conventional stores.

Conscious shopping can also mean choosing the products one buys very carefully. Another conscious initiative noticed in the interviews is the notion of buying high quality in the hopes that the products will last longer. From the interviews, it is clear that when shopping, the interviewees actively search for and prioritize purchasing products of higher quality. Many of them mention that the importance of quality has increased as they have gotten older and that it is a way for them to not consume such large quantities. Almost all interviewees acknowledge that it often costs more to consume this way, but that is how they chose to prioritize. This not only applies to clothes, but to skincare and makeup as well:

*“Just like when I buy makeup, I buy good quality so I know it lasts and is better. Rather than having all kinds of products that aren’t as good, I’d rather sacrifice a bit more money on it”* (interview 9, line 1307-1309)

With the quote above in mind, it thus seems as though the majority of the interviewees now prefer a higher cost and higher quality to lower costs and larger quantities. Moreover, the notion of not buying into trends as much was also highlighted:

*“So that’s something I try to be better at; buying classic things that don’t change from season to season”* (interview 8, line 1233-1234)

In line with the two mentioned conscious shopping methods, another interviewee mentions that many of the purchases she regrets - the “fejlkøb” as mentioned in section 3.2.3.2.1.2 - are mostly due to the quality not living up to her standards or because “(...) *it’s a trend that turned out to not be me*” (Interview 7, line 1001). Buying classics instead of buying trends is, therefore, a method for consuming less, which is the goal for the interviewees.

Another aspect deduced from the interviews is the notion that impulse and planned purchases can act as facilitators or destroyers of conscious consumption. Although most of the interviewees have good intentions when it comes to consuming consciously and planned, they are at times tempted to act impulsively and buy something here and now. This is mostly mentioned in relation to shopping in physical stores to which two of the interviewees have named these types of purchases “stress purchases”. Both interviewees highlight the process of spending a long time browsing online for the exact right thing, fit, or quality, but ending up buying something else in a physical store that they were not satisfied with:

*“Like stress purchases mostly end up being at H&M because I need something here and now and I don’t want to spend a lot of money for something I didn’t intend to buy. It’s pretty stupid (...) I try to minimize it and I’ve become more aware these last couple of years of not making the same mistake”* (interview 10, line 1420-1422 + 1447-1448)

Even though the interviewees are conscious of the pattern of buying products in a haste, it is something that they have a hard time breaking. As an example, one of the interviewees mentions making a rule to not purchase in fast fashion stores to control the cheap, impulse purchases that are not aligned with her consumption principles (interview 8).

Overall, conscious consumption is “in” among the interviewees, and how they implement the consciousness differs from buying secondhand, buying better quality, or buying classics instead of trends. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal, which all methods assist to, is consuming less.

### 4.3 Digital Relationships

Taking a closer look at digital relationships, this is our third research theme and a relevant theme as it represents an essential cornerstone of what we are interested in knowing more about. The wish to examine and get a better understanding of digital relationships is thus at the core of our research question. As discussed earlier in the literature review, there is limited research on the relationship between content creators on social media and the people that view their content especially with regard to product-oriented content. The available research establishes that relationships exist between the two parties and that the creators have an effect on their viewers but the details of this effect have, in our view, not yet been researched sufficiently. With the research theme of digital relationships, we will, therefore, attempt to shine a light on this gap in the literature by providing further insights into the nature of digital relationships.

Common for all our interviewees is the fact that they are familiar with the concept of social media influencers and they have consequently established relationships with one or more of these influencers either in present times or within the last few years. With this being said, it is worth noting that we by “relationship” are of course not referring to a “normal” relationship like the relationship with friends and family. Instead, we are referring to the online connections that are established between influencers and their followers. Over time, this can develop into a significant relationship in which the follower “knows” the influencer and is familiar with the influencer’s life to such a degree that the relationship may provide a meaningful contribution to the follower’s life. These aspects of a digital relationship and many more will be explored in the following TA analysis.

When discussing digital relationships, we furthermore find it worth noting that there is an overall consensus among the interviewees that there has been a significant change in the social media landscape in recent years. This change is especially tied to the YouTube culture, which, according to the interviewees, has fundamentally shifted from being led by amateur content creators to

becoming a fully commercialized operation. As a result, there has been a shift in the nature of the interviewees' relationships with influencers as the interviewees have become more attentive to the influencers' motives, among other things. This development, as observed by the interviewees, may help provide context for the analysis both in relation to digital relationships but also the following research themes.

#### 4.3.1 Friendly Authenticity

From the interviews, we can infer that the interviewees' relationships with influencers can be characterized by the fact that the interviewees follow a limited number of influencers that they feel a connection with. For the most part, the interviewees follow influencers in the form of people although there are also instances of the interviewees following inspirational accounts or companies with whom they establish connections that are similar to those of influencers. The interviewees furthermore seem to be very aware of their reasons for following specific influencers and the influencers they choose to follow are, therefore, carefully considered.

Taking a closer look at the reasons that the interviewees have for following influencers, a common thread among the interviewees is that they mainly follow people that seem nice and that the interviewees perceive as being good people. When these two elements are present, the interviewees may, as a result, develop a relationship with the influencers that resembles a friendship from the perspective of the follower. This is underlined by interviewee 3 who says the following when reflecting on the influencers she follows:

*"I am influenced by someone when they are nice and empathetic. I follow a lot of influencers on Instagram because they seem like really nice people, so there is a feeling of friendship. I am genuinely interested in their life and I want them to succeed"* (line 283-286)

The quote above exemplifies the main aspects of a TA theme that we have identified as "friendly authenticity". With this theme, we would argue that many of the interviewees have a relationship with digital influencers where there is a strong sense of knowing the influencers personally. For interviewee 3, there is furthermore a willingness to see these influencers do good in life thus resembling the characteristics of a regular friendship.

In addition to empathy and friendliness being defining of the interviewees' digital relationships, several of the interviewees express a satisfactory feeling with regard to having "found" the real and authentic influencers. The influencers, therefore, seem very intent on identifying influencers that are worth following due to their genuine personality. This is, for example, seen when interviewee 10 says: *"I primarily follow influencers where I feel like I get their real opinion"* (line 1510-1511). This viewpoint is further elaborated by interviewee 5:

*"I think that the reason that I don't really follow other influencers apart from Fleur is that I feel like she is authentic and also because she talks about things that don't work, so I feel like she is being honest when she tells me that something doesn't work"* (line 655-657)

With the two quotes above in mind, authenticity may thus be viewed as an equally important facet to friendliness when it comes to characterizing the digital relationships between influencers and their followers. The interviewees value the influencers' willingness to be honest in terms of the beauty and fashion products they are reviewing, which in turn creates the perception of the influencers as being real and authentic. Based on the interviewees' appreciation of friendliness and authenticity, we would furthermore argue that there is a level of intimacy associated with the relationships between the influencers and their followers. This is related to the fact that a high level of trust must be assumed to be present in a situation where a follower, in this case, the interviewee, puts faith in the hands of a stranger to believe them when they say that a given product is good or bad. We would thus argue that the interviewees' belief in the influencers' reviews and opinions underlines the depth of the digital relationships.

Based on the assessment that friendliness and authenticity are core characteristics of digital relationships, we would furthermore argue that some interviewees describe these relationships in a way that makes it seem as though the interviewees know something that others do not when it comes to these influencers. It is thus as if the interviewees are in some way able to see through the influencers to determine whether they are authentic or not. This is especially the case for about half of the interviewees who have been an active part of the online beauty and fashion community for many years and have, therefore, gained a comprehensive understanding of the community and the influencers comprising it.



When using the TA analysis, there is, as previously mentioned, no single, objective truth in the sense that there are no right or wrong realities. Nonetheless, we can infer from the interviews that some interviewees view themselves as somewhat of an expert on influencers and the British YouTube community in particular due to their year-long familiarity with the digital platform. Moreover, we would argue that these interviewees take pride in being knowledgeable about the beauty and fashion community and having the ability to tell who the authentic and genuine influencers are.

#### **4.3.2 Familiarity or Fascination**

In continuation of having identified a TA theme with regard to the central characteristics of the type of digital relationship that the interviewees are looking for, we have also identified a theme in relation to the needs that the interviewees are seeking to have fulfilled. Fundamentally, what do the interviewees want the outcome of the relationship to be? Based on answers to this question found in the interviews, we have identified the TA theme of “familiarity or fascination”. As seen from the perspective of the follower, we have thus identified two main streams. Interviewees may thus follow influencers that they share a sense of style with and aspire to be like or they may choose to follow influencers that they are fascinated by as these influencers live very different lives from the interviewees.

Starting with the instances of interviewees seeing themselves reflected in the influencers that they follow, we would argue that this group follows people with the desired outcome being inspiration and being able to copy the influencers’ style and use of products. There is thus a sense of the influencers serving as a representation of the style that the interviewees follow meaning that the influencers actively showcase the styling and product choices that fit a particular aesthetic or type of style. We would, therefore, argue that for the interviewees that mostly follow influencers based on familiarity, the influencers may be viewed as a source of information thus serving somewhat of an educational role. An example of an interviewee belonging to the group of familiarity-based followers is interviewee 2 who says the following when talking about why she chooses to follow the influencers that she does:

*“The fact that I can see myself in them and then I just think they have good taste. It’s also something about what you aspire for. They can contribute with something new and something I don’t get from other places” (line 171-173)*

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those interviewees that mostly follow influencers that are very different from themselves. Examples of this include following beauty YouTubers despite not wearing a lot of makeup or watching lifestyle videos of influencers living complete opposite lives in another country. Because of this, the interviewees naturally have a different desired outcome for the digital relationship. Instead of providing a source of inspiration, we would argue that the choice of following influencers with different lifestyles than oneself may stem from a point of fascination where the influencers, in this case, provide a source of entertainment thus allowing the follower to get a break from everyday life. Serving as an example of the follower who consumes content due to the fascination of it is interviewee 5 who reflects on the following when going through the type of videos she watches on YouTube:

*“I have the biggest guilty-please with watching rich, American girls moving into college dorms, and then they go to Target and buy the ugliest pillows and decorate their rooms in such a bad way. They spend so much money. I don’t know why I find it so fascinating” (line 581-585)*

Looking at the interviewees’ digital relationships, there is thus a distinction between whether the interviewees follow influencers that they relate to or if they, in contrast, seek out influencers that are different from themselves. It is in this regard worth noting that most interviewees gave examples of following different types of influencers where the relationships represented both ends of the spectrum.

In relation to the first TA theme, one may furthermore hypothesize that the interviewees who follow influencers with similar lifestyles to their own may, as a result, develop a deeper connection to the influencers. This does not mean that relationships based on fascination are not meaningful to the interviewees. Instead, we can infer that the outcomes of the relationships seem to differ as the group of interviewees that follow influencers with similar styles to their own may be more likely to be influenced right away because they are more inclined to want the things they are being exposed to. In contrast, relationships based on fascination may instead act as sources of inspiration for future

consumption as these types of relationships give the interviewees insight into a different world than their own, as previously touched upon.

## 4.4 Influence

As we now have a better understanding of the nature of the relationships that the interviewees have with social media influencers, we will now take a closer look at the effects that these relationships have on the interviewees' ways of consuming. The research theme "influence" is thus a broad theme relating to the ways in which the interviewees are influenced by social media. In this regard, *influence* may cover many aspects of purchase choices such as whether followers are influenced to make purchases they would never have made in the first place in addition to whether followers are influenced to make more or larger purchases than they had initially planned on. This research theme, therefore, relates to the core of the thesis' research question in terms of providing answers as to how followers, in this case, the interviewees, are influenced by social media influencers when it comes to the decision-making process associated with consumption.

Reflecting on the scope of influencer marketing, we would argue that the stakes are quite high for followers when influencers promote beauty products as the promised effect of these products can only be proven as a result of the followers trying the product. In addition, the effect may not only lack but be negative as the followers may in the worst case experience an allergic reaction. In our view, this ties well together with the TA themes analyzed as a part of "digital relationships" with regard to trust as one may assume that a certain level of trust is present in purchase decisions with somewhat high stakes. Overall, we find these contextual circumstances relevant when examining the interviewees' experiences with being influenced.

### 4.4.1 (Un)Filtered Influence

When analyzing the interviews with a focus on how the interviewees' consumption is influenced by social media influencers, we would argue that there is a clear consensus among the interviewees that influencers have an effect on their ways of consuming. The interviewees appear to be very aware of this fact and several of the interviewees directly express this standpoint when discussing

their perception of their own consumption. As an example, such a statement is provided by interviewee 9 who says:

*“I definitely think that my spending has changed from watching YouTube. Because I have bought some things that I didn’t necessarily need”* (line 1358-1359)

In continuation of interviewee 9’s statement of how watching influencers on YouTube has resulted in an increase in her spending, other interviewees provide similar accounts. These accounts range from influencers having increased their consumption levels directly to influencers having affected the interviewees’ purchase choices or preferences over certain brands. Common to the interviewees is thus the fact that following influencers has affected their ways of consuming by creating a need or preference, which we will elaborate on later.

With the interviewees’ acknowledgments of influencers affecting their consumption, we find it interesting to take a closer look at how the interviewees reflect on their awareness of this influence and how it affects them when consuming as the awareness is very present in the interviews. The heightened awareness may, of course, be prompted in response to the interview situation, but we also infer from the interviews that these thoughts relating to being “pushed” towards consumption by influencers are something that the interviewees encounter often and are thus conscious of in their everyday life. In continuation of this, we have identified the TA theme “(Un)Filtered Influence”, which encapsulates the interviewees’ own perception of how they deal with being influenced.

As part of the “(Un)Filtered Influence” theme, we have identified a pattern among several of the interviewees where they reflect on having a filter that enables them to sort through the influencer exposure and make an independent choice with regard to what they are influenced to buy or not. This perspective is seen with interviewee 1 who says the following:

*“I obviously feel like I am being influenced, but I also feel like I sort through if an influencer is, for example, wearing something that I don’t like. So I don’t just copy them. I choose the things I can use”* (line 73-76)

Many of the interviewees present similar viewpoints to the one above from which it can be inferred that the interviewees are conscious of the way that they are being influenced to such a degree that they are able to filter or deflect the influence. With this being said, we would argue that the interviewees are not as conscious of their ability to be influenced as they think. An example of this is interviewee 9 who says the following when reflecting on how social media has affected her way of consuming:

*“But the reason I stopped watching those beauty and lifestyle YouTubers was that I felt – or it’s like with ads someone is telling you to do it and then you think ‘oh, it doesn’t affect me’, but then you’re in Matas and think it looks good and then you buy it”* (line 1362-1364)

From this quote, it may thus be inferred that the interviewees are not necessarily as independent in their consumption choices as they claim or wish to be. Specifically, we would argue that the interviewees’ unconsciousness takes over in situations with stress purchases where the interviewees do not have time to further contemplate a purchase. In such situations, some interviewees may thus rely on recognizability based on the digital beauty content that the interviewees have viewed and thus become influenced by.

Reflecting on the TA theme of “(Un)Filtered Influence”, we would argue that the interviewees are conscious about how they are influenced although they think they are in more control of their consumption than they actually are. They are perhaps more influenced to begin with than they realize. This is furthermore underlined by the interviewees’ descriptions of their consumptions from which we would infer that their perceptions of how they are influenced and their actual purchase decision differ. This TA theme may thus be seen as an example of our and the interviewees’ constructions of reality being quite different. Summing up the TA theme of “(Un)Filtered Influence”, interviewee 8 says the following when reflecting on how influencers affect her consumption:

*“I am very conscious about it and try not to get too affected by it. But I still think there are some forces that are so strong that you really become controlled”* (line 1264-1266)

#### 4.4.2 New Trends Occurring

As determined earlier, the beauty industry plays an important role in the online beauty and fashion community, which is very much also the case for our interviewees' experience with following influencers. One interviewee describes how social media platforms are "*never-ending sources of inspiration*" that create a need to purchase more and that this need just keeps developing (Interviewee 4, line 424-427). This especially seems to be the case with beauty consumption and more specifically with makeup as online trends directly affect and increase consumption. As an example, interviewee 6 reflects on how she was unaware of products for filling in one's eyebrows existed but after seeing that a lot of beauty YouTubers did it, she also started filling in her eyebrows (line 856-859). Later in the interview, interviewee 6 also reflects on how makeup trends such as highlighting and contouring were previously unknown but after some beauty YouTubers started talking about it, it became a "thing" (line 880-882).

Based on several interviewees describing the consequences of watching influencers and YouTubers in particular, we would argue that "new trends occurring" is another TA theme within the research theme of "Influence". With this theme, we would argue that influencers directly affect consumption decisions by creating a need that was non-existent prior to the development of the digital relationship. As a result, the interviewees purchase beauty products that they would otherwise not have bought, as described earlier. To exemplify this development in the interviewees' beauty consumption, interviewee 10 talks about how her previously simple makeup routine has developed over the years as a result of watching YouTube videos:

*"It didn't come from my friends because none of them are doing it, but it's because of YouTube. Lately, I've wanted to buy a highlighter, which I don't have but I feel like everyone has now. So I would like to buy that, but my makeup routine, which used to take two minutes now takes eight minutes"* (line 1545-1548)

With regard to the quote above, interviewee 10 makes it clear that YouTube was the main reason for her to start using more makeup and that her friends had no impact on the decision. Following this, we can overall infer from the interviews that one's close social circle of friends and family does not play an important role in determining the interviewees' ways of consuming. Apart from perhaps providing inspiration to the interviewees, friends and family are merely acknowledged as

partakers in consumption and are, therefore, not active contributors to the interviewees' purchase decisions.

The impact that beauty influencers have on their followers is furthermore exemplified by the fact that several interviewees admit to actively seeking out situations for them to be influenced. With this, we are referring to interviewees who describe how they do research on, for example, YouTube to hear what specific influencers have to say about a given product category. For example, interviewee 4 says that she has the following habit when buying new makeup:

*“I’ll go to the beauty YouTubers that I follow and search for the makeup that I’m getting – for example a powder – and then I watch their videos and in that way see what they recommend”* (line 388-390)

Other interviewees describe similar habits and from this, we would argue that the habit of actively seeking out influencers' opinions on specific beauty products may be a type of influencing in itself. Even though the choice of doing research is voluntary, we would argue that there within the beauty community exists examples of indirect influence due to the power and sway that beauty influencers have. In relation to this, some interviewees also describe actively seeking out reviews and opinions on beauty products from experienced consumers on websites such as “Cult Beauty” (Interview 5, line 630).

Summing up on the research theme of “Influence” and the ability of influencers to affect their followers' ways of consuming, we find it interesting to note that the interviewees express a feeling of influencers also being able to affect their consumption in the opposite way of what is intended. The interviewees thus describe how the influencers' attempt to convey consumption may unintentionally backfire and lead to a lack of consumption. This leads to anti-consumption in the sense that the interviewees feel less inclined to make purchases as a direct result of the many product-oriented messages that they are met with on social media. Overall, we, therefore, see a tendency with regard to how the amount of exposure to influencers and consumption affects the interviewee's receptiveness to being influenced. This is true for all types of consumption and, therefore, not limited to beauty consumption.

## 4.5 Critical Reflections

The research theme of “critical reflections” was only used to ask one question in the interview guide, however, when we started coding the interviews, we noticed several interviewees reflecting critically on their own consumption and on how consumption is displayed on social media. The latter is the question we asked the interviewees in the end, however many of them also touched upon it throughout the interviews. We asked the question to make sure we included any opinions that the interviewees may have had regarding the topic, which would bring us closer to our research question.

We found that there were many important critical views represented in the interviews. We have summed these up into two themes, which we feel encapsulate the aspects that were directly linked to our research question. First, we will highlight the theme of “hyper-critical self-awareness of consumption” and then the second theme named “unsustainable consumption displayed on social media”.

### 4.5.1 Hyper-critical Self-awareness of Consumption

As covered in 4.1.1, the interviewees are very self-conscious beings. We found this to be especially apparent in relation to their consumption. This self-awareness and reflectiveness showed itself in different ways. This will be elaborated in the following sections.

The interview was centered on beauty and clothes, consumption, and social media, which seemed to have sparked a reaction in some of the interviewees, who were concerned about how they would come across to the interviewer and possibly also to whoever would read the research later. One interviewee, after a sentence where she had commented on how she appreciates nice, aesthetically pleasing things, stopped and commented; “*I sound very materialistic right now (...)*” where the tone was filled with what we understood as guilt or shame (interview 7, line 1131-1132). We understand this as the worry of seeming too superficial by caring about things such as fashion or makeup, themes that are sometimes noted as shallow in society. In line with this, the interviewee 7 said the following about what role fashion and beauty play for her: “*It probably plays a bigger role than it should (...)*” (line 964). We would, therefore, argue that the topic of beauty and fashion is not as easy or one dimensional to talk about as one might think. Instead, there are many emotions linked to



the topic, where one of them is being very critical towards oneself and another is the slight embarrassment when letting other people into your thoughts and opinions on the matter.

In addition to the interviewees being self-conscious consumers that try to cut down on their consumption, as highlighted in section 4.2.2, we also interpret this undertone of shame being connected to the guilt that they *should* care and thereby consume less. Immediately after stating, or perhaps in her eyes admitting, that she sometimes does not return products that she regrets buying, interviewee 1 exclaimed; *“Of course I feel bad about that”* (line 25). From this, we gather that it seems as if there are implicit rules of conscious consumption generated by other conscious consumers, or perhaps by the interviewees themselves, that result in the interviewees feeling shameful of some of their consumption actions. An example of this occurs at the beginning of the interview with interviewee 5 when asked how often she goes shopping. Here she stops herself playing down her consumption levels in the interview:

*“I would probably say like... Actually, if I’m being honest, then like five times a month. So like at least once a week on average”* (interview 5, line 464-465)

Based on the quote above, we get the sense that she is not very happy to share this fact, but she also wants to be truthful. The same interviewee reflects critically on her own consumption when having bought more than one of a beauty item, where, as mentioned in 4.2.1, there is a consensus that you only need one: *“I have a few too many. I have three. Which is two more than you should”* (interview 5, line 720). Here we also sense a tone of judgment, almost as if to tell her future self to do better. Additionally, in line with the sense of shame when diverting from their conscious consumption rules and ideals, we also notice a tendency of wanting to highlight the things they believe makes them better consumers. All interviewees were pleased to be able to inform us of when they *had* followed their consumption rules:

*“Then I tend to give myself credit if it’s been a couple of weeks since I’ve bought anything and I guess that says something about consuming being something that you just do”* (interview 4, line 338-339)

With this more positive, yet critical view of their consumption patterns, the interviewees also seem to be aware that they do not always act as well or consciously as their own moral standards. The awareness is displayed as a confession, in which the interviewee can give detailed accounts for why she missteps:

*“I buy things I don’t need just because it’s nice and then I think; oh well when I’m done with this body lotion then I have this one. But when I get to it, I’ve already fallen in love with ten body lotions since then and I’m not interested in the one I’d bought anymore.”* (interview 5, line 521-525)

It seems that the interviewees are not only aware of the fact that they are consuming in a way they would rather not, their self-awareness also enables them to know exactly what triggers them, yet they still make the same “mistakes” that they appear critical towards. We can, therefore, sense that the self-awareness, the apparent conscious consumption, is perhaps more of a voiced plan, than an actuality as of now, and that there are shame and embarrassment attached to this notion.

#### **4.5.2 Unsustainable Consumption Displayed on Social Media**

The interviewees are very aware of the consumption displayed on social media, which was prominent throughout the interviews and not just with the final question. Interviewee 4 generalizes the jobs of influencers saying: *“Their job is to promote consumption”* (line 431-432) where she clearly associates this with something negative given the context of the sentence. We understand that they think the amounts the influencers are consuming are excessive and unnecessary:

*“Especially with Zoella, like the ASOS haul or ‘My boyfriend bought my ASOS’, where I thought; ugh, you really just buy so much stuff that I’m not sure you’re ever going to use. So I was a bit repulsed by the careless consumption”* (interview 6, line 905-907)

We infer that “careless consumption” is the opposite of the conscious consumption that the interviewees strive for. The interviewee uses strong words such as “repulsed” to enhance and underline the level of dissatisfaction she feels about this type of content. In line with this, many of them have distanced themselves to certain types of influencers within beauty and fashion who were displaying an excessive consumption pattern:

*“I’ve unfollowed some because that whole shopping and consuming just doesn’t add any value for me anymore”* (interview 8, line 1254-1255)

From the interviews, it seems as though there are two versions of choosing to unfollow influencers between the interviewees. One where the interviewees no longer felt that they could relate to the influencers as we infer from the above quote, and one where they purposely cut out people who motivated them to consume more than they want to as seen with the below quote, where the interviewee is explaining why she stopped following beauty and lifestyle YouTubers:

*“And I wasn’t happy with the way they were pushing people into excessive consumption (...) I did it a few times, bought what the YouTubers had recommended and tried it. And it worked fine but I thought it was really unnecessary to buy so much”* (interview 9, line 1334-1338)

Perhaps in line with a new demand from the viewers of being more conscious about their consumption, many of the interviewees have noticed a trend where beauty and fashion influencers are beginning to advocate for cutting down on consumption. One of the interviewees gives her take on this by saying that influencers have always been very obvious in showcasing their overconsumption on social media, but that the tendency is slowly dying down. With the new demands and focus in society on sustainability, the influencers have toned down the apparentness of their consumption. Nevertheless, the interviewee says:

*“It might be that fewer are saying ‘Look at all of this I’ve bought’ as overtly but you can still see it pictured”* (interview 10, line 1561-1563)

In the quote above, interviewee 10 references that influencers are, for example, wearing new clothes in photos on their social media profiles. We can, therefore, infer that some of the interviewees are skeptical towards influencers’ relatively new appearance as conscious consumers. The criticism is partly because the level of consumption from influencers is so much higher than for a regular consumer:

*“Influencers have a completely different starting point to encourage others to consume less - more sustainably - because they have the largest wardrobes of anyone and they are gifted so much stuff”*

(interview 2, line 211-212)

We sense a certain degree of unfairness in the tone in the above quote. Interviewee 2 feels that there is a disproportion in what normal consumption means for her and what it, in her eyes, means for an influencer. It, therefore, seems that she feels that the decrease in consumption should start with the ones whose consumption levels are much higher than her own, and she, therefore, feels irritated by the fact that influencers are encouraging their followers to consume less.

Interviewee 2 furthermore touches upon sustainability and how flying, for example, is bad for the environment. Many of the interviewees comment on consumption, or excessive consumption as being bad, however, not many of them mention why or directly link this to sustainability, which came as a surprise to us researchers. In our constructions, we believed this link to be very direct and we expected most of the interviewees to comment on it, but that turned out not to be the case. It is as if, for many, the notion of consumption having an effect on the environment is a given and that the discourse has been so focused on just that - consumption - that the surrounding issues regarding the matter have been inferior – at least in terms of verbal communication.

Many of the interviewees only referred to consumption as being negative in itself. A few of them commented on the sustainability factor directly. An example of this is in interview 9 when asked how she feels about consumption portrayed on social media, she replied: *“I also think it’s – if you look at the climate, it’s a stupid – or not a good thing”* (interview 9, line 1383-1384). It is clearly difficult for her to verbalize her opinion on sustainability and the climate. It is almost as if the interviewees are not used to having to explicitly associate consumption and sustainability or the climate.

It is clear that the interviewees have been, and still are, dissatisfied with the beauty and fashion consumption displayed on social media by influencers. The dissatisfaction seems to follow the interviewees’ more conscious consumption pursuit, which ultimately stems from the focus on how climate is affected by excessive consumption, where the consumption part weighs heavy in their

common discourse. In relation to this, many of the interviewees have changed their strategy of who to follow in order to minimize exposure to excessive consumption.

## **4.6 Sub-conclusion on Findings**

The interviews conducted undoubtedly contained many layers in direct relation to the decision-making process. The substance of the interviews was explored and extracted systematically through a TA to which ten significant TA themes were identified and presented. The ten TA themes were: Beauty and fashion as a hobby, self-conscious identity, needing or wanting to purchase, conscious consumption is in, friendly authenticity, familiarity or fascination, (un)filtered influence, new trends occurring, hyper-critical self-awareness on consumption, and unsustainable consumption displayed on social media. These themes all contribute to identifying the prepurchase and purchase issues affected by social media. How these relate to the decision-making process will be discussed in the next chapter 5.

## 5. Discussion

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Following the TA analysis of the qualitative interviews and the subsequent findings, we will now discuss how these findings compare to the marketing literature on social media and consumption. Moreover, the discussion will highlight the areas in which this thesis has brought new knowledge to the marketing field and this knowledge may thus provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media and the decision-making process. As mentioned in the introduction in section 1.1, the three sub-questions inspired by Solomon's (2013) stages of the consumption process will be used to structure the discussion. The discussion will, therefore, also bring us one step closer to answering the research question of how the decision-making process is affected by the viewing of digital fashion and beauty content.

As the discussion is based on the key findings from the analysis and how these relate to the existing theory on social media and consumption, we also find it relevant to further reflect on the findings' validity. As touched upon in the methodology in section 3.1.2, validity is concerned with the quality of the findings and how these relate to the real world (Kvale, 2007). We will now reflect on the validity of our findings before moving on to the discussion of our three sub-questions.

We have obtained a degree of objectivity in the form of dialogical intersubjectivity as we have witnessed significant similarities between the interviews and theory relating to the thesis thus supporting the subsequent interpretation of the interviews (Kvale, 2007). This increases the validity of the research.

Another aspect affecting the validity of the thesis, is the interviewees in the sense that they also have their own constructs. Basing the answer to the research question on the interviewees' accounts of their consumption will thus influence the validity. With this, we are referring to the fact that we do not know if the interviewees' described thoughts and behaviors are representative of their actual behavior. We would argue that a lot of purchase decisions happen unconsciously and the interviewees may, therefore, be constructing their reality during the interview when asked to reflect upon it. Moreover, there may be a sense of selection bias present as the interviewees may wish to appear more relatable, responsible, or relevant. Nonetheless, we would argue that the findings

should be viewed as valid since our methodological approach is exploratory and the scientific approach asserts that there is no definitive truth. The interviewees' experiences and realities are, therefore, as previously argued, viewed as *their truth*, which supports the argument that the findings should be considered valid. Additionally, we would argue that the aspects highlighted by the interviewees hold valid against the theoretical field, and the findings will furthermore be discussed in this chapter.

In line with the interviewees' constructs, we find it important to reflect on the target group studied and how their views may deviate from other groups in the same life stage. Our target group is, as mentioned, urban millennial women in Denmark, a country with an extensive, functioning welfare system, and relatively high wealth (Erhvervsministeriet, 2018). Furthermore, climate change and sustainability are high on the agenda in the Nordic countries (Giese Jakobsen, 2019). We, therefore, argue that our target group is in a unique position in relation to consumption. The welfare system enables them to study for free and they are furthermore receiving funds when enrolled in school. Students in other countries may be more economically concerned and will perhaps not have the same disposable income. Furthermore, the welfare system provides a (relatively) livable economic safety net. We would thus argue that this sense of economic security affects consumption patterns. For residents in Denmark, the option of consuming is higher due to economic safety, and they furthermore have the economic and mental liberty to make choices and consider their purchases. Moreover, the extensive focus on the environment makes them more aware of consuming in relation to sustainability. Relating this to the constructivist approach, the target group's constructions are not only shaped by the smaller social circles but can also be shaped by entire countries and the cultures and discourses emerging from there.

## 5.1 Discussion of Sub-question 1

*SQ1: How are problem recognition and information searches affected by the following of beauty and fashion influencers?*

When a consumer starts the process of deciding whether or not they need a new product, the process begins with problem recognition (Solomon, 2013), as previously mentioned. With the term

*problem recognition*, we would argue that the first stage of the decision-making process implies that there is a problem to discover meaning that the problem was there all along waiting for the consumer to make the discovery. However, from our findings, we would argue that problem recognition is in many cases problem creation or manifestation. An example of this is seen in the theme of “needing or wanting a product”. Here, we discovered that for beauty products, the interviewees had to *need* something in order to justify a purchase. However, the temptation to buy outside of one’s needs was constant, and when falling for the temptation, the needs were justified with made-up needs.

Looking at the stage of problem recognition, the discovery or creation of needs may be viewed as the difference between the current and ideal state of affairs, as accounted for in the literature review. Based on this outlook on problem recognition, the results showed that consumers are met with ideals through the digital content that they view on social media. This has been named this competitive acquisition as one compares one’s own material possessions with people from the elite class (Pérez & Esposito, 2010), the influencers in this scenario. As a result of viewing this content, needs occur from wanting to have the same as the influencers and, furthermore, by marketing promises associated with beauty products, while new wants simply appear for clothing.

Following this, we would argue that the kind of need creation or desire sparked by social media differs depending on the uses and gratifications that the viewer seeks. The user-oriented theory of uses and gratifications points to users being present on different media as they seek different gratifications at different times depending on their mood and needs (Ruggiero, 2000). In relation to this, our research showed two distinct behaviors regarding the viewing of beauty and fashion influencers as presented in the “familiarity or fascination” theme in section 4.3.2. The TA theme of “familiarity or fascination” is directly related to uses and gratifications theory, which we will now take a closer look at.

Our findings showed that the digital relationships that exist between influencers and their viewers could be categorized as a relationship either grounded in familiarity or fascination. On a higher level, one could say that the use is the same, namely the viewing of influencer content online. Here, it is important to note that the use of the influencers’ content is based on viewing only as opposed to commenting, liking, or sharing as our research did not indicate that the interviewees participated in



such engagement with the content. On a more detailed level, the use differs from following the familiar or similar to following the unfamiliar and different. The gratifications are thereby correspondingly different, as highlighted in our findings. The gratification for a relationship of familiarity is strongly associated with being inspired by an influencer similar to oneself, while the gratification for the relationship based on fascination is more so about entertainment from watching something very different from one's own life.

Looking at the theory of the actual and ideal state in the problem recognition in relation to the uses and gratifications theory, our findings can be seen as a way of detailing the gratifications for the users. As we found that most interviewees are engaged in both types of digital relationships, we would argue that they, in different ways, are expressions of different ideal states. Solomon (2013) accounts for two types of ideal states and we do not protest the elements of these although we would argue for another perspective on the ideal state. The two digital relationships may thus be viewed as symbols of ideals occurring at different points in time for the viewer.

For the digital relationship characterized by familiarity, the inspiration from the influencer is nearly immediately adaptable to the viewer's lives as the influencer's lifestyle is close to how the consumer views their own lifestyle. Based on this finding, we would, therefore, argue that the consumer is persuaded to make purchases in the present that will bring them to the *immediate ideal state*. On the other hand, we would argue that a digital relationship characterized by fascination inspires the consumer but not necessarily in terms of immediate consumption. The consumer is thus inspired in some capacity for a, perhaps, *future ideal state*. Here, the consumer may not apply the inspiration right away, but instead, it may linger in the subconscious and affect future decisions.

The notion of being exposed to ideals can furthermore be linked to the change in technology and the use of technology, as accounted for in the literature review. From our research, we can see that consumers' source of entertainment has also become the source of external stimuli, which is the trigger of identifying a problem. An example of this is how a consumer, prior to social media, would watch TV for entertainment and perhaps see an explicit ad that created a need. Now, with the use of social media, we would argue that the distinction between entertaining content and ads, or even sources of purchase inspiration, has become ambiguous. This perspective is in line with the theory of technology affordance as mentioned in section 2.3.2. The theory describes how

technology can be used for things that it was not initially indented for (Majchrzak & Markus, 2012). New technologies have thus afforded online users to turn social media platforms into platforms of consumption despite this not being the intention of the designers.

With this perspective on technology in mind, a new problem related to consumption, therefore, constantly occurs for consumers. This is in line with Kozinets et al.'s (2017) research showing that technology enhances consumer desire, which the authors explain through the theory of networks of desire. Despite this, Kozinets et al. (2017) do not provide details as to why and how the desire to consume increases. In relation to this, our research confirms the notion of increased desire, where, as mentioned above, needs and wants are constantly occurring for the consumers.

An example of needs constantly occurring for the consumers is seen in our findings, which highlight makeup-related instances where the interviewees have been compelled to change their makeup routine due to a makeup trend displayed on social media (section 4.4.2). The consumers suddenly find themselves with a new problem where, for example, their eyebrows are not thick enough. The new desire to consume, therefore, comes from a problem slowly appearing from the viewing of social media content where the influencer, for example, develops their makeup routine. Consequently, but not necessarily immediately after, the viewer is left with a desire to want to apply the same makeup. Our findings may, therefore, be used to provide further perspectives on Kozinets et al.'s (2017) theory in terms of how technology increases consumption.

Reflecting on how problem recognition is affected by consumers following influencers, our research shows that the process from problem recognition to making a decision to purchase is not straightforward. From our research, it seems as though the recognition can happen many times for the same problem before the consumer moves on from the problem recognition stage. As with the before-mentioned example with makeup, the consumer is exposed to it many times and the urge to buy becomes larger as the problem seems more and more evident for the consumer, who has been fighting the urge to not *need* another product. Therefore, the ideal state is not only ideal; it also possesses a downside for the consumers to cross their own consumption boundaries. Our findings thereby share Ritzer's (2010) acknowledgment that the process leading up to a purchase may be long and complicated.

We see that, due to consumers ascribing to conscious consumption, it takes a lot of mental negotiation for them to move on from the problem recognition stage in the decision-making process. It, therefore, seems as though the consumers want to suppress the desire for purchasing something new, especially if it is a completely new “need”. This notion of conscious consumption being caused by the increased level of desire created from the use of social media has not been found in any other research thus far.

Unlike previous research focusing on social media, we have not found that new desires come from regular users inspiring other users on social media. Where friends may inspire each other in real life, the emergence of new desires only seems to arise from viewing an influencer’s content on social media. This is in line with the theory on brand publics where specific interactions other than simply viewing is not needed for increased consumption to take place (Kozinets et al. 2017).

From the above, we can clearly sense that the problem recognition of the decision-making process is highly affected by the following of beauty and fashion influencers. Generally, we have found that the problem recognition occurs much more often for consumers due to the notion of competitive acquisition and inspiration from following influencers as part of one’s source of entertainment. To this, there are immediate and future inspirations depending on the uses and gratifications sought by the consumer, yet for both, it is apparent that the use and gratification are deliberate. Due to internal “rules” on consumption, the consumer is, however, facing a dilemma when being inspired to purchase, and the process prior to purchasing is, therefore, long and often does not end in consumption.

## 5.2 Discussion of Sub-question 2

*SQ2: How does the consumer reflect on being influenced and purchasing beauty and fashion products?*

According to Solomon (2013), the actual purchase happens after a mental evaluation from the consumer. While some might assume that this process is logical and that the consumer will evaluate and then decide on the best, optimal solution, Solomon (2013) explains how consumers are not

rational beings and that the purchase decisions are not always considered thoroughly. As a result, this affects the consumption as different triggers can set off a non-rational purchase. Based on our findings, however, the consumers are very much aware of their mental weaknesses when it comes to consumption. Our findings show that the group researched is very self-conscious (section 4.1.2) and are able to articulate their interests very explicitly (section 4.1.1). They have beauty and fashion as a hobby, which they are self-reflective enough to notice about themselves. Additionally, they are self-aware to such a degree that they are able to reflect on and articulate why they find it interesting and where the interest comes from (section 4.5.1). The consumers are, therefore, highly knowledgeable and attentive to their own mental reasoning.

We furthermore found that the consumers' reflectiveness was also applied to their surroundings in how they relate to beauty, fashion, and consumption (section 4.2 and section 4.5.1). For the latter, we found that the consumers are very critical of themselves in relation to what they are allowed to consume and how much they consume. In relation to this increased self-awareness, it became apparent from our research that consumers believe that they have an internal filter (section 4.4.1) when it comes to being exposed to and persuaded by influencer content. We subsequently argue that, while this may hold true in some cases, there are situations where this is not always the case. We will now elaborate on why we believe that this internal filter does not function as the interviewees perceive, and why they are perhaps not as aware of their own consumption patterns.

We would argue that having and being aware of an internal filter entails that the consumer is aware of the filter when it is in action. What we understand as "in action" is when the consumer is deliberately reflecting on the power of influencers in relation to them either wanting to purchase something or in the event of the opposite where they are "repulsed" (as quoted in section 4.5.2) by a persuasion attempt by an influencer. However, according to Solomon (2013), consumers often use mental shortcuts when the purchase decision happens. These shortcuts are called heuristics as explained in section 2.1.1 where the consumer unconsciously simplifies options as to quickly make a decision. These mental simplifications often result in the consumer choosing the familiar option when faced with a choice. On many occasions, the selection may furthermore happen so quickly that the consumer does not even catch that they have been faced with a choice.

Assuming that consumers are in fact able to filter consciously, we ascribe to the notion of heuristics meaning that the consumers will also make use of mental simplifications when they are acting, yet it is unintentional and unnoticed. The consumers' filter does, therefore, not work when acting unconsciously. Our research has led us to believe that this manifests as the notion of recognition with certain products in the purchase situation. If the consumers have once seen an influencer talk about one of the products, this will, in our view, be logged somewhere in the subconsciousness.

Consequently, we would argue that when the consumers are faced with a variety of products, they will most likely choose something familiar or something that they have some kind of attitude towards. Here, the product once showcased by an influencer will have a familiarity value, which may persuade the consumer to purchase this specific product over others. With this being said, it should also be noted that other heuristics might dominate in the particular purchase situation, yet we believe that this is an important distinction in the self-awareness that consumers showcase as part of the actual purchase.

In relation to conscious consumption, we did not find any theory or research highlighting conscious consumption as a reaction to viewing social media content on beauty and fashion. In contrast, we found research pointing to increased consumption as a result of consumers being exposed to product-oriented messages through social media, and theories on excessive consumption in modern society, as mentioned in section 2.2. In this regard, Ritzer (2010) argues that the settings of modern society encourage and compel consumers to purchase more resulting in concepts such as insatiable consumption, which explain the observed patterns of increased consumption.

Adding nuances to Ritzer's (2010) perspective, we found that there seems to be a development from the consumer perspective. Although, we would argue that consumers, from an objective standpoint, engage in excessive consumerism, and our results show that consumers are adherent to conscious consumption. As presented in section 4.2.2, consumers are consciously attempting to cut down on consumption or changing their shopping strategies in order to facilitate less consumption. To this, many consumers state that they only purchase what they need, yet they also reflect on how a need is relative, and how it may very possibly be affected by the consumption displayed on social media. In relation to this, we found that consumers may choose to follow consumption "rules" set up for themselves although there is also an indication that these rules are formed as discourses between

groups. An example of the rule is for beauty products where consumers are generally only “allowed” one item per category even though they sometimes buy more due to succumbing to powerful temptations after a long deliberation with themselves.

We would argue that the findings described above stand as somewhat of a contrast to insatiable consumerism as defined by Ritzer (2010) since it is clear that the consumers display a relatively limited consumption of beauty products compared to the amounts that they are exposed to. Despite the heavy exposure through social media on makeup and beauty trends, the notion of consuming less weighs heavy for consumers. Adding a layer of detail to this, our findings show that consumers are not as restricted when it comes to the consumption of clothes as they are with beauty products. Nevertheless, it seems that consumers’ thought-processes are changing with regard to how they view consumption of this category, yet it has not fully translated into their actions.

We would thus argue that this development, in addition to being a consequence of climate change, is a reaction to the excessive consumption displayed on and arising from the viewing of social media. Our findings show that consumers are noticeably repelled by displays of disproportionate consumption or too much encouragement of consumption (4.5.2). Generally, consumers are thus becoming averse to the heavy and blatant consumption that takes place on social media (section 4.5.2). Some consumers, therefore, choose to follow influencers who are advocates for conscious consumption. Nonetheless, consumers also highlight the double standard in the promotion of this, as they point to the fact that most influencers have previously been or unconsciously continue to be promoters of excessive consumption.

Based on our findings showcasing how consumers reflect on influence and purchase decisions, we would argue that the thoughts relating to conscious consumption represent a new consumer perspective that the existing theory and research do not take into account. Here, we encourage more research to be done to explore how the notion of conscious consumption is affecting or will affect influencer marketing and the beauty and fashion industry. We also find it interesting to research whether the notion of conscious consumption is apparent for other industries. Furthermore, we would argue that our research only provides answers to the tip of the iceberg of how conscious consumption is carried out within beauty and fashion, and we, therefore, find it relevant to study this further.

### 5.3 Discussion of Sub-question 3

*SQ3: How does the consumer use the relationships with influencers as part of the decision-making process?*

To answer the third question under the research question, we will take a look at the findings, especially those in relation to the research themes of “digital relationships” as well as “influence” and “consumption patterns”. Where the two first questions are concerned with the influence on the consumer, this section focuses on the situations where the influence is not merely happening to the consumer. Instead, the focus is directed towards the situations where the consumer is actively using social media influencers as inspiration and information search.

As this thesis focuses on consumers’ usage of digital beauty and fashion content in relation to consumption choices, we would argue that the influencers represent the *sources of information* in Solomon’s (2013) model of the three stages of consumption. Providing insights on digital relationships are, in our view, therefore, central to understanding how consumers learn about alternative product choices in the pursuit of consumption. Moreover, we find it relevant to discuss the ways in which influencers affect consumers when they are researching alternatives. Lastly, the perspective of conscious consumption will be included to provide further insights into what *alternative choices* may constitute.

From the perspective of consuming digital content, social media influencers may be argued to comprise the environment in which consumers can survey for information that can help them solve a problem, as part of the prepurchase issues presented by Solomon (2013). The relationship that consumers have with influencers when viewing their content is thus of great importance when it comes to decision-making. Because of this, a significant part of this thesis has been focused on better understanding the relationship between influencers and their followers. Looking at the existing research on digital relationships, the scope of this is quite limited, as previously discussed. Based on the literature review, Berryman and Kavka’s (2017) examination of the role that intimacy plays in the relationship between the YouTuber Zoella and her followers represents one of the only research papers on the topic of digital relationships.

Based on Berryman and Kavka's (2017) article, we would argue that their findings provide a very limited view and characterization of the digital relationship that exists between an influencer, in the article's case, a YouTuber, and their followers. When Berryman and Kavka's (2017) article was written, Zoella was arguably one of the largest content creators in the British YouTube community but we would argue that the nature of the relationships between influencers and their followers are much more vast than described in the article. Adding perspectives to the conclusions of Berryman and Kavka's (2017) article, our research shows that digital relationships may be established on many different grounds in addition to those mentioned by Berryman and Kavka (2017).

In line with Berryman and Kavka's (2017) research, our findings show that the element of friendliness and authenticity is central to digital relationships. We would thus argue that having a personal connection to the influencer is central to the followers' ability to trust an influencer and develop a close bond with them over time, which confirms the findings of Berryman and Kavka (2017). Providing further nuances to the findings of the Berryman and Kavka's (2017), our research also indicates that digital relationships may not only be based on intimate feelings of friendship but also on pure fascination and curiosity with regard to influencers living very different lives than the consumers themselves, as previously mentioned. With this, we would thus argue that *sources of information* are not only comprised of influencers showcasing different familiar choices. Additionally, the consumers may seek sources of inspiration from influencers living different lives from their followers leading to the influencers unknowingly "educating" their followers on purchase choices that may be very foreign to the consumers.

Following the discussion on how our findings on digital relationships compare to the existing theory, we find it relevant to take a closer look at how consumers perform information searches as part of the decision-making process. With regard to seeking out information, Szmigin and Piacentini (2015) argue that consumers are more inclined to become involved and actively seek out information about a product when the perceived relevance of the purchase is high. We would like to add nuances to this perspective as our findings indicate that actively seeking out information prior to a purchase is an integrated part of the decision-making process regardless of the perceived importance of the purchase.



We would thus argue that consumers feel drawn to researching products through influencers as taking an influencer's opinion into account has become a natural part of the decision-making process for consumers. From our findings, social media constitutes the main outlet for consumers to get inspired and it is through social media they are persuaded to consume. As a result, we would argue that social media becomes the natural place for consumers to turn to when contemplating the specifics of a purchase no matter the nature of the purchase. With this in mind, we would argue that Szmigin and Piacentini's (2015) account of the information-searching aspect of the decision-making process may benefit from being further nuanced by consumers' digital behavior, as presented in our findings.

In line with consumers actively taking part in seeking out sources of information and doing research about their potential purchases, we would argue that the consumers' high degree of engagement applies to the entire decision-making process. As established from the findings of the TA theme "(Un)filtered influence", consumers are consciously very aware of their consumption choices and the processes leading up to and following a purchase. This, therefore, also includes the stage of prepurchase issues where the consumer gathers information about their options. With the findings from "(Un)filtered influence" in mind, we would argue that consumption is, therefore, not something that simply happens unknowingly, but instead, consumers take an active part in all aspects of the process. This also supports the argument that Szmigin and Piacentini's (2015) view of consumers' involvement with the consumption process may be further developed based on the power of influencers and how they affect consumers.

We furthermore find it worth reflecting on *sources of information*. Focusing on consumers who view digital fashion and beauty content, we would argue that social media influencers are the primary sources of information, as previously mentioned. This is in contrast to or, at least, in addition to Solomon (2013) who argues that online consumption communities play an important role in influencing purchase decisions as a result of consumers' access to online sources. Based on this, it may thus be argued that Solomon (2013) would view other consumers as sources of information, which is not the case for our findings.

Overall, we would argue that our findings provide a contrast to consumer behavior theory's characterization of how technology has changed the way that consumers interact resulting in the

creation of online communities meant for consumers to discuss products and purchases (Solomon, 2013). Based on our findings, a small number of consumers use websites with product reviews to get a better understanding of the usage and quality of products. This may thus be seen in relation to how consumers judge alternative choices. Despite this, the main consensus from our findings show that consumers do not engage with other consumers online, but instead actively seek out influencers to hear their opinions on products.

Moreover, Solomon (2013) describes how peer pressure exists in online consumer communities. Reflecting on this with our research in mind, we would argue that some sense of peer pressure does exist but more so in relation to influencers. Our findings do, therefore, not indicate that peer pressure from group members within consumption communities is a factor affecting purchase decisions. In situations where the consumer looks up to an influencer and sees their style and aspirations reflected in the influencer, there may be a present sense of wanting to conform but more so coming from the consumer herself and not from others. We would, therefore, argue that our research provides new perspectives on how consumers behave and engage online.

Having reflected extensively on how our findings shine further light on how the consumers make use of social media as part of the decision-making process, we would like to also add some perspectives to the overall definition of *alternative choices* as a part of the information search and what this means to the consumer. Traditionally, alternative choices are understood as various options of new products that the consumer can choose between purchasing as a response to solving their identified problem (Solomon, 2013). In our view, the decision-making process does not explicitly seem to take into account the fact that an alternative choice may also be to not consume at all.

Our findings indicate that consumers are increasingly becoming conscious of their consumption in response to being overexposed to product-oriented content on social media. As a result, the TA theme of “conscious consumption is in” show that alternative choices may also account for buying second-hand clothing or buying high quality and more classic items that may last longer and thus help minimize excessive consumerism. Based on this, we would, therefore, argue that the definition of “alternative choices” becomes wider in order to account for consumers’ changing awareness of their purchase decisions. As previously discussed, our findings indicate that consumers are starting

to question whether their identified problem is actually a problem, and furthermore if it is a problem that needs to be solved. This is, therefore, also reflected in the understanding of *alternative choices*.

To sum up, our findings on consumers' usage of and relationship with social media may thus be seen in support of Ruggiero's (2000) account of uses and gratification theory with regard to how consumers are independent in their media usage and how they use it deliberately and consciously with a specific purpose in mind. We argue that the consumers are, in certain situations, actively seeking inspiration and information from the influencers, and therefore take great gratifications from the use of social media in relation to the decision-making process. At the same time, when being influenced by the social media relationship, the choice of not consuming is just as evident for the consumer and thereby poses another alternative in the purchase decision.

## **5.4 Sub-conclusion on Discussion**

Based on the discussion, there are several aspects of our research that is supported by previous research and theory. Yet, there are also aspects of the research where only literature parallels exist, and aspects that are completely new due to the novel nature of the research. These will be highlighted in the conclusion.

As a last remark, we have applied a social constructionist approach in this thesis, and based on that we believe that, if constructions can be built and formed, they can also be broken down, reflected upon, and, perhaps in some cases, rebuilt. We would, therefore, argue that consumers' constructions are constantly changing along with the relationship that they have with the world, including social media and influencers. This also means that further research is important for examining the continued development in consumer behavior and the decision-making process in light of social media. In this regard, we would argue that this thesis may represent a valid study of reference when it comes to examining the effects that social media have on consumption further.

## 6. Conclusion

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This thesis addresses an identified gap in the marketing literature with regard to the effects that social media influencers have on consumption. Specifically, the thesis examines the decision-making process and how consumers' usage of digital beauty and fashion content affects this process. The thesis topic is, therefore, examined from the consumer's point of view with a focus on urban, millennial consumers who follow beauty and fashion influencers. Adding nuances to the influencing process and determining the extent to which consumers are voluntarily being inspired, this thesis brings forth a new level of understanding of consumption in the age of social media.

Researching social media influencers and consumption, we found that the processes relating to decision-making are highly affected by the input and inspiration from influencers thus supporting the results of the existing, limited research on this topic. As part of the exposure to social media, influencers' content has become the key source for *problem recognition* and *information search*. Thereby, social media influencers have changed the main force in creating needs, changing behavior, and providing information on alternative purchase options; components making up the processes prior to the decision to make a purchase.

Our research set out to research not only *if* influencers affect consumption but *how*. Specifically, we found that consumers are not merely receivers of influence by social media influencers and, therefore, passive in being persuaded to make more or different purchases. On the contrary, it is evident that consumers are highly conscious of the role of influencers in the decision-making process. As a result, the consumers contribute actively to the process through reflections and by purposely seeking out guidance from and using social media and influencers for certain gratifications.

We found that, due to different factors, including the portrayal of consumption on social media, the consumers have become exceptionally reflective when it comes to contemplating and justifying potential purchases in attempts to cut down on consumption levels. Subsequently, as social media presents many opportunities for consumption, the consumers are increasingly focused on critically evaluating and processing the product-oriented content. Therefore, the digital relationship, although

being characterized by inspiration, familiarization and fascination, holds many reservations from the consumer's perspective. Following this, the results of our research provided significant insights into the complexities characterizing the relationships between influencers and their followers.

With this thesis' results, we would argue that we are providing essential findings necessary to understand consumers' usage of digital beauty and fashion content. Specifically, we found that consumers reflect deeply on their exposure to social media influencers. As a result of the high exposure to product-oriented content, the consumers experience a high level of consciousness within the processes leading up to the decision of making a purchase. Following this, we believe that no other scholars have explored this perspective on social media and consumption to the same extent, therefore, making this finding a noteworthy contribution to marketing literature and we encourage further research to explore the topic.

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