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THE IMPACT OF INFLUENCERS ON ONLINE PURCHASE INTENT

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ABSTRACT

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Research

questions: What are the main features of influencers that have an impact on consumers' online purchase intent?

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to explore the features that an influencer possesses or should possess and their impact on online purchasing intent for consumers.

Method: Results were derived from two focus groups interviews with 12 different consumers from various countries.

Conclusion: Key findings reveal that perceived authenticity, together with trustworthiness, credibility, legitimacy, the expertise of the influencers and their honesty are the main features that have an impact on the consumers and the online purchase intent. Additionally, the study reveals that there are other factors besides the upper mentioned features of the influencers, that affect the online purchase intent of the consumers- the need for the product, its price, the recommendations, and some others.

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1. Introduction

Imagine you are sitting on a bus. The bus drives through the city streets, and while you are looking through the window you see a billboard with George Clooney advertising tequila. Later in the week, you are about to host a party and you search for various liquor drinks to buy. Of course, you want it to be a good party, and you want to have good quality alcohol. Then you start thinking: “Hmm, what was that brand I saw on the billboard?” –You don’t always recall it. But then your best friend approaches you and says that this particular brand is quite awesome and that you should buy it. You will ask her/him what this brand is and then buy it. Does this show that there is power in the reliable and authentic reference or influencer? Does it mean that the right influencer is not always a celebrity or a star with millions of followers on the social media platforms?

The world is getting more and more interconnected. People from all ages and countries are using the internet for access to information, as a networking source, as an alternative for the traditional shopping by conducting a purchase online (Starkov, 2003), also for socializing. According to Eurostat’s 2016 survey on the availability of information and communication technologies (ICT) 79% of the population in the European Union aged 16-74 have used the internet almost daily or on daily basis (Eurostat, 2016). Hence, approximately two-thirds of the internet users have made an online purchase, with the majority being in the age groups of 16-24 and 25-54. Furthermore, the emergence of social media transforms the communication between companies and consumers; the latter compare prices, check for coupons and deals, search for product information, look up opinions on products (Nielsen, 2016), or for example book hotels directly on the hotel website or via various booking platforms (Ratnasingam, 2012), thus making the word of mouth (WOM) marketing a powerful tool for advertising. Recognizing this growing trend marketers started to reach out to influential consumers, hoping to benefit from their ability to convince by sharing the consumption experience with others. The markets emerge, and the now existing ones transform, with the consumers taking more pro-active role, being it driven by their love for a certain brand (Martin & Schouten, 2014), or just to defy the market (Giesler, 2008). A number of studies have shown the important and rising role of family, friends, neighbors and colleagues play in affecting the choices of the individual (Coleman, 1966; Feick & Price, 1987; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). And nowadays we are all quite aware with celebrity endorsements- Brad Pitt and Chanel No.5 perfume, Beyonce and Pepsi, Cristiano Ronaldo and Nike, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Volvo- these are just a few examples. While some

consumers find it favorable and positive to see a celebrity advertise products or services, it is not always the case when a celebrity endorsement will drive brand resonance or revenue, as Nielsen found that 92 % of the people trust recommendations from people they know, and 70% trust experts' opinions they read online (Nielsen, 2016). So here come in the digital influencers- those who create content and share it on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, blogs, Snapchat, etc. These powerful everyday consumers have the ability to change opinions, to raise brand awareness or ruin it, and they are able to achieve such outreach or status by constantly showing they attempt to stay true to their culture.

1.1. Background

Whether it is for the brand or the consumers, marketers are always looking into the future to anticipate the upcoming trends in the market (Newman, 2015). People are believed to be the ones who will mostly influence the marketing and advertising world right now, as they are able to offer a credible prediction to the trends that will change the way brands connect, and the way innovative firms will work in within the next few years (Beer, 2015). Thus, people who have the power to affect the purchase decisions of others due to their real or perceived authority, knowledge, position, or relationship are identified as influencers (Mavreck, 2014). An influencer doesn't necessarily have to be some sort of celebrity, journalist, or blogger, they are a form of social micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008) and this is where the focus is in this thesis- the micro-influencers. They can be an ordinary person with the right connections and social pull, and not inevitably a celebrity, even though they are the first that come to mind when discussing social influence. Ordinary people who communicate with their friends or social circle can also be identified as influencers but so can be journalists, experts, public figures with different types of visibility- highly visible as in celebrities and politicians, or low visible as every-day bloggers (those famous mostly to their peers). Social media introduced new opportunities for brands to connect with people and has the ability to link people who influence or exert influence and even transmit influence. For example, an endorsed celebrity exerts a different type of influence than a trusted friend or neighbor endorsing the same product, and they, in turn, exert a different type of influence than a renowned expert (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason & Watts, 2011).

By incorporating social network information into influence strategies and marketing design, the brands and marketers make it possible to diminish unused resources and simultaneously achieve bigger sales (Galeotti & Goyal, 2009). One of the places where such strategy is used are the blogs- places on the internet, where different people publish and share experiences, stories,

pictures, opinions on products and services, with their popularity grown rapidly in the last years- due to them actually offering information in a synthesized and quite well functional form (Akritidis, Katsaros & Bozanis, 2011). Furthermore, in the blogosphere users and consumers can ask and receive information about products and services, and henceforth being influenced by that same information by the bloggers while making decisions- an illustration are the fashion blogs. The readers of the fashion blogs and the fashion bloggers stipulate blogs to be actually more authentic in their content, whilst delivering more independent view than the traditional fashion media, like Vogue or Elle magazines (Marwick, 2013). Hence, the fashion blogosphere is viewed as a democratic place where everyone can fit, no matter the size, social status, sexuality, or gender. At the same time, it has also been disclosed that a substantial number of famous influencers and bloggers are working with brands and getting compensated in money or products, so that raises the question about their credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity. The increased commercialization brings out some controversies and criticism in the influencer marketing. Are the bloggers or influencers honest when giving an opinion about a product? Is this honesty actually paid for, or are they authentic in their core? Does it depend on the amount of compensation they receive when blogging or advertising a product?

For instance, *Emily Austin*, a parenting blogger, says:

“We may call each other bloggers, but in the end we’re all just people who want to be heard and understood. Compassion and camaraderie go a long way, both in blogging and in life.” (Rowlands, 2016).

Even when a product or review are not flattering but still being published, for example, *Elite Daily* posting statements that appeal to their readers (women from Generation Y, or Millennials), thus adding a deeper connection to them: *“Work would be so much better if I could just not do it and work out instead”*. Such post touches upon the need for social proof; moreover, with bloggers exposing their personality they add up on the connection with the readers and followers, as personality helps to transition the ad towards something with more special feeling. Jocelyn Adams, the founder of Grandbaby Cakes, articulates:

“It has to come from me. It has to be my voice... When you start a blog you start with one follower, and that’s your mom. If you find someone who’s reading your blog who you didn’t know, you’re like ‘yay.’ (Elliott, 2015)

She has huge brands reach out and promotes on behalf of Coca-Cola (Elliott, 2015). Still, consumers and the followers doubt the brands themselves and their advocates in the faces of

influencers, despite their vow on being “true”, “real”, “not misleading”, “liking”, “honest”, or actually “authentic”.

Finding convincing and powerful influencers is at the base of the success of viral marketing or WOM marketing (Kim and Han, 2009). To be able to identify these people who can, and whose role is to influence, is very important, as by influencing they play a significant role in the buying decisions of the consumers, and in setting the new trends and preferences. Moreover, trust plays a major role in influencing the consumers' behavior, as it is a two-way relationship building block. From the one side there are the producers, vendors, and suppliers (Boughton, Nowak & Washburn, 1996), and from the other side there is the consumer, who doesn't want unpleasant surprises after receiving a product or service (Ganesan, 1994). The purchasing behavior is therefore influenced by multiple factors, for example online advertising (Manchanda, Dube, Goh & Chintagunta, 2006; Ha, 2008). Users exposed to banners are usually more prone towards purchasing, meaning increased purchasing intent, and followed by repeating purchase probabilities. Expanding on the behavior of the consumers, it has been shown that consumers actually integrate their real life into their online behavior, and vice versa. Yee and Bailenson (2007) refer to that as the Proteus effect- similar behavior patterns in both virtual and real-life settings. Such studies indicate that the both environments are closely related in the consumer's mind. Thus brand exposure online will have a similar effect in the real world, and opposite, as consumers create a virtual representation of themselves by using the Internet (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This leads to the reasoning that being influenced online will affect the purchase intent in real life, as well being influenced in general will affect the purchase intent and perception of products and services. Nevertheless, it remains important to find out what are the real factors that can influence the consumer in such commercialized exposure. People usually don't want to be lied to, especially in the role of consumers- no one wishes to lose money by buying a non-functional product or unsatisfactory service, due to misleading advertising.

1.2. Research problem

The thesis blends two areas, influencers in influencer contemporary marketing, and online purchase intent. But understanding if there is a connection between influencers and the online purchase intent of the consumers appears to be connected with what actual features these influencers have, and how they are perceived by their peers.

Much of the research on influencers has been conducted with viewing them as “brand enthusiasts” (Abidin & Ots, 2016), in the context of influencers as brand advocates (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015), exploring their success and growth as they are viewed as personal brands (Abidin & Thomson, 2012). The influencers and their credibility and authenticity have been researched in the context of brand messaging and awareness, or in the context of fashion bloggers (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010). At the same time, how popular and influential the influencers are has been of interest for different researchers. Kwak, Lee, Park and Moon (2010) measure the influence of the influencers on Twitter by comparing three different factors- number of followers, rank of the web-page, and number of retweets, with ranking being the most significant one. Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto and Gummadi (2010) used also three measures – number of followers, number of mentions, and number of retweets, and established the influencers with the most followers do not necessarily score high on the other measures.

Purchasing intention was addressed by different researchers through different contexts. Akar and Topçu (2011) indicated the higher consumers’ trust is about a product or service online, the higher the consumer’s purchase intention is. Trust has substantiated to have a considerable effect on purchasing intention (Li, Kim & Park, 2007). Furthermore, in an online environment consumers play a significant role via their interactions, which influences how trust is generated and consequently led to purchase intention (Lee, Khong & Hong, 2014). Meanwhile, the consumer purchasing decision is influenced by the electronic WOM, which in turn affects the purchase intent in two ways- positive or negative way (Sa’ait, Kanyan & Nazrin, 2016). It has also been noted that brand attitude has a positive impact on purchase intention, for instance when the consumer shows a desire to buy a specific brand this intent is invigorated when the consumer has a positive attitude towards it (Butt, 2014). Also, brand equity contributes to customer's’ purchase intention, and brand loyalty has a direct positive role in affecting both of brand equity and purchase intention (Porrall, Fernández, Boga & Mangín, 2015).

The influencers have the ability to affect purchasing decision in their roles of experts, which shows the connection between influencers and purchasing behavior, while at the mean time it infers an implicit connection to authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness, and other features an influencer might possess, as the main reason for trust in experts. Therefore, we can relate our research problem to the interconnection between influencers and online purchase intent. In this thesis the focus will be on exploring this interrelation from the point of view of the consumers

themselves, as existing research does not address adequately the question of what are the actual features of the influencers that influence the online purchase intent.

1.3. Purpose and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the features that an influencer possesses or should possess and their impact on online purchase intent for consumers. Therefore, this thesis will combine influencers marketing and online purchase intent in one framework. Hence, we have the following research question:

What are the main features of influencers that have an impact on consumers' online purchase intent?

1.4. Disposition

This master thesis is structured as follows. It starts with a literature review on influencers marketing, influencers, online purchase intent, including a conceptual framework for this study. Next is the chapter with method introduction and overview of the study, with elaboration on the research philosophy used and research strategy discussion. After that the results are presented and followed by analysis in consecutive chapters. Lastly, conclusions are presented, together with limitations connected to this thesis, as well suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

The aim of this chapter is to give an outlook of the literature relevant to this thesis' research. It starts with the definition of influencer marketing and influencers, their roles and how to identify them. Next is an overview concerning the purchasing intention and the various factors influencing it. The chapter ends with a theoretical framework representing a conceptual model about the consumers' online purchase intent toward online retailers and the role of influencers.

2.1. Influencer marketing and influencers

The Internet has changed the traditional ways of conducting business and establishing consumer's relationships, the way companies and customers interact and the transactions. Online shopping is gaining a vast popularity and is becoming broadly accepted as a purchasing tool for products and services. With the emergence of the e-commerce online purchasing emerges as a new phenomenon, becoming the future of commerce in the digital world (Bourlakis, Papagiannidis & Fox, 2008). Therefore, social media has become a crucial source for communicating marketing messages globally, making the organizations, researchers and marketers be more interested in the value of advertising and the possibility to influence on the multiple platforms (Saxena & Khanna, 2013). Hence, influencer marketing is a practice, which is extremely hyped lately, and can be defined as a form of marketing that involves activities aimed towards identifying and building relationship with individuals who have the capability to influence over potential buyers (Wong, 2014). It follows the concept of a "trusted advisor", as defined by Brown and Hayes (2007), and is perceived as a resemblance to the older TV commercials, where celebrities are featured to leverage their popularity and advertise a brand. Producing a content, that can go viral and achieve substantial marketing success, is considered to be the most difficult (Watts, Perretti & Frumin, 2007). By tapping into influencer marketing the companies are able to stimulate the consumers to buy their products, and create a significant retail lift. Brown and Hayes (2007) postulate three patterns to tap into influencer marketing. First, marketing "to" influencers- increasing the brand's awareness within the community of the influencer. Second, marketing "through" the influencer by using the influencers to surge the brand's awareness amid target consumers; and third, by marketing "with" influencers by transforming the influencers into brand advocates (Brown & Hayes, 2007). But what are influencers?

There are a few definitions of what influencers are, but for the purpose of this thesis we focus on the following definition of influencers, as an extremely popular multimedia form of micro-celebrities. Influencers are people who operate on numerous types of social media, and often simultaneously on few platforms, such as Instagram (known as Instagrammers), YouTube (known as YouTubers), Tweeter (known as Tweeters), and different professional and or commercial bloggers (Abidin, 2016), who are famous “*to a niche group of people*” (Marwick, 2013, p.114), unlike the mainstream celebrities. Marwick (2016) describes the micro-celebrities as regular people drawing on the culture of celebrities to boost their popularity within a network, using online tools. They do not do this just out of nowhere, it includes wary curation of “*self-conscious, carefully constructed personas*” (p.334), empowered by strategical sharing of information, and aimed at building a specific relationship with followers (Marwick, 2016). This specific relationship is para-social- giving the illusion of having an actual face-to-face relationship between the follower/fan and the influencer (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Para-social communication can create the feeling of intimacy and relationship as it would be in real life conditions with interpersonal communication (Chen, 2014; Horton & Wohl, 1956). By commenting on the different social media where they have account the micro-celebrities are expanding the para-social relationship (Marwick, 2016). It is argued, that by staying in touch and having direct interaction with their followers and supporters they are able to maintain and grow their popularity. In her study on the micro-celebrities in Singapore’s lifestyle and fashion area Abidin (2015) states that these micro-celebrities, whom she calls influencers, are giving the impression of intimate interaction, or communicative intimacy. They do that by utilizing different techniques- posting rawer and not highly photo shopped pictures, asking for comments in order to improve content, or showing they are down to earth personas with everyday problems.

2.1.1. The role of the influencers

In the WOM marketing nowadays the influencers play a very important role, and at the same time their recognition is fast growing (Scoble & Israel, 2006) due to them offering synthesized information in various forms and functionality (Akritidis, Katsaros & Bozanis, 2011). The main factors defining the consumer’s propensity of being influenced by a specific influencer are highly dependent on the right information, at the right time, on the right place and from the right person (Wu, 2012). The influencers withstand a special part in the virtual community - they spread information via various social media channels, such as blogs and social networks;

they share stories and pictures; they relate to their experiences; they express different opinions about numerous subjects, services and products; they are an illustration of the particularly important phenomenon of influencing (Alsulaiman, Forbes, Dean & Cohen, 2015; Alhidari, Iyer & Paswan, 2015).

Contrasting the celebrities who are usually public figures with vast amount of followers and fans, influencers are creating advertorials on social media or on blogs. Sometimes they receive payment in exchange for writing or promoting products and/or services. Bloggers have an audience that is interested in specific topics for discussions, and the popularity of online blogs is not unrecognized by the marketers- after all 77% of all internet users read blogs (McGrail, 2013). Accordingly, marketers have started using bloggers as endorsers, as they may be perceived as more credible than celebrities (Mendoza, 2010). Hence, the connections forged by the internet mean that brands wanting to be perceived as authentic will turn their marketing efforts towards seeding information or products with influencers, relying on their ability to provide the consumers with the feeling of “people like me” (Solis, 2016, p.1) - cited as the highest form of influence by the consumers themselves (cf. Nielsen, 2016). This means that brands have to carefully look for influencers who generate genuine interest, and these influencers can differ from the traditional celebrities and paid endorsements.

2.1.2. Social proof and identifying influencers

In order to make use of the potential of influencers the companies need to be able to identify them, as optimal use of social networks actually generates higher sales and bigger profits (Galeotti & Goyal, 2009). It is a process, that is difficult, and an area of interest in marketing research (e.g. Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Rosen, 2000). Rimé (2009) argues that sharing emotions helps with coping while enhancing the social integration and the ties to others. People share with others, thus generating social support (Buechel & Berger, 2012), as they want to be accepted by the society (Reiss, 2004) and looking for social proof. According to Baer and Naslund (2011) social proof is what makes one legitimate in the world of social media, it is the indicator showing a behaviour that is easy to identify and beneficial. Online social proof is manifested by usually the amount of “Likes”, comments, shares, or retweets one’s post generates. But Baer and Naslund (2011) argue that the number of followers is an indicator of popularity, not an indicator of good performance. Furthermore, the authors claim that it is not popularity that matters, but rather the influence. In order for the marketers to be able to identify influential influencers they need to focus their efforts on finding these influencers, whose

community is engaged in responding and commenting. This line of argument is supported by Schaffer (2013), who posits that influence is measured by the level of involvement of the followers, the follow-up e-mails, and the value and numbers of purchases completed via a referral link.

Some research in the past tried to identify those people who are able to change opinions (Stewart, 1964; Watts & Dodds, 2007; Weimann, 1994) or as they were called “opinion leaders” by engaging social network analysis. As social proof differs, depending on whether the communication is with a close friend or relative, considered as a strong tie (Granovetter, 1973), or a weak tie- an acquaintance. Reingen and Kenan (1986) posit social ties act as a tunnel for transmitting information related to products, proving there is a relationship between the information flow and the tie strength.

Furthermore, influencers can also be identified via different factors- for instance, by searching inside community blog pages, where the influence is asymmetric- some people are more influenced than others (Domingos & Richardson, 2001). Or in compliant engagements via hidden influence between users (Herlocker, Konstan, Terveen & Riedl, 2004), showing that the importance of the influencer is likewise constructed on the indirect influence he/she has on others.

2.2. Purchasing intention and online purchase intent

Purchasing intention is one of the major and central concepts studied in the marketing literature. The interest of marketing scholars in purchasing intent stems from its affiliation with the consumer buying behavior (Goyal, 2014). Intentions are deemed as potent predictors of future outcomes (Vineyard, 2014). As stated by Ajzen (1985) intentions are indicator of to what degree people are willing to approach a certain behavior and how many attempts they are trying in order to perform a certain behavior. In agreement with Ajzen’s work, Liu, He, Gao, & Xie (2008) posit lack of intention to purchase online is the main problem in the development of e-commerce. The purchasing process starts when a consumer browses products, which in turn may lead to the purchase of a specific item (Vineyard, 2014). Purchasing intention is the likelihood of the customer to buy a specific product or service (Vineyard, 2014). It is also the tendency towards the plan of making a purchase of good or services in the future (Goyal, 2014). Furthermore, the concept of purchase intention can be identified as one of the components of consumer cognitive behavior on how an individual intends to buy a specific brand or product (Hosein, 2012). Purchase intention demonstrates that consumers will use their experience,

preference and external environment to gather information, evaluate alternatives, and make their purchasing decisions (Chi, Yeh, & Tsai, 2011). Online purchasing intention is defined as the consumer willingness to make online transactions (Meskaran, Ismail & Shanmugam, 2013).

Research has shown that consumer's intention to purchase has a considerable effect on their actual purchase decisions. Companies realize the importance of purchasing intention as it is linked to their desire of increasing the sales of the products and services in order to maximize profits (Hosein, 2012). Moreover, purchase intentions are routinely measured and used by marketing practitioners as an input for sales or market share forecasts for both existing and/or new products and services, as the purchase intentions' data can assist managers in their marketing decisions related to market segmentation and promotional strategies (Goyal, 2014). According to Moe (2003), purchase intention can be linked to both goal-oriented and exploration-oriented browsing behavior. Goal-oriented consumers are prone to look for information before making any purchase decision towards a specific product, while the exploration-oriented consumers are recognized as the ones who act freely and openly, meaning that they do not make pre-plans before the purchase of any item. These two distinctions can be found in both regular and online consumers (Ramlugun & Jugurnauth, 2014). According to Belch and Belch (2003), a purchase intention arises as an outcome of the information search and alternative evaluation stages, once consumers have satisfied their comparison with competitor products (Belch & Belch, 2003).

2.2.1 Factors influencing the purchase intent and the online purchase intent

There are different factors that affect purchasing intent and the intention to purchase online, other than those related to the influencers' features. They include brand awareness, perceived quality, customer loyalty, perceived value, and others, which are explained further in this subchapter.

The consumer's ability to organize and recall a brand is known as brand awareness (Yaseen, Tahira, Gulzar & Anwar, 2011). A product with high brand awareness will attract more consumer and retailers, because of its high market share and the quality beliefs attributions. Store brand awareness has found to have a positive and significant impact on purchasing intent (Richardson, Jain & Dick, 1994; Porral, Fernández, Boga & Mangín, 2013; Semeijn, Van Riel & Ambrosini, 2004). Additionally, Yaseen, Tahira, Gulzar and Anwar (2011) define customer loyalty as the tendency to favor a certain brand or product over other product, and it assures

customer the repurchase of constructive brand on mind in the future. Furthermore, they revealed a significant impact of brand awareness, perceived quality and customer loyalty on purchase intention. This also coincides with what Porral, Fernández, Boga & Mangín (2013) found in their study regarding a positive influence of store brand loyalty and store brand perceived quality on consumers' purchase intent.

Brand Equity is defined as “*the set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name or symbol, which enhances or decreases the value provided by a product or service to the company and its customers*” (Porral, Fernández, Boga & Mangín, 2013, p.96). Hence, it contributes to customer's' purchase intention when store brands create value for customers (Porral, Fernández, Boga & Mangín, 2013). Moreover, there is a positive significant relation between dimensions of brand equity, brand preference and purchase intention (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble & Donthu, 1995; Myers, 2003).

Perceived value is defined as a “*customer's overall assessment of the utility of a product (or service) based on perceptions of what is received and what is given*” (Zeithaml, 1988, p.14, e.g. Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Consumers will buy a product with high perceived value, as Zeithaml (1988) suggested that the higher perceived value is, the higher purchase intention is. Chi, Yeh and Tsai (2011) also proofed the higher perceived value is, the higher purchase intention.

Website quality is a substantial factor in electronic commerce as customers' perceptions of website quality positively influence their intentions to use the website (Chang & Chen, 2008). Website quality directly affects purchase intentions (McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar 2002). A study by Chang, Kuo, Hsu and Cheng (2014) indicated that perceived trust is positively influenced by website quality, and purchase intention is positively influenced by perceived trust. Furthermore, the availability of useful and pertinent information online positively influences customers' purchasing intention and subsequently leads to the actual purchase (Leelayothayotin, 2004). Rozekhi, Hussin & Noor (2014) suggested that website features have strong positive effect on customer purchasing intention, due to the useful information contained in the website.

Past online experience is one of the predecessors of online purchase intention (Meskaran, Ismail & Shanmugam, 2013). A study by Weisberg, Te'eni and Arman (2011) indicated that past purchasing predicts the intentions to purchase and that trust and social presence act as partial mediators. Moreover, customer's experiences via online blogs' involvement significantly

increases the effects of customer experiences on purchase intention (Hsu & Tsou, 2011). Additionally, the consumer purchasing decision is influenced by the electronic WOM which affects the purchase intention either in a positive or negative way (Sa'ait, Kanyan & Nazrin, 2016). Mikalef, Giannakos and Pateli (2013) indicated that product browsing and word of mouth intention are inextricably linked, which enhance the probability of conducting a purchase.

Naturally, the consumer willingness to share his/her information over the Internet dictates the purchase decision, as some researches addressed privacy as a factor that influences the online purchase intention (Belanger, Hiller & Smith, 2002; Tariq & Eddaoudi, 2009). Endorsers and their expertise regarding the product, trustworthiness and their physical attractiveness are some additional influencing aspects. The more the person who endorses a product or brand fits these criteria, the more likely they are to positively influence the purchase intent, and vice versa (Fred, 2015; Pornpitakpan, 2004a). Albeit, a contradicting study by Chi, Yeh and Tsai (2011) suggested the moderating effect of advertising endorser does not affect purchase intention, and that consumers don't get influenced by the recommendation from an advertising endorser when evaluating their purchases.

2.2.2. Theory of Reasoned Action and Technology Acceptance Model

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) also provide underpinning conceptual frameworks for understanding and investigating factors that affect online purchase intention.

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) is one of the essential and most influential theories of human behavior, created by Fishben and Ajzen in 1975, and has been used to predict a wide range of behaviors. TRA states that behavior is preceded by intentions; the intentions are determined by the individual's attitude toward the behavior and the individual's subjective norms, which mean intention acts as the prime determinant of the actual behaviour (Meskaran, Ismail & Shanmugam, 2013). In this line subjective norm is perceived social pressure to engage or not to engage in a certain behavior. Subjective norm is believed to be determined by a set of normative beliefs. Normative beliefs "*are concerned with the likelihood that important referent individuals or groups would approve or disapprove of performing the behavior*" (Meskaran, Ismail, & Shanmugam, 2013, p.308). Whereas attitude refers to the person's own performance of the behavior rather than to his/her performance in general. An attitude satisfies a personal

motive, as a matter of fact brand attitudes along with the way they are formed, both impact the ultimate goal of creating a purchase intention among consumers (Murphy, 2014).

Trust has been measured as the most critical factor which encourages customers to conduct purchases over the internet, and has a significant impact on the customer's purchasing intents especially when dealing with unfamiliar web vendors, due to the high levels of uncertainty accompanied with online exchanges (Safari, 2014). However, the effect of uncertainty is mitigated when trust exists between the two parties. Uncertainty avoidance is directly linked to multidimensional trust beliefs (Dorfman & Howell, 1998). Online shoppers are constantly concerned about uncertainty, providing that uncertainty increase transaction cost and reduce acceptance of electronic channels (Liang & Huang, 1998). Dorfman & Howell define uncertainty avoidance as “*the extent of feeling threatened by uncertain or unknown situations*” (Hwang, 2009, p.90). Uncertainty avoidance moderates systematically the relationship between social norms and intentions to adopt (Srite & Karahanna, 2006).

Lack of trust is considered as a major limitation in the online purchase (Rahi, Ghani & Muhamad 2017). A higher level of trust in online shopping leads to a more positive attitude and higher intention to purchase (Cho & Jialin, 2008). Hence, the more a person trusts the company, the less he/she will perceive risks associated with online buying. Consequently, perceived risk negatively influences the attitude towards online shopping (Heijden, Verhagen & Creemers 2003). Also, brand image affects the perceived risks an individual comprehends, and has a direct influence on online purchase intention (Johnson, 2015). Therefore, building trust in customers' perception influences the online shopping intention, and by that customers tend to accept any potentially negative effects or loss caused by embracing online shopping (Lai & Wang, 2012).

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was first developed by Davis to explain user acceptance of technology in the workplace (Davis, 1989). TAM adopts a causal chain of beliefs, attitudes, intention, and overt behavior that social psychologists Fishbein and Ajzen (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991) have put forward under the Theory of Reasoned Action (Heijden, Verhagen & Creemers 2003), where intention is determined by the person's attitude toward the use of that technology and his/ her perception concerning its usefulness. Attitudes are formed from the beliefs a person holds about the use of the technology. According to Davis (1989) two cognitive beliefs are posited by TAM. The first belief - perceived usefulness, is the user's “*The degree to which a person believes that using a specific application system will enhance his or*

her job performance” (p. 320); while the second belief perceived ease of use is “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of efforts” (p.320).

The TAM, presented above, has been developed further by Venkatesh and Davis in 2000, where the authors added variables like subjective norm and experience. Their research show these and other variables are correlated with the intention. In some later studies researchers found that many different variables like risk and trust that are also influencing the attitude, intention or actual shopping behavior (Wang, Zhi & Li, 2014). Trust as a factor was first added to the TAM by McCloskey in 2006, who was focusing on trust of the consumers concerning the ability of the retailers to keep their personal data safe. The findings revealed that trust has a positive effect on the two main variables (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) as well as on actual system use (McCloskey, 2006).

2.3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in this master thesis is based on the literature used previously, and the conducted pre-study (explained later on in this paper in the Methodology part) before the main study.

Countless brands have engaged influencers in their attempts to reach out more consumers and influence their purchasing behavior. These brands vary from small and not so famous ones, to Gucci, Canon, KLM (Abidin, 2016). Multinational corporations (MNCs), government and non-government (NGOs) organizations, education and political entities have realized the extensive popularity and fame bloggers are gaining, and invite them for promoting causes or raise publicity to their projects. Their ability to influence is connected with the features they possess- authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness, competence and independence.

2.3.1. Influencers and features of the influencers

The concept of authenticity is one of the most important in marketing nowadays (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003), and the increasing commercialization altered the way consumers perceive authenticity in the contemporary world (Holt, 2002). Since bloggers usually write about topics that are interesting to them they are engaged and seen by the readers as already experts, making them look as more credible, and having a better expertise than the celebrities. However, when consumers see a celebrity promoting a brand they connect that with the possibility that the celebrity is engaged due only to the monetary binding (being paid to advertise), unlike the majority of the bloggers (Forrest & Cao, 2010). Authenticity forms the

uniqueness of the influencer, as consumers seek authenticity in both companies and brands (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner & Ridder, 2011). Consumers want an authentic experience, not a powdered replication of an imaginary experience as sometimes is the case with celebrity endorsers. Authenticity is viewed as the ability to be true to one's self (Molleda, 2009).

Credibility and perceived trustworthiness of influencers are found to be two of the features making the influencers effective brand promoters (Chu & Kamal, 2008). Credibility is one of the main protruding factors in persuasion (e.g. Pornpitakpan, 2004b), especially in online setting when the consumer doesn't have the possibility to actually feel and touch the product (Everard & Galetta, 2006). Moreover, credibility is important for the bloggers and micro-celebrities as it nurtures their effectiveness, and boosts their own media image and self-brand (Chu & Kamal, 2008). When an influencer is seen as more credible the purchase intents of the target groups are higher (Silvera & Austad, 2004), as he/she is seen as having higher expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. Thus they augment the contemporary marketing strategies, as consumers might still feel distant from the celebrities, but closer to the influencers, making them more likable. Ohanian (1990) argues that when measuring trustworthiness, the most important variable is likability. Trustworthiness is foreseen as an imperative variable in an online environment. Consumers perceive trust as "*the degree of confidence that a source is motivated to communicate valid assertions*" (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner & Ridder, 2011, p. 17), meaning that even though companies might be experts in their areas they might not be perceived as trustworthy. Nonetheless consumers will read blogs, or see a review by an influencer who is confident, and will judge it as more trustworthy. The influencers are seeming as giving honest opinions about the products/services. Thus their followers identify more with them than with the manufacturers, and subsequently trusting the product information better (Cheong & Morrison, 2008).

Competence is the extent to which a source is deliberated as expert, making it trustworthy, depending on the knowledge and proficiency about a topic (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner & Ridder, 2011). The concept of competence relates to the ability of the influencer to endorse certain intents (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2006), as competence is a dimension of human social cognition. Furthermore, it echoes "*traits that are related to perceived ability, including intelligence, skill, creativity and efficacy*" (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2006, p. 1). By self-proclaiming their expertise people aim at constructing the impression that makes them being perceived favorably and in better light by others, and perhaps increasing their persuasion traits (Willemsen, Neijens & Bronner, 2012). Furthermore, competence is directly linked with

credibility and the ability of the influencer to make valid statements (Chu & Kamal, 2008). Since communication is two-sided it is essential to provide accurate information, as it leads to higher competence perception. In this research context, independence is defined as a condition in which an individual is able to use their mind and body, regardless of social constraints or conscience. Independence is an element of authoritarianism (e.g. Langner, Hennings & Wiedmann, 2013; Oesterreich, 1998; Ogawa, 1981; Oesterreich, 1974) that making a person to act on his authority without doubting or inquiring their ethics, morality and integrity. Independence is a tool for measuring the consumer's view to influence in the context of social influencers. That leads to the suggestion that the higher the independence individual possess, the higher his/her abilities are to use opportunistically his/her influencing powers (Langner, Hennings & Wiedmann, 2013).

2.3.2. Purchase intent and factors, influencing the purchase intent

The rise of technology and the Internet advancement have led to the expansion of different firms and business online, causing a number of studies to take a closer look at the consumer's online purchasing intention (Heijden, Verhagen & Creemers, 2003) - when customers intend to search, select and purchase products over the Internet. Hence, the Internet affects the customer decision-making behavior in all stages of their purchase- the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase (Meskaran, Ismail & Shanmugam, 2013). The structure of the website, being it well-organized and attractive is what is important during that stage of purchasing decision making- the pre-purchase stage (Koo, Kim & Lee, 2008). During the purchasing stage the most valuable points forwarding the consumer towards buying are the information quality and sale services of the merchant. And in the post-purchasing stage the ability to return or exchange a product when there is a concern or problem with it is considered to be the most important (Liang & Lai, 2002).

From the discussion above the features of the influencers might have an impact on consumers' purchase intent when buying from online retailers. Therefore, a conceptual model for this study is developed and illustrated in *Figure 1* below.

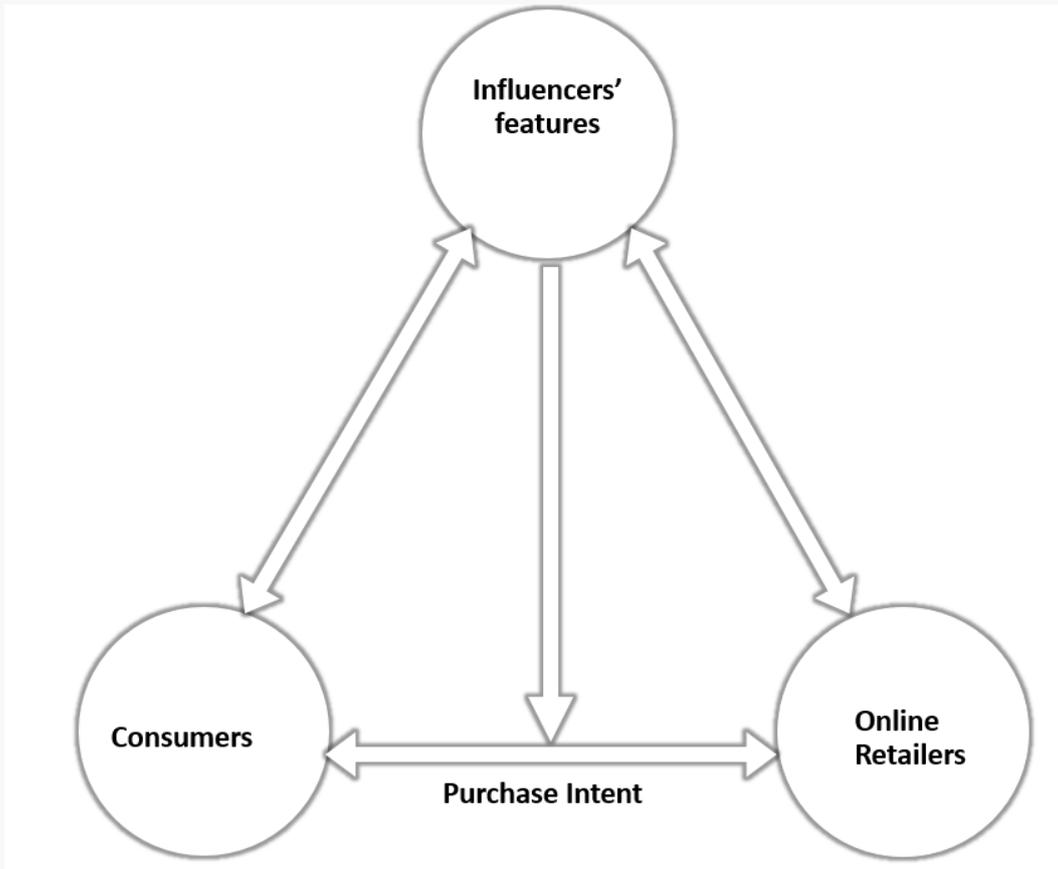


Figure 1: Theoretical frame: Consumers' online purchase intent toward online retailers and the role of influencers (Source: self-made)

3. Method

This methodology chapter of the thesis introduces the used method to generate empirical data and analyze it for solving the research problem at hand based on the data from the empirical study. The definitions of the method-related terms are stated, as well the chapter provides information how the data was generated, the participant's information, and elaborates on the reasons behind the chosen approaches.

3.1. Qualitative research method

This thesis is qualitatively situated. To be able to justify the chosen research method in relation to our topic, it is important to understand qualitative research methods more generally. According to Shank (2002, p.5), *“qualitative research is defined as a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning”*. Systematic means planned, organized and public, following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research society, while empirical means that this type of research instructed by experience. Inquiry into meaning implies that researchers try to understand how others can sense and benefit of their experience. Qualitative research methods comprise techniques or practices for data collection and analysis that generates qualitative data different from numbers (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).

Furthermore, qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach meaning - that qualitative researchers study subjects in their natural settings, attempting to interpret the study phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Ospina, 2004). This means that the subject is studied within its natural setting and the results are interpreted accordingly. The interpretation can be performed by using a range of empirical data gathered through different techniques such as interviews, observations and ethnographic experience.

The argument for using qualitative research for this particular master thesis is based on the fact that this method allows for insightful exploration of the objects under study here, and aims to grasp the topic from the point of view of the included local population (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). Further, this approach is applicable in circumstances where no or little research has been conducted, as is the case of influencers and online purchase intent from the view of the consumers. Hence, using this qualitative approach will give the ability to provide *“complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue”* (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest & Namey, 2005, p.1). Moreover, using the qualitative research as a study tool helps to develop concepts that contribute to understand the phenomena

under investigation with stressing on the meanings, experiences and views of the participants (Al-Busaidi, 2008).

3.2. Research approach

For this thesis the researchers will begin with a pre-study using an inductive approach to obtain knowledge as basic foundation to the theoretical selection. After addressing the theories, new empirical data will be gathered in an abductive manner through conducting focus group interviews.

The inductive approach starts with observing a certain instance, seeks to establish initial concepts, and draws preliminary thoughts and ideas in order to reach generalizations about the phenomenon under investigation, and sees if these generalizations can be applied to the phenomenon, while remaining at the same time flexible and open for alternative explanations (Hyde, 2000). Moving to the abductive approach which was chosen for this thesis, it involves a dual usage of inductive and deductive approaches, and allows the researcher to start from the known facts and work towards finding an explanation. Abductive approach can be referred to as an interplay between the theory and the gathered data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). With an abductive approach the researchers aim to understand social phenomena with regard to the actions of social actors, making it necessary to study the existing literature in order to get an understanding of the social environment (Ong, 2012), which in our case is influencers and their effect on online purchasing intentions. On one hand, the researchers are somehow testing existing theory based upon our empirical data collection. Nevertheless, due to the under-researched nature of this phenomenon from an academic point of view, an entirely deductive approach would be inappropriate. Here, the attempt is to combine different theoretical fields into a coherent framework; wherefore the abductive approach is suitable, as new insights can be gained from the primary data collected (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). A further justification for using this approach, is that it recognizes human behavior is influenced by the way individuals interpret the situations they find themselves in. This reassures the appropriateness of using abductive approach for this study (Reichertz, 2007).

3.3. Exploratory research design

This master thesis is prone towards exploratory design as the purpose is to look into the features of the influencers that affect the consumers' online purchase intent. Therefore, since the research here is qualitative in nature, it is associated with using exploratory research design. An

exploratory study seeks to find out ‘*what is happening, researches new insights and asks questions in a new light*’ which is the purpose of this thesis (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012, p.78). Exploratory research design is suitable as it contests new problems for which there has been little or no previous researching made (Brown, 2006).

3.4. Research philosophy- Interpretivism

The researchers of this master thesis have conducted eight preliminary interviews and two focus group interviews. Since the aim is to gain insights in the thoughts and beliefs of these interviewees as customers the chosen research philosophy was interpretivism. This approach states that to get results in a research study it is fundamentally important to understand the differences of humans as social actors, the motives, meanings and other experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The researchers are required to adopt an empathetic stance- they ought to enter the social world of the studied subjects and make sense from their point of view (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Interpretivism involves using approaches that view reality as something subjective based on meanings and understandings in which researchers interpret elements of the study, and their values are inherent in all phases of the research process. Thus, interpretive researchers are more interactive and participatory in their research studies, as they believe that just as people can't be separated from their knowledge, researchers can't be separated from their research subject (Chowdhury, 2014).

Since the aim of the thesis is not to generalize in a statistical sense and predict, but rather to interpret and understand human behavior, this research philosophy is suitable.

3.5. Data generation method- personal interviews and focus groups interviews

For the purpose of this master thesis the primary data collection techniques includes personal interviews and focus groups with various consumers, conducted on the territory of Sweden. The gathered data via personal interviews in the pre-study was used as a guidance for the theoretical framework and focus groups.

3.5.1. Personal interviews

In order to investigate the characteristics of the influencers and its impact on consumers’ online purchasing intent, it is crucial to study and understand the initial perception of the interviewees. For this purpose, personal interviews help to obtain the preliminary data required for the chosen

topic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Eight personal interviews (including both face to face and telephone interviews) were conducted as part of a pre-study, where we aimed to interpret the perceptions of the interviewees on the research. Qualitative interviews are used to provide new insight into a social phenomenon since the respondents are able to motivate and reflect their thoughts on a multiple subjects in a diverse way (Folkestad, 2008).

3.5.2. Focus group interviews

In the main study, focus group method was used and applied for understanding influencers and their features impact on online purchasing intent. The main purpose of this study is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Hence, using focus group interviews allow the researchers to gain such insights in a way that wouldn't be possible using other qualitative methods. Focus group research offers several strengths compared to other qualitative studies. First, in this interactive setting, participants are motivated to speak to each other, ask questions, exchange ideas, probe and comment on other's points of view (Kitzinger, 1994). Second, focus groups are useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to assess how people think and why they think that way (Kitzinger, 1995). Albeit, due to the different personalities, backgrounds, and experiences of the participants, a weakness of this method could be that some participants may get influenced or biased by other's opinion during discussions, in a way that they would show different opinions if they were interviewed individually. This must be taken into consideration when analyzing the focus group data (cf. Safari, 2012).

3.6. Participants' selection

3.6.1. Size of the sample

The data collection was conducted by searching for a vast amount of information gathered from eight pre-study interviews and two focus group interviews. The total number of interviews in the pre-study and the focus groups delivers data that is enough for analyzing and getting new insights for this master thesis research, especially since the researchers are using qualitative method, which was explained earlier. This means that the number of the interviews does not have to be extensive but the combination of two data collection methods- pre-study semi-structured interviews and two focus groups interviews would provide enough information in order to answer the research questions and address the purpose properly. With a larger sample the provided findings would be more relevant and due to the fact that the subject under interest

here lacked research more than one study was needed. Conducting qualitative research is efforts intensive on one hand, as well as time consuming, therefore a large sample will be hard to analyze (Mason, 2010). On the other hand, qualitative sample is usually a subject to a diminishing return – which means gathering more data will not result in having more information (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Nonetheless, this master thesis’ researchers have reviewed the existing literature for studies and theories on the topic of influencers and online purchase intent to facilitate new insights.

Furthermore, given the time constraint of only ten weeks the researchers were able to perform only eight pre-study interviews and two focus groups interviews. However, the focus was rather on performing high-quality semi-structured interviews.

Lastly, by conducting a pre-study, and two focus groups the researchers reached saturation in both phases of the research process. Saturation in this sense is defined by Saumure and Given (2008, p.3) as *“point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the newly constructed theory”*.

3.6.2. Criteria of the sample

Certain criteria were established on the basis of which the interviews were performed and the participants were selected. These criteria were constructed according to the literature review and the theoretical framework. Therefore, by interviewing the participants adequate reliable and rich data will be provided for the purpose of this study. In line with the recommendations of Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) we applied purposive sampling method with high heterogeneity, as this research is not quantitative in nature and it is not helpful to increase generalizability by selecting a random sample.

The criteria were as following:

- Consumers who have social media accounts and/ or read blogs/online content
- Consumers who use social media to communicate
- Consumers who are aware of influencers
- Consumers who purchase online at least once in their life

The demographics data for the participants and their social media presence data can be found in the Appendix, Table 1 and Table 2.

3.7. Primary data and data analysis

For the purpose of this thesis, primary data collection was generated in two levels; first a pre-study was conducted which included eight personal interviews. Secondly, two focus group interviews were conducted to generate empirical data for the main study. As being said, in order to investigate the characteristics of influencers and the effect on online purchasing intent, it was crucial to study and understand the initial perceptions of the interviewees. For this purpose, personal interviews helped to obtain the preliminary required data for the chosen topic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). While the focus group interviews provided access to in depth data and that's where the study's main empirical data was collected.

The sample for the pre-study included both males and females ranging from 25-50 years old, from different countries- Sweden, Germany, Poland, Jordan, and Bulgaria. The pre-study was conducted to receive a general understanding of the influencer marketing phenomenon, in terms of how the participants viewed influencers, as well as to explore and identify the important features of influencers and their impact on consumers' online purchasing intent. Therefore, the selected participants were from the researchers' personal networks. Some of the interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the interviewees, while others were in English. The researchers, when needed, provided clarifications to the questions in order to avoid possible misinterpretation and language barrier.

Part of the interviews were carried out in person in Västerås, Sweden, in various locations. The other part of the interviews was conducted via telephone and Skype due to geographical distance limitations.

Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded after initial agreement with the participants, as well notes were taken during the interview process, in line with Lee and Lings (2008). After the interviews, the researchers transcribed the data and added comments to ensure no information is lost, and to enable them to return and look for information at any time if needed (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).

The pre-study established the foundation for the conceptual framework of the main study, which was the focus groups interviews.

Two focus group interviews were conducted during April and May, 2017 and comprised of five to seven members. The participants in these groups were from both genders, male and female, and from various countries: Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Mexico, Spain, Pakistan, and Jordan. They were selected based on the sample criteria and the personal network of the researchers, who contacted those using private conversations, Facebook

Messenger, and e-mails. The focus group interviews were conducted again in Västerås, Sweden, on the premises of Mälardalen University as it was the most convenient place for both the participants and the interviewers.

Each session lasted for around an hour, and were held in English as the common spoken language for everyone. The participants were informed beforehand about the approximate expected longevity. They were welcomed by the moderators and offered some snacks before the start of each session. At the beginning of the interview the participants were informed about the topic under study, as well about their right not to answer questions they view as intrusive, and the right to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, their informed consent was taken for recording the interviews. They were also notified that their identities will be kept anonymous in the thesis, to avoid any negative consequences and to motivate them to give more open, honest and full answers.

The focus group interviews included ten structured questions, starting with three general questions to break the ice, followed by seven topic related questions. Depending on the flow of the discussion, additional unstructured questions were covered. Topic discussions for the focus groups were based on two levels. The first was to identify influencer marketing phenomenon, then elaborate on influencers' features and see how it affects the followers' online purchasing intent. Moreover, during sessions the discussion covered factors that alleged to influence online purchasing intention such as the website ease of use and its usefulness, the consumer attitudes and the personal subjective norms. The researchers took notes during the interviews to prevent any data loss.

After gathering the data from the focus groups, the recordings were transcribed in a written form in line with the guidelines by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012). In order to analyze the data, it needs to be summarized, categorized, and structured so that the researchers are able to recognize relationships, investigate propositions and build up conclusions that are reasonable. The responses from the focus groups were analyzed and afterwards compared to the literature review and theoretical framework with the goal to search for patterns and possible matches.

3.8. Validity and reliability

In order for a qualitative research and the interviews to be trustworthy, there are different aspects that need to be taken into account (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

Reliability and validity are important criteria in establishing and assessing the research quality and its contribution to the knowledge field (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Reliability refers to the degree to which a research method produces consistent results. Meaning, whether the researcher's data collection techniques and analytic procedures would produce consistent results, if they were repeated on another occasion or they were replicated by another researcher (Golafshani, 2003). The results collected via a research method are not fundamentally intended to be recurrent because of the time reality they were obtained in, and the particular situation that might change over time and is influenced by different factors (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). It is suggested to take notes about the design of the research in order to support the methods' and strategy selection, and it will be helpful for other researchers to understand the used process and the findings and to analyze the collected data again.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the research needs to stay the same despite any possible changes in the circumstances or environment. Since the research phenomenon in this paper is rather new and not addressed adequately in previous literature, the approach chosen here is supported by extensive literature review that is in compliance with the used method, thus allowing other researchers to comprehend our point of view. Correspondingly, it is important to document the whole process as it enhances the reliability of this study, as the researchers have reached saturation making them feel the findings are reliable.

While validity in the qualitative research pertains to the credibility and trustworthiness of interpretations. In other words, researchers need to persuade themselves and their readers that their findings are genuinely based on pivotal examinations of all their data and do not depend upon a few well-chosen examples (Brink, 1993). Nevertheless, there is the possibility while conducting interviews to lose some information being it during transcribing or due to language barrier (Kuzmanić, 2009). Therefore, to prevent data loss the researchers of this paper used a triangulation of research methodologies by recording all interviews and taking notes separately and reviewing them together in tandem team (Priem, Lyon & Dess, 1999). Further, transforming body language and any expressed emotions observed during the interview process is not possible, therefore it is important to pay attention to them (Kuzmanić, 2009). Performing face-to-face interviews ensures high validity, as well being very highly prepared and focused on in-depth understanding of the theory related to the questions in the interview and the research topic.

4. Results

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the data collected via the focus groups interviews.

4.1. Focus groups interviews

4.1.1. Influencers and features of the influencers

The interviewees follow the influencers for entertainment and inspiration. The influencers also serve as motivators. As one participant explained:

'It is nice to follow these people so you can learn about their life and how they are living'.

Another one added:

'I follow them (the influencers) as I like their pictures and I use them for inspiration for what I want to do, or for some places I want to go and visit'.

Another reason to follow influencers is because of the content they produce:

'I just watch it and I enjoy the product they produce- the content';

'I follow some because they are interesting to me, and their lifestyle encourages me to keep up'.

All participants stated listening to a recommendation from an influencer helps them in a way with uncertainty avoidance. Some of them said again it is the personality of the influencer that has an impact on the uncertainty:

'...here it comes down again to the personality of the person in general and how long you've been following him/her';

'Even though sometimes they officially state this review is sponsored by X brand you can still feel it from what they wrote if the influencer shows an honest and genuine opinion that comes from their own thoughts; compare to if it is very obvious it's a marketing material that they have been handed'.

The reputation of the influencer is what the majority of the participants agreed to be more important than the popularity of the referential:

'If the brand uses somebody who is a controversial person, or their image is super extreme this would totally turn me away from this brand and I will never buy it';

Besides, one interviewee stated that popularity changes over time:

‘...the more popular you become the more you tend to change, and your legitimacy might go down due to sponsors offering you more money’.

The participants in the focus groups appreciate the honesty of the influencers. They want to know when a product is provided for a review, or see a disclaimer posted:

‘...they have to have the disclaimer sponsored so you have to always know this’;

‘... in the description on YouTube it must be stated that he is sponsored or in his blog -they have to be honest about it’.

Being open and honest that a product is advertised, or how much is paid for a review makes the consumers perceive the influencers as more trustworthy:

‘...he's actually talking about the terms of the contract and what they have to do with the brand- this makes me trust the person more’.

‘The first thing that comes to my mind when I see an influencer recommending a product or brand is how much money have they got from a sponsor of this brand or product. Even though this doesn't really affect me but I want to know what is their reasoning behind’.

The majority of the interviewees agreed that when they listen to a recommendation by an influencer they do as they perceive them to be credible and trustworthy, and the level to which one is familiar with the influencer:

‘When I listen to the recommendation given by the influencer, I would say I would do that because I perceived them as a credible and trustworthy’;

‘if it an influencer that you follow for one or two weeks then you might find it a bit sketchy; while if you follow someone for a long time (like 2 to 3 years) or so you tend to listen more to them than the person that you follow for the short-term’.

The trustworthiness and credibility of the influencer depends on the relevance of the recommended product to their personality, according to the interviewees:

‘One day she started promoting a product of no relevance to her image; so that's was like sort of questioning what is the connection - this would make me question her authenticity’.

The legitimacy of the influencers is a factor the majority of the participants stated plays a role, and is linked with trustworthiness and credibility:

'I would think about legitimacy which plays a big part of this, and I think this is a problem with most (influencers) as I don't see them legitimate, they are there to get the money and then leave out of the business'.

Legitimacy is defined here by the participants as: *'they take a sponsorship or use a product for the genuine use of it - not for the money they take'. Hence, it is for the product value itself rather than the monetary value'.*

Moreover, the respondents linked the reputation of the influencers to authenticity and legitimacy:

'...someone can have thousands followers and be not with a good reputation, while another might have a few followers and be with a good reputation, so I think they both (authenticity and reputation) go hand in hand as well'.

4.1.2. Purchase intent and factors, influencing the purchase intent

Some of the participants get more influenced by the opinions of the influencers whenever it is related to their interest in the product and the budget they have:

'...I look it up then and I find it interesting for some future trips - for when I am more financially stable.';

'...but most of the time the products are really expensive and right now I'm a student and I don't really have the budget'.

Another reason to get influenced to some extent is when the influencers provide a proof for using the products: *'...they provide a living proof of how things happened in a way...'*

The level of influence also depends on the product itself and the interest the person has in the product:

'Certain bloggers affect me more than others, especially when they offer a product that matches my interest, so I value more what they are doing and can relate to it better';

'...It is also more about what purpose you seek behind it, for example if it is more about inspiration and motivation like in lifestyle blogs you would be more interested or affected by their opinions'.

When purchasing online, the interviewees were driven by the need of the product- this was a common reply:

'...the most important one is if I really do need that product. If I really need it then I would buy it from any website'.

One interviewee said that it starts with the need but then other factors might occur:

'...as the features of the website, the impression of the product and website; the place is also factor, as well as the price, and the product itself being offered by the company'.

The quality of the website and its ease of use are sometimes factors influencing the online purchase and purchase intent:

'...if you really need the product the website doesn't matter a lot, while if you're still wondering about the product - then the website might matter.'

For another participant it is the attitude towards the retailer or the brand that actually matter:

'If you have a negative perception about the retailer you would go and seek substitutes or other retailers'.

Interestingly, one participant said: *'My perception of the brand won't change if a bad site is selling it; it will turn me away from buying from this particular website only'.*

Another one added: *'Sometimes when the website looks bad I still buy the product because they have the best price but then I know what I pay for. It is kind of like a trade-off'.*

Social norms have an impact on the purchase intent. The majority of the participants claimed they get affected by the social norms and values of the society. They try to stick to them and look for social proof.

'I'm the kind of person who is affected by the social norms of the people- the people surrounding me, and what they do think about me.' Another participant added: *'...it depends on the perception of how others look at you, and it depends on the person himself or herself'.*

'It depends on how often you use the product and whether people will see you using it. For example, clothes and personal appearance might matter more when it comes to social proof,

as people would see you wearing them. But for products you use in private that no one will really see you it doesn't require social proof'.

Price of the product is a factor that impacts the purchase intent. The interviewees consider the price of the product affects their willingness to buy it and the amount of influence. One participant said:

'If the product is cheap and I really like it I will just take the leap of faith'.

The majority of the participants in this focus group agreed with that statement- cheap price with affection for the product is what drives the desire to buy a product. Meanwhile, another respondent included the option of how frequently one uses the product:

'If it is going to be a product I will just use once and not use it again, and it is not very expensive then I will give it a chance and try it...'

Product necessity and price are interconnected, with four participants agreeing on that statement:

'The higher the price gets the more the necessity of the product becomes also a factor. If it becomes more expensive you tend to rethink and say 'Do I really need that product?', whereas a product that is priced low you say 'I can just try it and see if it fits me in the long term'.'

One participant connected her willingness to buy a product with its quality:

'It is more about the perceived product quality than the monetary value. Again, the higher the price the more factors you need to consider'.

On one hand, the participants will buy products recommended by influencers depending on various factors, even when sometimes they don't like the advertised brand. The purpose of the product and the need for it are essential:

'... if it fits my purposes then sure, I would buy it; and also if I have the need for it and have the money to buy it'.

If the product has an added value then it is a driver that makes the consumer to be influenced and buy the product recommended by an influencer:

'If I believe that the product they're recommending would add value to me then I would consider buying it even if I don't like the brand, so here as if I would give the brand a second chance basically'.

Repeated usage of the product (being it used and reviewed not only once) and detailed review from the influencer are amongst the main factors that will influence the consumers' intentions to buy it. As one interviewee explained:

'...for me it's all about presenting the stuff. Then producing a good content if they use all of the products – and saying they use it because it's a good product and not" Oh, here I got that wonderful product" but they do nothing with it. It feels like teleshopping'.

Another participant included the personality of the influencer to this:

'It's also about the personality of influencers in general, because most of the people who follow influencers on a day-to-day basis start to get to know the person to some extent; in a way they start to know their personality, if they're money-hungry or showing honest opinion'.

Further, one interviewee added:

'When they tell a good story and really explain why the shoes are good then it's like 'Yeah, probably they are sponsored'. But when they are engaged with the products and also show negative part (because nothing can't be all good) ...they also show they have these problems, etc.... 'but you can fix it with this and this' Then I feel it's more comprehensive what they show'.

When the product represents the lifestyle of the influencer, and fits to it then to the interviewees it appeals more:

'... it fits their lifestyle and you don't have the impression that they push it too much'.

On the other hand, the interviewees see themselves as strong opinionated people with their own will, and consequently claiming they will not buy a product just because it is recommended to them:

'... just because someone tells me I should buy this I wouldn't do it- I stick to my own values and beliefs. If somebody's actively saying 'Buy this!'- I wouldn't do it'.

This is supported further:

'I value my own experience higher than these of the influencers. Of course I might be affected but I wouldn't just buy because they tell me to!'

Almost all the participants in both focus groups were prone to agree on trusting recommendations over the advertisements they see. They listen to a recommendation as they perceive it as something more personal rather than a general statement:

'I trust them (the recommendations from friends) because they're close to me and they wouldn't lie to me so I trust them. But if someone on the TV just said something is very good I wouldn't trust them- they say this to 1000 people...'

But then one of them expressed her different view, which she later adjusted to the general opinion:

'Then there are ads that I do really like and make me get interested in the company or the product, especially when the ads are smartly-made or are really different in a way. But I still need the recommendations'.

Some of the participants also said that trusting ads or recommendations is again price related- if the product is cheap they might buy it because of the advertisement, and not listen to recommendation: *'...if it's something cheap and I just saw a commercial about it I will buy it'.*

Meanwhile the consumers in the face of our participants do not also blindly trust the recommendations of influencers just because they like these influencers a lot. They claim objectivity of the influencer is what will make them trust more:

'...if somebody is reviewing product and pointing the good and the bad sides- then I'm okay with it. But if they are stating only the positive sides then I think there's something fishy about it.'

Expertise of the influencers was brought up by the respondents as a factor affecting trust: *'It really comes down to who gives the recommendation. If it is a friend who is knowledgeable about a certain product, then I would trust them more. So it is about the level of expertise they have'.*

For the majority of the interviewees trusting blindly is not an option, there is always a need for some rationalization, and they connect it with the digitalization nowadays:

'...there's so much information available for anyone, so you can't really just go to a friend and say 'Oh, you should really buy this one because it's really good!'. You can go and find out if it's really good just simply looking at the information over the internet'.

Another participant further elaborated:

'...because of the globalization and the advancements of Internet blind trust doesn't really appear in society anymore'.

Furthermore, it was agreed that: '*...trust is built with time and reputation*'.

Some of the consumers stated that the commercialization in today's world made them doubt the sincerity of the recommendation:

'...but at the same time people care about the money and sometimes they will say that a product is good even if it's not good. Just because they want to take the money for it so they're sacrificing their values just for the money';

'So they might not really like a product or the brand they promote but they do it for the paycheck they're getting'.

Furthermore, the participants in our focus groups see themselves as smart consumers, one who are not fooled easily by recommendations. Especially those that have a marketing background: *'I see myself as an enlightened consumer, especially since I study International Marketing'*.

5. Analysis

In this chapter the results will be discussed and analyzed in relation to the literature review and the theoretical framework.

There are many reasons to why the participants follow influencers. The participants listed inspiration, motivation, entertainment, keeping up with the latest news, or because of interest in the products the influencers use and advertise, and the content produced, as well as the potential future lifestyle that some consumers want to have and resemble to. Having in mind what the definition of an influencer marketing is, inspiration and being up-to date align with the purpose of this phenomenon, as expressed by Wong (2014) and Brown and Hayes (2007)- influencers are seen as trusted advisors, and as people who are aiming and capable of building relationships and influencing others.

The majority of the interviewees care about the values and the principles of the influencers, this is a reason as to why they like them and follow them. Probably this is due to the fact that the consumers want to follow people who resemble them, or who they might want to be in the future, as they said are acting as inspiration. This is supported by Solis (2016)- influencers by providing the feeling of being similar in a way to their peers, which in turn is actually increasing the amount of influence they might attain. Moreover, that can be also linked to the level of intimacy that the influencers are attempting to create with their followers via the para-social communication (Chen, 2014).

The reputation of the influencer is usually prevailing over the popularity. A good reputation is perhaps showing more influential and having more impact than popularity. Such finding is in line with what Baer and Naslund (2011) argued- the number of followers, is actually an indicator of popularity rather than a performance. Usually a good influencer will be in touch with their followers/fans, keeping the communication alive and engaging in discussion (Schaffer, 2013), as one of the respondents said:

'If I have negative opinion about this influencer I wouldn't trust the brand that they're associated with and I would not be wanting to be associated with this brand and supporting it. I care more about reputation of the referential than their popularity'.

Hence, having good reputation also adds up to avoiding uncertainty for the consumers.

At the same time the respondents stated that for how long they know or follow the influencer is of meaning for them. This is an interesting finding and factor the researchers have not come

across in the literature they reviewed. Probably getting to know an influencer online resembles the social process of acquainting someone in real life- it is a long process, and trust is built over time. Trust is earned, not given, as it is usually in relationships. To a degree such finding might be related to the work of Abidin (2015), who claims that the micro-celebrities are giving the impression of creating intimate interactions, or communicative intimacy via exposing themselves on the social media in a more honest way time over time.

Both personal and focus group interviews revealed that online purchasing intent is influenced by various factors. Whenever the influencer recommends a product that highly fits with the consumer need, purpose and interest, the higher is the purchasing intention for buying that product. That can be to a degree linked to consumers who are goal oriented- they carefully look for information before making any purchase decision towards a specific product in order to satisfy a particular need (Moe, 2003).

For the interviewees purchasing intent was found to be positively influenced by the perceived value and quality. Especially when the product recommended by the influencer is perceived by the consumers/followers as useful product that would add value to them. This coincides with Zeithaml (1998) and Chi, Yeh and Tsai (2011) who all suggested that the higher perceived value is, the higher is the purchase intention. Perceived quality was also found to have connection with the product price:

“It is more about the perceived product quality than the monetary value. Again, the higher the price the more factors you need to consider”.

Nonetheless, price was addressed as significant factor that influences the consumer willingness to buy online.

A predominant view was found among all the interviewees in trusting recommendations over advertisements and commercials. As they see recommendations reflect people’s actual experiences in using the product and hence resembles their honest opinions. However, the commercialization in today’s world make them sometimes doubt the sincerity of the recommendation. Despite that, recommendations was still strongly favored in unanimity over advertisements. Thus, consumers purchasing intentions is influenced either in a positive or negative way by the electronic word of mouth and recommendations (Sa’ait, Kanyan & Nazrin, 2016; Pateli, 2013):

'I value my own experience higher than these of the influencers. Of course I might be affected but I wouldn't just buy because they tell me to!'

As mentioned in the literature review, purchase intention demonstrates that consumers will use their experience, preference and external environment to gather information, evaluate alternatives, and make their purchasing decisions (Chi, Yeh & Tsai, 2011). The interviewees claimed that blind trust in influencers doesn't exist, due to the consumers' need of rationalization when making online purchasing decision, as well as the digitalization and the internet advancement which provide a wide access to various information. To an extent this finding about rational consumers aligns with what Herbert Simon (1955) stated- that the decision-making process is ruled by bounded rationality, as the human behavior is intendedly rational but limitedly so. The decisions and choices depend as well on the preferences and tastes, as posited by March (1978), but the digitalization and internet availability might change the picture as they provide the consumer with broader and wider access to information. It is assumed that informed consumers make informed decisions and therefore informed purchases, as our interviewees showed.

But at the same time website quality and its impression was identified among the respondents as a factor that impact their purchasing intentions when shopping online. Our finding here reconciles with previous studies indicating a positive relationship between website quality of the online retailer and online purchasing intentions (Chang & Chen, 2008; McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar 2002; Chang, Kuo, Hsu & Cheng, 2014). Further, the respondents claimed that the website features and its ease of use were other factors influencing online purchasing intentions. This coincides with the one of the cognitive beliefs posited by TAM (Davis, 1998) - intentions are determined by the person's attitude toward the use of technology.

In line with the TRA (Fishben & Ajzen, 1975), the interviewees concluded in agreement that societal values and subjective norms affect their purchasing intention as they try to stick to them and look for social proof. This was also linked to how people would see them and think about them, which is critical when consumers are using a product in public such as clothing.

"... just because someone tells me I should buy this I wouldn't do it- I stick to my own values and beliefs. If somebody's actively saying 'Buy this!'- I wouldn't do it".

Furthermore, this quote from one of the interviewees: *"If you have a negative perception about the retailer you would go and seek substitutes or other retailers"* shows the consumer attitude

towards the retailer and the brand/product are actually important and affect the purchasing intentions, again confirming the TRA.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to research the features that an influencer possesses or should possess and their impact on online purchase intent for consumers. The reason for this exploration was to identify and gain understanding into how influencers are managing to affect the online purchasing intent of the consumers. Therefore, this thesis by combining influencers marketing and online purchase intent in one framework aims at answering the following research question:

What are the main features of influencers that have an impact on consumers' online purchase intent?

Authenticity is amongst the most significant feature that has an impact on whether the interviewees will listen to the influencers. The other features of significance are trustworthiness and credibility, competence and expertise, legitimacy and honesty.

According to Guignon (2008) authenticity as stated by existential philosophers is living one's life honestly, coherently, sticking to the values of integrity. The respondents want the influencers to be honest with them, to disclose when they are advertising a product, or put a disclaimer, as it is required by some platforms:

'...now on YouTube there's this kind of requirement that you have to state whether this advertising by the influencer is sponsored, but to me- I don't always believe because I know that money speaks sometimes'.

The participants wanted the influencers to be honest with them as this was the feature that would help them with uncertainty avoidance. Honesty is helping them trust better, and this finding is in line with the literature about the interconnection between uncertainty and trust, as in the works of Dorfman and Howell (2008), Srite and Karahanna (2006), Safari (2014).

It is important to say here that we noticed that the respondents in a way seem to connect authenticity with trustworthiness and credibility, as an expression of honesty, making the classical definitions of all these terms blurred. Maslow (1971) defines authenticity as a “*phoniness towards the zero point*” (p.183), and Lenton, Bruder, Slabu and Sedikides (2013) state that external influences cannot affect the authentic self. Chu and Kamal (2008) connect credibility with effectiveness, meaning that those influencers perceived as credible will actually be more effective in selling a product. To an extent our findings show that the respondents are willing to buy more if the influencer is credible, which aligns with Silvera and Austad (2003)

but at the same time they do not rely only on this- they want to trust. The interviewees might buy a product if the influencer is trustworthy and honest (Cheong & Morison,2008).

Furthermore, an interesting feature appeared as to be very important for the second focus group interviewees. They claimed authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility are actually depending on legitimacy, and they gave a definition to what legitimacy is- according to them is when the influencers will not sacrifice their values just because they are paid to advertise a product, they will be honest about the negative sides as well as the positive ones. The definition of legitimacy in the Cambridge Dictionary is two-fold: “1. *the quality of being legal*; 2. *the quality of being reasonable and acceptable*”. Here the researchers observe again that the respondents’ perception of authenticity, trustworthiness, credibility, and legitimacy have similar to a certain extent meaning. But the connecting link between these features is honesty. Thereafter, honesty is associated with trust, as Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner and Ridder (2011) defined trust is: “*the degree of confidence that a source is motivated to communicate valid assertions*” (p.17). According to Cho & Jialin (2008) higher level of trust in online shopping leads to a more positive attitude and higher intention to purchase.

Meanwhile, competence and the level of expertise are also found to affect the interviewees but they perceive the experts to be more competent than the superstars or celebrities. Consumers’ purchasing intent increases whenever the influencers demonstrate having knowledge about the product they promote, through providing objective detailed reviews and living proof for using the product, as well as in showing a consistent repetitive usage pattern for the product. This in turn increases the level of consumers’ trust in influencers which confirms to what previous studies have found - when the people who endorse a product or brand have higher level of expertise and knowledge about it, hence they are perceived with more trustworthiness, leading the consumer's purchasing intent to increase (Fred, 2015; Pornpitakpan, 2004a). In general, very few of the contemporary bloggers and influencers tend to show how they use a product multiple times, by either making more than two reviews of it, or showing it repeatedly in posts without being paid for it- this is where the requested by the interviewees concept or living proof and repetitive usage tends to make a difference for them. And it is a finding the researchers did not manage to find analogues to in the existing reviewed literature.

Influencers are important and they are able to impact the online purchase intent to a certain extent but not that big of an impact as most of the brands and marketers think today. It will be worth exploring the ROI (Return of Investment) index for advertising budgets, where companies are strongly working and paying influencers to advertise. Furthermore, measuring

honesty is hard, as it is a cornerstone and a basis for authenticity, trustworthiness, and credibility as our interviewees pointed out.

Naturally, only the features that an influencer possess are not enough to have a significant impact and make a consumer buy a product without thinking or contemplating about it. But it can be assumed that these features are a factor that might enhance or diminish the purchase intent, when combined with other forces or depending on the environment and settings. What works for one not always works for all, there is not one strategy that fits like a magic. Furthermore, online purchase intent is found to be affected by a number of factors different than the influencers' features, including the need for the product, its price, the recommendations, and some others, listed in the findings and discussion chapters.

The perceived authenticity, together with the trustworthiness and credibility, the expertise of the influencers and their honesty are the main features that have an impact on the consumers and the online purchase intent. The consumers want to be treated fairly and honestly, they connect the concept of honesty everywhere, and view it as the building grounds for a successful marketing relationship- with both influencers and brands. In today's commercialized world, the consumers have access to multiple sources of information and are able to make informative decisions and research thoroughly before actually buying. Therefore, they treat honesty as the dice that is able to an extent to turn the tables in their decision-making process.

Authenticity, trustworthiness, credibility, expertise, legitimacy and honesty all add up to the reputation. Having any of the above features will contribute conversely to the popularity of the influencer, thus gaining them probably more endorsement deals in the future. But the influencers should not forget that trust is hardly earned and the consumers are not stupid, despite making decisions emotionally sometimes they still act rationally, especially since price and need are of essence. Additionally, the consistency of being legitimate and preserving all these features over time is essential.

6.1. Practical implications

Brands and marketers sometimes rely too heavily on endorsements with celebrities and influencers to increase the sales of their products and services. Occasionally they overestimate the knowledge that consumers nowadays have and have access to, making them not so easily influenced in their purchasing decisions. Therefore, our thesis might shed some light and

probably doubt in the marketing managers about the actual amount of influence of the influencers they engage with- how influential are the influencers?

Meanwhile, this thesis' findings can force the attention of the marketing managers and brands' marketing departments to switch towards finding and working with influencers who possess the features described here. These features, in combination with other factors, might have a positive effect on the consumers' purchase intent. As a result, the products and services of such companies who work with influencers with the above mentioned features will have better sales and longer market life.

Furthermore, our thesis can be helpful to the influencers themselves. Adapting their strategy and their exposure to fit better towards displaying they are authentic, trustworthy, credible, having expertise, and are legitimate and honest might help them. Especially in the long run, when their popularity grows, staying true to these values and features will be beneficial.

6.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research has few limitations that need to be taken into consideration. Due to the short timeline was given for completing this research which consisted of only a ten weeks period, we were restricted in terms of the number of focus group interviews employed and the research scope. A longer research timeline could have allowed conducting more focus group interviews or perhaps interviewing influencers to include their perspective in a comparative study.

Also, the generalizability of the findings for this study is limited due to the qualitative research nature, in which the participants in the study sample are usually selected based on certain criteria. Unlike the random sampling used in quantitative research, where the study sample is likely to be statistically representative of the larger population of interest, the results from such findings can be extrapolated to that population. A future research that employs mixed methods would be beneficial to overcome this limitation as well as to enrich and broaden the gathered data and consequently the empirical findings. Furthermore, another limitation relates to the potential bias in the answers and interpretations provided by the focus groups' interviewees. This is a weakness associated with using focus group interviews where some respondents could be affected by other participants during the discussions and they may not debate the issues in the way they would do if they were interviewed in person. Moreover, a limitation might be the language barrier, as English was the official language used in collecting the research data from

the respondents, who have different nationalities. The interviewees could have elaborated more or expressed themselves better if they used their own language.

A future research can be done via a longitudinal study, spread over a couple of years. Such study will possibly be affected by the continuous development of technology and social media platforms and communication. Another interesting aspect for a future research can be to look upon the different levels of social media involvement of the consumers, as different levels might affect differently the purchase intent.

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Appendix

1. Demographics data and social media involvement of the participants in the pre-study and the focus groups interviews

Number of interviewees	8
Age	25-50 years old
Male	5
Female	3
Social media presence	8
Follow someone on social media	7
Fan of someone /celebrity or influencer/	8
Bought a product/service online	8

Table 1. Demographics data and social media presence of the pre-study interviewees

Number of interviewees in total for the two focus groups	12
Age	20- 43 years old
Male	5
Female	7
Social media presence	12
Follow someone on social media	11
Fan of someone /celebrity or influencer/	11
Bought a product/service online	12

Table 2. Demographics data and social media presence of the focus groups' interviewees