JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY
School of Engineering

"Aesthetically pleasing''

A qualitative study of female Micro-influencers Aesthetic Strategy for their Instagram feed.

This final thesis has been carried out at the School of Engineering at Jönköping University within Informatics. The authors are responsible for the presented opinions, conclusions and results.

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the relationships between aesthetics and micro-influencers' Instagram feed along with its effects on follower engagement. Based on the assumption that there is a common practice for micro-influencers who are familiar with aesthetics. Although micro-influencer content has attracted increased interest on Instagram, relatively little is known about influencers' aesthetic strategy.

Method – The present study addresses this gap by examining how feed aesthetics are associated with micro-influencers aesthetic strategy and what elements contribute to feed aesthetics. The study leverages a dataset of Instagram micro-influencers compiled by scraping an online survey and online interview to test its hypotheses with a qualitative approach.

Findings – It has been indicated that feed aesthetics were positively associated with color, more specifically color harmony as well as a boost in follow engagement. However, these factors are modified by influencers' domains of interest when creating content. The findings contribute to the literature by illuminating how principles related to aesthetics in micro-influencers' images contribute to their aesthetic strategy and follower's engagement on Instagram.

Implications – The result of this study contributes with significant data that an Instagram client would carry out to make a feed that reflects feed style and grabs the eye of different groups. The significance of executing a thoroughly considered technique to an Instagram feed to make a tastefully satisfying look is demonstrated. In addition to that, getting a deep understanding of influencers feelings and emotions about their feeds and feed aesthetics, introducing the idea of color harmony when it comes to planning feed aesthetics. By the end of this paper a further research has been suggested which relates to the relation of aesthetics in different group genders and ages, with a different platform for instance.

Keywords: micro-influencer, aesthetic strategy, color harmony, feed aesthetics, aesthetically pleasing.

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1.   Introduction

This research paper represents the final project of the bachelor's degree for New Media Design Program with a Major in Informatics, studied at Jönköping University. The work process for this thesis has been sustained during Spring 2021 and it values 15 ECTS.

This chapter will introduce the reading audience to the background information regarding the research topic and will present the connection to the study field. Research questions have the role to illustrate answers for the identified research gap, while scope and limitations are clearly stated. The disposition contains an overview of the chapters included.

1.1   Background

Today people around the world capture and share billions of photographs every day. The way one creates, uploads and shares images online has evolved from the time the world's biggest social networking site Facebook was created in 2004 to the moment when Twitter was launched in 2006, which later was followed by photo-sharing sites Pinterest and Instagram in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2014). The founders of Instagram, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger who met at Stanford University before starting their journey, both worked with another app before creating Instagram (Mattern, 2017). This app called Burbn was an idea of Systrom where he wanted an application that allowed users to see each other's location, as well as being able to play games and share pictures. Systrom and Krieger soon realized that the most used function on the app was the photo-sharing function (Mattern, 2017). After that, they decided to launch another mobile app which became Instagram. This app is equipped for taking and editing images on the phone, as well as being able to caption the images and comment on other user's photos. After its launch in October 2010, the app started growing quickly and after almost a year Instagram reached 10 million users (Mattern, 2017).

Fast-forwarding to 2020, the reported total number of active monthly Instagram users is more than 1 billion (Omnicore, 2020). After all its success, Instagram is noted to be the most widely used photo centric SNS, Social Networking Service (Kim & Kim, 2019). Furthermore, as stated by Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020), "Instagram is at the heart of global digital culture". An important feature on Instagram is the search engine which helps users search for images by keywords or themes (Mattern, 2017; Thömmes & Hübner, 2020). Considering 995 photos are uploaded on Instagram every second (Omnicore, 2020), this

allows users to filter through billions of images to find whatever they are looking for. Some of the keywords that have been used frequently by users on Instagram according to Manovich (2016) are the words "aesthetics" or "aesthetic". Moreover, on his searches performed in 2016, Manovich found that the search of "Instagram aesthetic feed" on Youtube returns 7,200 videos while the search for "Instagram aesthetic" on Google returns 144, 000 results. Furthermore, as described by Hjorth and Pink in Suess (2020) and Jin (2019), Instagram is a platform based on aesthetics.

When talking about the word *aesthetics* the most common connection is to beauty. It is used to refer to principles and techniques to make something beautiful and with the human experience of beauty (Manovich, 2017). As Manovich mentions, explicit principles and rules to be used in design to achieve beauty were developed by many human cultures. These principles may relate to proportion, symmetry, harmony, composition, use of colors etc. Additionally, Manovich refers to the concept of "aesthetics" having a unique relation to media studies. It is believed that this concept is central to the modern culture industries as well as the creation of media by people. Such as the millions of people posting on Instagram who use digital tools to aesthetically refine their photos. Manovich is certain that the evolution of digital tools since the 1900s has led to an "aesthetic revolution". Before that, forms of modern media such as television, cinema and newspapers had limited ways to control their aesthetics. An example being, them not always using color or having technologies to control its nuances. Through digital tools and the web as a sharing platform, every pixel, line, frame, face and body can be edited to achieve the desired aesthetic effect. At the same time, Manovich (2017) noticed that the concepts of aesthetic pleasure have practically been completely overlooked in the theories of media. He means that there is little to no analysis of media aesthetics in the media studies textbooks, or in the works of major media theorists after the middle of the 20th century.

In a previous study by Thömmes and Hübbner from 2020, using online liking data from Instagram was the proposed measure in order to avoid the high cost of measuring aesthetic appeal through experiments where participants rate images or other objects according to their liking. Another study by Siahaan, Hanjalic and Redi (2016) recognizes that knowing what makes an image aesthetically pleasing is "crucial to the effectiveness of many multimedia systems" (p. 1338). This study also discusses what choices to measure aesthetic appeal are appropriate. An additional study by Siahaan, Hanjalic and Redi (2014), compares

methodologies for the subjective assessment of image aesthetic appeal. What is noticeable with these few studies is the focus on measuring the aesthetic appeal of an image rather than understanding the reasoning behind its aesthetics or analyzing the specific platform where they are being posted. A research gap was identified in this field when concluding that there are little to no studies that include the aesthetic analysis of images being posted on Instagram. Secondly, there is a lack of studies regarding the qualitative approach of the aesthetic appeal of an image or set of images. This leads to this paper finding a gap to fill with descriptive and conceptual reasoning behind the aesthetic appeal of images on Instagram. Following the comparable research made by Lev Manovich within the relevant field, the aim of the study is to identify the factors that go hand in hand with Instagram feed aesthetics and the thoughts behind this. In other words, dig into the aesthetic strategy of users on Instagram.

A valuable group of people known for their activeness on Instagram is Influencers. Influencers can with other words be called social media celebrities, with their high number of followers and impact on them, they have a role to influence other individuals (Jin, 2019). Jin (2019) stated that in comparison with regular celebrities, influencers have a closer connection to their followers and are perceived to be more authentic and real. Although influencers' Instagram content is mostly to promote a product or service, Duffy and Hund (2015), stated that they still put time to create value for their personal branding and to get a good engagement with their followers. Additionally, Jin (2019) described an influencers personal branding as an "aesthetic presentation" (p. 567). Likewise, an influencer was defined as "every day, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles''(De Veirman et al., 2016, p. 1). Also known as Social Media Influencers (SMIs), practitioners, popular media and general public refer to them as individuals who have attained recognition (Gómez, 2019).

On the other hand, Gómez (2019) refers that the title of influencers is applied to individuals who have an influence over their followers, and the term celebrity is merely used for high profile influencers. SMIs achieve recognition "by cultivating a network through content and self-representation techniques" (Gómez, 2019, p.15). Considering the great variation between SMI's status, following numbers, influence and practices, practitioners tend to categorize them (Gómez, 2019). The most popular classification according to Bullock (2018) as cited in Gómez (2019) p. 17 is "Micro influencers, Macro influencers and Mega influencers". As

noticed by Ouvrein (2021) in Gómez (2019), the classification is based on the number of followers that the influencers have. For this examination, female micro-influencers between the ages of 18-29 on Instagram were the perfect candidates. Although micro-influencers are regarded as the largest group out of the classifications, they have the smallest following (Gómez, 2019). This range covers 5,000 up to around 100,000 followers. However, it is noted that this range is not regulated and may vary (Gómez, 2019). All things considered; this study covers micro-influencers with 10 000 up to 100 000 followers on Instagram. Micro-influencers within this specific follower range are viewed to generate the best ratio of reach and engagement (Markerly, 2015, highlighted in Gómez, 2019). Furthermore, the remaining requirements were grounded from relevant studies that concluded that young adults in the ages of 18-29 are the most likely to use social media (Greenwood, 2016). Moreover, the choice of females was grounded on the statistics that there are more female users on Instagram than males (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2018, 2021 & Omnicore Agency, 2020).

1.2   The thesis purpose & research questions

This study aims to explore the relation between feed aesthetics and Instagram. Feed aesthetics is acknowledged as an aesthetic strategy for Instagram (Manovich, 2017). This study also pays attention to defining the different key elements that are connected to feed aesthetics. Ultimately, by acknowledging this information it is believed that a deeper level of understanding will be reached in the role of aesthetics in the world of Instagram, focusing on the specific target group and the value it has for the micro-influencers' accounts on Instagram.

The study's objective is to link the target groups' personal feed, with a focus on what feed aesthetics entail and what contributes to their aesthetic strategy. This being, understanding the user's choice of aesthetic strategy and their motives behind it. Unlike previous studies, the purpose of this study is to provide personal and specific results. Furthermore, to identify the strategy in relation to aesthetics and the elements that contribute to it.

The research questions are:

RQ1.
To what extent do micro-influencers follow a specific aesthetic strategy on their Instagram feed?

RQ2.

How have the micro-influencers noticed relevance in the specific choice of aesthetic strategy in relation to their audience?

1.3 Scope and limitations

Due to the fact that the limited target group consists of Instagram users, the study is focusing exclusively on this mentioned platform and the results cannot be applied to other social media channels. This is due to the difference of features and the structure of other social media platforms.

The target audience has strict constraints. The study focuses only on individuals aged between 18 to 29. It is also narrowed down to only women that have a range of 10 000 to 100 000 followers which classifies them as micro-influencers. The research is conducted exclusively towards them and will not analyze or influence any other type of target audience apart from the one described in this study. Due to this study not being quantitative, it is important to note that the follower range is given to classify the influencers and there is no method or intent to measure if all followers of each micro-influencer are active or authentic.

This investigation follows the role of feed aesthetics as an aesthetic strategy on Instagram by micro-influencers within the target group. There is no aim to analyze an image and its content individually but rather the elements that contribute to the images' coordination as a whole.

1.4 Definitions

Social Networking Service

A *Social Networking Service* involves the use of technologies that connect users of the internet who have similar interests together. An example of a social networking website would be Facebook and Instagram (Oxford Reference, 2021).

Social Media Influencer

A *Social Media Influencer* refers to individuals who achieve recognition by developing a network by means of content and self-representation (Gómez, 2019). SMIs can be

categorized into micro, macro and mega influencers according to their follower range (Gómez, 2019).

Micro-influencers

Although micro-influencers can be identified in the follower range of 5 000 up to 100 000 followers, this study covers *micro-influencers* as individuals with 10 000 to 100 000 followers considering they are viewed to produce the best ratio of reach and engagement (Gómez, 2019).

Instagram feed

When talking about an *Instagram feed*, this study specifies the sequence of images on an individual's Instagram profile. In other words, the collection of images and its entirety.

Aesthetics

Dating back to Plato (427-347 BCE), Aristotle, (384-322 BCE) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), *aesthetics* refers to the principles and techniques to make something beautiful and contributes to the experience of beauty (Manovich, 2017).

Aesthetic Strategy

An *aesthetic strategy* consists of specific principles that reflect beauty. Proportion, symmetry, harmony, composition, use of colors etc. are among these principles (Manovich, 2017).

Aesthetically pleasing

Something that is *aesthetically pleasing (*which in the context of this study would be the arrangement of a set of images on Instagram) are images that make use of aesthetic principles in an explicit manner. As specified by Thömmes & Hübner, 2020 p.76, "the aesthetic appeal of an image translates to the image's capacity to appeal to people in a way that they would call it beautiful, likeable, interesting, or aesthetically pleasing".

Color harmony

Although there is no common model for explaining the concept of color harmony, this study specifies *color harmony* as the satisfying affective response when colors are harmonized (Burchett, 2002).

Gap filler

Although it is not scientifically known, the common use of the term *gap filler* in the Instagram community concerns images that consist of either an object or objects and no people. The purpose being to create balance on an Instagram feed and fill it out without creating disorder.

1.5   Disposition

In this part of the study, the report structure will be explained. Starting with the *Introduction* (Chapter 1), the background along with an explanation of this study's research gap will be presented. Not to forget, the thesis purpose with the research questions and lastly the scope and limitation will be outlined. Here is where the reader will get an introduction to the context and purpose of the study as well as some possible constraints. This is followed by the *Method and Implementation* (Chapter 2) that will go through the data collection and analysis, validity and reliability, closing it off with the considerations for this research. Thenceforth the *Theoretical framework* (Chapter 3) is explained, presenting the referenced material from previous studies and theories that the study is based on. The theories included will be mentioned in order according to their relation to this study, starting from a broader point and digging into the central elements in this study. In Chapter 4, the *Results* of the study will be presented in segments related to the survey and interview manual. This meaning that there are different segments covering the relevant topics discussed in the survey and interviews. The interview and survey results will be separated for clarity. This will be followed by Chapter 5 where the results are placed in a *Discussion* accordingly to each relevant segment and further divided into the significant findings. Lastly in Chapter 6, the *Conclusion* of the study with the practical and scientific implementations are included. Closing this off with answering the research questions, providing further research and finalizing the study with the references used.

2.   Method & Implementation

In this chapter, the chosen method to examine the research questions will be presented. The selection of participants will also be described, along with how the selection was conducted and an explanation to the approach for this study. This section will also touch upon validity and ethics.

2.1   Qualitative study

To answer the research questions, it was very crucial to find what research method worked the best. Considering the two research method types: qualitative and quantitative, the two vary in many factors. According to Gerring (2017), a quantitative study is expressed through statistics and numbers, while a qualitative study is employed in *natural language*. Quantitative studies aim to discover a generalized fact about a topic, mostly through testing a theory rather than understanding it, which is where a qualitative method would take place (Gerring, 2017). Qualitative research methods aim to in depth understand a concept or a thought, to dive into the *why* behind the research by studying a person's experiences, beliefs and motivations. To do this, individual interviews, observations or focus groups can be conducted, which can unveil affinities or contrasts in personal behavior, experiences and cultures from the participants Gerring (2017).

The aim for this research was to understand why and to what extent Instagram micro-influencers use an aesthetic strategy for their personal Instagram feed. To do this, a qualitative research method was conducted by both sending out semi-structured open-ended questionnaires and conducting in-depth individual interviews. As mentioned by Gerring (2017) p. 31, "Qualitative data are generally (but not always) more useful insofar as a study is exploratory and is focused on a single case or a small number of cases". Therefore, this study will go in depth of a phenomenon by having a smaller number of participants, to truly get a deeper understanding of the individual cases.

2.2   Semi-structured Qualitative Interview

The vast majority of humans are presumably individually acquainted with the job of an interviewee, yet a large number have also been placed in the position of an interviewer. where a qualitative interview has most probably been undertaken. In other words, an

individual asking another individual on a specific point or issue and capturing their reply (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

A Semi-structured qualitative interview is a primary type of a qualitative interview, as it differs from an unstructured interview in many ways. A set of questions that have been gathered by a researcher regarding the targeted argument is commonly found in a semi structured interview. Furthermore, the questions do not have to follow an exact sequence or a determined order. Additionally, the interviewee might take the interview to different discussions that were not planned by the interviewer, due to human communication. This can lead to the participants sharing information that can be to clear value for the purpose of this study, adding up to more data to work with (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Furthermore, there is a chance for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions if necessary. This is considered an adaptable method, as it focuses on the main assigned questions and gives the researcher a more in-depth understanding of the researched topic and of the answers received from the participants (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Furthermore, according to Alshenqeeti (2014), the researchers have the chance to capture the participants' thoughts and feelings during the call.

Lastly the answers collected might be eye opening to a lot of gaps and new information while doing the research (Flick et al., 2004), choosing it as a method was convenient to deliver the purpose of this paper (Miles & Gilbert, 2005). Semi-structured interviews are conducted via Zoom calls which became the standard virtual meeting platform in the covid-19 crisis due to the rules and guidelines and social distancing (Hill et al., 2021).

The interview targeted four (4) international participants, therefore choosing to conduct the interview in English was the most convenient solution. Moreover, the interview consisted of two parts: a background part which attributes to introducing the participant and getting to know them, while the second part is more detailed which invokes the main research questions and answers them thoroughly. Some specific questions were readied, so as for the researcher to lead the interview towards the fulfillment of the research target, however, additional inquiries were experienced during the interview.

To be specific, a total of three (3) questions were asked in the background part of the interview, including questions like:
1. How old are you?

2. How long have you actively been using Instagram?
3. How many photos do you usually post per week?

These questions assisted in getting to know the participants, their Instagram history and some general information about their Instagram account. Additionally, these questions were there to warm up the conversation, to then dig deeper into their aesthetic strategy and follower engagement (Appendix.1). Four (4) participants were contacted and asked to voluntarily participate in an online interview through a Zoom call. The volunteers had a chance to schedule a time that suited them. Thereafter, the interview was carried out and got recorded in the wake of the participants to later be transcribed.

2.3   Qualitative open-ended questionnaire

For the purposes of this examination, an open-ended questionnaire was utilized. Using online surveys was the most beneficial solution to get a broader knowledge from a wider range of participants. In addition, open ended questions produce more missing data than closed ended ones (Reja et al., 2003). That was the main reason behind the choice of method. This online survey included five (5) open ended questions, two of them argued for the second research question, *How have the micro-influencers noticed relevance in the specific choice of aesthetic strategy in relation to their audience?* and the rest referred to the first research question.

Applying this research method in this study enables the collection of information and data that revolves around participants behavior, thoughts and feelings. Surveys serve as a way to convey or reflect a certain population, analyzing their characteristics, defining a phenomenon or clarifying the relation of variables in the research (Reja et al., 2003).

In addition, Google Forms, Zoomerang and Survey Monkey are considered the most convenient research tools to carry out online surveys. Using these tools made the survey applicable, easier, and faster to deliver and did make obtaining information from participants smoother, making it effortless and less time consuming to collect the results (Reja et al., 2003). Therefore, Google Forms were used to structure the surveys. The investigation was initiated by sending out direct messages to micro-influencers on Instagram, requesting them to be a part of the study by answering the survey.

2.4   Participants and the selection

To conduct this study, the chosen group to focus on are ten (10) female micro-influencer's Instagram profiles. In light of there being a strong correlation with age and social media usage, women will be found within the age range of 18-29. According to Perrin (2015), "young adults (ages 18 to 29) are the most likely to use social media" (p.4), which strengthens the choice of age group in this study. Additionally, statistics from the Pew Research Center which measured social media use in 2021 indicate that majorities of 18 to 29-year-olds say they use Instagram. This study will refer to micro-influencers as users with 10 000 to 100 000 followers. Although micro-influencers are set in the range of 5,000 to 50, 000 followers up to 100,000 followers in the world of practitioners, the range is not standardized and can vary depending on the platform (Gómez, 2019). In a survey conducted with two million social media influencers from Instagram by influencer marketing platform Markerly (2015), highlighted by Gómez (2019), "micro-influencers with following in the 10,000 to 100,000 range generated the best ratio of reach and engagement" (p.17). This study showed that as influencers attain a bigger audience, the engagement decreases. It is therefore believed that this is the perfect target group for this study considering their content will be analyzed in relation to their followers. Moreover, in view of micro-influencers still being 'ordinary people', there was a closer user to follower relationship and therefore another level of "trust, authority and authenticity" (Alampi, 2019, p.203). In other words, micro-influencers were generally perceived to be more accessible and authentic which was very attractive to an audience (Hatton, 2018; Bernazzani, 2018 cited in Gómez, 2019).

To find users, the plan is to search for female micro-influencers, more specifically users that have used the word *aesthetics* at least once on their profile. This is a given requirement to assure that the participants are aware of the term and its meaning. Since the aim for this study was to get a deeper understanding behind the usage of *aesthetics* on Instagram, it was crucial to have participants that comprehended the research. To begin with, the word *aesthetics* was searched on Instagram and selected the women that filled the required criteria. A feature on Instagram which recommends similar Instagram accounts as the one you just visited was also utilized. This allowed the search for participants to be easier considering profiles that followed the same criteria popped up.

Lastly, the criteria being used was the specific range of followers (micro-influencers), a consistent feed (more than 18 number of pictures) and a decent follower engagement in order

to conduct the questionnaires and interviews. Since the Instagram feed is built in rows of three (3), 18 images would mean six (6) rows, which would give a clear picture of the influencer's aesthetic strategy. Not to forget, this study will merely be conducted on female micro-influencers. To support this choice, several statistics from the Pew Research Center from 2014 until present 2021 show that throughout the years women use Instagram more frequently compared to men. Additionally, statistics from the Omnicore Agency (2020), note that globally, 510 million Instagram users are female and 490 million are male which may be a small difference but still points at there being more female users.

Overall, this study contained ten (10) questionnaire participants and four (4) interviewees. These were all found through Instagram and are located in different parts of the world considering we did not have any requirement regarding their geographical position. The chosen micro-influencers were contacted via Instagram direct messages and were asked to voluntarily take part in the study. This involved them answering some questions in the form of a questionnaire and an interview. In this way a qualitative approach was focal due to the aim of exploring the subject of feed aesthetics in connection to Instagram in a deeper manner.

Participants	Followers	Country
Female 1	13,5K	United States
Female 2	10,2K	Canada
Female 3	23,3K	Sweden
Female 4	11,2K	Mexico

Table 1. Interview participants with their follower count and respective countries.

Participants	Followers	Country
Female 5	34,8K	Mexico
Female 6	14,8K	United Kingdom
Female 7	96,9K	Germany
Female 8	10,4K	Australia
Female 9	11,5K	United Kingdom
Female 10	28,5K	Sweden
Female 11	21,7K	United Kingdom
Female 12	11,2K	Australia
Female 13	28,5K	United Arab Emirates
Female 14	13,2K	United States

Table 2. Survey participants with their follower count and respective countries.

2.5   Approach and Implementation

With the two chosen qualitative methods for this study, the process followed, 1) Finding the participants, 2) Sending out questionnaires / conducting the interviews, 3) Transcription of the interviews and 4) Collecting the data and analyzing it.

All participants were contacted through Instagram direct message. They were initially asked if they wanted to answer a questionnaire regarding the study. Secondly, if they were interested in participating in a longer in-depth interview. The same message was sent to all participants. Out of all the micro-influencers that were contacted, ten (10) females wanted to participate in the questionnaire and four (4) wanted to participate in the interviews. The four (4) interview participants were asked to book a time and date of their liking, where they can dedicate one (1) hour of their day for the interview. Due to Covid-19 all interviews were held online through Zoom. Previous to the interview, participants were informed about the precautions. They were aware that the interviews were going to be recorded and transcripted, as well as their anonymity in this paper. The second step of this study was to send out the questionnaires and conduct the interviews. By the end of this step, it was time to collect the data and transcript the answers. Since this was a semi-structured interview, the flow of the conversation gave room for variation in structure with each interviewee. In light of this, color coordinating all the parts that were cohesive was crucial. This involved creating a division by highlighting the answers in colors according to the themes used in the interview manual

(view Appendix 2). This technique was useful to visualize the results and avoid misplacement of the themes.

2.5.1 Data Analysis

For further clarification, after the data collection was conducted by voice recording, it was time to organize and analyze it. That was done by a transcription of the interviews and dividing the answers into themes to organize them. This method was called template analysis, which entails that the transcripts are categorized into analytics themes that make the data analysis process easier (Cassell & Bishop, 2019). An advantage of the template analysis was that it implements an overall image of the answers, helping to categorize the answers and drawing conclusions in relation to particular questions. The transcripts were printed out and organized into templated themes through color coordination. Since the interviews could lead to other questions outside of the manual, color coordinating the answers according to the themes helped when analyzing the results. The themes used are the same as shown in the interview manual: background information, general questions about Instagram usage, Instagram feed, aesthetic strategy, Instagram followers and Keywords.

2.6   Reliability and Validity

The validity and reliability in a qualitative study is shown by providing consistency, trust worthiness and an understanding of the purpose throughout the executed method and analysis (Golafshani, 2003).

2.6.1 Validity

In this study, the high validity is executed through the limited target audience. Since the study is A qualitative study of female Micro-influencers Aesthetic Strategy for their Instagram feed, the target group are females from ages 18-29 that have over 10 000 followers on Instagram and are considered micro- influencers.
The method consisted of two parts, interviews, and questionnaires, where the same approach and target group was made to execute both parts. Moreover, the approach that was made to create a high validity in this study was to have the same questions for all the survey participants, as well as having the same interview questions for the four (4) interview

participants. The survey questions start by getting to know the participants, digging deeper later into their strategies and thoughts around an aesthetically pleasing feed and whether it affects the attraction of certain audience. The interviews on the other hand, provided an immeasurable deep and emotional interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer, due to the communication tool that was chosen. Furthermore, the choice of these methods legitimately helped in collecting the sufficient information that were needed to fulfill the purpose of this study and answer the chosen research questions. A lot of weight was put into having the participants answer as freely as possible in the context of this study, by asking open ended questions that were non-judgmental and clarifying that there were no right or wrong questions. In addition to the other different topics and discussions that were occurring while carrying out the interview, due to the friendly environment and atmosphere that the interview was bearing, which gave more closure in the addressed topic.

2.6.2 Reliability

Golafshani (2003), argues that reliability lies in the credibility of executing the method, which in this study entails the survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and transcripts. All the questionnaire participants were prior to the participating informed of how their part would take a role in this research. With the interviewees, the four (4) participants were all aware and approved of being recorded and transcript in purpose of this study. Moreover, being asked in what way they felt most comfortable being interviewed in, to create a safer environment between the interviewees and interviewers. Additionally, all 14 participants in this study were approached in the same way, through Instagram direct messages.

2.7   Considerations

2.7.1 Consent

As mentioned by Nijhawan et al., (2013) and Tinker and Coomber (2004) in Crow et al., (2006), informed consent is considered a significant principle of research ethics involving human beings. Getting informed consent is followed by the researcher making sure that the potential participant is aware of the implications prior and after the research. (Rodham & Gavin, 2006). The participant should also be notified about being able to drop out from the research at any time (Crow et al., 2006). All things considered, researchers should prioritize

disclosing information regarding the research and other aspects that may have an impact on the participant's willingness to take part in the study (Rodham & Gavin, 2006). To be able to take part in the research, the participant is required to give their explicit consent. This goes hand in hand with the participant giving their permission to the researcher for any documentation and analysis of the data collected (Rodham & Gavin, 2006). In order to conform with these ethical guidelines, the female micro-influencers that were recruited to participate in this study were informed via Instagram direct messages about the whole process. An explanation was also covered in the survey, as well as prior to the interviews to assure that the participants are aware of everything connected to the research in relation to their informed consent. Considering the online environment, throughout the research process the room for flexibility was highlighted in order to adapt to the circumstances.

2.7.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

When conducting research, in connection to informed consent, participants should be assured of their privacy (Whelan, 2007). Although data from social media platforms has been a tool to facilitate research, the ethical challenges that arise in conducting social media research remain of great concern (Golder et al., 2017). For this study, the use of qualitative research in the field of SNS leads to considerations regarding the collection of data and privacy of the people. A number of studies have touched upon the concerns regarding possible misuse and abuse of the information gathered during research (Bollier, 2010 cited in Sormanen & Lauk, 2016). In light of this, anonymity and confidentiality are central to practicing ethical conduct in social research (Crow & Wiles, 2008). When talking about anonymity and confidentiality, there are different opinions as to whether these terms might be the same or if they should be argued for separately (Whelan, 2007). As mentioned by Wiles et al. (2006) p. 3, the Oxford Dictionary defines anonymity as "of unknown name, of unknown authorship" and confidentiality as "spoken or written in confidence; charged with secrets". Oliver (2003) and Gregory (2003) as referred in Wiles et al. (2006), acknowledge that confidentiality is often viewed as asking for the principle of privacy. To take this matter into hands, it is required to assure that the participants understand the purpose of this research, what their participation involves and how the data will be collected and analyzed (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Furthermore, anonymity will be presented as a choice for individuals to feel more comfortable throughout the research process ex. during the survey. To ethically recruit participants and manage this research, measures need to be taken to balance the concerns of the participants (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). In this way, the role of researchers takes upon

an ethical approach that prioritizes user expectations, safety and privacy (Williams et al., 2017). However, confidentiality in its strictest form cannot be assured considering the duty to report the findings of the research is present (Wiles et al., 2006). Further explained by Morse (1998), confidentiality is an issue for qualitative researchers in view of the data and transcribed interviews which become the text or data in which researchers work with and publish. The extent of anonymity can also be discussed, yet Morse (1998) believes that by grouping participants' identifiers together and describing them in ranges of each characteristic can reduce the risk of identification. This followed by the most common strategy which is changing the names of the participants.

2.7.3 Recruitment Process

The recruitment of participants is a crucial element in this qualitative study. For researchers, it is a goal to recruit proper participants. However, the recruitment process can come with some obstacles. As considered by Salkind (2010), a common limitation would include small sample sizes. Failure to recruit the appropriate sample size could risk the validity and integrity of the study (Begun et. al, 2018). Furthermore, methodological problems such as "the time of the study, number of surveys, location and language and literacy barriers" can come in the way (Salkind, 2010, p. 1225). In this study, considerations regarding the time span of the study had to be taken. Considering it is not given that the individuals contacted will reply right away or reply at all, it was important to contact as many female micro-influencers as possible to assure an appropriate sample size. Additionally, in view of the recruitment process occurring online, it was in the interest of the recruitment process to formulate an attractive and clear message in order to catch their attention and want to participate in this research. As Backaler (2018) mentioned, one should avoid sending long messages, which could lead to losing the participants interest in answering the survey or participating in the interview. With this in mind, there was an aim to write a brief yet informative message in a simple language. It is noticeable that many steps must be taken before reaching out to an influencer. Backaler (2018) also recommends that a research on the influencers and their backgrounds is vital to target the right group (Backaler, 2018). Moreover, it is expressed that appearing on the influencers page by interacting with their content, showing interest and appreciation is essential to grab the influencers attention. Another way to show interest is by personalizing the messages sent out to attract the influencers further (Backaler, 2018). Lastly, in order to suit the compressed timeline of the

study, it was clear that the survey and interview manual would not be extensive. The focus was placed on the nature of the questions asked rather than the amount.

2.7.4 Pandemic

In light of the study being conducted while the COVID-19 pandemic is present, certain factors had to be considered. Although the online environment contributed to facilitating certain components throughout the recruitment process due to not having to plan or worry about hosting face-to-face meetings; relying on Instagram to get in contact with individuals that are in different time zones or have packed schedules was definitely a concerning factor. For the reason that the potential participants were located in different places and have different schedules, it was necessary to make room for the interviews at any time given instead of being able to schedule one single day for these. It was also important to find an efficient strategy for collecting data that was adapted to the interviewing method and the circumstances.

2.7.5 Follower count

In the world of social media, followers, likes and interactions in general has become the ultimate proxy of an influencer. It defines the chances an influencer receives whether it is the offers they get due to their followers or the payments they get valued to due to their likes (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Although it would be ideal to have authentic followers, a particular sort of supporters on users Instagram profiles are bots that go about as normal followers. These are referred to as fake followers and go back to the purpose of gaining more opportunities in the field by having the benchmark number of followers one should have (De Veirman et al., 2017). Furthermore, there has arisen a business that focuses on selling fake followers to Instagram users to achieve their desires. These fake followers have become a deliberate matter in the field of social media (Abidin, 2018 as mentioned in Enke & Borchers, 2019). All things considered, due to this study being a qualitative study there is not a lot of emphasis placed in the measure of followers other than for the classification of influencers. Although fake followers are concerning in the practicing field, they are not considered to have an impact on this study's qualitative analysis of micro-influencers' feed aesthetics. This study solely aims to examine micro-influencers' experience with their aesthetic strategy and their follower's engagement.

3.   Theoretical framework

In this chapter the theories that set the ground for this study are presented. This includes the Social Networking Service theory which covers a broader perspective, continued by central elements such as empirical aesthetics and color harmony which are crucial to the findings in this study. In the final part of this chapter, previous research documents who represent reference components for the current study work are mentioned and described.

3.1   Social Networking Service Theory

According to Zhang and Leung (2015), from a more extensive perspective "SNS" can be defined as "Social Networking Service." This covers the fundamental structure of the term which involves the technological features and functions of use in daily life. Considering its fast-changing pace when it comes to both its technological features and usage patterns, it is eminent to note that SNS reflects the mobile, collective and dynamic practice of social interaction. This involves the essential need to stay up to date with current developments in order to link them to current research and make room for future SNS advancement (Zhang & Leung, 2015). Additionally, Zhang and Leung (2015) mention that their examination of previous studies revealed various names for "SNS"; "some argue that the term should be regarded as a "service" rather than a "site", two terms that are frequently used interchangeably" (p.1009).

3.2   Influencers

The concept of personal influence can be traced back to 1955 where Katz discusses the results of a study validating Paul Lazarsfeld's beneficial discovery. Lazarfeld identified that "messages from the media may be further mediated by informal "opinion leaders" who intercept, interpret, and diffuse what they see and hear to the personal networks in which they are embedded" (Katz & Lazarfeld, 2017 p.15). This in turn inspired the development of the term influencer (Gómez, 2019). As noted by Gross and Wangenheim (2018), influencers contrast in content, social presence, functionality and reach. In the present digital and commercial society, influencers are strongly related to influencer marketing and social media networks. Gómez (2019) specifies that digital influencers are considered social media users that create their own content, build their own audience and in this way create their own digital figure. The broad term for these influencers is Social Media Influencers.

3.2.1 Social Media Influencers

A study by Freberg (2011) p.90, refers to SMIs as "a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media". Furthermore, Yesiloglu and Costello (2020) found the development of SMIs to be a new rise of content creators and opinion leaders. When talking about the *influence* of SMIs, De Veirman et al. (2017) as cited in Harrigan et al. (2021) p.2, observed that influencers could be seen as "opinion leaders who communicate with a sizeable social network of people that follow them". As mentioned by Gómez (2019) and De Veirman et al. (2017), SMIs can be classified and identified according to their number of followers. The classification of SMIs is divided into micro, macro and mega influencers. Unfortunately, despite the recognition of Social Media Influencers, they remain fairly understudied in academic literature (Bakker, 2018 as referenced in Ouvrein, 2021).

3.2.2 Micro-influencers

Considering the classification of influencers according to their follower count, micro-influencers cover the influencers with the range from 5 000 followers up to 100 000 followers, while macro-influencers 100 000 followers up to 1 million and mega-influencers go over 1 million followers. Despite micro-influencers having less followers than the rest of the influencer classifications, they cover the largest group of content creators (Gómez, 2019). Bernazzani (2018) included in Gómez (2019) explains that micro-influencers are seen as valuable considering they often specialize in a particular area of interest which makes them informed in a specific subject and in this way support a more focused follower base. This is attractive for brands in light of the authenticity and accessibility (Hatton, 2018; Bernazzani, 2018 as cited in Gómez, 2019) that micro-influencers reflect due to the intimacy created within their "smaller and more nurtured communities" (Chen, 2016 cited in Gómez, 2019 p.17).

3.3   Aesthetics

In the world of philosophy, the term aesthetics refers to the perception of beauty (Kuisma, 2020). It is a term that has been discussed for decades, pioneering with Plato(427-347 BCE) and Aristotle(384-322 BCE) around 400 BCE, the theory of aesthetics has thereafter been developed throughout the years by indefinite philosophers around the world (Huron, 2008). Huron (2008) described Plato's view of aesthetics as something that was based on the thought

that beauty itself was located in forms, additionally the beauty of certain objects within the form. Plato's view of aesthetics was objective and meant that beauty was something non-physical and ideal, not material. Furthermore, Aristotle and Plato shared the same idea, that aesthetics was objective and that it was not in the response of the beholder (Huron, 2008). However, what differs in Aristoteles philosophy on aesthetics is that he believed beauty to be something that is observed and outlined by characteristics such as proportion, balance, order and symmetry (Walter, 2004).

Many decades later a philosopher by the name of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) appears with a subjective view of aesthetics, believing that feelings of pleasure were the thought behind an aesthetic judgement (Hayn-Leichsenring & Chatterjee, 2019). Kant was one of the first to dive into the imagination, phantasy, taste and pleasure within the world of aesthetic studies and therefore opening a new door for other philosophers to enter (Thömmes, 2020). Henceforth, the study of empirical aesthetics was born.

3.3.1 Empirical Aesthetics

The theory empirical aesthetics was founded by the philosophiser Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887), where he in his book Vorschule der Aesthetik (Fechner, 1876) outlined the idea of that aesthetics could be studied empirically, not only theoretically. Fechner (1876) meant that aesthetics could be measured by identifying what gives off "a beautiful sensation" (Woodward, 2018, p. 11) when seeing an object. Ethel Puffer Howes (1872-1950) went further with the idea and defined the *aesthetic experience* as something that is associated with color, composition, and other elements of the general psychological principles (Thömmes, 2020). In addition, Howes believed that these contribute to what could be the formula of beauty. Moreover, Thömmes (2020), describes empirical aesthetics as what contributes to a person feeling an aesthetic appeal and pleasure of a subject and the aesthetic behaviour. Aesthetic behavior in today's society can involve liking or following a person's photo on Instagram after finding it beautiful (Thömmes, 2020). It is mentioned that the measure of aesthetics is difficult and the questions what is beauty? and what makes a good work of art? are constant questions. In Thömme's (2020) research, she also focused on how a photo's aesthetic appeal makes a difference when it comes to the amount of likes an image gets on Instagram. Furthermore, she created a figure showing what determines the aesthetic appeal of an image: "content (What is depicted?), context (e.g.What information, such as text or titles,

accompany the image?), and composition (How is the photograph composed?) (Thömmes, 2020, p. 39).
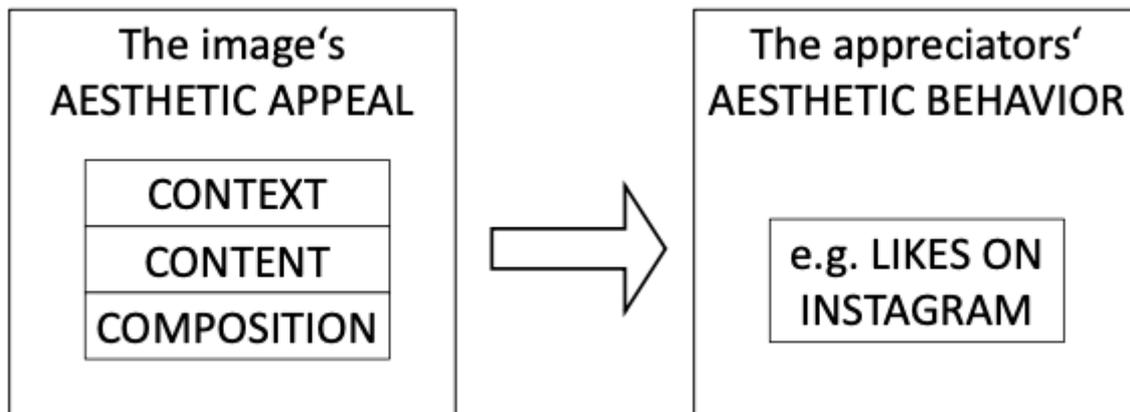

Figure 1. An aesthetic behavior can mean to like a person's photo on Instagram after finding it beautiful or generally aesthetically appealing. Henceforth, this can be determined by the image context, content and composition as seen on the figure (Thömmes, 2020).

3.4   Color Harmony

As explained by Burchett (2002), although there is an understanding that when two or more colors are brought together to form a satisfying affective response, they are harmonized, there is no common model for explaining the concept of color harmony. Burchett's (2002) report on color harmony finds that color harmony does not solely have one meaning. It is explained that it is a complex concept that is defined differently by different authorities as well as having various meanings according to what color-use process it is applied to. According to Feisner & Reed (2013) the visual arrangement of all parts of a work describes the principle of harmony. Furthermore, it is mentioned that "the successful application of harmony results in unity" (Feisner & Reed 2013, p. 122). This in relation to using numerous principles of design. Feisner & Reed (2013) list that repetition is the simplest way to achieve harmony, as well as color being the most significant and accepted means of repetition. Additionally, they propose how similarity works like repetition, however, it adds the element of variety. An example of variety being adjusting values (Feisner & Reed, 2013). Another study by Nishiyama et al., (2011) recognized that color harmony should be considered to improve the performance of automatic aesthetic quality classification. This in the light of color harmony being a key factor in many aspects that decide the perceived quality of a photo (Nishiyama et al., 2011).

3.5 Relevant studies

3.5.1 Lev Manovich "The aesthetic society: Instagram as a life form" (Manovich, 2019)

Preliminary work in this field has been conducted by Lev Manovich in his literature "The aesthetic society: Instagram as a life form" from 2019. Manovich (2019) concentrates on our aesthetic society or to be specific, Instagram as a platform for aesthetic production of images. He proposes the term *Instagramism* to refer to aesthetic strategies employed in various Instagram images. Not to forget, that Instagramism can be found on other social media platforms such as Facebook. Manovich (2019) refers to Instagramism as its own visual language. It is mentioned that it is shaped by millions of authors that connect and participate in Instagram, as well as other social networks. Moreover, he means that these authors "influence each other and share advice on using mobile photo apps to create, edit, and sequence photos to be shared on Instagram" (Manovich, 2019, p.4). Manovich (2019) argues that there are three types of Instagram photos: casual, professional and designed. Casual images are said to document a situation, an experience or represent one or several people. These types of images are not altered when it comes to their contrast, color or composition and "representative function takes precedence over aesthetic function" (Manovich, 2019, p.6). On the other hand, professional photos are created by individuals that are intentionally or subconsciously aware of professional photography rules. This refers to individuals that take images conforming with a certain aesthetic. Lastly, designed photos adopt an aesthetic that refers to modernist art, design and photography which dates back to the 1920s (Manovich, 2019). Not to forget, the word aesthetic refers to "a combination of visual style, photo techniques and types of content" (Manovich, 2019, p.7). He also notes that there are more than one aesthetics which follow their own conventions.

Another observation made by Manovich (2019) is the structuration of Instagram. An example of this is the rise of distinct rules one is set to follow to attract a grand number of followers. Manovich (2019) explains that the first rule is to develop a particular *style* to use for the photos in your Instagram feed. He also mentions that within the term *style*, the term *theme* starts to pop up. A *theme* may involve a combination of subjects, a peculiar color palette and a certain contrast choice (Manovich, 2019). Additionally, the second rule is to establish and follow a distinct momentary pattern for your Instagram feed. "Never post similar photos next to each other, but instead alternate between a few types in a systematic way. Create an

interesting formal temporal rhythm, alternating between compositions, color palettes or other variables" (Manovich, 2019, p.19). This systematic way goes hand in hand with the employment of sequencing techniques of the Instagram feed. Manovich (2019) explains that given the two rules mentioned, Instagram users can be divided into two corresponding types. The first type involves users who control the majority of the characteristics of their photos individually but do not attempt sequencing them in a specific way. The other type controls the aesthetics of individual photos as well as the overall aesthetics of a sequence of the Instagram feed (Manovich, 2019).

3.5.2 Jang Hyun Kim, Yunhwan Kim. "Instagram user characteristics and the color of their photos: Colorfulness, color diversity, and color harmony" (Kim & Kim, 2019)

Researchers Kim & Kim (2019) have studied the relationships between Instagram user characteristics and color features of their photos. Their study has been grounded on the inference that individuals with similar characteristics should display a similar style in their social media photos. The study focuses on color as one of the main elements of style (Kim & Kim, 2019). As cited by Guntuku et al., (2015) in the study performed by Kim and Kim (2019), "Color can be one of the factors that may play a significant role in SNS users' conveying innate preferences and tastes by images and videos" (Gutunku et al. 2015, cited by Kim & Kim, 2019, p.1945). Further explained, users are selective with the photos they share. This involves a choice of what they take photos of, how they edit the photos and what they choose to upload on their feed. Kim and Kim (2019) also note that color may play a role in these decision-making processes both consciously or unintentionally. "Users may select particular photos solely because they like the colors of them; or the colors of selected photos implicitly reflect the preferences and tastes of the users" (Kim & Kim, 2019, p.1495).

4.   Results

In this chapter all data from participants is analyzed and structured based on the 4 sections that derive from the interview and survey structure: general questions about the micro-influencers Instagram, in depth questions about their aesthetic strategy, factors that contribute to feed aesthetics and follower engagement. Specific primary questions are discussed in separate paragraphs for an in-depth analysis.

4.1   Micro-influencers' Instagram account

For this section the answers varied. Most importantly, all of the answers confirmed their qualifications for this study according to the requirements. This meant that all participants were female micro-influencers within the given age range. Secondly, most of their answers lead to a pattern of having used Instagram for a few years and starting strategically posting content the latest years "*Uhm, actively, I'd say five years, but concentration probably I'd say three years*" (Female 2), "*Uhm so I've been actively on Instagram since maybe like 2015 but I only really consistently started posting since like a year ago maybe*" (Female 1). When asked about how often they post photos per week, most participants responded in the range of 3-6 pictures "*I usually post between 3-6 posts per week depending on my schedule and how many images I have to work with*" (Female 4), "*It depends a lot to be honest, i would say around 3 images*" (Female 3), "*I also post three main posts per week, but if you include gap-fillers or none outfit photos then total i post like 5 to 6 times week*" (Female 1).

4.1.1   Survey results

For this section there were two questions asked that were limited to finding out if the participants were qualified for this study. Once again, the answers showed that all participants fill the study requirements which entails them being female micro-influencers between the ages 18-29.

4.2   Micro-influencers' aesthetic strategy

Talking about the participants aesthetic strategy, the participants leaned to a common answer, which was the tendency to edit their pictures in order for it to fit in their feeds, "*So in order to make it easier on the eyes and create a slightly more soft vibe I will like turn down the contrast a little bit sometimes or decrease the brightness sometimes as well.*" (Female 1).

Moreover, the participant also mentioned the reason why an aesthetically pleasing feed is important in this field *"it's only going to take like 3 seconds for a person to decide whether to follow you or not so first impressions are really important."* (Female 1)*.* Additionally, planning to post certain pictures beside other pictures to achieve this aesthetically pleasing feed, was also mentioned during the interview. As for the females 3 and 2, which mentioned that they use the support of apps to help them with planning future posts. These apps were explained to be something to use when planning future posts, since you could already see how it fit into the feed. The options to move, swipe and adjust the chosen pictures was also mentioned about these apps.

The participants mentioned the word gap fillers and referred to it as an image that is posted for the purpose to give some space in between self-portraits. This picture was described as something that usually contains no people, only objects or empty surfaces. Additionally, it was explained to be something that creates a balance in their feed and comfort for the eye. Female 1 mentioned that she has used gap fillers for years to create a balance on her feed and had an informative comment about it: "*So I would say that a gap-filler is a non-outfit post that usually is not you in it or your face in it,and focused more on like some objects or something like that. And it basically helps to maintain the overall mood or vibe of your uhm feed. Kind of like an editorial in a magazine kind of sense. Uhm I would also say that gap-fillers is something that people use in order to space out the photos and create a certain flow or open space on your grid*". Female 3 gave an example of what her gap fillers can contain: *"It is mostly very empty images of for example a shoe against the wall or a cup of coffee on a white table. Can be very random images that have the same colors as the rest of my photos".*

One of the participants mentioned using a one-on one-off strategy, meaning that the participant posts a self-portrait or outfit picture and then a gap filler. Female 4 followed a similar strategy, however focusing more on how the Instagram feed is built with rows of three (3). She explained how her aesthetic strategy is based on the Instagram grid system:*"This means that I will try to post 3 images close after each other so they can make up a perfect row. And of course these 3 images have to coordinate so they look like they belong beside each other"* (Female 4)*,* Moreover she talked about having one landscape picture in the middle, so that the middle row is all about landscape, surrounded by two (2) normal pictures of her on the right and left side*:" incorporating a filling image that has to be landscape or*

city for example" (Female 4). *"This filling image has to coordinate with the two images beside it so the row is in harmony."* (Female 4).

Participants differed in their loyalty of sticking to an aesthetic strategy, as for female 4, she managed to stick to the same content strategy for almost 2 years now. On the other hand, female 3 and 2 mentioned that they always had a thought behind posting their pictures the way they do but have updated their aesthetic strategy throughout the years: *"So I never had a feed that didn't have either a color palette or something. Like, it was never spontaneous content kind of. Um, but the only thing that I used to do before was one-on-one off and now we just do well blended together"* (Female 2). Lastly, a participant emphasized that she is not as attached to her aesthetic strategy and she was before, she recently started appending gap fillers in her aesthetic strategy. *"I don't really have a content strategy much like before but like 6 to 8 months ago I started to cooperate with gap-fillers"* (Female 1).

Another interesting observation was in a participant's explanation about how her feed aesthetics are explicitly planned *"Exactly. So I show what I want to show. I hide what I want to hide. I make sure the colors are right"* (Female 2). She described her feed as a puzzle and her aesthetic strategy as a way to solve this puzzle *"Do I need more pictures that are going to be very clean and minimal or can I afford to put something that's a bit like hesitant more like elements to it? Uh, which color do I want to put?"* (Female 2).

4.2.1 Survey results

According to the open-ended questionnaire, all 10 participants apply a specific aesthetic strategy on their personal Instagram feeds. When asked to describe their aesthetic strategies, lighting was a major key to achieve their aesthetically pleasing images. In addition, locations, background and outfits were mentioned by most of the participants as being a big part of creating their aesthetic feed: *"Different outfit pictures in different locations, no filter or editing. Only good lightning such as daylight, sun etc."* (Female 10).

Others mentioned the use of what they call *gap fillers*, which is referred to as a part of an aesthetic strategy according to the participants. Female 8 even explains the term gap filler as photos of aesthetics: *"alternation between photos of myself and photos of aesthetics - very neutral, don't often venture into color"*. Furthermore, some feeds tend to have this overall

dark mood as one of the participants mentioned that she usually uses dark lightning to obtain the perfect shot. Simplicity in the picture and the background balance between images were also parts of describing an aesthetic strategy.

4.3   Factors that contribute to feed aesthetics

During the interview, participants defined the word aesthetics as something that has to be pleasing and comforting for the eye, yet very beautiful and pretty, "*I guess it is really difficult to explain but I think when people talk about aesthetics it means that everything has to be very pleasing to the eye*" (Female 1). On the other hand, a good picture is not necessarily aesthetically pleasing, as one of the candidates explained *"It is not about only one element you know, a photo could look really good and can still not be described as aesthetic, it is not like the vine of the entire photo comes together necessarily"* (Female 1). When asking if they consider their feeds to be aesthetically pleasing, all 4 participants confirmed, *"yes, I would consider my feed to be aesthetically pleasing. Since all my photos have the same shade of colors. It creates an overall look that I believe would be ''pleasing'' for the eye to see."* (Female 3).

Moving on to an important element, participants believe it is vital to coordinate the colors of one's feed, whether it is to have a planned feed with planned colors or whether it is editing the images to make them fit in the feed. This was essential for establishing an aesthetically pleasing feed according to the participants, *"yeah i would definitely say that color coordination plays the biggest role in the content strategy for me and my feed aesthetics, because I feel like by this point it's kind of what I am known for"* (Female 1"). Moreover, color coordination is not something that coincidentally happens, it is mentioned to be something that is consciously planned. Additionally, not only for the present feed rows but also for the future rows, acknowledging the transition that has to take place eventually, *"the color coordination is definitely not subconscious, it's literally impossible to do it subconsciously like when I need certain colors. Like I put thought into the colors I need for gap fillers and even when shooting outfits, I look for specific colors in the background to like compliments or to help with the transition"* (Female 2).

Last but not least, when it comes to editing the images, the candidates apply effort in taking a good picture from the first place and if needed they edit their images to get the exact colors

and nuances needed to fit the feed, *"Because there's only so much you can do with editing sometimes, no matter what you do, there's things that you cannot avoid when you take a picture."* (Female 2). It was also mentioned that pictures with no editing turn out to be too sharp and bright to fit in the feed, *("on the feed if all your photos are very contrasted or very harsh, it gets hard to look at, you know."* (Female1). Therefore, adjusting the color of their images was a common comment from the participants, *("I would say that each photo I actually turn down the clarity and dehaze the photo a little bit for most of them" Female 4")*.

4.3.1   Survey results

The result of the survey shows that 4 of the candidates focus on altering the warm tones in their images. To continue, 2 of them tend to decrease the saturation level, shedding the light on that one candidate that adjusts the hue of the image while the other 3 candidates alter in their preferences. As one chooses to add a dark exposure to the image, the other focuses on having bright backgrounds and the last candidate chooses to work with 3 main colors only.

4.4   Follower engagement

In this section, the interviewees were asked about their target audience and their follower engagement in relation to their aesthetic strategy. When asked about their target audience and about their followers, the answers were similar. The four (4) participants mentioned that they attract girls around their age, as well as other micro-influencers that share matching aesthetic strategies as themselves, *"I see most appreciation from people that have a similar strategy as I do on their Instagram, since I guess they are the ones that genuinely understand what is going on both in front and behind the scenes"* (Female 4). Female 1 mentioned that this additionally meant that people who don't share a similar aesthetic look, did most of the time not support her in the same way as people who do: *"I'm very colorful, and creators or accounts that love neutrals tend not to like, follow me or support me"*. Additionally, female 1 mentioned that she herself does not follow accounts with neutral and minimalistic feeds, rather people that incorporate colors into their feeds. A similar comment was said by female 2, which stated that she limits her following count to people who share the same style as she does since she wants to get inspired from them.

Moreover, when asked about their follower engagement, female 2 made an observation about people who share similar aesthetics become some type of a community on Instagram, where they support each other by recommending other accounts to their own followers: "I've gotten m*ore followers since this 'feed community' support each other a lot and post each other's pictures*''. Supporting other micro influencers, was an answer that all four (4) interviewees had in common. Discussing micro-influencers' support to each other, female 4 explained that re-posting each other's work increased the chance for other accounts to find and follow her. Since they are all interested in the same aesthetic strategy, it is believed by female 4 that reposting is the best way to gain recognition and, in that way, increase their follower engagement. The engagement includes more likes, comments and followers.

As for followers that are not influencers, female 3 mentions that the feed is a fundamental part for catching other accounts attention when visiting her profile. She continued to describe that her follower count started to grow when she started taking her feed more seriously and focused more on a steady aesthetic strategy, also mentioning that she has gotten more collaboration requests: "*Many of my collaboration emails start with them liking how my feed looks*"(Female 3). Moreover, three of four (4) participants talked about how ever since they started applying a strategy to coordinate their feeds, they have gotten more engagement on their Instagram. The one interviewee that did not seem to notice more engagement, assumed the reason was due to her using many gap-fillers which she believed was not as appreciated from other accounts. A related comment was said from female 1 and 3, where they noticed that images that did not include them, did not get as much likes and comments as selfies and outfit pictures. Female 3 described gap-filler image engagement as "*They don't get as much love as in likes and comments as pictured of myself, it is very obvious if you look at the amount of likes throughout my content*''. An observation was also that all interview participants noticed many girls writing to them, asking them how they make their feed look the way it does.

4.4.1   Survey results

Within this section, the questionnaire participants were asked if they noticed any connection between their follower engagement and their aesthetic strategies. Out of 10 participants, 9 mentioned that their follower engagement has increased in different ways because of their

aesthetic strategy. 8 females noticed a growth in their follower count while female 5 only noticed a growth on her likes. Female 14, only saw growth in her followers: "f*eed aesthetics are much better for growth /acquiring followers but not necessarily for likes (because of gap fillers)*". Moreover, 4 of the participants mentioned that the people that engage the most with their accounts are people with similar aesthetics and styles as themselves. Additionally, an observation made by female 9 was: *"by sticking to a consistent feed I was able to grow my account"*, which she followed up by saying that many people comment on her posts asking how she creates that aesthetic feed.

The one participant that did not notice relevance in this question explained that she has an aesthetic strategy for herself, she likes to explore different color pallets and does not do it for the engagement.

5.   Discussion

In this chapter the strong and weak points of the chosen method will be described. Moreover, parallels in findings between the study and previous studies will be drawn.

5.1   Result discussion

5.1.1 Aesthetic strategy

In this section the fact that all of the participants follow a specific aesthetic strategy when posting content on Instagram was found. Overall, the point for the participants was to create an aesthetically pleasing look by posting photos within a certain style or theme as Manovich (2019) would describe. This theme could entail having a minimalistic and beige feed but could also be a very colorful one. An interesting finding was that this feed was for most of the participants hard to achieve considering it included planning both outfits and locations for the photos to fit the feed in the desired way. One of the participants mentioned that it was almost impossible to create a nice-looking feed by coincidence, most of the time the feed is thoroughly thought out in detail. In relevance to Kim and Kim's study from 2019, it is clear that the participants involve a choice of what they take photos of, how they edit them and what they choose to upload on their feed. The details can include the colors of the outfit or object in an image. The details depend on the trends and what time of the year. During summer and spring some participants mentioned that they like to cooperate colors into their feed more. This can also be recalled from Kim and Kim (2019), where it is noted that users may post particular photos just because they like the colors of them.

5.1.2 Aesthetically pleasing

Throughout this study the word aesthetically pleasing was mentioned by the candidates a couple of times and was later explained by them as an eye pleasing element that combines beauty and satisfaction for the viewer. According to the theory of empirical aesthetics by the philosophiser Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887), the beautiful sensation that is obtained when looking at an aesthetical object is what makes an object aesthetically pleasing. Ethel Puffer Howes (1872-1950) on the other hand went further with the idea by associating

aesthetic experience to color, composition and other elements. After analyzing the micro influencers results, it

 could reveal that this has been used to convey their aesthetic strategy on Instagram. Not to forget, various tools and methods have been used by the participants in order to achieve an aesthetically pleasing feed. Although all participants share the same goal which is to have an aesthetically pleasing feed, it is apparent that certain participants focus on controlling the majority of the characteristics of their photos individually but not to sequence them in a specific way. While as Manovich (2019) suggests, the other type controls the aesthetics of individual photos as well as the overall aesthetics of their Instagram feed as a sequence.

5.1.3 Color harmony

An interesting similarity was found when discussing elements that contribute to feed aesthetics: color harmony. According to Kim and Kim (2019) at the beginning of the study, the significant role that colors in SNS users play is highlighted. After analyzing the questionnaire and interview results, all participants mentioned that colors play a role in their Instagram feed. More specifically, colors that coordinate or harmonize which in this study would refer to as color harmony. On the other hand, the way that this color harmony is achieved varies from participant to participant. Some focused on a specific color throughout their feed, while others made temporary switches to add variety throughout their feed. Also, some participants focused on color harmony through the lighting or saturation of their images. The choice of color harmony creates this formal temporal rhythm which Manovich (2019) described. It is also notable that color harmony is utilized explicitly by the participants.

5.1.4 Feed sequence

Some participants mentioned their strategic coordination of images to create a sequence in their feed. This could easily be associated with Manovich (2019) where the observation that some users focus on the overall aesthetics of a sequence of their feed. While one participant would create a sequence according to the content of her image, for example: post one outfit image and one image of something else; another participant focused on creating the sequence through the lighting of her feed, for example: posting three bright images (which create a row) and posting three darker images. This can be associated with Feisner and Reed (2013) who listed that repetition is the simplest way to achieve harmony.

5.1.5 Gap fillers

After analyzing the results, a common ground between several participants was found, this being the use of gap fillers. These were described as images of an object or objects that create balance on Instagram feed. In other words, images that do not include the micro-influencers themselves. Although these were seen as very useful to create space or be a form of transition from an image to another, participants noticed that these types of images were not interesting for their followers and showed a decrease in follower engagement as it doesn't really attract the follower's attention.

5.1.6 Positive follower engagement

When analyzing the interviews and questionnaires, it was apparent that the majority of the participants have noticed a growth on their Instagram accounts after using an aesthetic strategy, one of the participants mentioned that feed aesthetics help with account growth as it takes seconds for a follower to decide to follow a person depending on their feed. When it comes to the people that support and follow them, it was mostly accounts that used a similar aesthetic strategy as themselves or accounts that admire and get inspired from them. According to Manovich (2019), using a particular style on all of your Instagram images can attract a large number of followers. This 'style' meaning particular colors or certain photo contrasts throughout all images. Additionally, Manovich's definition of the word style resembles the words 'aesthetic style' used in this study. A connection is found in what Manovich stated in his study and the answers from the participants, holding on to one type of aesthetic style throughout your feed can with time attract people to support your account. Furthermore, as stated by Kim and Kim (2019), it is notable that individuals with similar characteristics should display a similar style in their social media photos, which leads to the connection of participants receiving the most support from accounts similar to theirs.

In figure 1, Thömmes (2020) has illustrated what an aesthetic experience can look like. Starting with someone finding an image aesthetically appealing and then for example liking or commenting on an image as an aesthetic behavior. Since the participants stated that they have noticed growth since using their aesthetic strategy, a relation is seen between what they answered and Thömmes' figure.

5.2　Method discussion

The choice to have semi structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires helped get an in depth understanding of the micro-influencers' feelings, thoughts and motivations regarding their personal feeds. The interview participants had the possibility to explain and reflect on their Instagram aesthetic style with the help of the open-ended questions and discuss their overall thoughts regarding this phenomenon. Having the interview through Zoom gave the chance to ask follow-up questions, which assisted in getting all the information needed for this study. It was made sure that the participants were comfortable enough to be able to answer the questions freely and however they wanted. Many follow-up questions were used, especially when it came to asking them to explain certain words they used such as *gap-filler*. Regarding the questionnaires, asking follow-up questions was not a possibility which would be necessary for a few participants that answered very briefly on certain questions. However, since open-ended questions were used, most questionnaire participants understood the question and answered verbosely.

An observation made early on was that it was difficult to find participants for this study, in total over four-hundred (400) direct messages were sent out to micro-influencers on Instagram and got a total of 14 answers. Sending DMs, Direct Messages to Influencers was the weak point in the method, since it was both time-consuming and extremely difficult to get in contact with the target group. Due to Instagram DMs being the only way of contacting the target group, it was necessary to optimize the message prior to sending it in order to maximize the response rate. However, this study was met by the unexpected result of 14 responses. On the other hand, the choice of method with the involvement of less participants allowed for closer investigations (Garrin, 2017). Even though this was an issue that was taken into consideration when deciding on the targeted participants for this study, the challenge still existed. It is therefore vital to shed the light on the reason behind not being able to get a response from micro-influencers. Many reasons can contribute to this occurrence, both general and individual.

5.2.1　General concerns

In this study, due to time restrictions, following all the steps recommended by Backaler (2018) was inconvenient. Some background research was made to confirm that each possible participant fulfilled the requirements for this study, however, there was little room to interact

with their content prior to contacting them. Additionally, at a stage in the recruitment process, the mistake of writing too long messages was noticed and adjusted accordingly, which involved sending shorter and outspoken messages to the micro-influencers. This was in turn more effective and helpful to grab their attention and receiving some replies.

Another element that was altered after the trail of contacting the first patch of influencers in order to gain more responses was to personalize the DMs being sent out (Backaler, 2018). This was done through writing the participant's names in the beginning of the message in order to awaken their interest. The personalized approach gave some positive results in making the participants feel more intitled to open the messages. After all, the participant entries still remained on the short side. However, the significant role that these factors played when contacting the influencers is not deniable.

5.2.2 Individual concerns

As for any platform, Instagram has a spam inbox where the messages of unknown senders, or in other words senders that one doesn't necessarily follow, end up. This enables the user to read the messages with no trace that the user has received or read it. An interviewee highlights this concern by sharing her own experience with receiving the message that got sent out to her, *"it went to spam, like straight away, and the thing with spams is that you can look at the messages, but without the other people, like noticing"* (Female 2). Moreover, influencers have a busy lifestyle, as they receive loads of daily DMs while still having to engage with their followers by posting content and being active, which consumes a lot of their time. Hence, missing a message is not that extraordinary in their world as declared by another interviewee *"There's also a chance that it was like busy with doing something else. Like I read here message and then I went back to doing other stuff"* (Female 3).

The pattern continued when asking to schedule a Zoom interview with one of the survey participants. Firstly, after finding out the interview would not be a written one, her interest in participating disappeared, which resulted in no further responses while trying to be contacted. Prior to that, she insisted on making sure that her contribution to the study would not involve any content being posted on her Instagram story. She mentioned not wanting to hassle her followers considering she had a lot of ads to post the following week. From this it is noted that not only do micro-influencers have a busy schedule but they also use their Instagram

profiles as a source of revenue and consequently care a lot about what is posted on their profiles in relation to their market value and reputation.

6.   Conclusions and further research

This chapter concludes the research questions in comparison to the findings, as well as describing the practical and scientific implications of the study. Last but not least, opening a door for further research.

6.1   Answering the research questions

RQ1:

To what extent do micro-influencers follow a specific aesthetic strategy on their Instagram feed?

As concluded from this study, in order for micro influencers to achieve an aesthetically pleasing feed on Instagram it is crucial for them to explicitly follow an aesthetic strategy. As presented within the "Discussions" section, the key elements that contribute to the participants aesthetic Instagram feed have been highlighted. As an overall conclusion, participants place a lot of focus on colors and the way they harmonize which creates a connection to color harmony. Furthermore, although the participants focus on the same elements, they are able to achieve an aesthetically pleasing feed in different ways. This can be drawn to the participants having a particular style or theme within their aesthetic strategy. Not to forget, that some participants place more focus on the aesthetics of photos individually while others place importance on the sequence of the photos as well to achieve an overall aesthetic Instagram feed.

RQ2:

How have the micro-influencers noticed relevance in the specific choice of aesthetic strategy in relation to their audience?

A clear relevance between the choice of aesthetic strategy and engagement with their audience was noticed. Most of the micro-influencers answered that they indeed experience growth in comments, likes and followers since sticking to a specific aesthetic style. An overall conclusion was that since they started using an aesthetic strategy, most of their followers are people that share the same style as them. In this way, they grow on Instagram because most of the micro-influencers within the same aesthetic style support each other by

posting each other's photos. This leads to higher engagement due to the exposure of their Instagram accounts.

6.1.1 Practical Implications

The outcome of this study contributes with valuable information that an Instagram user would implement to create a feed that reflects feed aesthetics and catches the attention of other users. The importance of implementing a thought through strategy to an Instagram feed to create an aesthetically pleasing look is proven. Planning your content strategically to create a feed you desire, is confirmed by the study results to be something that can help gain followers and engagement on Instagram. Aspects such as color harmony and the placement of content on the Instagram feed was highlighted to play big roles, enhancing the look of an Instagram profile. Though this study focused on mainly micro-influencers, the implications of the results can however be implemented on all users on Instagram that desire a certain aesthetic look to their feed.

6.1.2 Scientific Implications

In view of the previous studies which mention Instagram aesthetics as a whole and a person's characteristics in connection to their Instagram content, this study enters a new perspective of a user's content on Instagram. This qualitative study explores the believes and experiences of micro-influencers on Instagram regarding their personal feed. Additionally, diving into the aesthetic appeal that an aesthetic strategy can create through elements such as color harmony when implemented thoroughly. The results suggest that using an aesthetic strategy has a big impact when wanting to increase the follower count, since it was noticeable that an aesthetically pleasing look on Instagram is highly appreciated by other users. This could help Instagram users establish more followers and perhaps upgrade their title from micro to macro-influencer, if wished. Moreover, the results showcase that sticking to the same combination of colors (color-harmony) throughout many content posts, can create an overall aesthetically pleasing look.

6.2   Further research

This research is believed to highlight the main connections between aesthetics and female micro-influencers' Instagram feed. It is clear how the use of an aesthetic strategy is relevant for micro-influencers both internally and externally. In other words, being significant to the micro-influencers themselves, as well as their followers. This study has given us an insight into the elements and reasons behind micro-influencers' aesthetics on Instagram and the research has proven as valid as theories regarding aesthetics, the elements that contribute to aesthetics and the chosen target group. As the research shows the relation between feed aesthetics and a limited target group on a specific platform, it is considered valuable and relevant to perform further research regarding the relation of aesthetics and other target groups or platforms. These could involve exploring the opposite gender or analyzing a completely different age group. Additionally, inspecting other photo-centric platforms such as Tumblr or Pinterest. A change of target group or platform for further research can have a great influence in the experience of aesthetics and is therefore relevant.

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8.   Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey Manual

Survey Manual

Background Information
- Instagram name
- Age

Instagram feed
- How would you describe your Instagram feed in three words?

Aesthetic strategy
- Do you, as an Instagram user, follow a specific aesthetic strategy? Ex. exhibiting a specific style or coordination for the sequence of images?
- If Yes: How would you describe your aesthetic strategy? (Keywords: Color harmony, Hue, Saturation, warm/cool tones, rows of 3)
- If No: What are your thoughts behind this observation about feed aesthetics? Could you see yourself applying this strategy in the future?

Instagram followers
- Have you seen any relevance in your choice of strategy in relation to user engagement? In that case, what have you noticed? Ex. Growth on the platform, followers, Likes, supporters, comments etc.

Appendix 2. Interview Manual

Interview Manual

Background Information

- How old are you?

General questions about Instagram usage

- How long have you actively been using Instagram?
- How many photos do you usually post per week?

Instagram feed

- How would you describe your Instagram feed in three words?

Aesthetic strategy

- To what extent do you use an aesthetic strategy for your Instagram account?
- Have you always used this aesthetic strategy?
- If not, how long have you been using it?
- Why did you change your aesthetic strategy?
- What is the difference between your old and new aesthetic strategy?
- Have you heard the term aesthetically pleasing?
- If yes, what do you believe it means in general terms?
- What does this mean for your feed?
- Do you consider your feed to be aesthetically pleasing?
- What factors contribute to that? IOW. How would you say that you apply aesthetics to your feed on Instagram?

Instagram followers

- Do you have a Target Audience?
- In that case, What is your target audience?
- Do you believe your feed attracts your targeted audience?
- How does this affect your following, growth, engagement?
- Do you follow people with similar aesthetic strategy?

Keywords

- How would you describe gap fillers on your Instagram feed?
- What is their purpose?
- How would you describe the word aesthetics?
- Do you know what color harmony means?

- What does it mean for your Instagram?
- Does your aesthetic strategy utilize color harmony?