



Consumers' Perceptions on Influencer Marketing through Instagram

How do the elements of credibility, trust, and interaction with influencers influence Generation Z's perception of branded content?

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Abstract

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Title: Consumers' Perceptions on Influencer Marketing through Instagram

Keywords: *Brand Perception, Generation Z, Influencer Marketing, Instagram.*

Research question: *How do the elements of credibility, trust, and interaction with influencers influence Generation Z's perception of branded content?*

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to understand in-depth regarding the rapidly growing phenomena of influencer marketing. The focus on understanding the consumer-influencer relationship, based on chosen elements, furthest explains how brand perception of Generation Z gets influenced by influencer marketing.

Method: The empirical collection of data is mainly based on qualitative focus groups carried out by the researchers with eighteen respondents on a semi-structured bias of interviews. The study mainly focused on answering the research question in the context of participants from Sweden and to the age groups of 18-25.

Conclusion: The results of this research revealed that influencer marketing does influence Generation Z's brand perception. Furthermore, the focus groups also conducted results that the chosen elements together contribute to a greater perception of brand, due to their strengthening of the consumer-influencer relationship. Furthermore, the findings could apparently contribute to futural research within the same field due to the questions awakened by the conclusions.

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Word List ¹

These concepts are linked to the paper, therefore these definitions provide a brief explanation of what the terms mean, given the importance of making it easier for the reader to understand.

Brand:	objects, products, and services that are all manufactured by a certain firm and have the same identity.
Brand Awareness:	the extent to measure awareness of a particular brand. Going along with the term brand loyalty that explains a person's proclivity to continue purchasing a specific brand of anything.
Brand Image:	attributes of a brand as perceived by potential and actual customers.
Branded Content:	advertisements that a brand creates itself and publishes or presents in venues other than traditional ad spaces, as entertainment, educational content. Can be created in conjunction with influencers platforms.
Consumer:	a person or thing that consumes, or that uses a commodity or service.
Credibility:	the quality of being believable or worthy of trust.
Effective:	when the product placement has a beneficial influence on purchasing intent.
Endorser:	a person, most likely someone well-known, that appears in different types of advertisements marketing particular products that they use and like.
Followers:	a person who follows or subscribes to another's posts on social media platforms.
Gen Z:	people born between the late 1990s and about 2010.
Millennials:	a person who was born in the 1980s or 1990s.
Genuine:	individuals free from pretense, affectation, or hypocrisy.
Influencer:	a person who has the power to influence many people, as through social media or traditional media.
Influencer Marketing:	a type of marketing in which marketers and brands dedicate in chosen influencers to generate and promote branded content to both the influencers' own followers and the businesses' diverse target groups (Yodel, 2017).
Instagram:	the brand name for a photo sharing and social media platform application, launched in 2010.
Trust:	to rely upon or place confidence in someone or something.
Unfollow:	to cease to track a person or a group on a social networking site.

¹ All words are defined from the website of Britannica's Dictionary and Dictionary.com.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

With the digitalization of the new world, digital consumer engagement has become increasingly important in the globalized market. Digital platforms have included rapid encouragement of interaction between businesses, their digital ways of marketing and types of communication with consumers. The interest in consumer engagement stands parallel with the evolution of the internet and the emergence of new digital tools such as social media marketing (Sashi, 2012). Influencers initially appeared in the digital world with the help of blogging platforms back in 2005, and they quickly went towards other social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Already during the beginning of 2010, the phenomenon of influencer marketing started to see exponential growth (Abidin, 2016).

The growth of social media platforms has confronted innovative communication reality for businesses and companies. Influencer marketing has grown in prominence as a critical component of businesses' digital marketing strategy (Abidin, 2015). The relatively developed social media marketing is one of main areas that academics today research within (Stubb et al., 2019), due to the fact of the method developing and increasing in use by companies to promote their products (Lou et al., 2019). Traditional media, amongst television and newspapers, are no longer the dominant players within marketing since they have social media as competitors. Hence, the growth of social media platforms has evolved to the extent that they today are the main reason for rapid growth of social media marketing (de Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Godin (1999) referred to traditional approaches that most marketers relied on as “interruption marketing” and compared it with the use of influencer marketing. The interruption concept derives from the argument contrasted with marketers interrupting consumers' day-to-day experiences, in the hope of catching their attention. The use of influencers compared to traditional advertising has previously shown as more genuine and credible, hence the feed of the influencer looks more natural approaching the consumer (Abidin, 2016; Martínez-López et al., 2020). Hence, the content from influencers gains importance due to its authentic and genuine insight of the brand, and when compared to brand-generated advertising, consumers are more inclined to trust and follow the communication as a recommendation instead (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencer marketing is a type of marketing in which marketers and brands dedicate chosen social media influencers to generate and promote branded content to both the influencers' own followers and the businesses' diverse target groups (Yodel, 2017). Social media influencers are individuals that have a strong presence online with large numbers of followers, on one or even more social media applications (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, or Youtube), and have an impact on their followers (Agrawal 2016; Varsamis 2018).

Boerman (2020) clarifies that the number of followers distinguish between the diverse levels of influencers, e.g., micro-influencers with up to 10,000 followers, meso-influencers between 10,000 to 1 million followers, and lastly the macro-influencers with more than 1 million followers. The influencers on social media platforms, as opposed to celebrities or public figures who are well recognized through traditional media, are "everyday individuals" who became "public figures" by generating and creating social media content. This, by them usually having a specialization or skills within a particular topic, such as lifestyle, beauty, traveling, or fashion (Swant, 2016). The strength of influencer marketing is often derived by, amongst others, their specialization, skills, reputation, and the popularity they have and are known for (Ladhari et al., 2020). Influencers are mostly referred to ordinary individuals that have gained their followers by engaging them by creating attractive content (Cotter, 2019), unlike the traditional endorsers that often are celebrities that have gained their popularity by traditional media (Garcia, 2017).

Influencer marketing is a well-established occupation, and the industry is constantly evolving, and continues to grow (Ye et al., 2021). This industry simply includes influencers who use their social platforms and market a company's products or services to their followers. Influencers create the so-called virtual relationships with their followers, and influence them by sharing their everyday lives, their interests and thoughts regarding different areas that depend on their professions (Jin et al., 2019). Influencers branded content is seen to have more organic and genuine direct interaction with prospective customers than brand-created commercials (Talavera, 2015). There have been previous studies showing results (Safari et al., 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2011) of influencer marketing and how it may influence the consumers purchasing intentions. The concept of purchasing intentions refers to the buyer's willingness to consume the products offered by the marketer (Morwitz, 2012), whereas the willingness gets influenced by factors such as pre-purchase support

(Landon et al., 1974), and integration of diverse corporate social responsibility (CSR) acts (Grimmer et al., 2013).

Social media platforms such as Instagram and others have grown exponentially during the last decades, resulting in radical trends impacting our communication patterns. Some age groups, amongst millennials, born 1981-1996 (Dimock, 2019), and generation Z, born 1997-2015 (Dimock, 2019), have developed a habit of the use of social media platforms (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Statista (2022) clarifies through their numbers that there are currently more than 1.1 billion users of Instagram during the statistics of 2022. According to the most current predictions, the number of users is expected to reach approximately 1.2 billion users by 2023 (Statista, 2022). Based on a poll from 2020 that Statista presents on the website, 89 percent among marketers choose Instagram as a crucial channel and the leading platform for influencer marketing (Statista, 2021). When using Instagram as a marketing field, the branded content could vary from picture posts of the brand integrated, stories, videos, reels amongst others are used to update the feed of the individuals (Perrin & Anderson, 2019).

Generation Z will be the chosen group to research thoroughly in this research, due to, unlike previous generations, they have developed accepting mindsets as they have grown up in a more inclusive society. It is also the generation that has been proven to be most exposed to social media platforms (Shatto & Erwin, 2016). The choice of exploring the research precisely in Instagram is since it is one of the most used platforms of influencer marketing (Perrin & Anderson, 2019).

1.2. Problem formulation

The field of influencer marketing is large and there are many topics to be emphasized. Many of the previous research emphasized various factors contributing to the influencer marketing effectiveness in conjunction with diverse contexts. Many of the previous researchers have been investigating around the areas of exploring what characterizes credible influencers, comparing studies between traditional and social media marketing and factors behind the success of influencer marketing amongst others. Some of the key factors that were investigated by previous literature have been regarding interaction and virtual relationship between the influencers and the customers, credibility, and trust in the influencer (De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Johansen & Guldvik, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Woods, 2016).

Also, many student theses have been taken into consideration during the investigation of possible gaps in the area. Simultaneously, most companies have emerged branding and development of brand marketing as a critical top marketing priority (Keller, 2009). Engagement between individuals among each other initiates both advantages and difficulties for brand marketing within innovations (Keller & Richey, 2006; Mueller et al., 2011). However, there is less understanding and agreement on how the brands and branding may or should be generated in today's virtual market (Naylor et al., 2012; Cben et al., 2011; Kozinets et al., 2010; Keller, 2009).

Even though the previously mentioned studies were conducted to explore the impact of social media influencers on branding, we know less about the consumer perceiving this influencer marketing. Furthermore, while some recent research on influencer advertising has been initiated, none of this research has focused directly on the fundamental mechanisms of what makes influencer marketing effective within specific contexts or elements. Considering the less qualitative research conducted within the area, we believe that there is information needed to be explored by closer connections of the consumers' perspective in-depth to the phenomena.

However, the occurrence of the consumer perception of businesses' brand image when it is expressed through social media by Swedish influencers is vague. Many of the abovementioned studies have also focused on older age groups and restricted to other geographical restrictions, however this research is restricted to Swedish respondents. The elements that will be further investigated are credibility, trust, and interaction between the influencer marketing and the receiver, focusing on generation Z as the target groups on Instagram.

1.3. Research Question

How do the elements of credibility, trust, and interaction with influencers influence Generation Z's perception of branded content?

1.4. Purpose

The purpose of this research paper is to explore how the elements of trust, credibility, and interaction in influencer marketing impact Generation Z's perception of the brand. The methodological approach of this research will be qualitative data via focus groups based on specific selections and samplings. This will have a focus on investigating how the influencers do impact the brand perception from the consumers perspective. At the same time, the focus will be on investigating Instagram as the field of influencer marketing and geographically restricted to Sweden. Lastly, Generation Z will be the perspective that is emphasized. There are no specific delimitations on the type of influencers, hence the aim is to explore influencer marketing as a whole and not divide the categories up.

2. Literature Review

In the following sections, the researchers conduct literature review regarding relevant concepts and theories. The concepts comprise of social media marketing, influencer marketing, credibility, trust, and interaction. Within these elements, there exist underlying connections to the influencer-consumer relationship and consumer purchasing decisions, therefore also the parasocial interaction theory is addressed. These theories will further contribute to the understanding of how consumers perceive the influencer marketing and diverse dimensions behind those acts.

2.1. Brand Definition in Influencer Marketing

Many previous literatures have contributed to studies regarding brand knowledge with underlining, amongst others, brand image (Rehman & Ishaq, 2017) or brand equity (Cardona et al., 2017). Regarding the element of brand image, studies have addressed that it is a crucial part of the evaluating of products by consumers (Supanvanij & Amine, 2000). Brand image is used by marketers as a vital concept in the communication and marketing, which in its turn is impacted by the consumers evaluations, both positively and negatively (Ghauri & Cateora, 2021). The definition and perception of a brand are essential in the context of social media marketing. To properly comprehend the significance of marketing on social media platforms, a fundamental grasp of several aspects of modern brand management (Esch & Möll, 2005) have been particularly outlined. The main features of a brand for whom the brand is recognized are portrayed in the brand identity (Esch & Möll, 2005). Brand identity may be defined as the core of a brand, both internally and externally (de Chernatony, 1999).

According to Kazmi and Mehmood (2020), a good or positive brand image is the concept that can have an added value impact on consumers. For instance, if a brand has a bad brand image, it will both directly and indirectly affect consumers and most likely the purchasing intention of consumers decreases. According to Rudyanto et al. (2021), the company is required to carry out a correct strategy to attract attention to consumers and not lose competitiveness with other businesspeople. Brand image is the perception given by consumers to the products or services provided by the company to consumers. Consumers will also find it easier to find information about the products they want to buy online, since they do not need to meet face-to-face directly or be physically in a shop to get access to information.

Brand image is the perception that consumers have of the valuation for the company that persists in consumers' minds. Affandi et al. (2020) and Prahiawan et al. (2021) explains that consumers in this case are those who have made a purchase and they are aware of the meaning of the brand image. A good brand image will be easily accepted by consumers, thereby increasing customer satisfaction, also increasing numbers of purchase intentions after consumers analyze various alternatives or information from products or services.

Based on Faircloth et al. (2001) and Purba et al. (2021) articles, consumer purchasing decisions are made through various processes. For marketers, it is very important to analyze the buying decision process made by consumers. Marketers will try to influence the consumers' mind to choose the products or services they offer in various ways. When viewed from the company's point of view, the company will get excessive profits since each product has a place in the hearts of consumers and will clearly increase the target market. An effective brand image can reflect three things, namely: (1) building product character and providing proportional value, (2) conveying product character uniquely so that it is different from its competitors, and (3) giving emotional strength from rational power (Faircloth et al., 2001). A company that can form a good brand image will be able to carry out marketing campaigns easily and effectively to consumers who have a great opportunity to increase customer loyalty, but if it has a bad brand image it will be valuable otherwise (Dash et al., 2021).

The largest efforts have been undertaken throughout the creation of advertisements and marketing, to investigate within the brand image and personality. Although such characteristics are formed by the interplay of a brand's image, Fournier (1998) explains that they do not represent the full interaction between the brand and the customer. The brand on its own is conducted to reflect the consumers attitude, therefore the understanding of the interaction between the brand and its targeted customer cannot be achieved until completing a comprehensive analysis of their relationship (Fournier, 1998).

2.2. Diverse Types of Influencers

There are diverse categories of the level of influencers identified by previous literatures, such as *Celebrity Influencers* and *Category Influencers* (Backaler & Shankman, 2018). Also, there are, *Micro-Influencers*, *Macro-Influencers*, *Mega-Influencers*, and *Nano Influencers* (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). To fully comprehend influencer marketing, it is critical to understand that the level of the influencers is expected to be reliant on the fame of the influencer. Influencers are grouped primarily depending on the number of followers they have (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Firstly, celebrity influencers can impact a larger group of fans in conjunction with their fame, such as their own occupation being e.g., an actor, athlete, or musician. Also, regular online personalities that have a huge number of followers are also considered. It is usual for them to have over a million followers, which comes at a significant cost for endorsements (Campbell & Farewell, 2020). These celebrities have achieved their status by working through diverse systems, to attain corresponding recognition and the ability to influence. It is also emphasized that a celebrity that does not have skills or specialization on how to influence their target groups, is not referred as a *celebrity influencer*, but only a regular celebrity since they do not have the ability of influencing consumers. (Backaler, & Shankman 2018

Secondly, the category influencers are referred to an individual “practitioner in a particular area”, such as one person having a genuine interest in beauty and is involved within that certain area. This makes the person reliable for the observers since they are related to the topic and may have an expertise within it. The target community of the category influencer may not have as broad an audience as the celebrity; thus, they possess ample amount of influence from their followers (Backaler & Shankman, 2018). The micro-influencers refer to the personas that do not necessarily have access to an online reach, or even have an online presence at all. These influencers are passionate within a certain area, or even brands and products. This could be one person being passionate about technology and being one source for both their online- and offline target community. Examples of these influencers could be in our everyday lives if we identify similar actors, such as a makeup enthusiast with no social media presence but is the go-to person for individuals they know if needed advice or recommendations (Backaler & Shankman, 2018).

Finally, the mega-influencers are those who have over a million followers. What distinguishes celebrity influencers from mega-influencers is that mega-influencers achieved popularity through their social media profile. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Macro-influencers often have 100,000 to one million followers, yet they are still regarded as amongst the most interesting influencers to cooperate with. As compared to celebrities and mega-influencers, their engagement levels are greater whilst also generating tremendous reach. Conversely, these endorsements are frequently viewed as more sincere and genuine, proving them beneficial in influencing the consumer's buying intention (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The nano-influencers who have fewer than 10,000 followers. As an outcome, they do not have the same influence as the higher rate of endorsement of other influencers, but they will most likely have the highest response rate and considered credibility. The nano-influencers are like the micro-influencers. Without much leverage, they are more inclined to accept unpaid partnerships in exchange for free items (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

2.3. Influencer Marketing

As this study concerns influencer marketing, it is therefore essential to understand the concept behind the virtual approach of marketing. Influencer marketing is the active process of identifying individuals who influence a specific targeted audience to increase engagement and awareness of a brand (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). The authors further state that influencers are used as an extension of word-of-mouth (WOM) with a focus on the social context and are a form of relationship building that will expand their audience. Brands seek to turn their targeted audience into loyal customers through trust and authenticity. The relationship between influencer and audience is based on the creation of content realized by the influencer which is desired and relates to its audience. The increase in trust towards influencers has forced brands to shift focus. Other marketing strategies such as direct marketing are seen less effective, where the younger generation are more demanding for advertised content (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Furthermore, for influencers to attract their audience and be persuasive they regularly produce content through social media in their specialist areas (Lou, 2021). To increase the effectiveness of the content, influencers tend to add personal touches which provides an enjoyable experience (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

2.3.1. Influencer Marketing over Traditional Marketing

During the past century, radio and television had been introduced as tools for branding, displacing earlier usage of magazines, posters, and billboards. This allowed businesses to attract more customers, which was seemingly unimaginable previously, and furthest firms are depending on the internet to market their company instead. Influencer marketing is one of these new marketing tactics that has gained prominence and is rapidly being used by firms (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Godin (1999) have earlier referred to traditional advertisements that most marketers relied on as “interruption marketing”. The interruption concept contrasted with marketers interrupting the consumers' day-to-day experiences, in the hope of catching their attention. Backaler and Shankman (2018) illustrates the comparison between providing the advertisement as a recommendation instead of interrupting the experience of the consumer. with emphasis on the virtual relationship the consumer has with the marketer. Hence, the content from influencers gains importance due to its authentic and genuine insight of the brand, and when compared to brand-generated advertising, individuals are more inclined to trust and follow the communication as a recommendation instead (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Influencer marketing refers to an individual getting compensated for sharing branded content on their personal social media profiles. The content is created to promote the brand described in the post. One main factor why firm are increasingly utilizing this marketing approach is that customers have migrated away across more traditional media. Consumers today acquire knowledge and content on social media platforms rather than television and print media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Influencers are great for building involvement with the content they generate, which is what natural reach is based on (Lipsman et al., 2012). Natural reach is considered as wider reach obtained sans allocating extra money on marketing, that is often difficult to attain through traditional marketing methods. The interaction from the consumer refers to any involvement with the influencer's content, which is typically expressed through likes, comments, or shares. Influencers likewise tend to generate content from a more genuine manner than companies do, also they are considered to have an increased ability to reach potential target groups (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Also, social media influencers effectively took over the role of possible endorsers of celebrities by following the latest trends (Lim et al., 2017). Utilizing social media influencers in marketing is nowadays more beneficial than the usage of celebrities, especially because consumers regard influencers as more credible depending on their expertise (Jin et al., 2019) Even if traditional superstars utilize social media to generate content on their profiles, influencers began as undiscovered to the public and built their careers online which makes them more reliable (Schouten et al., 2020).

2.3.2. Generation Z

Influencers are frequently associated with millennials whilst marketing content in categories such as fashion, beauty, and travel, despite having recently grown increasingly popular amongst people of different ages and across many product categories. Influencers are frequently known as professionals in specific areas, concepts, or even lifestyles. As a result, it has drawn an audience that is mainly interested inside the areas in which the influencers are considered experts. All these components combined have offered the opportunity to expand the natural reach, target potential customers such as younger age groups, and boost awareness in the advertisement that is being marketed (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Generation Z, born in 1997-2015 (Dimock, 2019), is the first generation growing up and being surrounded by digital communication and online platforms. They are constantly connected online and are reported to be exposed to more media than any other activity (Shatto & Erwin, 2016), where technology and social platforms are redefining the interaction between individuals (Vitelar, 2019). The attitude and behavior of generation Z differ in relation to the previous generation, mainly due to their connection to the digital world. These formed behavior characteristics suggest that generation Z highly values brands that provide authenticity, honesty, and transparency (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2015). The consuming behavior of generation Z is highly influenced by friends and influencers on social media platforms (Priporas et al., 2017).

Priporas et al. (2017) argues further that generation Z has lower loyalty toward brands compared to other generations and demands excitement to stay interested. Moreover, previous studies suggest that opinion leaders on social media platforms are still highly influential. The engaging content posted on social media has been seen to create positive emotions and influence the opinions of the targets of marketing (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

2.3.3. Instagram

There are several social networking sites available today, in which Instagram is the most used platform used by opinion leaders to influence their audience (Casaló et al., 2020). Instagram is available on most digital devices, it is a social networking application where the users upload content in diverse types, such as videos, photos, stories, and reels. The content is in the form of one of those many types from different individuals that the users of the application have decided to follow. The different contents that are visible show up in the so-called “feed”. These pictures and videos are embedded with a commenting, liking, and sharing system where people can interact with the creators and vice versa. Instagram is actively analyzing your activities and updating your feed to provide the most interesting content for the user (Instagram, 2019).

Hence, the increase in brands' and marketers' usage of the platform, brands have another way of maintaining communication and building a relationship with their audience. The strive for likes, comments, and shares are factors that examine the performance of a campaign on Instagram. The recently introduced algorithm on Instagram has changed the flow of content on a user's feed, where it now displays the most interesting content instead of the time order with the latest content first. It is also emphasized that this may cause issues for Instagram influencers where their post may be missed due to the suitability and interest of the users (Chen, 2018).

It has been shown that Instagram has the highest engagement rate when compared with other social networking sites, where the percentages have even increased in the case of influencer usage (Casaló et al., 2020). The shopping features and the many visual affordances such as stories where the consumers are directed to a brand's website or product, are some factors behind the noteworthy growth of the platform, where it also has been ranked as the most used and favorable platform for marketers when using influencer marketing (Lee et al., 2021).

2.4. Credibility in Influencer Marketing

One of the main focuses of this study is to investigate the perception of credibility, trust, and interaction towards brand perceptions through influencers, therefore, it is essential to understand the fundamentals of all concepts and their relevance to the phenomena. Brands are collaborating with influencers to increase brand awareness, where influencers have become today's opinion leaders (Belanche et al., 2021). Businesses can add value and receive positive attitudes toward their brand by using highly credible influencers (Lee & Kim, 2020), that are closely connected to the audience as well as specified area.

The simple definition of credibility refers to the quality of being someone worthy of trust (Dictionary, n.d.), which clarifies the importance in our context, where the influencer needs to be credible, to then have trust in the influencer that will be further explained in the next section. The credibility is also the reason of why brands need to overlook the choice of the influencer that will be their marketing tool, since they need to be viewed as “credible” and “real”, to gain the success of sustaining the status of not just being paid to advertise (Abidin, 2018). Not only businesses care about the sake of the credibility, but also many influencers determine the collaborations and advertisements they make with brands, to maintain their credibility for the followers (Abidin, 2018).

To strengthen credibility, influencers need to promote brands and products that fits with their lifestyle, and the created content they have established to not lose their status (Belanche et al., 2021), since the phenomenon is defined as the ability to be believed or trusted by the perceiver (Wagar, 2014). Credibility has been shown to be vital for establishing increased buy intentions in influencer marketing (Jimenez & Medoza, 2013; Martin-Santana & Beerli-Palacio, 2013). Previous research proposes the parasocial relationship between consumers and influencers, its credibility and trust towards influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019), which is seen to be one of the most important factors that influence consumers’.

The parasocial interaction strategy focuses on a one-way interaction established between an individual and a personality with an online presence, who is identified as a well-known person among many individuals who interact with them across diverse social media platforms. The concept assumes that the audience may have similar connection with the persona as they have with

actual relationships in their real life's. This, considering that the audience has been an integral part of the person's life throughout multiple situations and emotional experiences. The individual's link is only strengthened to the persona when the social media persona develops a continuous relationship by being accessible to the individual for a set amount of time (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Credibility strengthens the relationships between the influencer and their followers. The promotion from influencers of products, or less congruent with their style influences the followers' perception of credibility towards the influencers as well as the changes in consumer attitude, which leads to different behavioral responses. They express a favorable attitude towards a product which further evokes positive attitudes (Belanche et al., 2021). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) suggest that influencers have a greater impact on their followers' intentions and behavior since they are perceived as more credible than traditional celebrities. Due to the influencers' shown proximity and expertise towards their followers' interest, they have a greater influence in shaping their follower's reaction (Belanche et al., 2021).

A consumers' perception of credibility is based on trustworthiness, attractiveness, and knowledge (Ohanian, 1990). Hence, the aspect of attractiveness refers to the image portrayed by the individual, knowledge or expertise refers to the information known about the source, and lastly trustworthiness which concerns the honesty of the source (Lee & Kim, 2020). The credibility of an influencer endorser has a direct impact on the endorsed brand, where an individual's overall appearance affects the judgment of others (Ohanian, 1990). In other words, someone's appealing lifestyle can be judged to be a greater person (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Influencer credibility is regarded as the most essential antecedent to a consumer relationship to reach effective advertising where the advertising campaigns can reach a larger and more focused target group (Belanche et al., 2021). It further indicates that the brand depends on its reputation in the marketing and might or might not influence a consumer response to branded content on social media (Lee & Kim, 2020).

2.5. Trust in Influencer Marketing

Forbes (2021) explains that consumers tend to have more trust in influencers since they are perceived as relatable and authentic, in conjunction with that they have established credibility. Trust has different definitions, whereas Zsigmondová et al. (2021) explains that trust is a kind of relationship that is based on experience and takes time to develop. This concept has played an important role in business, where higher trust results in greater results (Zsigmondová 2021). Another definition of trust is:

The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a specific action significant to the trustor, regardless of the ability to monitor or control that other party (Mayer et al., 1995).

Building and maintaining trust in a virtual environment is seen as a multidimensional and complex process. The element of trust can pose both a threat or be the success of a brand's E-commerce operations and is essential to developing a functioning relationship, and explains initial trust as the willingness to take risks within a relationship (Bojang, 2017). Moreover, the lack of trust is making transactions and online activities vulnerable because of the physical absence of the other party (Hoffman et al., 1999), hence it is one of the consumers' biggest concerns (Bojang, 2017). However, to gain trust several factors are involved, which means that trust is dependent on certain actions. An influencer is seen to improve trust by being as transparent and unique as possible in their virtual activities such as promotional posts, where the audience trusts their word since the influencers are believed to have expertise. What an individual perceives the influencer to be truthful can be defined as trust (Lee & Kim, 2020).

Trust is one of the most influential factors in online transactions and has been known to be a decider for decision-making. Trust has a moderating effect on consumer process behavior where it reduces anxiety and stress levels (Dwidienawati et al., 2020). The concept of trust concerns the perception of the receiver of influencers' honesty, sincerity, and truthfulness (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Giffin 1967). Followers have a higher probability to be influenced by influencers that convey these aspects (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Trustworthiness of an influencer is essential to initiate successful influencer marketing, where they have often established themselves in specific areas, which means

that consumer trust for the influencers will weigh heavier if they collaborate with a brand within that area and matches the specialization of influencers.

Reciprocity is a concept that suggests that the social exchange between two parties occurs by rewards and continues when both are satisfied with the exchange, and have been seen to affect the relationship, where exchanges between partners are unbalanced (Kim & Kim, 2021). However, influencers are obtaining interpersonal trust through continuous activities that engage their followers. The intentions perceived have also been referred to as trustworthiness. Actions of persuasion and manipulation interfere with the follower's trust. Influencers promote the brand image to their established domain and followers, in doing so they are leveraging their pre-established relationship that is built on trust (Kim & Kim, 2021).

2.6. Interaction in Influencer Marketing

The usage of influencers has become a frequently used strategy to attract more consumers. Influencers are skilled in engaging the consumers and generating interesting content (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This type of marketing is one of the most effective strategies to reach the right target groups as well as for the businesses' financial perspectives (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media has been transformed and encourages consumers on different platforms to connect, engage and share their opinions and ideas about certain topics with other consumers that have similar mindsets. Platforms such as Instagram are used to share experiences, communication, and contribute to ideas about brands (Cheung et al., 2021), hence brands are collaborating with influencers with a large amount of following to promote their brand. Instagram influencers are posting a wide variety of photos featuring themselves wearing a specific brand (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Users of the social networking sites are developed to engage with user-generated content, that is based on the online personality that the consumer portrays. The parasocial relationship between influencers and followers has been seen to increase product interest among adult followers. This type of relationship refers to the creation of audience connection towards media personae through constant media exposure (Lou, 2021).

Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction will be used to identify what different patterns of interaction between influencers and followers can be found on Instagram. The theory explores the interactions of an imagined distance relationship between individuals. Interaction encourages intimacy between the audience and performer with images, videos, and other posts on the platform. The influencer has control over the relationship, however, for the audience to express their feeling about dissatisfaction they have the option to withdraw, which in this case is unfollowing the influencer's Instagram account (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

The influencer-follower relationship becomes stronger due to the interactive environment of Instagram. The parasocial relationship is exploited by trustworthiness and the strong social ties that have been formed (Martensen et al., 2018). The authors continue stating that the textual and visual nature of social media enables followers to create an atmosphere of personal connection. Hence, it is easier to establish trust with personal and real connections (Martensen et al., 2018). However, research suggests that interactive social media marketing efforts have been seen to be more effective than non-interactive digital marketing efforts. In other words, influencers are required to constantly engage with their following through stories, concrete content, and be active to be successful (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

3. Conceptual Framework

In previous chapters, we discovered how influencers influence their followers' perceptions of the diverse branded content. The conceptual framework was created subsequently with the literature review with the emphasis on describing the research question along with the chosen elements. The research aims to justify how the consumers' perceptions of influencers influences the perception of brands and the branded content. The elements focused on in this paper are the connections between influencer marketing and credibility, trust, and interaction, which then directly or indirectly do influence brand perception or image, hence, the interest in investigating the topic. It is an important current topic that can provoke discussions and an issue that today is important to solve since problems that arise in connection with the marketing and negative effects are becoming increasingly critical in view of increased purposeful generations. With the help of the abovementioned concepts and the literature, this study has developed a research model along with the previous literature review which connects and describes the research question. Figure 1 on the next page was therefore created to further clarify the research objective to the readers.

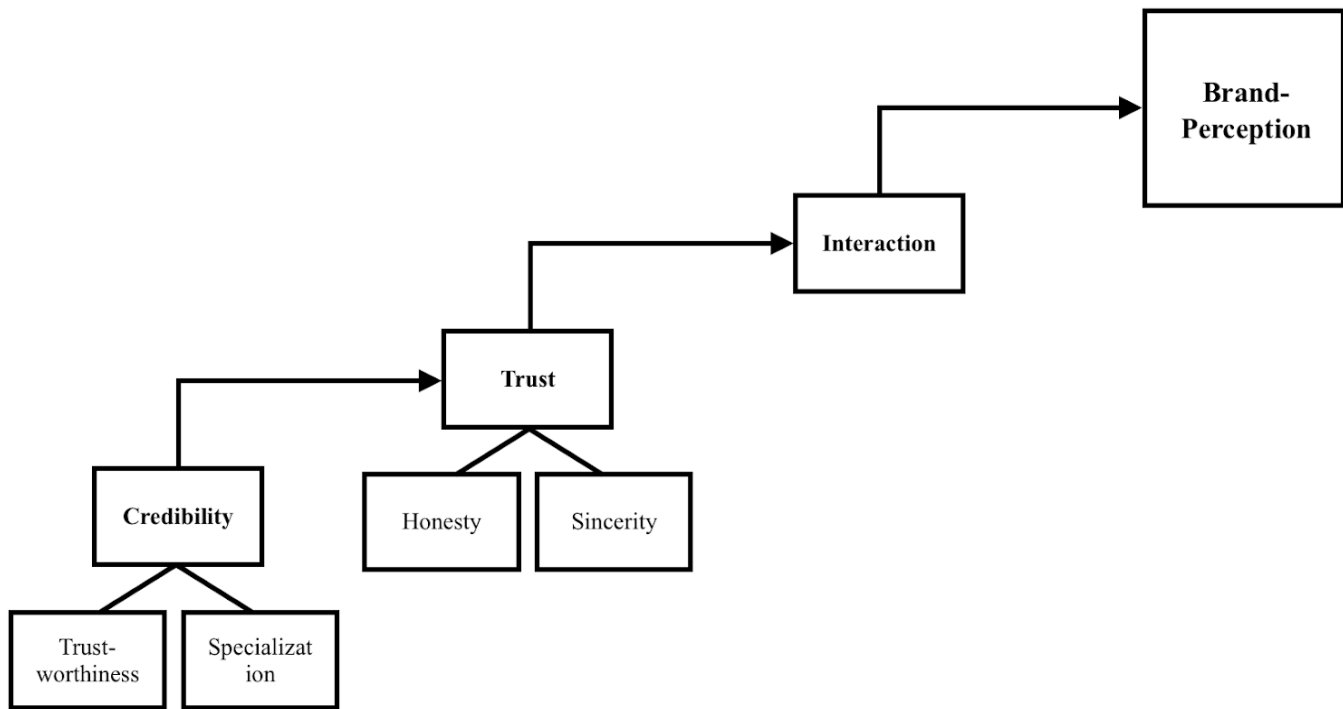


Fig. 1: *Illustration of the conceptual model.*

The figure gradually examines how the role of elements in conjunction with influencers influences the Generation Z's brand perception. Moreover, this research has found that brands are often using influencers to attract a wider range of customers through promotional posts on Instagram, thus, the audience need to form their own perceptions. Individuals' thoughts and opinions towards brands are shaped by credibility, trust, and interaction with influencers on Instagram; these factors are further investigated within the study to understand the vital role behind the perception of receivers of influencer marketing. The presented model lays the foundation for how further variables are affecting credibility. When credibility is achieved it leads to trust, which leads to improved interaction between the influencer and the follower as well as what role this plays in the individuals' brand perception. Furthermore, this research has found that the receiver of marketing is dependent on their resistance to social influence. In other words, the stronger these factors are towards an influencer the stronger perception of the brand image. Hence, the aim of presenting this model is to view if the consumer-influencer by these elements influences the perception brand and branded content, and how important they are for the interaction that needs to take place for the sake of the success of the influencers.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Philosophy

A research philosophy is defined by a set of ideologies and expectations regarding the evolution of knowledge throughout the embarkment of studies (Saunders et al., 2019). Some individuals may consider the personal ideologies they have of the reality surrounding them, or their own desire of what they feel is crucial to remain separated from their collected data before even carrying out research. The process of studying and comprehending a personal research philosophy requires the construction of reflexivity, or the ability to observe the personal thoughts and behaviors of yourself, as well as learning to the openness of investigating your own perspectives with the extent of criticism that would be devoted to the thoughts of others (Haynes, 2012). In the researcher role, it is encouraged to emphasize reflexivity, to identify and actively influence the connection among the philosophical perspectives and the conduction of your investigations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Saunders et al. (2019) furthest presents the five different main philosophies, whereas, positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism. All those different philosophies are vital to develop an understanding of how environments and societies are perceived as a point of view, also guiding the researchers of what methodological approaches are the most suitable to conduct (Saunders et al., 2019). The chosen philosophy for this research is interpretivism, and the explanation of why the researchers will stick to this philosophy will be explained further. The figure that is presented below is addressed to display the main values and natures of the chosen philosophy.

Interpretivism

Ontology <i>(Nature of reality or being)</i>	Epistemology <i>(What constitutes acceptable knowledge)</i>	Axiology <i>(Role of values)</i>	Typical Methods
Complex, rich Socially constructed through culture and language Multiple meanings, interpretations, realities Flux of processes, experiences, practices	Theories and concepts too simplistic Focus on narratives, stories, perceptions, and interpretations New understandings and worldviews as contribution	Value-bound research Researchers are part of what is researched, subjective Researcher interpretations key to contribution Researcher reflexive	Mostly inductive Small samples In-depth investigations Qualitative methods of analysis, but a range of data can be interpreted

Fig. 2. Table generated from Saunders et al. (2019) describing main values of interpretivism philosophy.

Taking into consideration the purpose of this paper, the research aims to understand how the different elements of trust, interaction, and credibility contributes to the perception of influencer marketing from the audiences' perspectives. This interpretivism philosophy was therefore the most accurate, due to its facilitation of understanding the patterns of the respondents. Interpretivism refers to the philosophy in which individuals develop social roles within societies, although it is essential to understand how people behave in diverse manners based on their personal values (Saunders et al., 2019). The theory furthermore emphasizes that the assessment of the behaviors of individuals that socializes has an impact on the growth of another's attitude (Saunders et al., 2019). The behavior and attitude of each respondent were fundamental throughout the process of examining their contributions during the focus groups considering the importance of interpretivism. Interpretivism believes that individuals and their social environments should not be investigated in a way that natural processes do, hence social sciences study should be distinctive compared to it. Individuals derive from distinct cultural origins; they expand and perceive social circumstances under varying conditions and at distinct intervals compared to each other. Interpretivism is skeptical of initiatives to establish general rules and assumptions that relate to all humans, since when complexity is reduced to assumptions, the crucial insights regarding people are missed. Interpretivism is inherently subjectivist through its emphasis on complexity, richness, multiple interpretations, and meaning making. Interpretivists acknowledge that the assessment of research data and findings, and hence their personal beliefs and views, play a significant part in the research study (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.2. Research Approach

The approach to obtain the aim of this research is through collection of data and a focus group to conduct information by researching furthest into the topic. The data collection and the focus group will give us a better understanding about how the generation Z perceives influencer marketing according to chosen elements through Instagram. Given that the philosophy used in this research, which is interpretivism, an inductive approach will be performed. Choosing an approach is important given that it determines how later processes of the study should be conducted (Saunders et al., 2019). However, since the paper mixes between finding and evaluating existing theories, to then create its own conceptual framework and identify themes, and so forth test this through the

interviews, then both deductive- and inductive approach is applied. The deductive theory simply means that the researchers first begin the collection and development of data, and the inductive approach is applied by identifying and exploring constructing a theory or framework based on the result (Saunders et al., 2019).

Since the choice of method is a qualitative study, and more in-depth on focus groups, it is related to the fact that the approach is to analyze deeper smaller samples. This analysis that is reviewed can then be built on perceptions about the behaviors and perceptions of what the paper aims to understand. Focusing on a smaller sample was therefore more appropriate. This is because the researchers will have a facilitative method to exercise their purpose while the research will deepen this connection between a selection of generation Z and influencers via Instagram. Understanding the behavior and then being able to evaluate it further led to an inductive approach to increase the dignity of the work. The figure that was previously created under the conceptual framework section will therefore be able to be further developed into a model based on the respondents' enabling understanding.

4.3. Research Strategy

In the chapter of literature review, the previous studies of influencer marketing and its relationship with consumers were presented. Even though most of these previous projects were informative in their chosen fields, they often relied on quantitative strategies when collecting data. Hence, the purpose of being able to perform a qualitative result stem from evaluating results more in-depth by the answers of the respondents directly, and not studying numbers or variables. In the past, qualitative methods have been valued as more non-scientific than other strategies (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2005). However, many other benefits that contradict this argument are explained. Hence, this approach provides an opportunity for researchers to gain an in-depth understanding, as well as the results can evaluative around the problematizations ((Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2005). Qualitative data in this research have contributed to a deeper understanding and analysis of the topic, based on the focus group where not only the respondents' answers were the center but also their behaviors and expressions. The main requirements of the chosen method meant having the ability to avoid bias within the subject, be able to analyze and present valid material based on previous literature (Ghuri & Gronhaug, 2010). In connection with

an inductive approach, the strategy was developed by applying focus group interviews with a small sample of respondents, of which a semi-structured strategy is also applied. Semi-structured interviews work in group interviews and are usually based on physical interviews rather than telephone interviews (Saunders et al., 2019), so the aim was to meet in the middle of this and conduct a video meeting. Through a semi-structured strategy, the opportunity was given for openness and development of the questions asked, hence the researchers were able to ask various follow-up questions to the respondents without feeling influenced by what others said. This further included an in-depth study of the subject and an understanding of their perceptions about the elements regarding influencer marketing.

4.4. Data Collection

This research collected material comprises primary data. The data obtained provided the opportunity to gain important knowledge to grant the reader with valid and relevant data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The searching for published paper was based on several keywords (e.g., influencer marketing, consumer-influencer relationships, Instagram influencers) through the library of Mälardalens University and its external links to other databases. Though, the main source used to conduct the findings of this paper was primarily the focus groups interviews.

Although this research resource was focusing on contexts, the material from the University library, other databases, and Google Scholar, which is referred to as a specialist search engine, increased the validity of the data obtained (Saunders et al., 2019; Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). Thus, only a few secondary data sources have been used to get access to numbers (e.g., previous quantitative data of which platforms is the mostly used), such as Statista and Instagram's own homepage. Most of the sources included in this paper were conducted to create the literature review, for the sake of gaining an understanding of the field. Other sources that were initiated were due to the fact of the researcher's gaining knowledge of how to then carry out their own data collection, the focus group interviews.

4.4.1. Focus Group Interviews

Since the data collected was restricted to the rapidly developing phenomena of influencer marketing, it was essential to continue the research utilizing primary data (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). Since the primary collected data might have greater insight into individuals' behaviors and backgrounds, primary data does have the ability of maintaining consistency in retaining with the aims and study issue (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). Focus groups were used to collect the primary data, in which respondents were asked concerning the connection with influencer marketing on Instagram, depending on the chosen elements, to acquire awareness regarding their perceptions of influencers. The use of a focus group recurred from the need of conducting reliable and valid collection of material (Saunders et al., 2019). The focus groups approach will be further presented in the following sections. Primary data, on the other hand, could have significant expense needs since researchers are often forced to travel further distances (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). Hence, the reason why the focus groups that were conducted were carried out on Zoom, to ease the process of both the researchers and the respondents.

4.5. Sampling

The sampling approach for this research is to collect participants for the focus groups. Qualitative research obtains a detailed explanation of a certain area (Saunders et al., 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2011). In this research, the aim is to collect data about how the consumers' perception of influencer marketing is impacted by the elements of trust, credibility, and interaction. Hence, it will further provide the research with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon with the help of the chosen concepts to achieve the purpose of the paper. To collect participants for the focus groups, purposive sampling was used. Bryman and Bell (2011) discuss purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling method, which means that the sample is not randomly picked. This sample procedure is based on the researchers' deliberate choice and is a suitable method to use when the research problems focus is to investigate a specific group of individuals that possess applicable information to the research area, thus, it seeks out important participants to gain relevant insight (Belk et al., 1989; Miles & Huberman, 2018).

In this research, participants are selected based on the relevant knowledge they can provide to answer the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, the sample needs to meet the criteria based on the relevant knowledge they can provide to answer the research question. Since the selected participants were required to share a few key characteristics to provide relevant results, they were categorized based on living in Sweden and they are all from generation Z, as well as being users of the social media platform Instagram. Considering the time frame of this paper, the researchers gain relevant and reliable information efficiently where a wide variety of Swedish participants with an Instagram presence and within the mentioned range were interviewed, which was deemed to be manageable for the gathering and analysis of the data. Since a typical focus group consists of six to ten members, a larger number could be difficult to manage (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The researcher's choice for this research was to collect 18 respondents divided into three smaller groups, whereas nine were women and the other nine were men. The choice behind having equal numbers of participants' gender was mostly relying on the aim of understanding the answers independent of the gender, or to discover independently of their answers. The participants' ages were all between 18 to 25, the choice of the age groups is to create possible diversification in opinions but at the same time all of them from generation Z.

4.6. Focus Groups

Furthermore, as focus groups were the method to collect data for this research, this will be elaborated in detail during this section. The difference between regular interviews and focus groups is that not only one person is interviewed at once, rather there is a smaller group interviewed together. The focus groups include open discussion between the respondents, but with minimal involvement of the perspectives of the researchers rather than them conducting the questions. The groups are shaped by the thoughts and opinions of the respondents, where the theme of interest of this paper will be used as a guide. As mentioned above, semi-structured interview guides have been used as an application to gain a deeper understanding of the focus groups. What differs from this interview and a structured one is that the questions are not asked in the same order to all respondents. The semi-structured guide is instead a more flexible strategy, hence increased openness, and deeper discussions (Saunders et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2009; Corbetta, 2003). The semi-structure is mostly predetermined by researchers in this case; however, follow-up and open-

ended questions will be asked when unforeseen situations occur, in the hope of not leaving any topic unanswered. The purpose of this approach is to not only focus on what and how is behind the answers, but to also be able to present why (Saunders et al., 2019).

The approach of the focus groups is suitable for the field of the investigation; hence it is based on the consumers' perception and experience, which can be answered freely during this strategy (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The focus group began with a short presentation of each participant, a brief explanation of the structure and execution of the upcoming discussion as well as to clarify the purpose of the paper, where we further conveyed the participants rights to not mention their names without further permission. The discussion began with open questions regarding the subject, and from these answers, the researchers tried to keep the conversation going through follow-up questions to gather as much knowledge as possible from the participants' past experiences. Moreover, the open question prevents any biased answers and focuses on the exact wording and explanation from each participant. Thus, it provided the researchers with the best possible foundation for exploring the participants' opinions on how their perception of influencers affects their perception of their branded content (Saunders et al., 2019). This process of gathering empirical data provided the authors with the possibility to capture the participants' perception of the situation and it gave a good research contribution rather than asking direct questions where there is a high probability of being limited. biased and strict answers.

4.6.1. Size of Focus Groups

According to Saunders et al. (2019), some people are not willing to participate in interviews and experiments, which require some sort of arrangement with the interviewee before conducting the interview to seek their permission to participate. This process could be done through telephone, email, or any other preferable way. However, to get in contact and reassure them that the people wanted to participate in the paper, the researchers provided them with an outline of the interview and the structure as well as informed them about their usefulness beforehand. Another way of reassuring the right participants about the research according to Bryman and Bell (2011) was to use polite language. In these focus groups, the researchers choose to have three small focus groups. In the testing period it showed the researchers that two smaller groups with four people did not enhance discussions or even bravery, instead the participants only waited for the others to talk.

Also, one focus group with six respondents was tested, but also was not counted as enough. Therefore, instead including three medium focus groups with six people in each were tested, whereas three women and three men. Also, one more reason for the larger number of participants in the focus group was because the research needed the variation of the opinions. The researchers neither wanted a too large group, to not have many discussions not leading to a complete tread, or too small groups where no discussions were awake.

4.6.2. The Composition of Focus Groups

Participants within a focus group should, according to Jacobsen (2002), have a required minimum of common experiences or criteria. This refers to whether the group should be considered homogeneous or heterogeneous. Regarding homogeneous groups the participants are as alike as possible, since this will provide relatively common experiences for the participants. In this research, the common link between the participants was that they are all students or working full-time, a part of Gen Z, and who are all active on social media. This often leads to an easier way to communicate within the group (Jacobsen, 2002.).

A heterogeneous group on the other hand, refers to a group where all the participants have different experiences and backgrounds. Groups of this type are often more creative since they have different points of views (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Due to this, it was important for the researchers to ensure that there were both similarities and differences amongst the participants, such as age, gender, and study or working areas. Therefore, a mix of these groups were chosen, the participants were homogenous in some respects but also heterogeneous in other aspects.

4.6.3. The Role of the Researchers

Bryman and Bell (2011) states that the correct term for an interviewer is moderator. Jacobsen (2002) discusses that moderators can maintain a passive or active role. A passive role means that the moderator starts the discussion by presenting the theme, ask the questions when needed, and listen to the discussion that occurs among the participants. Within this research, one of the researchers had the role as a moderator meanwhile the other researcher had the role of reviewing the content and ensuring that the questions were being answered.

The other role of a moderator could have been an active role. In this approach the moderator asks specific and targeted questions and thereafter lets the discussions flow for a while until they ask a new question to be discussed (Jacobsen, 2002.). In this research the discussion flowed easier within two of the focus groups whereas the moderators could have a rather passive role. Meanwhile in the other focus group, the moderator needed to have a more active role and ask the questions more specific for the discussions to start.

4.6.4. The Time and Place for Focus Groups

The discussion in the focus groups was held virtually instead of face-to-face. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that this refers to a discussion conducted on an online platform instead of a physical meeting. The advantages of collecting data this way is that it is less time-consuming, the cost is significantly lower and access to people long distance is possible (Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, it would be more efficient to have a virtual discussion due to time consumption and the expenses to meet up at a certain place. A preferable time for the meetings was communicated and to be agreed upon to ensure the attendance of the participants. The disadvantage of non-face-to-face discussion is that the moderators cannot observe the body language (Saunders et al., 2019), where the researchers may have missed out on noticing any clear discomfort or confusion from the respondents which could have had an importance on our paper. The discussion was held on the virtual platform Zoom which is a communication platform where every participant turned on their video before the discussion, mainly to show a sign of respect and prevent potential misunderstandings. This allowed the researchers to capture any reactions such as facial expressions.

4.6.5. Focus Group Interviews Guide

Before the focus groups can be performed, the moderators must decide whether to use themes or more detailed questions. By using a set of questions instead of themes it makes the focus groups more structured, but that is not beneficial in every case and therefore does this need to be decided beforehand (Bryman et al., 2021). In this research, the theme was presented to the participants in the beginning and then the moderators followed an interview guide to collect the material (Appendix 1, p. 61).

The opening question to the focus groups should intend to make the participants relaxed and comfortable within the context (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The participants within this research sat down and had the chat in Zoom open in front of them, whereas the moderators started the whole focus groups with an opening question, which the participants could think freely about and write down their thoughts. The opening question was “how do you use social media and why?” This was asked to make the participants comfortable and familiar with the theme by discussing together openly regarding the topic.

An interview guide contains several questions that can be constructed in different ways and depending on how the questions are phrased and in which format, the participants will answer differently. There are two types of questions that can be asked, open or closed. Open questions give the participants a chance to answer freely, and closed questions come with a set of alternatives for the participants to choose from (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In this research, open questions were used simply because the moderators wanted to start a discussion with each question and collect as much material as possible from each participant. The interview questions are available in Appendix 2 (p. 62). This is also relevant to the use of the semi-structured strategy, to follow-up any possible questions that awakens even more discussions during the interviews.

4.6.6. Pilot Test of Focus Groups

During the early stages of the research, it was in the minds of the researchers to conduct a pilot study. Pilot testing is defined as a well-developed process to be able to further develop potential methods, and to be able to eliminate potential problems (Nunan & Malhotra, 2020). The reason behind conducting a pilot study was to both be able to develop an experience of how we can build our focus groups. This meant, among other things, understanding the handling of different situations and being able to realize whether a different strategy should be used or whether our purpose of a focus group should suffice.

The execution of the pilot study involved a set-up of two smaller focus groups, with four respondents in each. What happened were positive points for the most part, while the more negative ones helped the researchers to further develop their conduct of the approach. Among other things, one of the negative points was that a type of saturation arose, where in the end, despite the variation of two different groups, only the same and similar responses were repeated. This could

be also because of the less knowledge of the interview guide of the researchers before. Hence, the decision to focus on a larger focus group, with six people, consisted of the idea that the goal of the work is not how many people say what, but what is said and explained is what we want to focus on. Thus, when the researchers tried out the strategy of having only one focus group with six people, everything went great, but we ended up with great answers, but not enough. This, because of the time of the focus groups then were estimated to almost 60 minutes and dividing that up on the six respondents it could be viewed that each only did discuss about ten minutes. Therefore, the researchers chose to meet in the middle of their pilot-test and resulted in conducting three medium focus groups with six respondents in each. Also, this time the gender got equal divided, and instead of having women more than men as respondent they amount were equal, to get an insight of their opinions and thoughts.

4.7. Data Analysis

The analysis of the collection of empirical material is the process of coding and connecting the data in text (Bryman & Bell, 2011). During the analysis process, the aim was to present the empirical findings to meet with our conceptual model to answer the research question. The collection of data is presented with a transcribed text, which was later analyzed to identify the main aspect of each question. Transcribing is the conversion between speech to text and allows a thorough examination of the concept covered in the focus groups (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The sounding of the recording were tested before the focus groups started, to ensure that the sound was registered. In this research, the focus groups were entirely conducted in the Swedish language since some respondents did not speak a second language, which also required a translation from the authors. Transcribing speech into text, the authors must be meticulous throughout the process where grammatical issues occur as well as individuals in the discussion speak over each other (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The primary approach for this paper was the structural coding approach. The analysis and process of transcribing were based on the conceptual framework, which provides the reader with a clear illustration of the main aspects that are covered in the focus group (Saunders et al., 2019).

To further analyze the collected data and identify important themes of this research, theory-driven thematic analysis was considered. This approach analyzes recurring topics and finds patterns, which was mentioned in the focus group by each participant (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The occurring themes in this paper are the consumer opinions, credibility, trust, and interaction of influencer marketing. Hence, the analyzed theme regards these three factors, which are described in detail in the empirical findings section, with the help of subheadings to easily attract the information as well as understand the relationship between each theme. The thematic approach should first analyze the collected data on a general level to gather an overall perspective of the collected answers and then to a more detailed approach where the interviewee analyzes key ideas from the theme that was attracted from the discussion (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The researchers of this paper analyzed the discussion from the focus groups and thereafter made a summary under each theme to create the relationship between the themes (Appendix 3, p. 63). This provides the reader with an insight into the discussion and highlights relevant topics, which will be analyzed later in the research.

4.8. Method Criticism

Based on the most recent, qualitative research is based on quality rather than quantity, which demands diverse standards between the two study categories (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The fundamental criteria for judging qualitative research are trustworthiness and confirmed, and they could be obtained by four basic criteria (Guba, 1981; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The (1) credibility, which involves issues such as verifying that the study is conducted properly and interpreting the data in accordance with the respondents. The (2) transferability, which describes the intensity of a smaller group as well as its scope, while the (3) dependability, which provides reliable information collection by different approaches, in this case both deductive and inductive. The (4) conformability, which prevents personal values of the investigators from biasing the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

For a variety of reasons, this paper was an illustration of the many perspectives about the consumers' perspective on influencer marketing and how they influence the brand perception. First and foremost, the respondent group selected for data collection was relevant to the study. Furthermore, the data collecting method had been used, as primary data were acquired with significant sample data via focus groups interview. Focus groups are useful in this form of study because they promote extensive debate and give a more in-depth knowledge of the various consumer interactions. Furthermore, reliable academic sources such as journals and peer-reviewed papers were applied to generate the various portions of the research study, which informed the good structure and reasoning behind the numerous arguments. The data gathered from various academic databases were an essential component of the study, since sources were routinely referenced and addressed, it was simple to grasp up on all the individual elements for validation purposes. When recording, transcribing, and analyzing the collected material for this project, the researchers have investigated ethical concerns. The investigators did not permit their subjective values to influence the research, and rather listened to the debates in the focus group discussions with an unbiased view and attitude. Finally, the research is limited to examining consumers from Sweden. Furthermore, the study intends to focus only on the media platform Instagram, hence Instagram users that belong to generation Z. The enlarged topic to investigate within of influencers and the generation Z has been delimited as much as possible so as not to end up in the absence of respondents and end this with an unanswered research question.

4.9. Ethical Aspects

There are requirements and obligations to consider conducting scientific studies. To begin, the researchers behind the paper must present the essential information to the participants, as well as information on each subsequent phase in the project (Saunders et al, 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, in this paper the participants were instructed further about research and what steps would follow next, before the information was gathered from them. An additional criterion to observe is the permission, which states that participants must be conscious that their contribution is not obligatory and that they may withdraw from the study at any time (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This has also been accomplished in this research. All respondents were asked in advance if they decided to engage and were also aware that it was entirely optional. Participants were also

requested for permission to record all through the focus groups, which was granted overwhelmingly.

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the third regulation considers confidentiality and anonymity of the information for all respondents. Which means that all material about the persons involved must be treated with extreme care so that no information spills to untrusted sources. All participants in this study are anonymized, and the transcribed data will not be used in the study. The transcribed data, on the other hand, can be divulged to other parties but will only be shared when contacting the researchers, as agreed upon by the participants. Another key restriction is the utilization rule, which states that the obtained material may not be reused in situations other than the original research. The last rule is that authors must not offer incorrect information about the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011 Bryman & Bell, 2011)

5. Findings

This paper shows the results of the focus group will be emphasized and presented further. The chapter is divided into smaller subsections to make it easier to follow. The research is limited to examining consumers living in Sweden. Furthermore, the study intends to focus only on the media platform Instagram, therefore the next delimitation is to be Instagram users. Instagram users are selected on the basis that they belong to generation Z.

5.1. Introduction to Focus Group

In this subsection a background of the findings will be given to achieve the purpose of giving the reader a fundamental understanding of the next section that will provide the answer of the respondents. To make it go with a flow while presenting, the huge tables of interviews will not be presented in text during this chapter, however they are found in Appendix 1 and 2. The first appendix is the outline of the interview and what steps are gone through, while the next appendix addresses the interview questions. The methodological approach that was conducted was three focus groups with six participants in each, between the ages of 18 to 25, whereas three of them were women and three were men. To further get an insight of the respondent's diverse characteristics a figure will be inserted below, containing general information of each participant.

Focus Group	Participant	Age	Gender & Occupation
F1	P1	22	Male, working
	P2	21	Female, student
	P3	23	Female, working
	P4	20	Male, student
	P5	18	Male, student
	P6	25	Female, working
F2	P7	19	Female, student
	P8	21	Female, working
	P9	21	Male, student
	P10	18	Female, student
	P11	23	Male, working
	P12	20	Male, working

F3	P13	25	Male, working
	P14	24	Female, working
	P15	20	Female, student
	P16	19	Female, student
	P17	21	Male, student
	P18	20	Male, student

Fig. 3. *Summary of the Participants*

As the figure reveals, the participants that have been chosen to do have at least one more component in common, more than that they all belong to generation Z, they all are either students or working. One more thing they do have in common is that they do use Instagram daily, and they all follow influencers. Not much weight has been put on the type of influencers or specific brand during the collection of data, hence the complete attention was on the relationship itself and how it in its order could influence the perception of the branded content. More than most of the respondents were all very active on Instagram. Other respondents, such as, P3, P6, P13, P14, and P16 were not as much, and instead they could stick to using the application up to one to two hours a day as a maximum. “Instagram is one of my all-time favorite applications, you can use it whenever, and whatever mood you are in”, P5 and P10 explained. “I did appreciate Instagram more before, but I believe that all those social media applications somehow have lost something”, P6 said. She further explained that still Instagram gained some of her attention since she lowered his following to only things and people she liked.

The respondents were all either still studying or have started working full-time. Even though their paths were different in life, or at least not as like each other, their expressions regarding their opinions of influencers were vital to analyze. Their opinion is because they all follow some kind of influencers and have been exposed to various kinds of influencer marketing. The influencers themselves will not be presented further, due to the first delimitation not going further within the influencers of the brands, only focusing on the relationship between the consumer-influencer. However, basic information regarding the influencers includes that they have diversification in their content, whereas the respondents followed them in diverse categories (e.g., beauty, food, lifestyle, and fashion). It is valuable to mention is that the categories found also mirror the interests of the respondents. Moreover, all the influencers mentioned during the interviews are Swedish or celebrities from other countries, but most of them belonged to the category-influencers, mega-influencers, macro- and nano-influencers, based on the number of followers they had.

5.2. Definition of Concepts

The first step aimed to break the ice between the respondents, with the goal to have their discussions more open and minimize any risks of anyone not feeling safe. During this step the researchers had the mission to present the concepts that are in center for the interview. Thus, before explaining the concepts we believed that asking the respondents of their opinions and thoughts would be vital. Influencer marketing is presented based on the findings from secondary data, and according to the thoughts of the participants they all were on the same page as the definition itself. But, briefly based on their thoughts, they could receive this marketing in differ ways which also will be addressed further in next sections.

P5 was the one mentioning that the influencers may have had many of their followers looking up to them and referring to them as “fans”. He however made it clear that this would mostly apply to the influencers with huge numbers of followers and not influencers with less followers. P2, P4, P15, and P9 all agreed on the basis that the influencer marketing could be more referring to “normal” people and not only celebrities. The rest of the focus group brought up that in the end of the day, the influencer marketing was just a kind of employment by different companies to these influencers. “These individuals get paid to brainwash us, and since we see them more genuine than celebrities, we believe them despite the fact that we know they are getting paid to say all those things” P5 explained during F1, which was like what P11 and P13 mentioned from the other groups.

Lastly during this section, the concepts of trust, credibility, and interaction within influencer marketing. Only basic information regarding the elements were presented by the researchers and in a very objective way, to not risk mentioning any biased thoughts. The participants all understood the elements, however, only the element of interaction got some question marks on. Therefore, the researchers explained that interaction within influencer marketing could refer to the followers interacting (e.g., liking, commenting, and sharing) with the influencer directly. “That is true. I do not even trust an influencer that is not credible, but as soon as I trust an influencer and start liking them, I start interacting with their content” P3 from F1 said and got agreeing comments from other respondents. However, after the explanation, all were on the same page and the next step got introduced. They discussed how the concepts affect influencer marketing as well as why influencers have such an impact on the decision making of everyday life from their perspectives.

5.3. Credibility

Respondents P3, P4, P7, P11, P15, and P18 state they appreciate when influencers show their personal side and are open with their problems. One important thing mentioned several times during the discussions was that they like the influencer to be themselves on all platforms as in real life or at least stick to their image they created on social media.

When an influencer collaborates with a brand it needs to be a fit for both the brand and the influencer. P2 claims that “A beauty influencer cannot promote electronics”, whereas P5, P14, and P18 say that they would not collect information about something from someone that does not have the knowledge or specialization in the area. P10 and P7 states that they sometimes use influencers as a source. All respondents also claims that credible influencers would only collaborate with credible brands. Where the majority continued adding that this would make the trust the brands as well and prefer purchasing from them. Influencers have been seen to say that they do not want to cooperate with several companies then do not believe in the product, which has increased their trust in the influencers, according to P17. However, if the opposite is displayed, the relationship the followers believe they have created could be destroyed, according to P14. This was acknowledged by several respondents in the discussion. Several respondents stated that Q&As have been an important factor in improving credibility since it is a way of communication and asking direct questions to the influencer. Product reviews and honest opinions are much more appreciated by the respondents, as long they are not forcing their opinions on them. Most influencers have many appreciations towards authenticity, and some appreciate the created character and image they have created. P10 states “Influencers should be themselves and say what they think as long it is not discriminating”.

According to the respondents, the credible influencer is more trustworthy and mostly already has proven it. This was discussed when comparing influencers with a different number of followers. The respondent claims that it is easier to get in contact and reach out to an influencer with a smaller following base. P5 claims that he has gotten in contact with an influencer, and he believes the reason behind it is that it is easier to see messages when you do not have many followers. P6 continues claiming that she believes they need to increase their following by doing good, which has led them to build this relationship and increase interaction on their page. This was covered in

all discussions. When more brands want to collaborate with an influencer, it means he/she is doing good by themselves and credible, according to most respondents. They also claim that the trust because of this has improved and would most likely do what the influencer says. The focus groups further discuss how this influence their perception on brands the influencer promotes. P3, P16, P11 and P18 mentions that brands promoted from highly credible influencer would generate a positive attitude, the audience would most likely have the same attitude towards things as their “favorite” influencer according to many respondents.

P3, P6, P11, P13, P14, and P17 were the participants that also brought up political and humanitarian perspective within the credibility factor. “Honestly, maybe I am overreacting, but I feel that someone supporting for instance a racist politic group, how should I see them as credible?” P3 mentions, as P6 in the same group added “Or even worse, when they make some kind of collaboration with such parties, I believe that more than that is bad for them since they will lose huge numbers of followers, it is also bad for brands that have collaborated with them since they also will get affected”. P13 and P14 mentioned also that they do not see influencers credible when they do not take acts in politics or similar. “I believe, when there is war or humanitarian crisis somewhere in the world, especially when it something all over the news, then I cannot perceive the influencer as credible when they are living their lives completely fine without mentioning it at all” P14 explained. P13 agreed and said that maybe some influencers are afraid of sharing opinions in such manners, “but, I feel that they are too fake when they are afraid of speaking for justice. If someone would unfollow you because you stand against discrimination, killing, or war, then let it be. I would rather see that the influencer needs to see the importance of this, at least from my perspective, I appreciate these such things a lot”. This statement was also appreciated between the other participants and the topic awakened more discussions regarding the issue, which included further perspectives for the researchers.

5.4. Trust

All participants in the third group discussion acknowledge that trust is a concept that is hard to build and easily destroyed. Respondents P13, P14, and P17 agree that they have a difficult time trusting a person especially if they never personally met the person. The discussion further continued what it would take for them to trust a person. Most respondents from the groups want to feel acknowledged and want the influencers they follow to have a past with minimal scandals and controversies. P15 states “I would start believing a person if I have seen he/she can be trusted, if they are credible enough”. In other words, more respondents claim that an influencer has been seen lying and acting unethical several times before it would affect their trust decision. However, all respondents also state that they trust people if they believe their actions are ethical and share the same values. P10 states “I only trust when I believe the person is taking the right decision to then form a relationship with them”.

According to the respondents, it is essential for them to be recognized for their support in a way. Several respondents have also unfollowed influencers due to their arrogance and lack of content. P3, P5, P7, P16, and P17 claim that engagement from the influencers is the first step to getting to know them since they have not met personally. Personal and unique content is much appreciated through all three group discussions. P5 and P6 claim that responses to private messages are also very much appreciated. P6 states “We understand that it is difficult to respond to every private message from every follower, but, once in a while a like or a sign of acknowledgment would be appreciated”. Sharing the bad sides, struggles and emotions gets people closer as well as being authentic which would set them apart from other influencers. Several respondents stated that it is nice to see that the influencers have their feet on the ground and still are human with all the recognition they get. These discussions most of the participants were on the same page, that influencers with less numbers of followers could be seen as more genuine since there are lots of chances of them responding to messages. P9 and P15 mentioned that they recognize influencers that are very kind and responsive to messages and interactions with the followers, but as fast as they gain huger numbers of followers they stop. “Maybe it is just harder to respond, but for me, sometimes I perceive it as they start seeing themselves too important to answer us” P10 said.

When researching the topic and through the participants, it is shown that trust and liability from the influencers are vital and have an influence on their followers. The audience is more interested in the influencer rather than the brand they promote, whereas too much promotional content can damage the image of the influencer since it is portrayed as only wanting money. Several participants in the discussion group mentioned that an overwhelming amount of promotional posts hurts the engagement from the followers, where P6 and P14 both claim that they do not appreciate too many promotional posts since they do not know how to react. P9, P10, P14, P15, and P17 all claim that Swedish influencers with minimal recognition internationally are less likely to “spam” pictures and branded promotional posts since they believe they know their audience very well. There are times when influencers do not get paid, however genuinely promote a product or a service that they enjoy. This way they earn the trust of their following and capture their audience. Also, the brand benefits from social media marketing since it attracts a wider range of customers.

A highly trusted influencer has been discussed to generate a positive attitude towards brands. Most of the participants answered that they would at least look at the brand that relates to their “favorite” influencer. Words and recommendations from a trusted influencer change many followers' opinions. According to P1 and P5, a controversial influencer would not affect an already established and well-known brand; however, an influencer needs to stick to their area of skills, otherwise, the credibility will decrease. Influencers have a huge influence on the brand when it comes to marketing it on social media. There are times when influencers do not get paid, however genuinely promote a product or a service that they enjoy. This way they earn the trust of their following and capture their audience, with built trust most respondents' states that they want to engage more with the influencer. P15 and P16 say that especially when it comes to beauty influencers, they have seen an increase in interaction between the followers and the influencers, where they communicate through questions about a specific brand or product. Most respondents in all discussion groups agree and mention because of this they have seen a lot of Q&A's, where the follower asks, and the influencer answer the questions. P4, P12 and P15 states that they are more likely to engage in some sort of communication with people they trust. This way the brand benefits from social media marketing since it attracts a wider range of customers.

The discussion continued further where most participants stated they perceived appearance, as well as the engagement rate of an influencer, does affect their perception of brands to some extent, however, according to P1 he focuses on the influencers' specialization on the promoted brand, Thus, it is very understandable to not want to be associated and interact with anything close to an influencer with a bad reputation. However, P3 and P18 mentions that influencers with bad reputation are often more engaging, and those brands get more recognition. However, brands that collaborate with controversial influencers are not getting my attention, according to a minority of the respondents. The participants have made it clear that as influencers they need to take precautions about how they portray brands as well as not overdoing it. Their audience prefers when the branding or marketing of a product is genuine with their actual thoughts about it. P11 states “I like when the person I look up to tries to get to know me or at least provide something I find interesting”.

5.5. Interaction

The focus group began with a discussion of the purpose behind creating an account on Instagram, where the participants had several reasons. Respondents P1, P5, P9, P16, and P18 all stated that the reason behind their daily usage of Instagram is to interact with other users and keep up with their ”favorite” peoples’ lives. Respondents P2, P11, P15, P14, and P7 prefer to upload and share content whereas most of the rest registered on Instagram due to all his friends and family having an account. Most of the participants are currently active on the platform, whether they use it to like, comment, share or chat with other people and all participants reveal that they have gained new followers and friends due to the similarities they have. P1 prefers to watch other users' content rather than post himself since he does not want to share his personal life on social media. All participants are aware of influencers on the platform. P4, P5, and P16 claim that they follow influencers depending on the content they prefer and the best thing about Instagram is its visual nature. In other words, they follow influencers based on their lifestyle and similarities. P14 mentions that she follows two Swedish influencers named Bianca Ingrosso and Therese Lindgren, and that she follows them because they both like the fashion and beauty aspect of their content. The participants further state that they show who they are through their Instagram posts, where they showcase their personalities and uniqueness, the shown vulnerability creates trust in the influencers.

Other influencers mentioned a lot during the discussion are Kenza, Pewdiepie, Anis Don Demina, Filip Dikmen, QueenFeyli, and Ida Warg amongst others. Many respondents from each group claim consistency in their posts and that humor is a huge factor when deciding which influencer to follow. Interaction leads to more involvement by the followers. P9 says that friends and other social media platforms are a good way to discover new influencers with similar interests. P3 continues to explain that bad experiences from these influencers lead to Word-of-Mouth, which can lead to a loss of followers, where she explains that it is important for the influencer to always be active on the social media pages and interact with their audience for promotions to have an influence. According to P14, "It is not enough to only be active but rather genuine, because some people can see through them". The discussion swayed towards the idea that engaging influencers always are preferred, where some sort of relationship is created, as P7 states, "We feel connected with influencers when they respond to our messages and comments". All respondents claim that this relationship is created through the functions of Instagram that enables them to comment, like, share and meet new followers with similar interests.

P3 continues by saying "More promotional posts would not make me interested in a brand, rather feel annoyed, because it makes me feel that they are only doing it for their profit". Respondents P3 and P6 claim that they can sense when influencers are trying to portray their opinions and thoughts to them and are appreciated if it is a trustworthy influencer. Similar topic was also up brought by P14 and P12, where they felt interrupted when the influencer would repeat the same branded content many times. P2 claims that she follows influencers because of their interest in their lifestyle, and beauty tips and to communicate with other people with similar interests. Respondents P9, P10, P16, and P15 claim that even though influencers try to be as genuine as possible, their opinion will rub off on the followers. P7 continues claiming that it is because the amount of time we spend with them, our opinions are becoming more and more similar.

Additionally, when discussing influencers, most participants are following beauty influencers that mostly promote their brands, whereas the participants got divided into the focus group. Beauty influencers are likely to create a personal brand where the respondents discussed the credibility and trust within an influencer promoting a self-created brand. Respondents P1, P6, P14, and P11 stated that not one person would talk bad about their own product. P6 states that "Why would you talk bad about your own brand?", where she explains that it would not be believable or trustworthy

in that case. Whereas respondents P3 and P4 answered, bad publicity does not exist, and negativity is more visible online, in other words, we should not judge before trying. For P2 and P16, personal amusement and the personality of the influencer are important elements. P6 and P13 argue that the followers of influencers need to be careful in who they trust since the image they portray on social media is the image they want their audience to see and may not be true.

Finally, the discussion of quitting the interactions got awakened by some respondents mentioning how they unfollowed many influencers. P3 argue that “I do not continue following someone when they start to show off and only think about money. For instance, someone making collaborations with many different companies that are competing, how are we supposed to believe you?”. P6 agreed and mentioned “I also hate when they make us followers feel dumb, I mean, we know how this marketing works. It is just that, sometimes one influencer is so genuine, and you feel connected to them because you maybe have followed them for three years, and from nowhere their personality changes and you see a completely different person”. Many respondents brought up the issue of that the influencer needs to be real to get the interaction they hope for, you need to create personal connections with your followers.

“I love it when an influencer makes honest recommendations, I do not want to see a person speaking positive about every and each brand they collaborate with. Be honest, show that you have tried this out. Do not only make it to take your money and go” P12 mentions. This revealed the perspectives of the respondents that they appreciated when the influencers made for instance videos trying out the products directly. P14 commented that “I do not interact so much with influencers, but when they actually show you such pictures of before and after, my interaction level increases directly”. Many agreed that trying products in front of the followers, giving honest reviews (e.g., bringing up negative sides of the brand as well), and shows real moments of trying the brand are increasing the level of interaction.

6. Discussion

The information obtained in this study through primary data has resulted in the findings regarding influencer marketing, and how the consumers' perception of brand gets impacted by influencers based on different elements. The answers obtained from the interviews are similar and are based on the respondents' own experiences, therefore this chapter aims to discuss the results more closely.

The researchers decided to analyze further on the field of influencer marketing and to collect in-depth data on the relationship between the individuals and the influencers. Hence, the respondents were all from generation Z, where their ages were between 18-25. The aim of diversifying in the ages was to get a point of view from each age. Also, all the respondents were active on Instagram daily and have been exposed to influencer marketing by following some directly. To make the discussion even more understandable for the reader, the chapter will be divided into smaller subsections.

6.1. Credibility

When the audience has a positive perception of an influencer, that will say sees them as credible, it strengthens their relationship, and the influencer has a greater chance of forming their audience's reactions and behavioral responses. This outcome occurs when the audience is interested in the influencers' lifestyle and content, where the improved interest leads to the followers' perception of credibility increases (Belanche et al., 2021), thus, businesses have been seen to use credible influencers as a marketing approach to gain positive attitudes towards their brand. This displays how different consumer responses are used towards branded content (Lee & Kim, 2020).

In Ohanian's (1990) study, the author presents a model explaining credibility. Credibility is based on three aspects, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and knowledge, which explains the overall perception of an influencer influences the judgment of their audience and affects the endorsed brand. The results revealed that prefer influencer that is genuine, showcase their lifestyle, and expresses their opinions and feelings as long it isn't forced upon the audience. The influencers' way of communicating through Q&As and responses to comments is discussed as a good way to create a relationship, whereas openness and honesty gain the trust of their followers. The findings revealed that influencers should choose an area of expertise and promote brands they genuinely

believe in, which enhances their trust. P2 states in the discussion that “A beauty influencer cannot promote electronics”. This could result in confusion and the audience disbelieving the influencer. This is where trustworthiness comes in and can change the upcoming elements.

Credibility was measured as to how it would affect an individual’s brand perception. Brand image is a concept used to promote and communicate with the audience (Ghauri & Cateora, 2021). The findings of this study propose that the credible influencer, whether it being honesty, working with several well-established and credible brands, promoting because of self-belief, and/or posting attractive content influencer have a high rate of positively affecting their audience perception. This result indicates that most respondents believe this influencer where, at last, will share similar opinions and would at least look at the promoted brand. Therefore, the result of this research shows credible influences improve the trusted relationship with their audience, engage the audience, and shape a positive attitude toward brands. The perception is influenced by the influencer opinions they portray. The credibility element also includes the reputation of the influencer. For instance, one influencer having the reputation that they only work for money and that their reviews are not actually that real, they will not be trusted by the follower later.

6.2. Trust

Trust is an influential factor in the consumer process behavior (Dwidienawati et al., 2020), and can both have a positive and negative influence on a business's brand image (Bojang, 2017). Trust is complicated where the physical absence has made the phenomena vulnerable (Hoffman et al., 1999), where several respondents have a hard time trusting a person they have never met. However, the influencer has developed in which they know how to engage their audience, by sharing personalized content, and showcasing their emotions and struggles the audience has built a relationship according to several respondents. Their perceived appearance is discussed as being important in the trust factor. Nevertheless, for a relationship to work the followers require some sort of acknowledgment from influencers. The respondents highly value if the influencer could respond or like their comments. P6 states, “We understand that it is difficult to respond to every private message from every follower, but, once in a while a like or a sign of acknowledgment”. The established trust increases the engagement of the audience. Some respondents state that they are more likely to engage with people they trust. A highly appreciated communication method is

Q&As where many influencers have product and brand reviews. Several factors are also acknowledged to destroy trust. According to the majority of “content spam” in form of promotional posts is harming the trusted relationship because they feel that the genuine aspect disappears, and the only motive is to trick their audience to earn money.

Trust is based on an experience and takes time to build the relationship (Zsigmondová et al. 2021), which is showcase in the findings. Most respondents’ states that they only trust when their values and action align and are deemed acceptable, which takes time. In addition to the created trust between influencers and their audience, the findings indicate that a trusted influencer is believed in, to the extent that the opinions and thought they portray become the audiences as well. An influencer that is trying to understand its audience is more likely to get them on their side. The importance of having trust between the relationship of the consumer and influencer reflect to that the element of trust makes your following base like a fan base. A fan base includes a higher level of interaction by the consumer, which also will positively impact the influencer that also in their order will get higher chances of better brand collaborations. When a trusted influencer promotes brands specifically and matching to their area of expertise, the audience is more likely to engage with the brand. This even attracts a wider audience and makes the algorithm of the influencer increase.

6.3. Interaction

The visual nature of the social media platform Instagram is highly appreciated by the respondents, where businesses have taken advantage of influencers to promote their brands (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Therefore, it is important to investigate the interaction aspect between influencers and their followers’ to fully understand the functions of interaction on Instagram and its effects on the consumer’s brand perception. Since it affects everyone differently. However, an influencer often has a specific type of following. They are often categorized in lifestyle, beauty, fashion, gaming, humor, etc. This allows their audience to pick which influencer they want to follow depending on their own interests, which also gives the brands an understanding of which influencer could be the most suitable for their brand when collaborating. When the similar interests are provided then also the higher interaction there is, that will say, someone interested in reading and

academic matters may not be interested in gaming influencers as much. It just refers to the opposite interest and that the consumers find their path to the most accurate influencer for themselves.

Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction attempts to describe the human imagined social relationship and the creation of a distant relationship, which is created through the interaction between two parties. The interactive environment of Instagram strengthens the parasocial relationship, where the social connection increases the emotions, interests, and time of an individual. This relationship is exploited by influencers due to the created trust and the strong ties with their audience, which increases engagement (Martensen et al., 2018). Instagram contributes to the relationship between an influencer and his/her audience due to their social and virtual activities. When the audience addresses the Instagram post of an influencer, it strengthens the closeness. The similarities in interest between influencers, and their audience and functions of Instagram such as comments, likes, and the follow button are used to create "connectedness" between people distant from each other. Thus, it is important for influencers to constantly engage their audience through e.g., stories, pictures, and videos (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), where consumers are more likely to engage with user-generated content that matches the personalities of the audience (Lou, 2021).

There are several research that explores the interaction between influencers and their audience. The influencers use Instagram to enhance communication in the form of sharing experiences, ideas and discussing similar interests (Cheung et al., 2021), however, businesses are using an influencer to promote their brands (Jin & Ryu, 2020). The result of this research suggests that the audience is more interested in the influencer rather than the brand, where only promotional posts have a negative effect. The audience is also seen to highly engage in their "favorite" influencer posts, whereas non-controversial influencers are seen to be highly affected in attracting customers. A recurring topic is that brands that use influencers' that stick to their area of specialization rather than portraying their opinions and their audience are more effective to gain a positive attitude, especially when it comes to beauty influencers.

7. Conclusion

Hence, the enlarged topic to investigate within has been focused as much as possible so as not to end up in the absence of respondents and end this with an unanswered research question. These boundaries have also been important as the authors have had a limited period to relate to. In this section more information regarding the restrictions the researchers had to stick within is addressed an idea for future research.

Influencers are a phenomenon that is rapidly growing and using them as marketers for various brands is evolving. The aim of this paper is therefore based on the importance of this topic in nowadays discussions, where the presence of influencer marketing on Instagram is only growing. The findings presented in this research indicate that consumers are highly influenced by Instagram Influencers due to a variety of reasons. Referring to the research question: ” *How do the elements of credibility, trust, and interaction with influencers influence Generation Z’s perception of branded content?*”. The findings revealed that these elements all together contribute to the perception of the brand and branded content for the consumers, and as the conceptual framework conducted by the researchers, the one leads to the other. The stronger these elements working together, the higher influence it has on the perception of brands that the influencer promotes.

The results indicated that the audience believes in the influencer due to the presented factors, which leads to the opinions and thoughts of the audience will at some point be altered by the influencer's perceived opinions. Therefore, credible, and trustworthy influencers have a higher chance of influencing their followers which results in positive attitudes towards the brand that is promoted, which at least would generate consumer engagement. Recommendations from trusted influencers is appreciated and generates a favorable attitude, towards a brand where most of the audience would prefer engaging with the brand that is associated with the influencer. The credible influencer refers to their trustworthiness, how believable are they in the point of view of the follower. Also, the reputation goes along with this, since this enchases the level of credibility, and in its turn lead to a consumer-influencer relationship built on trust. Thus, the trust takes time to build, and any components can affect this. But as soon as the trust is established in the influencer, it directly leads to higher level of interaction with them and their content they create.

However, one important discovery in this research is that the presented factors contribute to the relationship created between the influencers and their audience and is a fundamental part in the individuals' perception. The element of credibility is the foremost reason that contributes the consumer to further see this certain influencer as trustworthy and trust them, which broadens the chance of interacting further with them. It is fundamental for both influencers and companies to understand these elements, to see how the consumers evaluate such elements, and how much they attribute to later actions (e.g., purchase behavior or unfollowing).

Moreover, one aspect that was not expected is that some of the respondents mentioned a lot of deep personalities of the influencers, such as sharing their emotions, personal life, and authentic actions playing a huge part in the trust-building. Also, the influencers' choice of what to brand and market, does influence the perception of audiences. Such as, the trustworthiness of the influencer may reduce if they every week, market for products from brands in the same field and that are competitors, or market products they do not apply to themselves (e.g., marketing a Samsung phone when they only use Apple). Neither too many collaborations nor sponsorships increases the credibility since the influencer is only viewed as an employee and less trustworthy comes up from the follower's perspective.

Therefore, the relationship is reinforced by building up the level of trust, to make the next elements contribute to the higher interaction. The relationship is for instance stronger when you have followed the influencer for a great time span, somehow that would be like a personal connection. When these elements are all greatly perceived it will furthest make the influence positive, whereas the positive attitude amongst others will increase.

During the collection of data in the focus groups, there were aspects not expected that were brought up. Such as, the respondents mentioned that generation Z, by the huge access and knowledge they have compared to other generations, know much more about issues such as sustainability, humanitarian crisis, and politics. This refers to the findings of them, despite their young ages, are more educated in everyday issues and they prefer when the influencers take actions or brings such topics up. When they also are working for such crisis, then the level of credibility and trust increases, and the interaction gets influenced. These kinds of discussions made the researchers thus reveal that the younger respondents may not put as much attention to these matters compared to the older participants.

7.1. Limitations and Future Research

The respondents achieved high level of findings, where many aspects were found and most of the issues were mentioned. Due to the fact of the broad phenomena, this paper had to be focused to not end up with the risks of not having any accurate findings to present. Also as mentioned earlier, this research has been focusing on Sweden geographically of choosing the respondents, and focusing of age groups from generation Z. Also, only the branded content on Instagram was the focus, due to it being the platform most used for influencers, maybe other platforms could be compared in the future to enhance their chances of competing. One idea that the researchers already have is that in the future research conducting comparing studies of different generations would be interesting to follow. One more perspective could be to compare generations of different countries, with the help of either quantitative research or mixed methods. As most Nordic countries are like each other, great research would be investigating and comparing European, and non-European countries.

Due to lack of time, the research only focused on the relationship itself between the consumer and the influencer and how it influences the branded content perception, therefore further researching within certain influencers for brands could not be conducted. That is also a potential area for future researchers, where one could compare different fields of marketing, brands, or even influencers. Moreover, due to the nature of this paper to be qualitative, a great opportunity could be that putting together two methodological approaches in one (e.g., qualitative, and quantitative) and comparing the different findings to broaden the results. Since the findings revealed further differences of the younger and older generation Z, one research could also be conducting this. The different futural research that are mentioned could be important for brands and influencers to understand, to be able to work further on the consumer-influencer relationship and focus on answering such gaps.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Schedule of the Focus Group Interview

All topics in order	Description of the topic
<i>Presentation to the group:</i>	During this presentation the research and its purpose will be further explained. Furthest, the roles of the researchers and how the interview will be conducted is also clarified.
<i>Define concepts:</i>	To minimize any possible risks of misunderstandings, there will be a clear presentation of the different concepts that will be at the head of the interview. Whereas influencer marketing, trust, credibility, and interaction.
<i>Questions regarding the respondent:</i>	This step refers to a focus on the respondents themselves, both for them to break the ice between each other, and for the sake of the interview to understand their characteristics for the analysis.
<i>Questions regarding the influencer marketing:</i>	This step aims to understand their main thoughts of influencer marketing before going in depth.
<i>Questions regarding the relationship with influencers:</i>	This goes along with the step before and is a fundamental step for the next. During this section the aim is to understand how much the respondents follow and engage with influencers they follow or know.
<i>Questions based on the chosen elements:</i>	As the previous step focused on influencer marketing generally, this step will focus on the question based on the chosen elements: trust, credibility, and interaction.
<i>Sum up</i>	During the last section of the interview, it is important to make some time to ask the respondents if they are satisfied with what has been addressed, and if they have any additional thoughts.

Appendix 2. The Focus Group Interview

Parts in interview	Questions
<p>Part 1: <i>Questions regarding the respondent</i></p>	<p>Where are you from? How old are you? Do you study or work? What are your interests?</p>
<p>Part 2: <i>Questions regarding the influencer marketing itself:</i></p>	<p>Do you follow any influencers? How many? Do your interests mirror the choice of influencers? Does your cultural background mirror the choice of influencers? Why did you start following these influencers?</p>
<p>Part 3: <i>Questions regarding the relationship with influencers:</i></p>	<p>Do you relate to the influencers in any types? Does this relationship affect your perceptions of brands? Do you look up their kind of marketing or ignore it, that will say, do you double-check what they say on advertisements? Have you ever bought products because of influencers? Have you ever used their discount codes?</p>
<p>Part 4: <i>Questions based on the chosen elements:</i></p>	<p>What makes the influencers you follow credible? Do you blindly trust all branded content, or have you ever acted in a certain way based on what you do not like? Have you ever seen the influencer posting about a brand that is not good? Can you trust the influencer on what they promote? Does your trust get affected since you know they are paid to say this? Have you ever unfollowed an influencer due to less trust? How do you interact with influencers? Does your interaction base on other elements?</p>

Appendix 3. Thematic Analysis

Credibility	Trust	Interaction
Openness increases credibility	Establishment in a specific area increases their trust towards their promotions	Communicate and interact with their "favorite" people on Instagram
Influencers need to earn the audiences trust	Trusted influencers generate positive attitudes towards brands.	Influencers should not force their opinions on Influencers
If the influencer collaborates with already well establish brands it increases credibility	Responding to messages and sharing their personal life contributes to a trusted relationship	The audience interact with influencers mostly through comments and likes but also by private messaging and different reactions
Review products and honest opinions are appreciated	Trust increases brand awareness	Exciting content attracts attention and their interacting increases
Authenticity appreciated	Trust build relationships	Audience feels connected and closeness with continues engagement
Influencers credibility is improved when they collaborate with brands that fit their perceived image	Too much promotional post harms trust	Attracts attentions towards the brands
Changes the follower's opinion over time	When influencer tries to understand their followers the trust factor improves	Interaction increases if there is trust