MK7227 Postgraduate Dissertation

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Component	Comments	Weight	Actual Mark
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Social Media Influencers: Exploratory Analysis on the Relationships Between Female Millennials and Influencers

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Royal Docks School of Business and Law, University of East London for the degree of
MSC International Business Management

September 2019

[Word Count: 15695]

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Social Media Influencers: Exploratory Analysis on the Relationships Between Female Millennials and Influencers

Abstract

Purpose – Firstly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the motivations of female millennials to interact with social media influencers (SMIs). Furthermore, it aims to explore how the commercial side of influencers impacts female millennials' trust towards the influencer. Ultimately, the study aims to explore the relationships created between female millennials and social media influencers.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A exploratory design and an interpretivist approach was followed. In order to gain insight into participants' attitudes and behaviours, a qualitative approach for data collection was followed. To successfully answer the research questions, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Findings – Findings suggest that female millennials create para-social relationships with social media influencers. Further, it was found that commercial activities conducted by the influencer do not negatively affect trust. Motivations found for female millennials to engage with SMIs were: gaining information and inspiration, entertainment and emotional enhancement, fantasising, social comparison, construction of self-image and a sense of community and belonging.

Research Implications – The research found that female millennials create para-social relationships with social media influencers and further identified key motivations behind the relationship, offering an explanation for the nature of the relationships.

Practical Implications – The results have practical results for organisations and marketing professional to incorporate social media influencers into their practices. Further, the results have practical implications for social media influencers to frame and implement strategies to grow their brand.

Originality/Value – The study addresses a gap in literature. While literature previously addressed relationships created between consumers and social media influencers, this study is context-specific as it focuses on female millennials.

Acknowledgements

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1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Influencer marketing has evolved over the past years and is increasingly gaining in importance. This research aims to explore the relationships created between consumers and social media influencers in the context of female millennials, as this has been identified to be a gap in current literature. This chapter will provide an overview on the background of the study with industry-specific insight, the problem statement and academic rational, research objectives, research questions, significance of the study as well as an overview of the structure of the study.

2.2 Background of study

Social media platforms have evolved and expanded in the past years and have changed the way in which organisations reach consumers.
With 3.48 billion active social media users worldwide (We Are Social, 2019), such platforms represent a great opportunity for organisations to reach a large audience.

In fact, the number of users on social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter continues to see growth. According to a study conducted by We Are Social (2019), the number of active social media users worldwide has seen an annual growth of 9 % since 2018. Interestingly, over the span of one year, 1 million people per day have started using social media for the first time, which equals 11 new social media users every second (We Are Social, 2019). Social networks are especially popular with millennials, the group with the most purchasing power, with 88% of American millennials between the age of 18 and 29 being active social media users (The Manifest, 2019). Not only can we see an increase of social media users, the time spent on social media also sees and increase. According to a report published by GlobalWebIndex (2018), users spend approximately 2.22 hours a day interacting with social platforms, which consists of 9,25% of their daily activities.

The time spent on social media has been increasing over the last years and is predicted to increase further (GlobalWebIndex, 2018). This can be seen in the graph below.

Figure 1: Daily time spent on social media
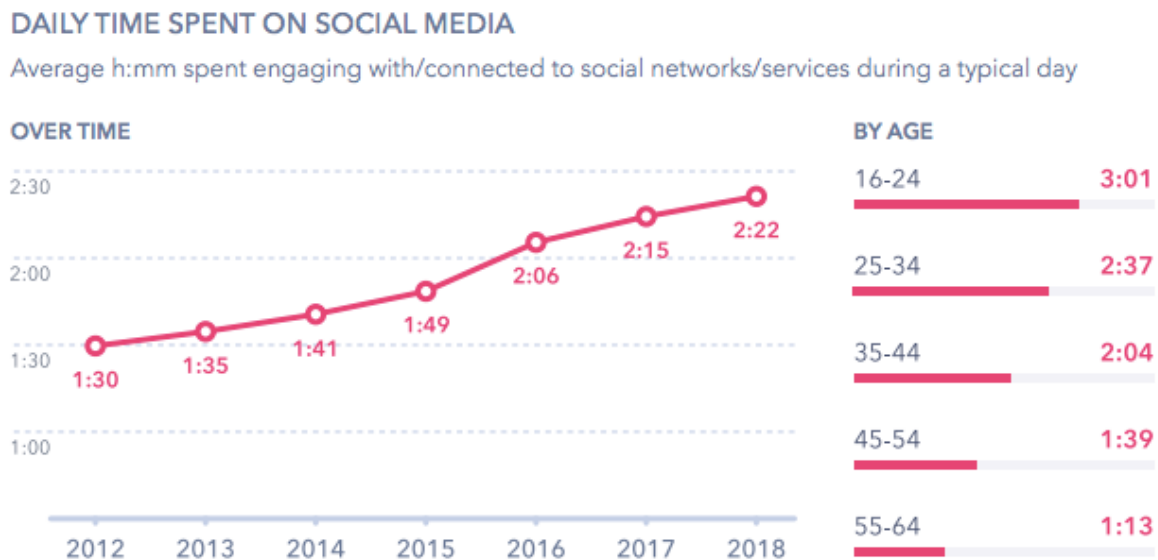
 (GlobalWebIndex, 2018)

Not only do people spend a great part of their daily lives on such platforms, they are also heavily influenced by content available on social platforms. According to a study conducted by Sprout Social (2017), 74% of shoppers make purchasing-decisions based on social media (Social Media Week, 2017). This is further supported by a HubSpot report which found that 71% of consumers are more likely to make purchases based on social media referrals (HubSpot, 2019).

While marketers appear to be unsure about the suitable way to integrating social media in their marketing activities, previous studies have shown that the potential to change consumer behaviour through social media is great (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Kumar *et al.*, 2016). Because of the potential influence that social media can have on consumers purchasing behaviour,

it is not surprising that marketers allocate a high budget towards social media activities.

One indicator that points towards a return on investment is the fact that marketers increase their internet ad spend each year. In 2018, global internet ad spend was reported to be $246 billion, and is forecasted to grow by 10% by 2021. Internet ad spend is forecasted to reach $329 billion, accounting for 49% of all global ad spend (Zenith, 2019). With the growing interest in internet advertising, one can recognise a shift from traditional media towards digital media. The year 2019 marks a milestone for the advertising world as digital ad spending in the US, which includes social media, will surpass traditional ad spending for the first time (eMarketer, 2019).

With the growth in popularity and marketing agencies allocating a large portion of the budget towards digital advertising, it is important to select a strategy to achieve a high return on investment. One strategy which emerged in the past years is influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is a form of marketing where brands utilise and work closely with influential social media figures to promote products or services. Influencers oftentimes share characteristics such as a large following, being present on several platforms as well as being specialised in one area such as beauty or fitness (Freberg *et al.*, 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Influencer marketing also shares similarities with native marketing where paid advertisement is made to appear like editorial content. Further, in this form of native advertisement, the nature of the relationship between the sponsored brand and the influencer may not be clear to the consumer, thus creating the impression that the influencer shares an objective opinion about a product or service which is not a result of monetary incentives (Evans *et al.*, 2017).

While Influencers are an important tool for marketers to reach consumers, influencers also rely on the relationship with brands. Being an influencer in most cases is a profession for the influencer, meaning it is the main source of

income. Therefore, it is important for the influencer to know how to sustain relationships with followers as well as growing the following.

1.3 Statement of Problem/ Academic Rational

While previous research has been conducted around the topic of social media, it is a new field of research and not fully explored.

Previous research (Sudha and Sheena, 2017; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017) in the field of influencer marketing has been identified to largely investigate the impact of influencer marketing on the consumer purchasing decision making process. While previous studies have been conducted in order to investigate the motives as to why consumers use social media (Cheung *et al.*,2011; Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012; Whiting and Williams, 2013), to date there have been few studies that look specifically into the motivations behind the interaction with social media influencers. Wu and Li (2008) for instance have written and excellent paper on social comparison in the context of the web 2.0, nonetheless the authors have not specifically looked at social comparison with influencers in mind.

In addition, many authors such as Kanazawa (2002) and Labrecque (2004) have investigated consumers' interaction with celebrities however papers that investigate the motivation behind interaction with SMIs are rare.

While previously studies have been conducted on consumer's relationships with influencers (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Xiao *et al.*, 2018), more specifically the credibility of influencers, due to its contemporary aspect the topic is far from being exhausted as a research area.

This paper has investigated the motivations behind female millennials interaction with social media influencers as previous research has been found to focus on consumers in general, not taking consumers different demographics into account. Thus, this research addresses a gap in the literature.

1.4 Research Objectives

The aim of the research is to understand the relationships created between social media influencers and female millennial consumers.

In order to achieve the research aim, the following three research objectives have been set:

A. Investigate the motivation behind female millennials interaction with SMI's

B. Examine the relationship created between SMI and female millennials

C. Explore the connection between the commercial side of the SMI and the consumers' attitudes towards SMI's

1.5 Research Questions

The researcher will answer the following research questions in order to achieve the aim of this research:

1. What are the key motivations of female millennials to interact with social media influencers?

2. What type of relationship is formed between female millennials and social media influencers?

3. What is the role of trust in the relationship between female millennials and commercialised SMI's?

1.6 Significance of Study

The study is of high significance as it aims to explore the motivations behind female millennials interaction with social media influencers. As the study is contemporary and contextualised, it will address a gap in the literature. Findings will further help marketers to understand the reason behind their target markets interaction with SMIs which can help to frame and implement strategies to identify influencers that can effectively target their audience. Influencers can also benefit from this study as findings can help to strengthen relationships with their followers and ultimately their brand.

1.7 Structure of the Study

The study is divided into the following six chapters: Introduction (1), critical literature review (2), research methodology (3), Data Analysis (4), Conclusion (5) and lastly Recommendations (6).
First, the introduction introduces the research topic and provides an industry context for the inquiry.

The literature review (chapter 2) provides a critical evaluation of academic scholarship on the topic of social media influencers and consumer behaviour. Firstly, the concept of social media and social media influencers is introduced. This is followed by the evaluation of concepts of consumer behaviour such as para-social relationships, self-concept and social comparison theory. Next, in order to assess trust, the concept of source credibility and advertisement disclosure is discussed. Lastly, a summary of the chapter is provided.

The third chapter, research methodology, will provide insights into the methodology utilised in this study. The researcher will introduce the research objectives as well as the research questions. Further, the research philosophy guiding the inquiry and research design are introduced and justified with the research question in mind. This is followed by the research strategy, justifying the interpretivist approach. This section further provides insight into the

researchers' approach towards data collection, sampling strategy and the procedure of data analysis and interpretation. This chapter is concluded with the reliability and validity as well as the limitations and challenges of the study.

Chapter 4 consists of the data analysis. In this chapter, findings will be discussed and analysed in order to address the overall research aim. Based on the interviews, the analysis is divided into the following themes: 1) Social media usage of female millennials, 2) Characteristics of the interaction with SMI's, 3) Para-social relationships and pseudo friendship and finally 4) motivations behind interaction with SMI's. Lastly, findings will be summarised.

Having established the results of the study, the conclusion (chapter 5) reflects upon the research questions and objectives as well as summarising the findings.
This is followed by chapter 6 which provides managerial recommendations and implication based on the findings derived from the study. Further, recommendations for future research projects are provided.

2 - Literature Review

2.1 Overview

The aim of the research is to understand the relationships created between social media influencers and female millennial consumers. Hence, this literature review covers an overview of prior research around the topic of social media influencers, why consumers engage with influencers and factors influencing trust. The review of literature contains an overview of social media and social media influencers, followed by an insight into female and millennial consumers usage of social media. Para-social relationship, self-concept and social comparison theory are then evaluated. Finally, source credibility and advertisement disclosure are discussed.

2.2 Social Media as a Communication Tool

Social media has seen a rapid growth in popularity in recent years and has rapidly emerged as one of the key tools in marketing to influence consumer attitudes and behaviours (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).
A variety of definitions of social media can be found in the literature. Elefant (2011) defines social media as "digital platforms that enable information sharing and facilitate user-generated content and collaboration between people". These Web 2.0 platforms are solely digital which means they can only be accessed through the internet. Some of the most popular social networking platforms include Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest and Tumblr (McFarland and Ployhard, 2015). Nevertheless, new platforms are constantly created which all share the same characteristic: being based on the Web 2.0 (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009).

Social media is characterised by conversation amongst users, community, connection and openness (McFarland *et al.*, 2015). In contrast to the one-way process of transmitting information in traditional media, social media is a two-

way process and communication tool as it encourages conversation amongst users. Furthermore, while traditional media is characterised by the vertical flow of information from content creators such as brands to consumers, social media allows a horizontal flow of information between consumers (McFarland *et al.*, 2015).

While Social Media was traditionally created in order for people to connect and socialise, it has gained commercial features over time such as brand use and vigilante marketing (Muniz and Schau, 2007). Furthermore, literature suggests that social media has shifted from a social platform towards a platform where consumer, commercial actors and commercial objects interact (Husain *et al.*, 2016; Muniz and Schau, 2007).

2.3 Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

SMIs are described as interdependent, third-party endorsers who have the ability to shape their audiences' attitudes through their social media channels (Freberg *et al.*, 2010).

Indications of research which suggest that the lines between consumers and producers are becoming increasingly blurrier can be traced back to the work of Toffler (1980; cited in Ritzer *et al.*, 2012) who suggests that the emergence of digital technologies have created the so-called 'prosumer'. Prosumer in the context of social media means that consumers, rather than only consuming products, play an important role for an organisation as they can become the voice of the brand and contribute towards success or failure of a product or brand (Roberts and Cremin, 2017).

A study conducted by CPC Strategy (2018) found that consumers define SMIs as people with a large following on social media as well as anyone who promotes products on their personal social media page. In addition, fewer than 20% of participants described SMIs as celebrities (CPC, 2018). While a social media influencer can be a celebrity, so-called micro celebrities are often seen on platforms such as Instagram (Abidin, 2016). In contrast to traditional

celebrities who are famous because of their work in media such as film and television, micro celebrities are individuals who found fame through their social media presence (Khamis et al., 2016).

According to Khamis *et al.* (2017), micro-celebrities have changed the way people are recognised as famous. Furthermore, it is suggested that micro-celebrities change the dynamics of interaction where receivers are both audience and a community where the community has an interaction with the micro-celebrity and the audience is listening to the messages. Because of the new dynamics, Khamis *et al.* (2017) introduced the term 'strange familiarity' based on the 'familiar stranger' concept introduced by Milgram *et al.* (1999, cited in Khamis *et al.*, 2017) where people recognise each other without actually knowing each other.

While celebrities are judged by the audience based on their authenticity, micro-celebrities are judged based on ethical standards due to the fact that they have become famous through their audience (Jin, 2018). Because influencers become famous due to their audience and the influencers success is measured based on how many followers they have, it is suggested that relationships are more crucial for micro-celebrities than they are for traditional celebrities (Jin, 2018).
Studies by Tran and Strutton (2014) have found that consumers showcase a stronger bond with SMI's because of their perceived realness and the way they can identify with the SMIs (Tran and Strutton, 2014).

One example of a social media influencer in the beauty industry is James Charles. James Charles has become famous through his YouTube videos, showcasing different make-up products. He since reached a large following on several social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Instagram which is illustrated below.

Figure 2: James Charles Instagram Page

(Instagram, 2019)

Due to a large number of followers, many influencers have created their own brands. James Charles for example created a beauty-product brand and sells his products through the large cosmetics-retailer Morphe.

While social media celebrities create a brand of their own, they heavily depend on the brands they feature on their platforms. The relationship between the SMI and brands is a critical reliance. There are several ways in which brands use SMI's for marketing purposes such as product placement and discount code offering.

Because social media influencing is still a relatively new phenomenon and marketing concept, several studies have used theories around celebrities to assess the impact of SMIs on consumer behaviour.

While this is the case, research from the field of celebrity endorsement is going to be used in this study in order to explore the research question.

Social media influencers are oftentimes considered to be opinion leaders. Casaló *et al.* (2018) found that influencers who display a high degree of originality and uniqueness are likely to be seen by followers as opinion leaders. In turn, users that perceive the influencer as an opinion leader are likely to follow the influencers advice and recommendations (Casaló *et al.*, 2018).

2.4 Female Millennials – Social Media and Consumption Pattern

Literature suggests that there is a difference in the way male and female consumers use the internet. Females specifically are an important group in the world of social media and are considered to be a good target audience for online advertisement (Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2007; Cho and Workman, 2011). Not only are women more active on social media than men, they are also more likely to share content and get involved into a dialogue with a brand (Barker, 2009).

It is also suggested that marketers have to fight harder for a female consumers' attention as they are not as easily convinced to make a purchase as a man. This is due to the fact that females are more suspicious consumers and are slower in the purchase decision process due to their need of information and reassurance (Chan *et al.*, 2015). Overall it is suggested that women tend to use social media as a source of information. This is particularly the case when it comes to fashion and beauty related products (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010).

Research suggest that consumers born into the same generation display the same behavioural patterns. This is because of shared experiences that influenced their childhood (Jackson *et al.*, 2011). One generation are the so-

called 'millennials' or 'Gen Y' which consists of the population that was born between the years of 1980 and 2000 (Ordun, 2015).

This generation is described by Syrett and Lammiman (2003) as individualistic, well-educated and technologically savvy. While social media is popular amongst different generations, social networking websites are predominantly popular among millennials, with 90% of American university students owning a Facebook profile (Ellison *et al.*, 2007).

2.5 Para-social Relationships

Research into para-social relationships can explain why consumers might decide to interact with an influencer. The term para-social interaction (PSI) has first been coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956. In their seminal article, the scholars describe PSI as a conversational give and take between a spectator (or user) and mass media performers. Furthermore, para-social interaction is described as the illusionary experience of the user who thinks to be in an interaction with the television performer, although the interaction is nonreciprocal, meaning that the celebrity is unaware of the relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The outcome of PSI is referred to as para-social relationship (PSR) (Dibble *et al.*, 2016). For brevity, the phenomenon is going to be used interchangeably and referred to as PSR in the paper.

While the social interaction is illusionary and not shared by the performer, the user believes it to be personal, immediate and reciprocal (Horton and Strauss, 1957). These unilateral interactions have found to be affect-laden, intimate pseudo-friendships (Hartmann *et al.*, 2008) which emulate intimate feelings prompted in ordinary social relationships (Dibble *et al.*, 2016). Thus, para-social relationships are closely associated with the concept of real-life relationships (Dibble et *al.*, 2016).

In fact, research suggests that it is difficult for the human brain to make distinctions between real-life friends and para-social relationships (Kanazava, 2002). By consuming content created by the celebrity, users imagine having

direct interaction and conversation with the celebrity which is perceived as a direct communication with a real life friend. This leads to the user seeking instructions from the celebrity, the user imagining to be part of the activity experienced by the celebrity as well as the urge to meet the celebrity in real life (Frederick *et al.*, 2012; Rubin *et al.*, 1985). While previous research conducted by Horton and Wohl (1956) and Rubin (1985) has mainly focussed on television performers, PSR can be used to explain why consumers interact with social media celebrities or influencers. In fact, the usage of social media even strengthens the PSR between the viewer and the celebrity (Labrecque, 2004).

SMIs or micro celebrities post updates of their life and show feelings on their social media accounts or microblogs which satisfy the users' curiosity about the SMIs personal life (Wood and Burkhalter, 2013). These updates which happen almost in real life time foster the users' believe to be part of the celebrity's life and their illusion to know the celebrity on a personal level (Christine, 2010). Lin and Utz (2017) also found that a high frequency of disclosure predicts familiarity and increases interpersonal closeness.

Social media allows the users to then instantly comment, like or re-post the content which consequently gives the user an illusion of direct communication with the celebrity (Christine, 2010). The function of commenting makes the para-social interaction on social media different from the PSI described by Horton and Wohl (1956). While they described para-social interaction as unidirectional, PSI in the context of social media can be a bidirectional communication as it allows the content creator to respond to comments and messages. Nevertheless, the content creator cannot respond and react to every comment or message due to the high following which comes with a high volume of comments and messages. Thus, the interaction is not fully bidirectional which makes the interaction illusionary and less similar to a real friendship. It is therefore suggested that para-social relationships in the context of SMIs is closely related to the original definition of para-social relationship in the context of traditional celebrities (Lee and Watkins, 2016).

Self-esteem is suggested to be one of the reasons behind building PSR. Paz *et al.* (2017) explain that personalities with low self-esteem are more vulnerable when it comes to criticism from others which has an impact on the quality of social interactions. According to the para-social compensation hypothesis, para-social relationships could be a compensation tool. In order to compensate for the lack of self-esteem and real-life relationships, para-social relationships are created (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Moreover, this suggests that people who are affected by loneliness, social isolation and weak social skills are more likely to develop more intense para-social relationships (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

Prior research has indicated that individuals with low self-confidence see social media as a safer place to articulate themselves (Andreassen *et al.*, 2017). Due to the lower self-esteem, users increase the frequency of their social media usage (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2017) and develop virtual friends (Eşkisu *et al.,* 2017). Because individuals with low self-confidence try to prevent the possibility of rejection, it is difficult for them to allow closeness in real life relationships (Murray *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, they take part in para-social relationships in order to prevent rejection, making it easier to interact with others (Derrick *et al.*, 2008). Yet, scholars are still uncertain about the results of the para-social compensation hypothesis as it is difficult to distinguish which variables precisely are associated with para-social relationships (e.g. Rubin *et al.,* 1985).

2.6 Self-concept

Another possible explanation for the creation of relationships with influencers can be derived from the self-concept, a theory widely used in consumer behaviour. In fact, research has empirically proven that self-concept can influence consumer behavior. Self-concept is described as an individual's feeling and thoughts in comparison to others (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987).

The theory of self-congruity on the other hand is regarded as an extension to the self-concept. According to this theory, consumers prefer products that match up with their self-concept. Sirgy (1982) discussed four areas of self-congruity, namely the actual-self, ideal-self, social-self and ideal social-self. While Sirgy (1982) discussed four types of self-concept, Usakli and Baloglu (2011) only discuss the actual-self and ideal-self as they show the strongest empirical support.

The congruity of actual-self is explained as the congruity between the way the consumer sees themselves and a brand image while ideal-self congruity is described as the congruity between the desired state of the consumer and the brand image (Dolich, 1969).

According to Graeff (1996), consumers constantly behave in a way that upholds and strengthens their self-concept. Further, consumers are motivated to achieve a state where the actual-self equivalents their ideal-self. Research has found two self-concept motives. One being self-consistency, which explains that consumers seek experiences which are consistent with their actual self. Self-esteem on the other hand explains that consumers seek experiences which in turn enriches their self-concept (Sirgy, 1982).

Furthermore, literature suggest that brands act as symbols for consumers to express their personality (Strizhakova *et al.*, 2011). Consumers use the consumption and purchase of specific brands in order to express their actual self and ideal self (Belk, 1988; Holt, 2002).

While this is the case, consumers also use celebrities they look up to in order to form their self-concept (Boon and Lomore, 2011). In this case, the consumer uses the celebrity as an example and inspiration because of the meaning of the celebrity which the consumer finds relevant. Through the purchase and consumption of endorsed products, consumers can obtain the meanings associated with the celebrity and use them to construct their self-image (Dwivedi et al., 2016).

2.7 Social Comparison Theory

According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), people engage in comparison in order to explore how they measure up against others. Furthermore, literature suggest that comparison is used in order to evaluate oneself (Muller and Butera, 2007), for self-enhancement (Willis, 1981) and for self-improvement (Taylor and Loben, 1989). Social comparison happens deliberately and the individual selects and considers standards for comparison (Festinger, 1954). While the process is deliberate, it can also be spontaneous. When consumers are unsure about a product choice, they would make a deliberate choice to compare themselves with an individual who is perceived to be similar to them in order to confirm their choices and approve their self-evaluation.

This is a common practice when consumers have to make a purchasing decision in fashion because clothing items are visual and easy to compare. Spontaneous comparison on the other hand happens unintentionally and shapes self-evaluation even though there was no specific goal. Bearden and Rose (1990) suggest that social comparison takes place because individuals care about what other people think of them. When conducting a comparison, the individual picks a group or another individual to act as a reference group. Consequently, the reference is then used as an example when evaluating factors such as beliefs, attitudes or abilities.

Research conducted around the selection process of reference groups suggests that targets who share similar attributes are likely to be selected for comparison (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007). Additionally, upward social comparison and downward social comparison are two commonly recognised types of social comparison (Vogel *et al.,* 2014). Downward social comparison appears when an individual compares themselves with someone who is perceived to be socially worse off than themselves.

Upward comparison on the other hand happens when the individual compares themselves with someone who is perceived to be socially superior, for example a celebrity (Vogel *et al.*, 2014). Comparing oneself to a superior can help individuals understand how to improve themselves (Festinger, 1954; Schutz *et al.*, 2012) as well as create self-enhancement and self-compensation (Wood *et al.*, 1994).

2.7.1 Social Comparison Theory in the Virtual Context

While Festinger (1954) explores social comparison in the real world context, it can also be observed in the virtual world. In the virtual world, reference groups can be formed through online communities, social media influencers and celebrities (Wu and Lee, 2008). Consumers tendency for social comparison online (TSCO) appears when an individual feels a connection with a source which appears credible and accepts the information about an endorsed product. Wu and Lee (2008) suggest that both in the real world and the virtual world the purchase intention is higher when social comparison occurs. In addition, literature suggest a positive correlation between online social comparison and willingness to purchase a product (Burnkrant and Cosineau, 1975; Mandel *et al.*, 2006).

While the literature reviewed does not specifically mention characteristics consumers look for when following and engaging with a social media influencer, literature suggests that consumer seek others to compare themselves to in order to improve themselves and to build self-esteem. It can be suggested that consumers in the virtual world look for others who share similar characteristics but have a higher social status than themselves, which satisfies consumers' need to feel that improvement of their life is feasible (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010).

2.8 Source Credibility and Trust

Perceived source credibility is important for the success of any form of communication as people do not trust sources deemed not credible (Johnson and Kaye, 2004). Thus, source credibility can determine whether or not a consumer will trust a social media influencer.

Credibility is oftentimes an important determining factor for the success of an influencer.

The concept of source credibility was created in order to understand the relationship between the trustworthiness of a source and its persuasiveness. According to Hovland (1953; cite in Westerman *et al.*, 2014), consumers are more likely to be persuaded if the source portrays itself, or is portrayed, as credible. Credibility is comprised of several factors, an important one being expertise.

Expertise is related to whether or not the source can make a valid evaluation of the material that is being covered. Furthermore, it is related to whether or not the source has the expertise needed to make a claim or statement and is using accurate facts required to make a statement (McCracken,1989). Scholars suggest a positive relationship between the sources level of expertise and the ability to change consumers' attitudes, which is crucial when attempting to influence consumers (Meddux and Rogers, 1980).

According to a study conducted by Johnson and Kaye (2004), consumers report to trust blogs and see them as credible sources. Furthermore, it is reported that consumers trust blogs more than traditional media. Also, consumers reported to gain a greater depth of information from blogs than from traditional media. Taking it a step further, Bruning and Ralston (2000) suggest a positive correlation between the credibility of bloggers and a favourable attitude towards products promoted by the blogger.

2.9 Advertising disclosure and Trust

When influencers do not disclose to their audience that content is sponsored, one can speak of so-called covert advertisement (Bauer, 2015). Covert advertisement is illegal in certain countries such as Germany (Bauer, 2015). While influencer marketing has not yet been identified as covert marketing, influencers must be careful about advertisement disclosure as it can have an impact on overall consumer trust.

Advertising disclosure is a rather new issue in the field of social media marketing. Thus, research is limited. According to Boerman and Van Reijmersdal (2012), any type of advertising disclosure could trigger a consumers' persuasion knowledge which in turn leads to the consumer resisting the message. This in turn can have a negative impact on brand attitude and purchase intention. Similarly, Rotfeld (2008) suggests that consumers are naturally suspicious of any message or information that comes from a business-related source. Similarly, Koslow (2000) states that consumers are generally suspicious towards advertising. As soon as consumers detect sponsorship disclosure, they are set to see advertising, which can ultimately lead to the consumer opposing the persuasion. While it only seems fair to disclose advertising or sponsorship to the consumers, it can destruct the effectiveness of the sponsored content and make it to be perceived as commercial (Rotfeld, 2008).

2.10 Summary

The chapter began by introducing social media as well as social media influencers. In particular, it has been discussed that SMI's share characteristics with celebrities although differences exist, thus SMIs are also referred to as micro-celebrities. Para-social relationships have been discussed which means that users oftentimes create fictional relationships with celebrities or media figures. The concept of self-concept and social comparison theory have been

introduced which explain that consumers might engage with influencers due to their desire to change themselves and to become similar to the influencer or the desire for confirmation. Lastly, advertisement disclosure is discussed to have a possible negative effect on consumers' trust towards the SMI who is perceived as commercial actor.

3 - Methodology

3.1 Overview of Chapter

Having discussed the relevant literature, the methodology chapter will introduce the appropriate methodology chosen for the research. Selecting the appropriate research method is of high importance as it will have an impact on the validity and accuracy of the study (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

First, the chapter will introduce the research objectives and research questions formulated by the researcher. This is then followed by the research philosophy, research design and research strategy. Next, this chapter will introduce the data collection process, sampling strategy as well as the methods used for data analysis and interpretation. Lastly, reliability and validity of the research as well as limitations will be discussed.

3.2 Research Objectives

The aim of the research is to understand the relationships created between social media influencers and female millennial consumers. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), research objectives are important as they aid the researcher and act as a guideline for the researcher.

In order to achieve the research aim, three research objectives have been selected.

The researcher has selected the following objectives:

A. Investigate the motivation behind female millennials interaction with SMIs
B. Examine the relationship created between SMIs and female millennials
C. Explore the connection between the commercial side of the SMI and the consumers' attitudes towards SMIs

3.3 Research Questions

Research questions can be described as the key questions the research process will address (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). The researcher will answer the following research questions so as to achieve the aim of the research:

1) What are the key motivations of female millennials to interact with social media influencers?
2) What type of relationship is formed between female millennials and social media influencers?
3) What is the role of trust in the relationship between female millennials and commercialised SMIs?

3.4 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy can be described as the way the researcher sees the world (Bryman and Bell, 2011). It also relates to the nature of knowledge, the way knowledge is gained as well as the way knowledge is enhanced (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). It is important to discuss the research philosophy as it will influence the research design. The two main philosophies used in social science are positivism and interpretivism (Blumberg *et al.*, 2014).

Positivism is regarded as the philosophical attitude adopted by the natural scientist (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). According to positivism, the behaviour of individuals is a reflect of the external world. Further, the philosophy believes that reality is an independent entity. While this is the case, the researcher is also seen as an independent entity who does not influence the subject of the study and is also not influenced by the subject (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). With this being said, it is almost impossible for the researcher to exclude own values from the research objective.

Positivism attempts to create law-like generalisations by searching for regularities and causal relationships in the collected data (Gill and Johnson, 2010). Researchers who follow a positivist philosophy study existing theories in order to develop hypothesis which are then tried and either confirmed or rejected.

In contrast to the positivism approach which aims to explain and test human behaviour in a value-free way, interpretivism aims to understand why individuals behave in a certain way by interpreting the beliefs and views individuals hold about the world (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). While positivism lays its emphasis on explaining human behaviour, interpretivism is concerned with empathic understanding of human behaviour rather than forces that act on it (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Furthermore, the interpretivist philosophy argues that individuals interact dynamically with the intent of forming their environment. Consequently, this means that individuals influence and are being influenced by the environment. Therefore, the aim of the interpretivist philosophy is to create an understanding of behaviour and not predict it and to understand the underlying motivation and reasons of the behaviour (Collis and Hussey, 2014). One important difference between positivism and interpretivism is the way in which reality is formed and viewed. While positivism views reality as single and objective, interpretivism views them as multiple, complex realities which are

socially constructed and change over time depending on varying circumstances (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

As explained by Collis and Hussey (2014), the two approaches previously mentioned lay on the opposite spectrum and most researchers adopt characteristics of both approaches.

The researcher of this study expresses a tendency towards the interpretivist approach considering the nature of the study. One characteristic of the interpretivist approach that can be identified in this study is the role of the researcher. While researchers utilising the positivistic approach are seen as a separate entity which does not influence the subject, researchers utilising the interpretivism play an active part. This is because reality is formed between the researcher and participant as the participant guides the researcher and provides them with information (Mason, 2008).

Further, the research does not aim to create a law-like generalisation but rather attempts to understand the motivations and reasons behind individuals' behaviours. While this is the case, a drawback of this approach is that the findings of this study cannot be generalised (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

3.5 Research Design

The research design will provide a framework which the researcher will utilise in order to answer the research questions. Thus, the research design is based on the previously outlined research questions. Research design is described as a blueprint or framework for collecting information that is required for a study in the best way possible (Malhotra, 2010). It is of great important for the researcher to choose the relevant research design as it will allow the researcher to conduct reliable and valid research (Appannaiah *et al.*, 2010).

Three main research designs exist which are exploratory, descriptive and causal. The research conducted in this study will be exploratory.

Although previous research around the relationship between social media influencers and consumer exists ((Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Xiao *et al.*, 2018),

the research found that limited research has been conducted in the context of female millennial consumers, thus exploring the topic will be beneficial.

One drawback of exploratory research combined with qualitative research is the bias that it is susceptible towards. This is because of the supposed subjectivity. Nevertheless, it is deemed beneficial when the researcher lacks a full understanding of the problems which may be encountered during the research (Blumberg *et al.*, 2008). The second advantage of an exploratory method is the flexibility which it allows. Because of the lack of formal structure, it allows the research to adapt to change.

Due to time constraint, the nature of the research will be cross-sectional, meaning that the research is conducted in a specific time frame. The drawback of the approach is that it does not allow a longitudinal approach.

3.6 Research Strategy: Qualitative vs. Quantitative

Because this research aims to explore consumers' attitudes and behaviours and does not seek to find a solution to a given problem, the researcher will make use of an inductive approach. The inductive approach is an approach oftentimes used in interpretivism (Bryman and Bell, 2011). An element of this approach is the search for patterns through observation. The inductive approach will allow the researcher to create meaning from the data in order to identify main patterns (Saunders *et al.*, 2015).

This section of the methodology chapter will consider the research strategy utilised for this study. While several research strategies exist, the two main strategies are qualitative and quantitative.

Quantitative research is based on the quantification of the data obtained and its analysis. In contrast, qualitative research emphasises the collection of verbal or behavioural data (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). As described by Saunders *et al.* (2012), qualitative research takes into consideration the emotions and feelings of participants as well as the connection between those.

Qualitative and quantitative methodologies are different in terms of the research focus, the researchers' role, data collection techniques as well as sample size (Proctor, 2005).

While quantitative research focuses on measuring and explaining different elements, qualitative research focuses on understanding, exploring and interpreting a phenomenon (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). The role of the researcher in quantitative research is that of an external observer, meaning that personal involvement is minimal. The role of the researcher conducting qualitative research changes throughout the process. Further, the researcher holds the role of an active participant of the researcher who provides information and assistance (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

In terms of the technique, quantitative research makes use of tools such as questionnaires and structured interviews. In contrast, qualitative research makes use of tools such as in-depth interviews and focus groups (Punch, 2014). A large enough sample size for quantitative research is of high importance in order to examine relationships between categories. Qualitative research on the other hand does not lay emphasis on sample size as the goal is to recognise the themes that could aid the understanding of how the social world is constructed (McCracken, 1988).

As the researcher follows a positivist and inductive approach, the researcher deems qualitative data collection to be most appropriate.

Bryman and Bell (2011) point out that studies that follow a positivist approach oftentimes successfully make use of qualitative research. Furthermore, the interpretivist philosophy emphasises a qualitative approach over the quantitative approach.

Overall, making use of the qualitative approach will allow the researcher to interpret participants' emotions in a specific context. While literature suggests that a positive feature of the qualitative approach is the internal validity, a drawback of this philosophy is the external validity due to the oftentimes small sample size (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

3.7 Data Collection

Following the selection of the research strategy, the strategy for data collection will now be discussed.

The researcher has made the decision to focus on primary data collection as it will allow a greater level of depth which will consequently enable the researcher to answer the research questions effectively. In addition, because the study aims to understand consumers' attitudes and emotions, the researcher will make use of in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews which will be conducted with female millennials.

As previously mentioned, the study aims to make a connection between participants' emotions and attitudes. In-depth interviews specifically are thought to be especially effective in this context as other techniques such as focus groups may not be able to uncover underlying attitudes and motivations (Polonsky and Waller, 2015). In the same way, Bryman and Bell (2011) illustrate that in-depth interviews can enable the researcher to understand consumers' attitudes, complex human behaviour and perceptions.

The researcher deems semi-structured interviews to be most appropriate as this will allow a high degree of flexibility. Thus, the flexibility will allow to move the conversation when relevant or interesting points are mentioned by the participant.

Interviews will be conducted face-to-face which will assist the creation of trust between the researcher and the participant (Cameron and Price, 2009).

The researcher deems it important to make use of an informal interview technique as she believes it would make participants feel more comfortable which in turn will allow the participant to express themselves freely. In addition, conducting the interview face-to-face will allow the researcher to capture participants' facial expressions and body language. Interviews will last approximately 1 hours which will allow the researcher enough time to explore the research questions.

Lastly, the researcher makes use of an interview guide (see appendix 1) to ensure all relevant areas are discussed during the interview.

The researcher has obtained ethical approval to conduct the interviews (see appendix 2). In order to ensure participants anonymity, the discussion chapter does not include participants' names but have been encrypted into code-names.

3.8 Sampling Strategy

A sampling strategy is needed as the researcher cannot interview the entire population. While this is the case, Appannaiah *et al.* (2010) suggest that a well selected sample has the ability to reflect the characteristics of the population fairly accurately. The portion of the population selected to take part in the research is referred to as sample. While the population consists of all possible participants, the sample is a fragment of the population which is chosen to be studied (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

For this study, the population is comprised of female millennial consumers. As previously mentioned, the researcher cannot conduct interviews with the entire population, therefore a sample is chosen. The advantage of using a sampling strategy is cost efficiency, the speed of the data collection process as well as the accuracy of the data collected (Blumberg *et al.*, 2014).

Convenience sampling, which is one type of non-probability sampling, is deemed by the researcher to be most appropriate for the study. A convenience sample is described as a sample or part of the population that is simply available to the researcher (Appannaiah *et al.*, 2010).
 One reason for choosing this sample strategy is a lack of resources such as time, money and only one researcher conducting the study. While findings gathered from convenience sampling oftentimes cannot be generalised and are often subject to sampling error and selection bias (Bryman and Bell, 2011), the research can still gather valuable knowledge. While this is the case, the

researcher ensures a diverse sample, meaning that participants with various ethnicities are selected. In addition, the sample consists of female millennials residing in London as the geographic distance was limited and participants living outside of London would have had to travel to take part in the face-to-face interviews.

In addition, the researcher made use of purposive sampling which means that the sampling was conducted with the goal of the research in mind. In order to answer the research questions, participants were selected with the criteria of being millennial females who are active social media users.

The sample consisted of 10 female millennials. Initially, the researcher estimated a sample size of 15 participants. However, the sample was limited to 10 as a point of theoretical saturation was reached as the researcher deemed similar data not to add value towards the results of the study.

3.9 Data Analysis and Interpretation Procedure

In order to create meaning for the dataset, the researcher has to analyse and interpret the data. While the terms analysis and interpretation are oftentimes used in the same context, both terms hold different meanings (Polonsky and Weller, 2015). Data analysis contains compiling, clearing and examining the data while the process of data interpretation tries to make sense of the data (Polonsky and Weller, 2015).

While there is no fixed way in which qualitative data has to be analysed, Saunders *et al.* (2012) suggest that the approach should be consistent with the research philosophy, research strategy and the data collection strategy. Keeping this in mind, the researcher has decided to make use of thematic analysis in order to analyse and interpret the data. While the thematic approach is considered to be a rather generic approach to analysing

qualitative data, it offers a systematic yet flexible approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The researcher audio recorded the interviews so that she could access what the participants said during the interview at a later time. This ensured that the researcher was able to focus on the conversation with the participant. This process was followed by the researcher transcribing the interview which helped with becoming familiar with the data as well as noting ideas. First the transcripts were read in order to gain an initial understanding. This was followed by reading the transcripts line-by-line in order to identify codes. This step ensured that the researcher is familiar with the transcripts and that the data was organised in preparation for the analysis. In the next stage, codes that were identified in the previous step were grouped based on similarities. The researcher made sure that codes were applicable for the entire data set. In the next step, the previously identified codes were grouped into broader categories. Based on the previously identified codes, themes were identified driven by the research questions. The goal of the themes was to understand the relationships created between female millennials and social media influencers.

The themes developed were concept and data driven. Concept driven meaning that the researcher has taken into consideration the relevant literature previously identified in the literature review (Chapter 2). The researcher also emphasises that the open coding process is susceptible towards interpretation bias (Blumberg *et al.,*2014).
Furthermore, the researcher made use of colour coding so that key themes could be identified which can aid during the data interpretation process which ultimately helps to answer the research question (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).
In addition, the researcher utilised a reflective journal and a research notebook to assist the process.
As suggested by Spiggle (1994), the researcher has been flexible throughout the data analysis process and the interpretation of the data was constantly changed until the process was completed.

3.10 Reliability and Validity

This section will consider the reliability and the validity of the research. Without reliability and validity, it is difficult to convey the trustworthiness and quality of research. Validity is described as the extent to which the research findings are precise, the research questions are being addressed and represent actual reality (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Reliability refers to whether or not the same findings would be discovered if the study would be replicated (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). With this being said, It is difficult for qualitative studies to show consistency when replicated because of the nature of the research. Risks in terms of reliability of this study include research bias and research error as well as participant bias and participant error (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, the researcher ensures that the process has been thought through.

In terms of validity, the validity of the research is seen by the researcher as face validity. As previously discussed, the findings of the research cannot be generalised due to the nature of the research.

3.11 Limitations and Challenges

As identified by Saunders *et al.* (2012), it is inevitable for researchers to encounter limitations. Therefore, the researcher recognises that the findings cannot necessarily be generalised as the sample does not reflect the beliefs and attitudes held by the entire population. Another limitation stems from the time frame given for the research. Due to limited time, it was not possible to follow a longitudinal approach. Next, the researcher acknowledges that the convenience sampling strategy is susceptible towards sampling error and selection bias. Further, the researcher acknowledges that the social desirability bias exists where participants tend to respond to questions during an interview in a manner that is viewed favourable by others. (Auger and Devinney, 2007)

4 - Data Analysis

4.1 Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present an analysis of the data gathered from the interview. The researcher has examined the participants' social media usage patterns, the way in which participants interact with SMIs, the relationship which is created between the participants and social media influencers, how commercial activities impact trust towards the SMIs, as well as key motivations behind the interaction with social media influencers. Therefore, based on the data collected, the analysis is divided into the following themes: 1) Social media usage of female millennials, 2) Characteristics of the interaction with SMI's, 3) Para-social relationships and pseudo friendship and finally 4) motivations behind interaction with SMIs. Lastly, findings will be summarised.

4.2 Social Media Usage of Female Millennials

All of the participants interviewed were found to be active social media users. This finding supports prior research that suggests social media to be an important part of millennials lives in the 21st century (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

While frequency, reason for using social media platforms and people interacted with on social media sites vary slightly, the results based on the interviews indicate a pattern. Results indicate that participants spend between 2-4 hours on social media on a daily basis. Participants indicated to interact with social media throughout the day, mostly accessing it through mobile devices such as smartphones. For example, on interviewee stated:

"Overall I use it around 2 hours. So at least I would probably say 30 times a day I would check my Social Media." (Anna, 26)

Participants also described a shift in their social media usage pattern, expressing that the frequency and time spent on social media increased. The participant stated the following:

"I used to be on Facebook or Twitter maybe once or twice a day a few years ago because there wasn't really much to do on there. But now that the new platforms such as Instagram exist I would say I use it more, around 3 hours a day." (Lisa, 23)

This finding supports previous research which suggest an increase in social media platforms (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). When asked what activities were conducted on social media, the majority of participants stated that the reason behind social media usage was to connect with friends and family who they do not see in person often, stay up to date with celebrities and gossip, finding out news about events and new products as well as connect with influencers. When asked about the people they interacted with on social media, Anna stated the following:

"I keep up to date with friends and family who still live back in my home country. But I also follow people like celebrities or influencers." (Anna, 26)

As previously discussed, social media was originally created for users to connect with friends and family. But due to the commercialisation of social media, a shift was created which explains the participants' response. In addition, when asked about how many influencers are being followed, the average response was that 40% of people followed on social media are influencers. Based on this result, it can be said that influencers play an integral part in female millennials lives. This is illustrated in the graph below which was created based on interviewees answers.

Figure 3: <u>People followed on social media by participants</u>
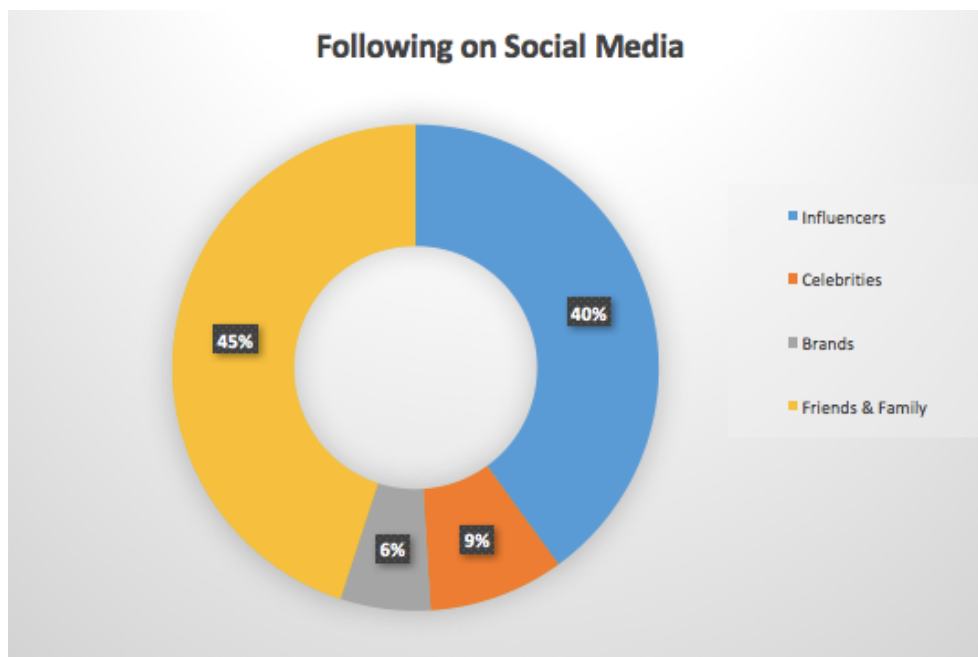
(data derived from interviews)

4.3 <u>Characteristics of the Interaction with SMIs</u>

In order to understand the motivations behind female millennials interaction with social media influencers and the relationships created, it is important to understand how female millennials interact with the influencers.

Interaction in the context of social media in this paper was identified as following the influencer, liking their content, commenting on the content as well as private messaging the influencer. For instance, when asked about the interaction, eight participants stated that influencers are followed but they do not necessarily interact with them further. One participant stated the following:

"I follow a lot of them in Instagram but it doesn't mean I do more. With some, I just watch their Instagram story and profile but nothing else." (Susan, 23)

Similarly, another interviewee stated:

"Some influencers I only follow. I see their story or tweet when it pops up on my feed but nothing else. Some of them I even forget that I follow them, they are just there." (Lisa, 23)

Results indicate different levels of interaction. Overall, results indicate that participants create a core group of influencers who they actively interact with, meaning commenting, sharing and liking content. This is an interesting finding and the factors which influence who is selected to be part of the core group will be considered later on.

The above can be illustrated in the comment below:

"I think there are two kind of influencers I connect with. The ones that I like a lot who I can identify with and who I support by liking and sharing and those who are just fake and I only follow them" (Lily, 25).

Based on the results, it can be said that the intensity of the relationships between participants and the influencer vary. One factor influencing the intensity of the interaction has been identified to be for how long the participants followed the influencer for. Findings suggest that the longer the participant has known or followed the influencer for, the more likely the participant is to increase the level of interaction. It was further found that the disclosure frequency of the influencer has a positive effect on the level of interaction. As a result, a relationship is created between participants and influencer.

One participant in particular stated the following:

"I have been following the Body Coach for 3 years now. And I think the more I find out about him and the more I know about his personal life the more I want to be part of it. I even know about his kids and parents. He updates us about his life every day" (Anna, 26)

Overall, based on the answers obtained through the interviews, it can be said that social media is an important part of a female millennials everyday life. In

addition, we may conclude that influencers are followed as much as friends and family. This finding strengthens Muniz and Schau's (2007) findings which suggest that social media has shifted from a social platform towards a platform where consumers interact with commercial actors. Further, interaction is characterised by following, liking, sharing and messaging. There may also be variances in terms of the level of interaction with influencers which is based on factors such as time. This finding is supported by research findings by Lin and Utz (2017) who have found that a high frequency of disclosure predicts familiarity and increases interpersonal closeness.

4.4 Para-social Relationships and Pseudo Friendships

Results indicate that all participants besides of one would consider certain influencers to be their friends. As previously discussed, people can develop para-social relationships with celebrities. This is the illusionary experience of the user who thinks to be in an interaction with the television performer, although the interaction is nonreciprocal, meaning that the celebrity is unaware of the relationship (Hartmann *et al.*, 2008).

Insights gained from the interviews suggest that one factor which contributes to the para-social relationship is the fact that the influencers share their life in detail with their followers. By letting the followers into their life and sharing personal information, the follower believes to know the influencer on a personal level. These findings have been observed with seven participants.

One particular participant stated to have a very strong connection to an influencer as she believes to know as much about the influencer as she knows about her real-life friends. This can be seen by the following quote:

"I know so much about him that's why I feel like I'm so close to him. I know for example that his wife is pregnant again and they are expecting a second child. I see the struggles they are going through as new parents. I even know his grandma and what she's been up to lately. Maybe I know more about him than I do about some of my close friends." (Lisa, 23)

Interestingly, the process of the influencer sharing private information is regarded by the same participant as the expression of trust on the influencers side. She expressed the following:

"I feel like because they share so much detail and so many little things with us that they trust us as well. Because if they wouldn't trust us they wouldn't tell use all their private matters." (Lisa, 23)

In addition to being able to learn about the influencers private lives, the content posted by the influencers is perceived by some participants as a form of direct communication with a real friend. Four participants in particular expressed that they believe the content to be addressed towards them.
One participant pointed out the fact that influencers look directly into the camera when they talk to the audience, for example on their Instagram story or in a YouTube vlog. The following quote illustrates the finding:

"And it's also the way they talk. Because they talk to the camera it's like they are talking to you. So they would look straight into the camera and obviously you catch their eye so it's not like they are talking to someone else." (Anna, 26)

Similarly, eye-contact is perceived by another participant as an intimate gesture and conversation between her and the influencer. This suggests that the intimacy created leads to a level of trust followed by a friendship. Lisa stated the following:

"It feels personal and intimate, like Saffron Barker is in my room and talking to me face to face, especially when she's talking about something sad that maybe happened. It makes my heart warm." (Lisa, 23)

Having this strong connection with the influencer, five participants stated that they would like to meet the influencers outside of the internet-space. This is a strong characteristic of a para-social relationship or pseudo friendship. This has been expressed by one participant as follows:

"I saw that Jake Paul was in London so I messaged his friend who was there with him and asked if he would like to meet up because I was hoping to meet Jake Paul himself." (Lily, 25)

The finding supports research conducted by Frederick *et al.* (2012) who looked at athletes' social media specifically and found that people who engage in para-social relationships have a strong desire to meet the celebrity.

The relationship being non-reciprocal is another important characteristic of a para-social relationship, meaning that the influencer does not know or interact with the follower. While this is the case, interestingly all participates who believed to be friends with the influencer knew that it is non-reciprocal. This finding is contrary to Kanazava's (2002) findings which suggest that it difficult for the follower to distinguish between a real friendship and pseudo-friendship. While this is the case, Kanazava (2002) based his argument mainly on evolutionary psychology and states that the human brain has difficulties dealing with situations or entities that did not exist in the environment of evolutionary adaptiveness. The participants recognising that the relationship is not reciprocal can identified in the following quote by Olivia:

"I know that they don't know me but they are my friend, it doesn't necessarily mean that I am their friend maybe. Cause obviously I know that they don't even know me. If I met Anastasia Kingsnorth on the street for example, she definitely wouldn't recognise me." (Olivia, 28)

This is an important finding as it can explain why the participants follow influencers in the first place. One participant in particular expressed her

struggles to make friends in real life. Further, due to her lack of social skills, having a pseudo friendship still satisfies her need for interaction and takes away potential loneliness. This is in accordance with Horton and Wohl's (1956) findings which suggest that people with low self-esteem and real-life friendships use para-social relationships as a compensation tool. One participant stated:

"I am quite shy in real life, so I don't have many friends. So it's really convenient for me because I don't have to talk to them or put much effort into it. I know friendship is there with a click of a button, on demand. And I know I can't disappoint or lose the other person because they don't know me." (Lily, 25)

With this being said, the benefit for the participant seems to be self-gratification without having to put effort into developing and nurturing a relationship. Accessibility also seems to be an important factor as to why participants interact with social media influencers. A second participant mentioned the on-demand characteristic of the friendship.

"I find social interaction tiring sometimes. And when you are following someone and they don't expect anything back, it's easier that way. It's an easy way to connect with someone without actually putting too much work into it." (Anna, 26)

Another factor that fosters the illusion of a friendship has been found to be the illusion of taking part in the activities conducted by the influencer. This is illustrated in the following quote:

"It's like I'm there with my friends without actually leaving the house. It feels like a first person perspective view when they film for example for their Instagram story when they go out for dinner with their friends and you can see the food and the friends sitting there as well." (Melanie, 21)

This finding supports findings previously discussed by Rubin *et al.* (1985). The interviews revealed that the way in which content is created by the influencers gives the viewers the feeling of being present while they are doing certain activities. This is because influencers tend to film a large part of their daily lives. Three participants in particular were most intrigued by content seemingly insignificant to them such as going for a coffee or having dinner with friends. Being part of these events makes the participants feel less lonely as they can be part of an activity with a friend.

4.4.1 Trust towards the influencers and Advertising Disclosure

When participants were asked which factor is deemed important to them in a friendship, the majority of females responded with trust. Interestingly, seven participants stated that they trust influencers. Furthermore, it was recognised by the participants that influencers are commercial and that they work closely with brands and are being paid for advertising products and services on their platforms. Interestingly, all of these seven participants stated that paid advertising posted by influencers does not impact their trust towards the influencer. One participant in particular expressed it in the following way:

"I don't think it's wrong. They have to make money somehow. I even support them because I want them to be successful and make money so that I get more content." (Ava, 21)

Interestingly, the study found that females trust that influencers only promote products and services which they believe in. When asked about the reason behind this, a common answer was that they know the influencer and that the influencer would not lie to the followers. This further strengthens the previously discussed phenomenon of the pseudo-friendship where the follower believes to know the influencer on a personal level. One participants stated the following:

"I guess it's the same as with your friends, you can tell what's out of character. So Zanna Van Dijk she would never promote an unhealthy snack because she doesn't believe in products with high sugar content. She just wouldn't lie to us." (Lily, 25)

Contrary to previous research that explored how advertising disclosure affects consumers' perception of an influencer, the study found that advertising disclosure increases trust towards the influencers and has no negative effect. Further, advertising disclosure is received by participant as honesty. Participants displayed a positive attitude towards advertising disclosure. One participant expressed it in the following way:

"When they say that it's sponsored content it just shows that there is no need for them to lie because they genuinely like the product. It's just honest and makes them more authentic in my eyes." (Lily, 25)

According to Koslow (2000), consumers tend to oppose persuasion coming from sponsored content when advertising is detected. Interestingly, five participants mentioned that they have a positive attitude towards influencers' advertising. This finding is closely associated with the close relationship built between participants and influencers. It was found that females support the influencer by liking sponsored content as well as purchasing promoted products by using a personalised discount code provided by the influencer which can be tracked back to the influencer. This is because they like to support the influencer so that the business of the influencer can grow. This can be illustrated in the quote below:

"I like to support their page and their content because I know it's their business and I know if they have more likes and comments they get more brand deals. It's their job. It doesn't take much effort to give back and support them and their business. You would also support a friend's business." (Lily, 25)

This is an interesting finding as the participant directly compared the influencer to a friend. This indicates that supporting the influencer stems from the para-social friendship created with the influencer.

4.5 Motivations Behind Interaction with SMIs

The researcher has identified key themes emerging from the interviews which can explain the motivations behind the interaction with social media influencers. Most commonly, participants mentioned information gathering and inspiration as a key motivation, followed by entertainment and emotional enhancement. Other themes include: fantasising and day dreaming, social comparison, self-concept as well as community and sense of belonging. Each of these factors contribute towards the understanding of the motivations behind female millennials interaction with social media influencers.

4.5.1 Information and Inspiration

Firstly, the study found that participants follow influencers to gather information and get inspired by the content posted.

All participants stated that they follow influencers who share the same interests, meaning that the influencers are often specialised in one or two topics such as health and fitness, beauty or travel. Participants seem to find inspiration from influencers who present them with ideas on a variety of topics such as beauty and fitness. The inspiration has been found to lead to females implementing the suggestions into their own lives for example by trying a new beauty look or a new recipe. This becomes evident when looking at the following quote by Olivia:

"Sometimes I don't know what to cook so then I just check for example Molly Yeh's Instagram to see what kind of food she's been cooking lately. She's known for her recipes." (Olivia, 29)

While this is the case, sharing the same interests has also been found to be a determining factor for the decision to follow or not follow a particular influencer. Further, it was found that participants perceive influencers as expert in their field as well as opinion leaders.

One participant who spends her time training for fitness competitions expressed that she specifically follows influencers who can help her develop her fitness skills and who can give her inspiration to try new work-out methods. She stated the following:

"I follow people posting workouts and exercise that I can use for myself. They show new exercises and work-outs that I didn't know before." (Susan, 23)

Other participants, six specifically, added that they specifically would access an influencers YouTube channel or Instagram page in order to look for information about specific products. The following quote is one example:

"When I want to do buy new make-up for example and I want to learn about eye-shadow and how good different brands are, I would go to Jeffree Star's YouTube channel because I know he would have a video about that. The products that he liked are called 'Jeffree approved' meaning he approves the product as good quality." (Ava, 21)

When asked whether the influencer is considered to be an expert in the field, it was found that influencers are perceived by the majority of participants as opinion leaders. It was found that the opinion leadership is created by the fact that influencers specialise in one or two areas of expertise. Further, influencers are thought to spend a large amount of time learning about the topic and perfecting their skills or knowledge. Lastly, especially beauty influencers are thought to be opinion leaders as they tend to collaborate with make-up brands frequently, which gives them the opportunity to test several products. Ava, who is particularly interested in beauty-influencers stated the following:

"They know so much more about make-up, I guess because they spend a lot of time practicing how to do make-up and they get a lot of products for free so they test a lot of them and know what's good." (Ava, 21)

This finding is supported by Casaló *et al.* (2018) who found that followers oftentimes perceive influencers as opinion leaders which in turn leads to the users following influencers' advice and recommendations.

4.5.2 Entertainment and Emotional Enhancement

Another reason as to why female millennials follow influencers has been found to be entertainment. While social media was developed for people to socialise and connect with each other, it has developed into a form of entertainment and tool to pass time. The participants interviewed have described that influencers post entertaining content in form of funny videos, vlogs and professional photographs.

Participants have expressed that they would rather consume social media content rather than being by themselves, watching TV or reading. Checking influencers social media pages has been identified as an automatic response for counteracting boredom. This is illustrated in the following quote:

"When I'm bored I just watch a YouTube vlog by James Charles for example. It's just entertaining and relaxing especially after a long day at work I can take my mind off things." (Lily, 25)

Another participant specifically stated that consuming content is a great way to pass time and overcome the lack of other activities.

"When I would wait for the train for example I would scroll through Instagram. At least it gives me something to do." (Mary, 21)

The results indicate that the participants find it difficult to be by themselves which created a sense of loneliness. This ties perfectly with the previously discussed points on para-social relationships as the participants try to avoid loneliness. Consuming content thus makes them feel as if they are not alone.

Further, social media has the ability to act as a mood booster and a tool to escape from reality. Escapism has been studied by Gao *et al.* (2017) who, similarly to this study, have found that online activities aid as a tool to escape from real-life troubles or to avoid thinking about unpleasant thoughts.
When asked about how consuming content posted by SMIs made them feel, seven participants expressed that it enhanced their emotional state. This is illustrated by the following quote:

"When you had a bad day you see the perfect pictures of Saffron Barker relaxing in Miami on the beach and the sunshine, it's just nice to see something like that. It makes me dream of going on holiday as well." (Olivia, 29)

The findings have received prior empirical support by scholars such as Myrick (2015) and Utz *et al.* (2011) who suggest that social media generally is a tool for emotional modification. While this study has uncovered positive emotional modifications resulting from social media usage, Kircaburun and Griffiths (2019) present contrasting findings which suggest that escapism in regards to social media usage can have negative effects such as problematic use of social media which can lead to negative behaviour.

4.5.3 Fantasising and Day Dreaming

Fantasising and day dreaming has been found to be one reason why female millennials interact with social media influencers. Specifically, the results indicate two types of fantasies lives through by participants. Firstly, reflection of suppressed desires and secondly fantasising about unfulfilled dreams and unmet goals.

Considering reflection of suppressed desires, the outer appearance of participants was specifically mentioned by four participants. Because of the fear of being negatively judged by peers as well as the society as a whole, participants supress their desire to dress in a certain way, but instead live the fantasy through the influencers. Further, lack of self-esteem was also found to strengthen the suppression of desires.

This is an important finding as previous literature has not identified this behaviour specifically concerning interaction with social media influencers. The following quote illustrates the finding:

"I would love to dress like them [fashion influencers]. But to be honest, I don't think I have the confidence. Cause I grew up in a small town where people would stare at you if you'd wear something outrageous. So it's nice to just look at what they wear and just imagine wearing that as well one day." (Lisa, 23)

Fantasising about unfulfilled dreams and goals has been a pattern throughout the interviews. The majority of participants exhibited this type of behaviour. Particularly, fantasising about material possessions has been expressed by seven of the respondents. Such possessions included cars, houses, designer clothing and make-up products. Participants stated that they fantasise about owning the previously mentioned items as it's their dream to own them. Participants stated that lack of financial ability hinders them to fulfil this dream. This shows that interacting with influencers who own these desired possessions partially fulfils their needs. One participant stated:

"I know they have more money than me. I can't afford a house for 1 million pounds even though I'd love to. But looking at them living in this nice home I can imagine what it's like having one." (Olivia, 29)

Similarly, another participant expressed fantasises about non-material things such as life-events. In particular, the participant was single with no kids. She stated that seeing footage of an influencers wedding makes her imagine getting married one day.

"It is like a dream, when she [the influencer] got married, she got married in Italy in a castle and it was perfect, like a dream. One day I want the same." *(Tina, 28)*

Based on these findings it can be argued that female millennials use the content created by influencers as a compensation tool for suppressed desires, unfulfilled dreams and unmet goals.

4.5.4 Social Comparison

Results indicate that all participants except two did participate in a form of social comparison. While social comparison as introduced by Festinger (1954) is conducted by human-beings on a daily basis outside of the internet space, patterns have been identified which can be observed through the interaction with social media influencers.

Participants have indicated that they compare themselves with the influencers which they follow. As it is suggested by Festinger (1954), people select their own standards for comparison. Because female deliberately compare themselves, it is argued that the interaction with influencers happens because influencers are used as standards for comparison.

Two types of social comparison have been identified, downward and upward social comparison.

Downward comparison has been identified with four females. This happens because the participants compare themselves with influencers who they believe to be worse off than themselves. Interestingly, the factor determining this has been identified to be intelligence. It has been expressed by one participant as follows:

"I watch her videos because I like to make fun of her because she's not the most intelligent. So I'm better off in that sense." *(Lily, 25)*

Similarly, another female stated the following:

"I follow her stuff just to laugh at her. Her content has so many spelling mistakes. I'm a better writer than her." (Tina, 28)

Based on these findings, it is suggested that downward social comparison is utilised by females in order to make them feel better about themselves and boost their ego.

Comparison to influencers that are better off than themselves (upward comparison) has been identified as well. This is indicated by the following quote:

"Of course I compare myself, especially with fitness models. They look so perfect and then I see myself, not as fit. But it motivates me because I know if they can do it I can do it." (Susan, 23)

Based on this, it can be argued that females use comparison with influencers in order to understand how to improve themselves as well as motivation to better themselves.

4.5.5 Self-concept

Findings point towards the fact that females use influencers to construct their self-image. This is because the participants use specific influencers as role-models or inspiration due to the meaning that the influencer represents.

Females follow certain influencers because they strengthen their self-consistency and the way they see themselves, meaning that females follow influencers because they are consistent with their actual-self. Thus, upholding and enhancing their self-image.

Actual-self has been identified to be important when discussing outer appearance. Females stated that they recognise their flaws and are not perfect and seek other female influencers who represent the same imperfection. Further, it has been found that influencers who present their vulnerable side are followed because of their authenticity. One female said the following:

"For example, Alice Living would post pictures where her stretchmarks are visible. Which is totally relatable. I am not the only one who has those stretchmarks," (Lily, 25)

On the other side, participants indicate that they interact with influencers in order to achieve their ideal-self. It was found that influencers are seen as role models and females look up to them as they want to be the same way as the influencer. This has been expressed by Olivia as follows:

"I would love to be more environmentally friendly and be like Zanna Van Dijk because she is an environmentalist. I even bought the bottle she sold in collaboration with the brand Chilli. I definitely follow her because I want to be more environmentally conscious like she is." (Olivia, 29)

This supports research conducted by Belk *et al.* (1982) which found that consumers purchase products as they deliberately remind the consumer of their ideal position in society.

4.5.6 Community and Belonging

Female millennials see themselves as part of a community when they follow influencers. Results obtained through the interviews indicate that most of the participants follow a select few influencers who they have a strong connection with. They see themselves as part of a community with other people who follow the same influencer. Thus, because other followers share the same interest for the influencer, it gives them a sense of belonging and a space

where they can express themselves freely for example by commenting on a post. The following quote indicates the finding:

"I feel like there is a connection between me and those people because we share the same values and I feel like they understand me. The comment section gives me an open space to express myself and not be judged." (Lily, 25)

Interestingly, the community revolves around the influencer themselves as the topic of discussion with other followers is often the influencer (for example what they wear). One participant who was particularly passionate about the topic stated the following:

"Bramty and Louis call us followers the Bramfam. So when they would address us in the videos they would call us the Bramfam. So I'm part of the Bramfam community." (Lily, 25).

The sense of community is further strengthened by the influencer giving a name to the followers, similar to a family name.

4.6 Summary

To summarise, the researcher gathered data from interviews with 10 female millennials and has analysed the data with the research questions in mind. The findings suggest that social media is a crucial part of female millennials lives. Further, participants seem to interact with social media influencers as much as they do with family and friends on social media platforms. The intensity of interaction with influencers mainly depends on how long they have known the influencer for.

The researcher has concluded that female millennials create para-social relationships or pseudo-friendships with influencers. The main reason for that is the personal content shared by the influencer as well as the way in which

the influencer communicates with the followers. While this relationship is non-reciprocal, participants do not mind it as the on-demand friendship fits their lifestyle. When examining trust towards the influencer in relation to advertising disclosure, the study found that female millennials trust that influencers only promote products that are actually liked by them. Further, advertising disclosure fosters trust as it is seen as a sign of honesty. Lastly, the study identified key patterns in relation to the motivation behind female millennials motivations to interact with influencers. The motives have been identified to be: gathering information and inspiration, entertainment and emotional enhancement, fantasising and day-dreaming, social comparison, self-concept and lastly community and belonging.

5 – Conclusion

The study is of significance as it helps to gain a more in-depth and contemporary understanding on the relationships created between female millennials and social media influencers. While social media usage of female millennials has been studied in the past and scholars have attempted to explain peoples' relationships with influencers, the research area is in no way exhausted. In addition, the study has a significance both for managerial practice as well as theoretical implications. To the best knowledge of the researcher, this study is the first to explore female millennials relationships with social media influencers. This study has not only found that female millennials create para-social relationships with influencers, but has also offered possible explanations as to why female millennials interact with social media influencers.

Its managerial implications can help marketing professionals frame and implement strategies to identify influencers that can effectively target an audience. Further, the study has been found to have implications for influencers as commercial actors. Findings can help influencers to increase their following and exploit the factors identified by the study which act as catalysts for interaction and possibly a relationship.

The nature of this study was explanatory, thus the researcher attempts to provide answers to the research questions.

1. What type of relationships is formed between female millennials and social media influencers?

The study unveiled that female millennials form a para-social relationship or pseudo-friendship with social media influencers. While this is the case, the majority of participants stated that while they follow influencers, they do not necessarily interact with them. Participants create a core group of influencers which they support by viewing their content, commenting on their content,

sharing their content as well as directly messaging the influencer. One important factor which determines whether an influencer belongs to the core group is time, more specifically for how long the influencer has been followed by participants. This is an important finding as it ties in with the finding which indicate that female millennials see influencers as friends because of the detailed private information they share.

Thus, the longer the influencer is being followed, the more participants believe to know the influencer on a personal level. Similar to a real-life friendship, participants were found to believe that the process of the influencer sharing private information is a gesture of trust. In return, it might increase the participants' trust towards the influencer. This intimacy is further strengthened by the way in which content is delivered. Eye-contact in particular has been identified to be an important factor for the creation of intimacy resulting in a connection with the influencer.

The study has further identified that the majority of female millennials value the on-demand characteristic of the friendship with the influencer.

Another factor which supports the finding that pseudo-friendships are created is that interviewees believe to be in a real-life interaction and part of the activities conducted by the influencers. Female millennials therefore believe to be in a social setting and to have a social interaction with influencers when they post videos of their daily activities such as going for dinner.

In contrast to real-life friendships, participants valued the convenience of the pseudo-friendship, meaning that females do not have to put great effort into sustaining a reciprocal relationship which requires nurturing of the friendship, real-life interaction as well as social skills.

2. What is the role of trust in the relationship between female millennials and commercialised SMI's?

Having established that female millennials form para-social relationships with social media influencers, findings suggest that trust plays an important role in the relationship.

As previously discussed, social media influencers receive monetary incentives from brands in order to promote products and services. The study has found that the commercial activities of the influencers do not negatively impact the relationship between female millennials and influencers. The researcher found that female millennials trust influencers to only promote products that the influencer genuinely likes. Trust is a result of the para-social relationship created with the influencer. Female millennials mainly trust influencers because they share their private lives and because they believe to know the influencer on a personal level.

Interestingly, the study found advertisement disclosure to positively affect trust. It was found that although participants recognise that influencers receive monetary incentives for promoting products and services, they perceive advertisement disclosure as a form of honesty. This further strengthens the pseudo-friendship.

3. What are the key motivations of female millennials to interact with social media influencers?

Firstly, this study has found that female millennials interact with influencers in order to gain information and inspiration about specific topics such as beauty, travel and fitness. Moreover, influencers are seen as opinion leaders and experts in their field, thus female millennials access influencers' content when they need information or inspiration around a topic that the influencer is specialised in. Next, it was found that entertainment and emotional enhancement is another motivational factor for interaction. Interacting with influencers has been identified to be a way to pass time, reduce loneliness and boost females' mood.

Results also indicate that female millennials interact with SMIs as the content allows them to fantasise about unfulfilled dreams as well as reflecting suppressed desires.

Another important finding is that social media influencers are used as a tool for social comparison. Specifically, female millennials have been found to

participate in downward and upward social comparison with influencers which leads to either ego-boosting or motivation for improvement.

Next, the researcher found that influencers act as tools for the construction of self-image. Findings indicate that influencers are used to either strengthen the self-image or as means to achieve the state of the ideal-self.

Lastly, the researcher found that female millennials interact with SMIs as it provides them with a feeling of community and a sense of belonging.

Overall, the findings contribute towards the body of literature examining the motivations of female millennials to build relationships with social media influencers. Specifically, the findings contribute towards theories such as the theory of para-social relationships, self-concept, social comparison theory as well as escapism and brand communities.

6 – Recommendations

Having previously concluded that findings from this study make several contributions to the current literature on the relationship between female millennials and social media influencers and overall address a gap in the literature, this chapter aims to provide recommendations for management practice. In addition, it aims to provide recommendations for future research projects based on the findings.

The findings of this research agree with previous studies that were conducted to understand consumer's relationships with brands and influencers. Similarities in findings include the concept of self-concept and social-comparisons as motivations behind interaction with social media influencers. However, dissimilarities have been uncovered when the correlation between trust and advertisement disclosure has been analysed.

Overall, the researcher holds the opinion that the insight gathered has provided a rich insight and has answered the research questions. Further, the researcher argues that findings and the contribution can potentially enable

future research into the relationships created between female millennials and social media influencers.

6.1 Managerial Recommendations

The research has considered the motivations behind female millennials interaction with social media influencers as well as the relationships created. Based on the findings, the researcher will now suggest practical measures in order to sustain and increase female millennials interaction with influencers. Further, recommendations will be made which can aid the influencer to create meaningful relationships with female millennials.

Firstly, the findings indicate that female millennials build para-social relationships with social media influencers. Findings suggest that para-social relationships increase the intensity of interaction with the influencer.
Influencers need to take the factors that impact a relationship into consideration in order to build relationships with female millennials. One factor that should be considered is the way in which the influencer communicates with its female audience. It is recommended for influencers to keep eye contact when addressing the follower as it creates intimacy.

Next, it is recommended that the influencer shares its private life with the audience as this aids to create a connection on a personal level which in turn increases trust and the receptiveness of promotional messages. This includes sharing videos of everyday moments with the audience via platforms such as Instagram and its story function as well as sharing private information about personal matters such as the family. This will give females the impression to know the influencer on a deeper level rather than a superficial level.

Secondly, it is suggested that the influencer exploits the motivations behind the interaction with the influencer.
As the results indicate that females look for information and inspiration from an influencer, it is recommended to focus on an area or topic such as fitness

and become an expert in a specific area. This is because female believe influencers to be experts in their field and see them as opinion leaders. Once the female follower perceives the influencer to be an expert, she will use the content as a source of information or inspiration which can lead to a purchase of promoted products, ultimately increasing the potential for brand-sponsorships and thus increasing revenue.

Based on the previously discussed findings, it is recommended to organisations to incorporate social media influencers into their integrated marketing communications plan. Nevertheless, influencers should only be incorporated if it fits with the organisations objectives. Further, before selecting an influencer to collaborate with, organisations have to consider if the influencer fits with the brand. It was found that females believe to know the influencer on a personal level, thus believe to know the influencers preferences for products and services. Before selecting an influencer, organisations should therefor closely review the content posted by the influencer so that the product or service fits with the influencers displayed preferences. In the case that the product or service fits with the influencers perceived preferences, the consumer will trust the recommendation which may result in a purchase.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the fact that the study is of exploratory nature and the research area is far from being exhausted, scholars should try to create a deeper understanding of the relationships created with social media influencers. Firstly, the researcher recommends to explore relationships with influencers with both female and male consumers in mind and to analyse how relationships and motivations vary depending on gender. In addition, future research could compare how the factor of age or generation influences the relationship created with influencers.

Secondly, the researcher recommends to further examine specific motivations behind the interaction with social media influencers such as self-concept as this is a rich topic which can be further examined in detail.

As this research was of cross-sectional nature and did not allow a longitudinal approach, it is recommended to follow a longitudinal approach to explore the relationships created between female millennials and social media influencers. This could enable the researcher to discover evolving trends in this research area over a period of time.

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8 – Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

First: Research process is introduced to interviewee.

Interviewee is then asked to introduce herself (Name, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, Occupation)

- Do you use social media?
- What kind of social media platforms do you use? (this could be Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, blogs etc.)
- Do you follow people that you don't know personally?
- Do you follow influencers?
- How would you describe influencers?

Relationships with influencers
- What kind of influencers do you follow? Are those part of a particular group (e.g. fitness, fashion, cooking)?
- Why do you follow influencers?
- What could be a reason for you to follow a particular influencer over others?
- How would you describe your relationship with the influencer? Do you feel like you know them?
- Do you think that they are approachable and that it's easier to connect to them rather than a traditional celebrity? And do you think that she/he is similar to a friend?

Motivations behind interaction with influencers

- Do you follow them to get specific information about a topic?
- Would you say that the influencers you follow are similar to yourself or different?
- Do you sometimes wish to be more like the influencer you are following? If so, why?
- Do you compare yourself to the influencer?
- Do you sometimes feel envy towards the influencer? Or are you happy for them and they deserve their success and fame?

Trust, advertisement disclosure and commercial activities
- Are you aware that influencers get paid to promote products and services?
- Does that affect your view of them?
- Does that mean you trust them less or more?

Appendix 2: Ethics Approval

School Research Ethics Committee Application Front Sheet

Field Name	Details to complete
Student Number(s)	1509845
Programme	MSc International Business Management
Module Code	MK7227
Project Title	Social media influencing: exploratory analysis on the impact on buying behaviour among female millennials
Project Supervisor/Tutor	Dr. Diliara Mingazova
Please confirm that you completed the form based on your supervisor or tutor instructions and recommendations.	Yes
What form of primary data collection will your project involve?	Semi-structured face-to-face interviews
Supervisor/Tutor Review Decision (**Not completed by the student**)	Approved
Supervisor/Tutor Review Comments and Amendments Required for Resubmission (If "Minor" or "Major", **Not completed by the student**)	No amendments required – the application is correctly completed