Exploring the relationship between brands and Social media influencers from an Irish perspective.

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Declaration:

I declare that all the work in this dissertation is exclusively my own, unless referenced in the body of the text indicating the source. The bibliography gives the full reference of the source consulted and used in the dissertation.

Furthermore, I declare that no portion of this dissertation has been submitted in support of another degree or qualification in any other university.

Liam Murdoch

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Contents:

Abbreviations:

NBA- National Basketball Association

AMEX- American Express

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Abstract:

Introduction:

Increasingly in today's climate the way in which modern day companies communicate their brand messages to consumers has changed from the traditional method of using celebrities through endorsements to now using social media as a means to communicate the brands message. In that companies are now looking to utilise social media and social media influencers as a means of communication to their customers. It is increasingly becoming more and more popular for brands and companies to engage in this method of marketing as it could be seen as a more personalised approach to marketing. This concept of social media and social media influencers, needs to be explored in regards to their effectiveness as a communications tool for customers especially around the areas of brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

Aims and Objectives:

The main aim of this dissertation was to investigate the relationship that social media influencers are having in regards to the formulation of brand attitudes, brand awareness and purchase intentions around particular brands for customers. This topic of social media and social media influencers has gained considerable traction in parts of Asia, however there has been a lack of significant research from a European perspective but more so an Irish perspective. Hence it was paramount to try and understand it from an Irish context.

Methodology:

In order to suitably investigate these particular topics, the appropriate methodology was undertaken based on certain criteria of social media influencers such as the amount of followers they would have, their daily interactions on the different social media platforms and finally a relationship with companies in regards to the content they populate on their channels. The central method that was used was that of in-depth interviews. There was four interviews with social media influencers, there was two male and two female. The interviews lasted between 45-90 minutes in length and they followed a semi-structured approach.

Results and Findings:

The results of the interviews were derived via a thematic analysis approach, by engaging in this level of analysis it conveyed some level of clarity in regards to the topics of brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions. In that the main underlying themes from the interview process were:

1. Advertising exposure
2. Consumer preferences
3. Personalised celebrity
4. Monetary value

The connection was made how the themes of consumer preferences and personalised celebrity could be linked to the concept of brand attitudes. Furthermore, the theme of

advertising exposure could be linked to brand awareness and finally the theme of monetary value was suitably linked to the topic of purchase intentions.

Future recommendations:

In the future, these topics should be discussed with brands themselves and the followers of these social media influencers by doing so it may give a revealing insight which could benefit marketing practices in the future. Furthermore, these topics should be explored in other European countries like that of the UK, France and Germany. As their cultures would be slightly different to that of Ireland and may also give revealing insights to brands and companies who are engaging in social media as communications tool.

Chapter 1:

1.1: Introduction:

The way in which companies interact with their customers via their advertising messages has changed drastically in the last decade. Where previously in the past, one of the most effective ways for companies to interact with their customers was through the use of celebrity endorsements where it was hoped that a celebrity would have a certain level of influence due to their credibility and likeability factors over customers when they come to buy particular products and services. However, in recent times there has been a shift away from this practice and more companies are shifting towards an improved social media presence. By having an improved social media presence this has co-in sided with the rise of social media influencers. In that these are individuals would be classified as influencers due to their significant following through their different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Furthermore, these individuals would be populating their respective platforms with messages and products from particular brands. The rationale behind these actions is based upon the idea that these social media influencers can have a positive effect on their followers spending patterns. Due to their likeability and credibility factors these influencers possess.

However, this idea of social media influencers and social media needs to be thoroughly investigated in regards to the areas around brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

As stated above the main practices of companies was to in still a celebrity into their marketing campaigns, the early literature put forward by Freidman and Friedman, (1979) and Bashford, (2001) suggest the reasons for why it was successful.

Furthermore, Conrad, (1995) and Till & Shimp, (1998) developed this idea around celebrity endorsements, however they investigated the negative aspects of celebrity endorsements and what can potentially happen if a celebrity acts out or misbehaves. Which in turn may lead to why companies are now pushing more towards a larger social media presence through the use of social media influencers.

However, from an Irish standpoint in regards to the use of social media, there has only been two significant studies. Firstly, Torres & Nevin (2012) carried out a study investigating how social media can be used with nightclubs in the midlands and west of Ireland as a means to generate a wider customer base. The second study was undertaken by Durkin, McGowan & McKeown (2013), they were looking to explore social media adoption in small to medium-sized enterprises in Ireland. However, neither of these studies gave insights in regards to the role that social media influencers can play on brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

It is hoped that this dissertation will add to the body of research in the particular areas of brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions in regards to how social media influencers effect these topics. Furthermore, this dissertation will take into consideration the secondary research carried out in this topic, but try to build on these findings with the use of primary research.

The literature review, helped determine the relevant train of thought for this particular study. In that it helped in grouping the suitable themes and relevant areas that should be investigated. Finally, the literature also aided the development of a suitable research aim and also provided the basis for the development of the relevant research objectives.

Chapter 2:

Literature review:

2.0: Introduction:

Formerly, brands and companies would seek to incorporate celebrities into their respective advertising campaigns. It was anticipated that by doing so, customers would become more receptive towards that brand through traits that the celebrity in question may possess such as a credibility and likability factor.

The section will delve into why brands and companies have used celebrities in the past as a means on advertising. Furthermore, this section will explore if celebrity advertisements have been successful or if they have failed, and why might this be the case. Additionally, this section will explore the linkages between the research objectives of brand awareness, brand attitude and purchase intentions and how they relate closely to this idea of celebrity advertisements.

2.1: Why do brands use celebrities?

Celebrities are acknowledged as effective endorsers because of their symbolic aspirational reference group associations (Assael, 1984; Solomon & Assael, 1987). Friedman and Friedman (1979) refer to this when they discuss 'internalisation' and 'identification'. They indicate that identification occurs when 'individuals conform to the attitude or behaviour advocated by another person because these individuals derive satisfaction from the belief that they are like that person'. Identification is suitably linked to the concepts of likeability and attractiveness, which would explain why celebrity endorsers can be best placed for persuasion with consumers. On the other hand, internalisation occurs when individuals conform to the attitude or behaviour advocated by another person because they believe in the substance of the

new attitude or behaviour. Even though these theories were advocated in the nineteen seventies, they are still somewhat relevant in modern times with more and more people striving to be like their idols, i.e. celebrities, especially in the younger age group from 16-25 year olds. A study by Taylor Nelson Sofres in 2001 discovered that out of all consumers, the 16–25 year old age bracket is the most receptive to celebrities in advertising (Bashford, 2001).

2.2: The moderating effect of negative publicity on the relationship between celebrity endorsement and consumer attitude:

2.2.1: Negative publicity:

Conrad (1995) indicates here "They're humans. When you sign on to a celebrity, you sign on to the whole package: the good, the bad, and the ugly." There are various positive effects relating to celebrity endorsements: a better recollection of the product/service, stronger image, a positive effect on the perception of consumers towards the brand, increased sales and profit. Nevertheless, celebrities remain flawed individuals that are not faultless and are often prone to making public mistakes. Consumers may then link the negative publicity to the brand the celebrity is representing. If a celebrity is strongly associated with the brand, then the occurrence of the negative publicity about the celebrity can influence the attitude and purchase intentions of consumers towards the brand (Till & Shimp, 1998).

There are three possible consequences that may occur from negative publicity to the endorser. If an endorser is interconnected with law breaking activities e.g. Michael Vick the American footballer who was working with Nike, was found to be carrying out illegal dog fights. This could negatively influence the related brand he was endorsing (Till & Shimp, 1998). Conversely, negative publicity can positively affect

the attitude of consumers towards the brand. When something negative happens to the endorser, E.G the loss of form for a athlete due to injury e.g. Rafael Nadal with his recent run of injuries have inevitably damaged his performance levels, this can have a positive effect regarding the attitude of the consumers. Consumers feel a certain amount of empathy for the endorser, and consequently for the brand they endorse (Berger et al, 2007). The third effect of negative publicity is that the endorser is released from their respective contracts. The company will decide to end an endorsement with the celebrity to show to the consumers that they disapprove the behaviour of the endorser.

2.2.2: Negative effects of negative publicity on attitude:

When a celebrity endorses for a brand it might happen that the endorser gets drawn into a so called transgression incident. McCracken (1989) states that the effectiveness of the celebrity depends upon the meanings that this endorser bring to the endorsement process; also seen as meaning transfer.

When a transgression incident takes place, the effectiveness of the endorser can decrease because their respective credibility may be affected (Louie & Obermiller, 2002). Furthermore, this can be detrimental to the brand as the consumers attitudes may be swayed away from a particular brand. Subsequently, the purchase decision making of the consumer will be affected, as well the sales of the product. According to Till and Shimp (1998), negative information about a celebrity can result in a decline of attitude towards the brand and the change of attitude will be influenced by the size of set association, the timing of the negative information, and the strength of the link between brand and celebrity. Negative impact on the attitude has the biggest impact when negative publicity occurs before a strong match-up is originated.

Taking the reputation of a brand into account, it is not good to start an endorsing campaign with a celebrity who is already reaching the news negatively and generates negative publicity (Till & Shimp, 1998).

When a sport celebrity transgressions (SCT) occurs, it affects the sport celebrity's brand image. It is also likely that the SCT may affect the sport celebrity's associated brand partners through the process of brand image transfer (McCracken, 1989). Celebrity endorsements have previously been described as a brand alliance (Jaiprahash, 2008), thus explaining this association. Especially in circumstances when the set action is either breaking the law or behaving immorally.

The involvement of celebrity endorsers in negative events such as drug usage and cheating represents a major danger in respect to consumer's opinion of the celebrity and consequently on the brand that he or she endorses (Burton, Farrelly, & Quester, 2001; Carrillat, d'Astous, & Lazure, 2013; Edwards & Laferle, 2009; Knittel & Stango, 2014; White, Goddard, & Wilbur, 2009). Such cases have displayed this negative impact, such as in the instance of golfer Tiger Woods committing adultery (Chung, Derdenger, & Srinivasan, 2013), the imprisonment of football player Michael Vick for his participation in illegal dog fighting (Thwaites, Lowe, Monkhouse, & Barnes, 2012), as well as cyclist Floyd Landis being tested positive for taking doping substances (Albergotti & O'Connell, 2010).

Furthermore, in the case of the National Basketball association (NBA) player's public image, there were issues that reportedly led to a 33 percent drop in NBA apparel sales from 2004-2005, presumably associated to indiscretions such as Carmel Anthony's much-publicised gang-related DVD entitled Stop Snitching, which intimidated witnesses against testifying in drug cases (Kang and Fereira,

2005). Additionally, in Kope Bryant's rape trial, McDonald's and Nutella both dropped Bryant from their roster of celebrity endorsers after his arrest. On the other hand, Nike did not sever the $45 million agreement signed with Bryant just before his indictment. Possibly the best publicized transgression was with Tiger Woods and his extramarital affairs. Knittel and Stango (2014) discovered that companies that had invested the most in the golfer's endorsement (i.e., Nike, EA Sports, and PepsiCo) saw their cumulative abnormal return decrease by 5.8%, fifteen days after news of the scandal broke out.

Transgressions do not just affect sports celebrities alone, but also models such as Kate Moss. Kate Moss was abruptly dropped from endorsement contracts with Chanel and Burberry following allegations that she used cocaine (Wall Street Journal Online. 2005) This was because the companies in question were too worried about the negative effects such as potential losses that being associated with drugs.

2.2.3: Disposal of celebrities after negative publicity:

The elimination effect of negative publicity involves the endorser being fired from his endorsing activities for the brand. The brand will make this action to show the consumers that they disapprove of the behaviour of the endorser. Subsequently, it is anticipated that consumers will not link the negative publicity from the endorsers with the brand, therefore, their attitude will not be influenced negatively (Louie et al., 2001). By releasing a celebrity from their contract, companies believe the loss in promotional and marketing activities by the celebrity will have less influence then the upcoming negative publicity which will appear by the actions of the celebrity (Berger et al., 2007). Till and Shimp (1998) concluded that a strong link between celebrity endorser and brand must be there, before negative publicity will influence

the reputation and attitude of the brand. Hence, the highest potential risks of negative publicity may occur for new, unknown brands when there are no strong links established yet. Moreover, brands that are not that well-known are vulnerable.

2.2.4: Positive effects of negative publicity on attitude:

Negative publicity can also have a positive effect on consumer attitude towards the brand (Berger et al., 2007; Langmeyer & Shank, 1993). When something happens to the endorser which is negative for him or her, such as a loss of form due to unforeseen circumstances such as an injury, consumers may feel a certain amount of compassion for that endorser. For example, in the case of the tennis player, Rafael Nadal. Nadal experienced an injury crisis and his natural performance levels dropped to a poor standard. However, due to the nature of his injuries, that it was not from a public offence the reputation of Nike remained untarnished, and his fans continued to buy attire from them. Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen (2007) state that negative publicity of an endorser can increase product awareness and accessibility. Consequently, the attitude to the endorser and the brand will also increase. Therefore, some types of undesirable events may increase the likeability and empathy of the endorser and, as such, enhance the attitude. Hence in the case of Nadal.

Through analysing the negative impacts that celebrity endorsements can have, it is evident that the connection between brands and their endorsers can impact negatively on consumer attitudes towards that given brand. For this particular research, regarding social media influencers, if said influencers act negatively in similar ways as celebrities such as Michael Vick and Tiger Woods, this may also affect the credibility of the brand in the eyes of the consumers.

2.3: Rational why celebrities work:

Celebrity endorsements have been extremely successful over the past thirty to forty years This can be accounted by celebrities being generally viewed by consumers as credible sources of information about the product or firm they endorse (Goldsmith *et al.* 2000). Secondly, advertisers are choosing larger-than-life sports heroes as spokespeople for their products but also for the positive qualities they embody (Brooks and Harris, 1998; Sukhdial, Aiken, and Kahle, 2002; McCracken, 1989; Erdogan et al., 2001). Researchers have suggested that celebrity endorsers may be influential because they are viewed as highly dynamic and they have attractive and likable qualities (Atkin and Block, 1983). Celebrity endorsements can also be seen as an effective promotional tool by marketers worldwide because it influences perceived product quality and uniqueness, in addition to also bringing reliability and trust to the brands endorsed (Challapalli, 2007) (Dean, 1999).

With celebrity sports endorsements they are targeting two main areas either male or female consumers, sometimes both but most likely one or the other. Men and women respond differently to persuasive messages with women being more easily persuaded than men, (Widgery and McGaugh 1993). The qualities that males will lean towards in terms of celebrities may differ from what females would lean towards. Females for example, they value respect and the social aspect of sports and thus prefer to buy sporting goods that are endorsed by their favourite athletes from companies that are socially responsible and supportive of female sports (Bush et al. 2005). Research has also found that women are 22 percent more likely to buy a product or service that is endorsed by a female athlete (Women's Sport Foundation, 2003, Bush et al., 2005). Furthermore, women in general may be more likely to engage in word-of-mouth communication due to their gender role (Bush et al. 2005). Young women in

particular have been found to be quite adept at spreading word-of-mouth due to their susceptibility to both normative and informational influences (Bush et al. 2005). However, with male consumers they were more receptive than female consumers to athlete endorsers. Independent of endorser gender, men tended to see athletes as more expert and trustworthy. However, the difference was not statistically significant (Boyd and Shank, 2004).

As previously stated, that has been a natural rise in the number of celebrity endorsements over the past 30 years, this can be partly attributed to the natural culture of society, Culture influences behaviour through its manifestations; values, heroes, rituals, and symbols (Hofstede, 1997). In certain cultures, society may look for different attributes in celebrities and what they worship could be different i.e. within India. Advertising in Asian countries reflect westernization patterns and appeals to the greater extent from US advertisements such as guidance and content adopted from global advertisers (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003). However, consumers may be influenced more by the celebrity's status and glamour. This is because in such cultures, belongingness, harmony, and respect for social hierarchy are key values (Han & Shavitt, 1994; Hofstede, 1980).

As previously discussed, the successes of celebrity advertisements as means of traditional advertisement, is conducted for several reasons. Certain celebrities embody these assumptions, in that they are a credible source in regards to product and service reviews. Secondly, they embody positive qualities about themselves which make them more believable to the natural public. And lastly, they are seen as attractive and likeable people, which makes their particular message about a product or service resonate more for certain customers. These three reasons coincide with this particular research as they are easily transferrable to when brands are looking for

social media influencers, in that they could strive to find people who embody these characteristics. By doing so, it could have positive returns in terms of brand attitudes. Additionally, obtaining this strong brand attitude amongst customers, could have a favourable return in terms of purchase intentions towards that particular brand.

2.4: Source credibility model:

According to the source credibility model "The effectiveness of a message depends on the perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness of an endorser" (Hovland & Weiss, 1953, page 20). Consumers assume that celebrities are credible with regard to the information they give about the products or brand they endorse (Goldsmith et al., 2000). Attitudes towards particular advertisements can be defined as "a learned tendency to respond in a consistently desirable or undesirable approach towards advertising in general" (Haghirian, 2004). In general, it can be acknowledged that celebrity endorsement has a positive influence on attitude (Seno & Lukas, 2005).

An endorser who scores high on expertise and trustworthiness is able to change the consumer's attitude and purchase intentions (Liu & Teo, 2007). If consumers believe a particular endorser is somewhat reliable, they may be more susceptible to believing the information that the celebrity is conveying via an advertisement. Furthermore, when an endorser is seen as an expert in their industry, consumers will form a favourable attitude towards that brand or advertisement due to this perceived credibility. A reliable source can still prove to be somewhat persuasive, even if the consumer is relatively unknown about a particular product or service. If the source is highly credible, there will be more positive attitude changes and stronger behavioural changes towards the advertisement (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008). Consumers

can be swayed by a credible, expert source (Solomon, 2006). The source credibility model can be very beneficial, when looking to examine consumers who may have a high involvement with a particular product or service.

2.4.2: The source attractiveness model:

There is a strong consensus around the source attractiveness model in that it can be linked to what the famous philosopher Aristotle stated: "Beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of introduction". Companies embrace celebrities as part of their advertising strategy because they combine two key elements of an endorser these are: they have a celebrity persona and consumers are known to be attracted by this. The beliefs and purchase intentions of consumers can often be swayed with the use of physically attractive celebrity endorsers (Baker & Churchill, 1977). Following on from this, certain behaviours can best be explained by the halo effect. This is where a person who performs well on a particular aspect, for example physical attractiveness, automatically scores high on other dimensions (Solomon, 2006). Several papers have indicated that attractiveness of endorsers creates an attitude change (Cabalero & Price, 1989; Chaiken, 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1983). Kahle and Homer (1985), conducted a study, with a total of 200 men and women to grade celebrities on physical attractiveness, involvement and likeability. The candidates received particular information about set celebrities and their respective advertisements also combined with a few brochures of these celebrities. Following on from this, each candidate was given a questionnaire regarding to the attractiveness, likeability and involvement of the celebrities. The results of this study showed that candidates who saw an attractive endorser liked the product more than participants who saw an unattractive endorser. When looking at likeability, Kahle and Homer (1985) indicated that participants would form a more positive attitude to

the liked celebrity than the disliked celebrity. Furthermore, another significant result of the test was that brand recall was also considerably higher with attractive celebrities rather than unattractive celebrities, the same could be conveyed for liked and disliked celebrities. In relation to brand recall, the recall of the certain product was higher when participants had a high involvement. When participants had a low involvement, subsequently their recall of the product was lower (Kahle & Homer, 1985).

In general it is perceived that when consumers have less involvement in terms of advertisements, they may be more influenced by the source attractiveness model. When consumers are less involved they are more inclined to use impulse behaviour; so they use simple decision-making behaviour to form attitudes.

The key features of what makes up a celebrity endorser can be found by applying the models of the source credibility and the source attractiveness model illustrated in Amos et al. (2008).

The theory around the source attractiveness model may be linked to the objective around brand awareness, in that one of the main aims of this particular research was to develop a better understanding of the relationship between social media influencers and their followers in relation to brand awareness.

2.4.2.1: Credibility:

Belch & Belch, (1994) define credibility as "the extent to which the recipient sees the source as having relevant knowledge, skills, or experience and trusts the source to give unbiased, objective information". Celebrities are seen as credible sources of information (Goldsmith et al, 2000). The credibility of a celebrity is described as the total amount of positive features that create and increase the acceptation of the

message (Erdogan, 1999). Credibility is one of the most significant traits of celebrity endorsement. In that credibility is particularly imperative when people have formed a negative association towards a particular brand. Thus influential arguments are needed to try and sway the argument towards a more positive association around that particular brand. Therefore, when celebrities are credible it affects the acceptance of the message and the persuasion (Belch & Belch, 2001).

2.4.2.2: Expertise:

The expertise of celebrity endorsement can be defined as "the extent to which an endorser is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (Erdogan, 1999, page 298). Through exploring the expertise in a celebrity endorsement context, it is clear that it is not essential that the celebrity in question is an expert in their given field. But considerably more that consumers think and believe a celebrity has the relative expertise (Ohanian, 1990). Expert sources can also influence consumer's perceptions of a product's quality. The source or celebrity that is a specialist has been found to be more persuasive (Aaker, 1997) and can generate a more favourable position in regards to purchase intentions (Ohanian, 1991). This can be seen when a celebrity i.e. Wayne Rooney endorses a particular type of sports brand his level of expertise would be considerably higher than an individual who is not a footballer E.G Tom Cruise. The level of celebrity expertise will determine its effectiveness (Amos, Holmes & Strutton, 2008). The higher the level of expertise a celebrity has, the more effective they will be in regards to swaying consumers to purchase that product/service. The expertise of a celebrity will not be influenced or changed by negative publicity. However, the believability and credibility may be negatively influenced which can be detrimental in regards to credibility and subsequently influencing purchase intentions.

2.4.2.3: Trustworthiness:

The definition of Trustworthiness refers to "the honesty, integrity and believability of an endorser" (Erdogan et al. 2001, page 40). Companies try to find endorsers who are widely seen as trustful and who are seen as honest, believable and dependable (Shimp, 1997). Trustworthiness is the most significant factor in regards to the source credibility model. Furthermore, likeability is mentioned as the most important attribute of trust (Friedman, 1978). By uniting both likeability and trustworthiness advertisers can look to create a more effective advertisement for a particular product or service. Accordingly, as it is stated when consumers like a celebrity, they will trust that celebrity (Friedman, Santeramo & Traina, 1979). Trustworthiness is a key trait for effective endorsers in that if consumers believe what the endorser is conveying in the advertisement, the believability of that advertisement is stronger and the potential fora positive brand attitude with the consumers will increase.

2.4.2.4: Attractiveness:

Attractiveness also entails concepts such as intellectual skills, personality properties, way of living, athletic performances and skills of endorsers (Erdogan, 1999). Physical attractiveness suggests that a celebrity determines the effectiveness of persuasion as a result of that consumers wanting to be like the endorser and wanting to identify themselves with that endorser (Cohen & Golden, 1972). However, companies do not always use celebrities who could be considered highly attractive. The rationale behind this is that brands may want a particular celebrity to represent the image of that company E.g. Steve Jobs and that constant strive for the perfect product. However, a lot of the advertisements we come into contact with would have elements of men and woman who seen as physically attractive. An example is David

Beckham for the Armani, Breitling, H&M and Diet Coke brands. The rationale behind using someone like David Beckham is that men want to be associated with the highly successful footballer, however due to his credible fashion sense this is another aspect that appeals to men of a certain age. While woman are physically attracted by his appearance because David Beckham always looks fashionable and is seen in many eyes as a very charitable person and who is constantly surrounding himself with his family which may also appeal to woman . He would come across extremely credible and attractive and has a high degree of desire; people want to be like him.

2.4.2.5: Likeability:

Likeability is defined by McGuire (1985) as the "affection for the source as a result of the source's physical appearance and behaviour". Furthermore, McGuire (1985) indicates that when people like a particular celebrity they will also like the accompanying brand and hence one of the main reasons why celebrities are used in commercials and advertisements. Following on from this, if the likeability is high amongst certain consumers it may influence the consumer behaviour and attitude (Belch & Belch, 2001).

2.4.2.6: Familiarity:

Familiarity is supposed to resemblance as knowledge that a celebrity endorser possesses through exposure (Erdogan, 1999; Belch & Belch, 2001). When companies are choosing a celebrity, it is important that the consumers are relatively familiar with that set celebrity. The more familiar the consumer is with the celebrity, potentially the more positive the effect will be. In that the effect of familiarity on attitude increases when there are brief exposures of the celebrity. It is also effective

and when there are longer delays between the exposures. The effect decreases when there are long exposures of the celebrity and when there are shorter delays between the exposures (Bornstein, 1989).

The two models source attractiveness and source credibility indicate some level of clarification in regards to the public's view on celebrities and why they work as an advertising agent. The same connection could be made with that of social media influencers. In that consumers may identify with them for similar reasons. This in turn may give some indication into whether or not social media influencers have an effect on brand awareness and brand attitudes. Previously celebrities had a significant impact on brand awareness. In that many brands would use celebrities as a means to get their message across to the general population.

Following on from what has been said in regards to the previous activities of brands in terms of conveying their message out to the general public through the use of celebrity endorsements. In recent times there has been a shift in the industry in that the new perceived way for brands to reach their target market is through the use of social media. The rationale for why this has happened will be discussed, additionally whether or not social media has been successful as an advertising vehicle for brands.

2.5: Shift from traditional media to social media:

As stated above there has been shift in advertising practices in recent times where previously brands would communicate their message to consumers via traditional advertising messages. However, consumers are now the individuals broadcasting personal or second-hand stories to their social networks and the world. They are a brand's storytellers and the new brand ambassadors. This shift has occurred due to the general public's trust in traditional news sources had been steadily declining. Pew

Research Centre surveys, for example, revealed that the percent of the public who gave their daily newspaper low credibility ratings nearly tripled between 1985 and 2005 - from 16 to 45 percent. Public trust in television broadcasts and leading news magazines also fell (Doherty, 2005).

Additionally, consumers nowadays, are turning away from traditional media and are increasingly using social media to search for information (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) because it is regarded as a more trustworthy source of information than those traditional instruments of marketing communications used by companies (Foux, 2006). For example, one of many platforms that has been gaining considerable attention from consumers is Instagram. Members of the Instagram community share photos and videos. Photo-sharing could be a good way to draw follower's attention to the brand and inspire participation and discussion from users and ultimately contribute to brand consciousness. Thus, it is assumed that perceived social media marketing activities will positively influence brand consciousness.

With traditional media, social media is seen primarily by the users as an environment for consumer to consumer interaction (Colleoni, 2013; Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Ridings *et al.* , 2006), not corporation to consumer interactions (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Hsu *et al.* , 2010; Kelly *et al.* , 2010). Corporations need to produce or curate content that fits this perception, with material that contributes to the community, and stimulates users to diffuse the message to their social networks, either in its original state or adapted in some form of user generated content (Smith *et al.* , 2012).

Moreover, social media is considered to be different to traditional marketing channels, and even other digital marketing channels, centring on a two-way conversation or exchange (Bacile *et al.*, 2014; Shih, 2009). Many organisations are

investing in their social media presence because they appreciate the need to engage in existing social media conversations in order to protect their corporate or brand reputation (Lee and Youn, 2009), increase customer engagement (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012) or increase online sales (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014).

In regards to social media compared to traditional media, the high usage and ease of access engrained in social media allows consumers to rely more on social sources rather than commercial sources of information to inform their consideration sets (Pavlou and Stewart, 2000). Moreover, social media derives its pervasiveness in the lives of younger people causes social media to crowd out cognitive capacity towards traditional media sources, such as television and radio, especially as simultaneous viewing habits increase (Boyd, 2007, 2014). Media multi-tasking has also become more pronounced (Boyd, 2007, 2014; Brasel and Gips, 2011; Pilotta and Schultz, 2005).

In addition to what has been stated regarding social compared to traditional media, today's leaders should embrace social media rather than traditional media for three main reasons:

1. They provide a low-cost platform on which to build your personal brand, communicating who you are both within and outside your company.

2. They allow you to engage rapidly and simultaneously with peers, employees, customers, and the broader public, especially younger generations, in the same transparent and direct way they expect from everyone in their lives.

3. They give you an opportunity to learn from instant information and unvarnished feedback. Active participation in social media can be a powerful tool - the difference between leading effectively and ineffectively, and

between advancing and faltering in the pursuit of your goals. You can use this tool proactively, as Dickson did, or reactively, as the technology CEO could have done (Dutta, 2010).

Marketing professionals in recent years have had more opportunities to use current developments in technology in their work, resulting in innovations in viral marketing, buzz marketing and advertising through social media. These methods are becoming popular and effective ways to acquire customers and promote products (Kozinets *et al.* , 2010) especially because social networking is one of the fastest growing areas of the internet (Trusov *et al.* , 2009). One form of social networking which has experienced a reputation for influencing consumers in their product purchases are blogs. According to studies by Brown *et al.* (2007) and Kozinets *et al.* (2010), blogs are considered a reliable source of gathering information, second only to newspapers.

In relation to purchase intention from blogs this refers to the process by which consumers make a plan to purchase a product/service due to advertisements delivered through advertising media (Huarng *et al.*, 2010; Kamins and Marks, 1987). Purchase intention is also used to identify the final purpose of transmitting an advertisement (Kim and Han, 2014; Xu *et al.*, 2009) and to explain the purchase of products/services due to a match between the advertisement and consumer (Kamins, 1990; Tingchi Liu *et al.*, 2007).

However, practitioners continue to give traditional media higher grades for accuracy, credibility, and ethics than social media or blogs (Wright and Hinson, 2010).

This increasing reliance on social media and mobile advertising indicates that social media and its influencers could a greater role to play for brands in relation to their own awareness.

2.5.1: Social media importance:

Following on from what has been suggested regarding social media compared to traditional media, this section will look to highlight the increasing importance of social media from both a branding and consumer perspective. Globally, more than 50 percent of social media users follow brands on social media (van Belleghem *et al.*, 2011) and 29 percent follow trends and find product reviews and information, and 20 percent comment on what is hot or new or to review products (Gallup, 2014).

Businesses are now joining social media to target those two types of consumers and actively perform less costly integrated marketing activities. An overwhelming majority of marketers worldwide 97 percent are participating in social media marketing to market their business (Stelzner, 2014). More than half of marketers 54 percent chose Facebook as their most important platform. Social media being used as a marketing tool mainly for four purposes: market research and feedback generation; publicity, branding, and reputation management; business networking; and customer service and customer relationship management (Thoring, 2011)

Furthermore, marketers invested 22% of all marketing communications to digital media in 2013 and this percentage is expected to grow to 27% by 2017 (Hernandez, 2013; Vranica, 2013). In 2015 advertisers worldwide will spend $23.68 billion on paid media to reach consumers on social networks. By 2017, social network ad spending will reach $35.98 billion, representing 16.0% of all digital ad spending globally. In a clear signal of its growing power, Facebook terminated free organic

reach of company posts and updates through computer and mobile newsfeeds - companies but must now pay to promote and reach existing and potential customers (Loten, Janofsky & Albergotti, 2014).

One of the most prominent methods of social media advertisements is through smartphones, the accessibility and use of smartphone advertisements differ from both the characteristics of mass media advertisements as described by Ducoffe (1995). Identifying these distinct characteristics requires a grasp of smartphone features, such as positioning through GPS, individual identification through U-SIM technology, the accumulation function of internet information access, and accurate time information sent from the base station. These features have enabled companies to obtain extensive knowledge of individual users. The level of an advertisement's value has been defined by the degrees of the ad's entertainment, information, and irritation Ducoffe, (1995). This definition excludes the peripheral "mood" factor, which was suggested by the ELM. Mood is the feeling produced by an advertisement, and is influenced by individual differences and the reception context. The advertising value concept failed to address the factors reflecting individual characteristics, which strongly affect mobile advertisements. Therefore, a new influence factor, context awareness value, was proposed.

Coulter *et al.* (2012) points out that the mechanisms through which marketing activities impact brand equity differ between traditional tools (e.g. newspapers and TV advertisements) and social media tools. One reason is that social media tools are characterized as more interactive, more informative, and more proactive in dealing with customer information than traditional tools.

2.6: Negatives of Social media compared to Traditional media:

However this shift from traditional towards social media is not a guaranteed success, in that early evidence revealed that only 35 percent of Fortune 500 companies used Twitter, with only 24 percent of those being actively engaged Barnes and Mattson, (2010). Content analysis of corporate tweeting established that such accounts blended customer testimony, complaints, and product/service inquiries (Jansen *et al.* , 2009). One-way communication remains the dominant form of messaging used by organizations on Twitter (Waters and Jamal, 2011; Xifra and Grau, 2010). Chasing followers who want to receive one-way messages has become a common non-communication strategy (Rybako and Seltzer, 2010). Furthermore, organizations have been cautioned to venture carefully into social media because slim evidence exists that such efforts can actually build communities around organizations (Kent, 2008). Other research suggests that individuals remain apathetic regarding organizational use of social media since people primarily use the social media services to connect with friends, family, and co-workers (Vorvoreanu, 2009).

Additionally, social media as a news outlet has been questioned, in that it is important to understand the degree to which people in general trust online social media information in regards to product information. As Sweetser *et al.* (2008) stated, "With the ever-increasing number of online information sources, credibility has taken the stage to separate the good from the bad." (p. 169). In terms of traditional vs social media, 58 percent of respondents in developed countries trust traditional media, whereas only 26 percent trust social media (Edelman, 2013). Predictably, trust in social media increases among younger (global) audiences, however, with 47 percent of 18-29 year-olds trusting social media vs only 29 percent

of those 65 and older (Edelman, 2013). In terms of specific social media channels, Forrester Research reports that only 15 percent of Americans trust posts by companies or brands on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (whereas 70 percent trust brand or product recommendations from family and friends) (Wasserman, 2013).

2.7: Rationale for this study:

As stated above the advertising media landscape has changed significantly in the last decade, with a greater emphasis now being placed upon social media. Especially when looking at brands which would have a target market of a slightly younger generation I.E generation Y or millennials. With this shift towards social media, there should be a suitable study in place that delves into the psyche of both the consumers and the brands themselves. Increasingly, one of the main ways for brands to convey their message to the general public is through social media and in some cases social media influencers. However, there has been little research done to establish why these influencers are being used as advertising vehicles for these particular brands.

This idea of social media influencers will only continue to grow with society's reliance on smartphones especially in Ireland where according to Statista (2017), 3.8 million people use their smartphones which is just under 71% of the population. Furthermore, from a marketing context, social media is seen as essentially different to other forms of digital media (Hoffman and Novak, 2012; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010) and as potentially heralding a paradigm shift in marketing (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). With this in mind there should be some level of research in place to see what

level of impact social media influencers will have on the advertising landscape from a smartphone user's point of view.

Particularly from an Irish context, there has been no significant studies done in regards to this particular topic. There have been only two studies that are somewhat relevant to this area of social media and influencers within Ireland. Firstly, Torres & Nevin (2012) carried out a study investigating how social media can be used with nightclubs in the midlands and west of Ireland as a means to generate a wider customer base. The results indicated that at the time when looking to implement a social media strategy, there should be a concerted effort to integrate individuals from each department of the organisation as to get a better view of what is needed for that particular organisation. Furthermore, it was found that whatever social media channel is being used either that being Facebook, Twitter, Bebo or Instagram it should be applicable to the target market.

The second study was undertaken by Durkin, McGowan & McKeown (2013), they were looking to explore social media adoption in small to medium-sized enterprises in Ireland. The authors indicated that with the use of social media, it can add value to the customers experience when purchasing a given product/service from that brand. Moreover, their study also gave some insight into how brands in some cases would be somewhat against integrating a social media policy into their advertising and marketing practices.

From these studies that there is minimal mention of influencers and the role they may play on consumers purchasing decisions, brand awareness and formulation of brand attitudes. It is for this particular reason why it is paramount that a significant study is undertaken so it may shed some light on these particular issues.

It is hoped that by seeking out clarification from social media influencers, in regards to the topics of brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions it would give some indication to brands and consumers whether or not these particular advertising strategies are working. Additionally by looking at social media influencers, it may give the industry some level of insight into their relationship with brands in regards to demands and possible payments. It will also be interesting to note the views of social media influencers in relation to customers shift towards social media as a medium for advertisements. Unfortunately there is little indication within the literature about this aspect, especially from an Irish context.

Chapter 3:

Research methods:

3.0: Methodology:

According to Gross et al (1996), methodology can be described as the procedural process that researchers make use of to analyse information or data, and the process selected represents the way a researcher sees the world. Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2008) express that research methodology is truly essential for researchers due to its vast contribution regarding to knowledge and skills provided in order to solve the problems, and achieve the goals or objectives planned for the investigation. For researchers, it is quite important to have a clear methodological framework in order to pose questions and also to answering them (Gross et al, 1996). Therefore, this chapter highlights the methodology chosen for this investigation, as well as its limitations and the ethical considerations.

3.1: Research aim defined:

The research aim is to investigate the impact social media influencers are having on consumer's behaviour in the context of purchasing power. This information will be derived from social media influencers and their respective views on the topics such as brand attitudes, brand awareness and purchase intentions. Previous studies by Booth and Matic, (2011) & Tafesse, (2016), Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller (2013) have shown that they would use a quantitative approach for the research methods around the topic of social media influencers. However, a qualitative method will be used for this particular study due to what Keegan states in relation to the importance of understanding behaviours in the context of research 'understanding why individuals and groups think and behave in the way they do'.

Furthermore, throughout this section the writer will be explaining the rationale why qualitative is more applicable to this study. Also, there will be a small discussion based around the different qualitative methods that will be used for this study in reference to why they are more applicable to this particular research.

3.2: The research objectives:

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) indicate that the research objectives are derived from the research question, and that the objectives are more likely to lead the researcher in a direction that leads them to obtaining more specific information in regards the main research objectives.

The research objectives:

1. To assess the impact of social media influencers on brand awareness.
2. To assess the impact of social media influencers on brand attitudes.
3. To assess the impact of social media influencers on purchase intentions from Irish consumers between the ages of 18-30.

3.3: Proposed methodology and structure:

The aim of this research is to investigate the impact that social media influencers have on purchasing intentions from an Irish context from the ages 18-30. In order to properly achieve this aim the researcher will use a number of elements from the ''research onion'' put forward by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009). This model is composed of six different layers. The research philosophies (outer layer), research approaches, research strategies, research choices, the time horizons and finally the different techniques and procedures used to collect the data. Every layer of the model provides a critical element regarding the process of the research and the way it will be designed. Following on from this is the end of the process which is the collecting

of data and analysing it appropriately to make a suitable conclusion in relation to the findings and the suitable objectives.
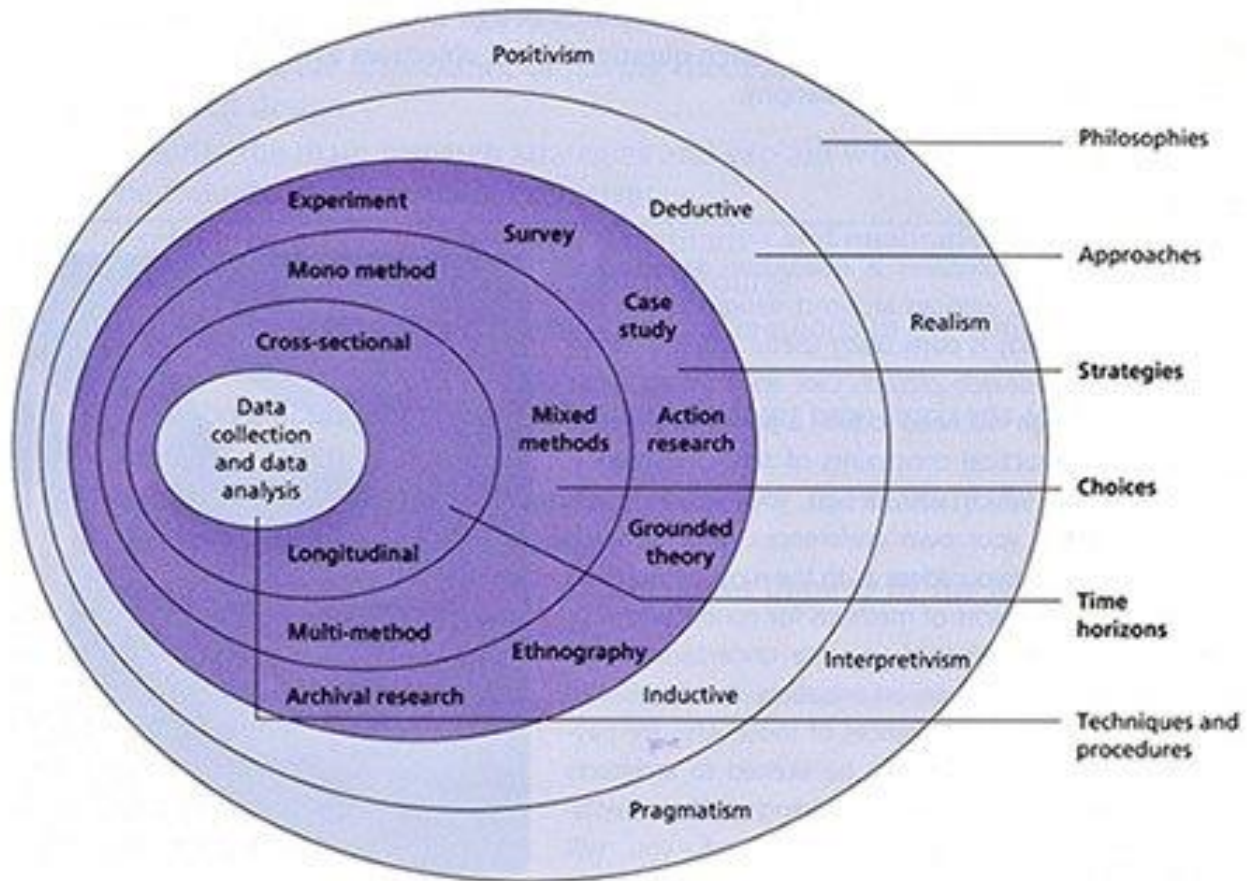
Figure 1: Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009), Research Onion.

3.3.1: Research philosophy layer:

This is the first and also external layer of the model, according to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009) it offers the different philosophical methodologies that the research can take in order to under pin its research strategy and the variety of methods that are going to be used regarding to the successful fulfilment of the research. The external layer is linked to the creation of knowledge for the particular research topic. Furthermore, the research philosophy should be considered as one of the most substantial points regarding to the research methodology because it emphasises the

understanding of the methods selected to gather and analyse the primary data collected for the investigation.

According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009), there are ten different philosophies that can be adopted by researchers. However for this particular piece of research the interpretivist approach will be the one adopted, as it the one most suitable since it's the best way to observe and interpret the data. According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009), the interpretivist perspective is highly applicable in the case of business and management research. Not only are business situations complex, but also unique function of a particular set of circumstances and individuals. This immediately raises the questions about the general ability of research that aims to capture the rich complexity of social situations.

3.3.2: The approaches layer:

The second most external layer of the research onion helps the researcher identify the specific tools that can be used in order to answer the specific research question. In regards to the research onion there is two different approaches to choose from: the deductive approach and the inductive approach. For this research, the inductive approach will be used, the reasoning behind this is that according to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009), inductive is more connected to the philosophy of interpretivist because it is attempting to gain and understand the meaning humans attach to certain events. Furthermore, trying to understand the behaviour of respondents under examination compared to the deductive approach which is to do with the creation and development of theories.

Research using an inductive approach is likely to be particularly concerned with the context in which such events are taking place. Therefore a small sample is more

appropriate than a large sample as with the deductive approach. It is for this reason why for this particular piece of research a smaller sample was chosen.

3.3.3: The strategies layer:

This is the third layer of the model. With this layer it examines the different types of research strategies such as: experiment, survey, case study, action research, and grounded theory, ethnography and archival research. Not all of these strategies will be applicable to the inductive approach it is for this reason the research strategy for this investigation will be the use of in-depth interviews. Successful interviewing involves the interviewees feeling comfortable and confident enough in the interaction to 'talk back.' (Blumer 1996).

3.3.3.1: Basic characteristics of in-depth interviews:

According to McGivern (2013) in-depth interviews are conducted by a qualitative researcher on a one-to-one basis with a respondent who has been chosen according to the agreed sampling criteria for the project. As the name suggests, the aim is to explore a topic in depth, and most in-depth interviews will be in the range 45 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the topic and what has to be covered. In most cases the researcher will use an open-ended interview approach. Interviews may take place in the respondents home, workplace, central location or viewing facility. Typically the interview is recorded.

The format of the in-depth interview is loosely structured, allowing freedom for both the interviewer and the interviewee to explore additional points and change direction if necessary. These interviews incorporate a good deal of the respondent's perspective into the findings, and therefore increase validity of the information collected. This is a very important feature where the research concerns are not

known, or where there is a feeling that decisions have been driven by assumptions that may or may not be an accurate reflection of the views in that given industry.

Malhotra & Birks (1999) make reference to how in-depth interviews are not an alternatives to group discussions but more so generate different types of data. They are appropriate for more sensitive subjects, for understanding in detail without the views of the respondent being influenced by what members of the group say or what other members of the group might think of them if they were to report a particular attitude or behaviour.

However, similar problems can arise in an individual interview situation but they are easier to read and disentangle when there is loss 'contamination' or 'noise' from others.

3.3.3.2: Why use in-depth interviews?

According to Bryman (2008) In-depth interviews are generally carried out face to face so that the interviewer can create a relationship with the respondent by taking the time to open up the subject, respond to body language and build trust that results in the researcher obtaining the appropriate results.

A small number of in-depth interviews increase understanding of issues faced by the respondents and can reveal practices that were previously assumed. By using in-depth interviews in a research design, the validity of the research is increased as the respondents own perspectives are incorporated into the research agenda.

Furthermore, Hague et al (2016) suggest that, in-depth interviews are useful in market research design where research issues are not known, issues, attitudes and motivations need exploration, processes need describing in detail, complex

explanation and understanding is required and also when individuals need to test things and give their reactions to the products.

3.3.3.3: Advantages of In-depth interviews:

1: Uncover greater depth of insights than focus groups: This can happen through concentrating and developing an issue with the individual. In a group scenario interesting and knowledgeable individuals cannot be solely concentrated upon.

2: Attribute the responses directly to the respondent, unlike focus groups where it is often difficult to determine which respondent made a particular response.

3: Result in a free exchange of information that may not be possible in focus groups because there is no social pressure to conform to group response. This makes them ideally suited to sensitive issues, especially commercially sensitive issues.

4: Be easier to arrange than the focus group as there are not so many individuals to co-ordinate and the interviewer can travel to the respondent.

3.3.3.4: Disadvantages of in-depth interviews:

1: Lack of consistent structure:

The lack of consistent structure makes the results susceptible to the interviewers influence and the quality and completeness of the results depend heavily on the interviewers skills. As with all qualitative techniques, the interviewer needs to develop an awareness of the factors that make them 'see' in a particular way.

2: The length of the interview:

The length of the interview, combined with high costs and the availability of candidates, means that the number of in-depth interviews in a project tends to be minimal.

3: The data obtained can be difficult to analyse and interpret:

Many responses given in the interview process may lack a certain level of credibility in that there can be many hidden messages and interpretations in how respondents express themselves. The researcher needs a strong theoretical awareness to make sense of the data or the technical means to develop theory if using grounded theory approach. As well as the transcripts of the interview, additional observations add to the richness and multifaceted analyses and potential interpretations.

3.4: Choices of layer:

This is the fourth layer of the model, within this layer the researcher aims to choose the research method for the investigation. The research methods can be seen in three distinctly different ways: mono method, multi-method and mixed method. The mono method is the one most appropriate for this particular piece of research as it is more applicable for interpretation and observation which are key aspects when trying to build rapport with the candidates throughout the interviews.

3.5: Time horizons layer:

This is the second to last layer of the model and it encompasses the possible ways that an investigation can be approached, particularly when looking at time in respect to how long a study may take. It will either be cross-sectional or longitudinal. For this particular piece research the cross-sectional study is the more applicable. This is because it is used more frequently when an investigation is going to examine a specific phenomenon but only at a certain time rather than for a long period of time

(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In that the in-depth interviews were done at a specific time. To align with the parameters set around the research completion date and with availability of each of the respondents.

3.6: Qualitative approach:

For this research, the approach that was taken was of a qualitative nature in that the method used was that of in-depth interviews. The analysis of data will be done through the application of a grounded theory approach which is defined by Martin & Turner (1986) 'as a systematic methodology in the social sciences involving the construction of theory through the analysis of data'. Furthermore, in conjunction with the grounded theory approach thematic structure was also used. This is defined by Braun & Clarke (2006) as 'the emphasizing, pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data'. By engaging in both sets of analysis, it gave the researcher a more rounded view on the findings.

Qualitative research is conducted through an intense or prolonged contact with a life situation. These situations are ecologically valid, reflective of the everyday life of individuals, group's societies and organisations. In relation to this research it is for this reason why the qualitative approach was most appropriate as it seeks to understand behaviours rather than trying to quantify certain phenomena with statistics. Furthermore, Silverman (2011) makes reference to this when he says 'the primary issue is to generate data, which give an authentic insight into people's experience''. Additionally qualitative research is about rich, detailed description, understanding and insight rather than measurement. It aims to get below the surface, to get a more rational response. Moreover, the basic methodology involves

techniques which seek to reach understanding through observation and dialogue, rather than measurement.

Branwaite and Patterson (2011) identify key issues that make it a unique and invaluable tool in consumer market research context. These are as follows:

1. It is a conversation, a direct dialogue with consumers. The dialogue is underpinned by active listeners, it entails rapport between the researcher and responder.

2. A 'merging of minds' to achieve insights and possibilities that can be explored to marketing issues. Furthermore it is possible to find realties within interviews-stories that reveal culturally embedded normative explanation (Orbuch 1997).

3.7: Sample:

For this particular research four social media influencers were used as a means to answering the research objectives. These four social media influencers made up the entire sample.

Furthermore, qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people nested in their context and studied in depth, unlike quantitative researchers, who aim for larger numbers of context stripped cases and seek statistical significance. Qualitative samples tend to be purposive, rather than random. (Kuzel, 1992: Morse 1989).

For this research, because of time constraints this was the best way of collecting the data. In addition, and as a sample design within the non-probability ones, convenience sampling was the one used for this research, which in Sekaran and Bougie (2010) own words "refers to the collection of information from members of

the population who are conveniently available to provide it... and it is perhaps the best way of getting some basic information quickly and efficiently" (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010, p. 276).

The eligibility criteria for each of the candidates was as follows:

1. They must have a substantial following of people, preferably over 50,000 followers on certain social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat.

2. Furthermore, that they would be active daily on each of these platforms in terms of the content they put out.

3. Finally that each of the candidates would be engaging in some level of sponsorship ideally in their given field of expertise.

It was paramount that each candidate had a high following on the different social media platforms, so that if possible it may shed some light on objectives in terms seeking clarification on matters of looking at brand attitudes, brand awareness and purchase intentions. Similarly enough with the criteria of each candidate being active daily on their platforms, it was hoped this may give some insight into the relationship brands have with their social media influencers. Finally, the criteria around each candidate engaging in levels of sponsorship this was paramount as one of the objectives set above is to understand the relationship that social media influencers are having on consumer spending within Ireland. By having these relationships in place I.E brands and influencers in place, it was hoped they may give some insight in terms of the content they put out for each company and the frequency of these posts.

All this information was freely available by simply searching for a given social media influencer and on their respective social media channels, the amount of followers they have is clearly displayed, similarly enough if the influencer is engaging in sponsorship this information is available also by simply searching through their respective platforms.

Figure 1.2: Table of candidates:

Gender:	Age:	Area of expertise:	Years as social media influencer:
Male	23	Gym and Fitness.	2 ½ years
Female	29	Gym and fitness and make-up.	1 ½ years
Male	25	Make-up and Fashion.	3 years
female	24	Gym and Fitness and nutrition and fashion.	3 ½ years

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3.7.2: Procedure:

Before the interview process started, the topics in question in regards to the research itself was signed off by the ethical committee from the National college of Ireland.

Before the interview process began, in order to facilitate the candidates a location and time was agreed upon in regards to where the interview would take place.

During the interview process, each of the respondents were asked a similar line of questioning regarding brand attitudes, brand awareness and purchase intentions. The interviews themselves lasted approximately 60-90 minutes in length.

Each candidate discussed at length the areas around brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

All 4 interviews were performed between May 2017 and June 2017.

3.7.3: Measures:

The questions that were used in the interview process, were based upon the reading of the literature. However, within the literature there had been scarce examples of the types of questions that would be applicable for this particular research.

Due to the lack of significant evidence in terms of previously applicable questions, a pilot interview was done with two individuals who could not be considered for the study as they did not fit the criteria as mentioned above. There were issues with three out of the 10 questions, in that the grammar and context did not make sense to each of the individuals so changes were made to those particular questions.

The candidates were given a copy of some of the topics at the start of the interview process, in that the elements of confusion would not come into play.

Ten questions were asked to each of the candidates encompassing the elements of:

1. Brand awareness, how social media has changed this particular landscape.

2. Brand attitudes, has your role as a social media influencer encompassed elements of brand attitudes?

3. Purchase intentions, has your role as a social media influencer with certain companies had any effect on consumers purchase intentions?

In regards to the recording aspect of the interviews, each candidate was asked before the process began if they were comfortable with the process being recorded on both video and voice record. Each of the candidates agreed to both forms of recording. The basis for both aspects is that so if a candidate did give a particular response to a question, it may not have matched their facial expression which could give a key insight into that given topic.

None of the candidates were rushed in any way, if they became confused or stuck on a topic, there was some clarification offered if necessary in regards to that particular topic.

3.7.4: Analysis:

After the interviews commenced, the recordings were viewed and listened back. This was done so that the thematic analysis could take place following the guidelines put forward by Braun & Clarke (2006). In that the responses that appeared most frequently from each of the candidates were organised into patterns which help form the hierarchy of themes. These themes reflected the important factors from the interviews. After reviewing the themes, they were subsequently linked to the research objectives set out previously.

3.8: Ethics:

According to Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2008) ethical issues take part in every single sort of investigation and all parties involved in this process should be able to show a relatively high level of ethical behaviour.

3.8.2: Confidentiality:

This is in regards to protecting the participant's identity, the place and the location of the research. For the in-depth interviews the participants will have the option to stay anonymous and will also be given first sight of anything that is going to be published with their respective views and if they are not comfortable with their views being published it will be removed however each respondent's views will be anonymous.

3.8.3: Codes and consent:

The research subjects have the right to know that they are being researched, the right to be informed about the nature of the research and also have the right to withdraw at any time if they want to. In some countries it is mandatory that research participants sign an informed consent form. Other places accept oral consent unless the researchers is working with certain groups like children, pupils, clients and patients. With the in-depth interviews each respondent will be notified before the process starts as to what the particular subject is in regards to what's being researched. Furthermore there will be written consent forms for each respondent to fill out just to clarify their agreement to being part of the in-depth interview.

3.8.4: Researcher bias:

When looking into researcher bias it is critically important that the strategy of reflexivity is used, this is when the researcher is engaged in critical self-reflection about his potential bias's and inclinations. By using this strategy the researcher then becomes more self-aware. Furthermore within the section of researcher bias, the researcher should also discuss the areas around that of personal background and how that might affect the research.

3.9: Limitations:

Limitations are those actions which can create difficulties when conducting an investigation, it's critically important that researchers are aware of them because they can have a high impact on the findings of the investigation. (Hair, Bush and Ortinau, 2003).

The two major limitations that were faced in this investigation was that of time and access to respondents. With the time element, having a specific deadline for this investigation meant that there was only suitable time to do four in-depth interviews. However with an extended deadline there could have been perhaps a focus groups in conjunction with the interviews which may have given the researcher a more rounded view of the population in relation to the different topics. In relation to the access of respondents, numerous social media influencers were contacted in regards to their availability of engaging in the study, however many of them refused to take part due to 'contractual issues' and in some cases they chose to simply not entertain the request.

For this particular study, it is important not to focus too much on one or two particular areas within the interviews when asking the questions. It is vital to try and balance out the conversation through a semi structured conversational style so that a conversation flows amongst the interviewer and interviewee. Following on from this in terms of researcher bias, it is critical that the reflexivity strategy is upheld in that the moderator of the in-depth interview does not engage in any methods of bias in terms of the types of questions that he/she is asking. In regards to the type of questions that are asked in the in-depth interview the moderator must ensure that

he/she is not leading the conversation in a direction that he/she wants in order to fulfil their own respective expectations. They must ask questions that are fair but also in an open ended and non-directive format. By doing so ideally the respondents will not feel pressured to talk about topics that may be leading in a particular away, but engage more in a free flowing conversation between the moderator and the respondents. It is critical from a moderator's point of view that they listen carefully to how the respondents are giving their respective answers so that the moderator can ask suitable follow up questions After these open ended questions have been asked if the facilitator is looking for more clarification they may ask follow up questions in order to clarify meaning or to encourage the respondent to answer in more depth.

Chapter 4: Research findings:

4.0: Research findings:

The following section will clearly display the results of the interview process, the results will be broken down to follow the constant themes that featured throughout the interview process.

In relation to the interview process itself, each of the respondents were extremely receptive to the line of questioning and very open to discuss most elements of their respective answers around the areas of brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

The four main themes that emerged from the interview process were as follows:

1. Advertising exposure
2. Consumer preference
3. Personalised celebrity
4. Monetary value

4.1: Advertising exposure:

This was one of the more dominant themes throughout the interview process with each of the respondent's. In that each of them made references to how brands are using them for added exposure. With respondent 1 stating that 'more and more day to day brands are approaching me for a collaborations, in that they understand that more and more consumers are placing an emphasis on their mobile devices and not paying attention to TV and paper ads'. Respondent 2 also made reference to this logic in that companies are now applying social media influencers as key part of

their advertising strategy. This notion of added advertising exposure coincides with the objective of brand awareness.

However previously in the past social media influencers would of advertised brands that would be in their area of expertise. Respondent 4 indicated this when she stated that 'yeah the only brands that I would endorse would be ones which are in my industry, like I wouldn't be endorsing a fitness brand as I am a make-up artist'. This suggestion from respondent 4 shows a certain level of rigidness in that she would only be focusing on brands within her given area of expertise. However with this added advertising exposure which social media influencers are engaging in, brand saturation may affect consumer's views on that social media influencer and thee brands they are endorsing. In that respondent 2 made reference to this issue 'Look if I'm endorsing 10 different brands doing a few advertisements every couple of days for a range of different brands then consumers will naturally become somewhat confused, because I know I would be confused if I was following someone who constantly posting messages about brand X and brand Y'

4.2: Consumer preferences:

The second major theme that was evident in this interview process was that of consumer preferences and how that played into this personalised celebrity approach which was both insightful and informative around the areas of brand attitudes.

This term consumer and brand preferences, respondent's 1 and 3 suitably referenced this concept in that customers preferences for different social media platforms is shaping influencers decision in terms of the content they put out. In that respondent 1 stated 'The frequency of the content I put out on Snapchat and Instagram would differ greatly from Facebook, purely because my followers in general would be more

inclined to seeing me on Snapchat and Instagram. So much so why would I populate a particular platform if my target audience isn't looking at that particular platform?' It is valid question which gives a strong indication that these influencers are much more conscious of the role that consumer preferences are playing on their decisions in relation to content. Respondent 3 made a very interesting point in that she stated the following in relation to brand attitudes 'For me if I was in charge of promoting a brand, albeit make up, gaming, gym and fitness. I would make sure that I am promoting it on the right platforms. In that if the customer preference is Snapchat that why would I display the advertisement in newspapers and billboards? I would not because that's not where my target market is. If I did I would think that consumers would feel a slight disconnect with me as a brand in that why is she displaying in papers when she's always done it on Snapchat or whatever?'.

4.3: Personalised celebrity:

In terms of personalised celebrities, this theme was evident from the start in terms of the interview process. In that it was paramount to get a clear definition of what a social media influencer was as the descriptions in the literature was somewhat vague. The question was put to each of the respondents in regards to what they would classify as a social media influencer and whether or not they classify themselves as one.

Each respondent did however come up with a slightly different view on what they would classify as a social media influencer. The main characteristics which each respondent was that it is someone who is an opinion leader in their given field, they endorse products in that they would receive a small monetary sum for their efforts. But importantly from a brand attitudes point of view 3 out of the 4 respondents made

reference to how social media influencers could be seen as a personalised celebrity. In that the respondents believed followers in today's culture have much more connected and invested interest in who they are following. Unlike with celebrities who are always in the public domain with TV and magazines. With the use of social media platforms followers can become closer to that given person. In that respondent 4 stated the following, 'I would like to think that the brands I endorse which aren't many, my followers understand that I am endorsing them because the brand is something I am passionate about and I enjoy using the brand. Unlike certain celebrities such as David Beckham where he will endorse numerous brands, it doesn't have the same connection with his followers.' By using social media influencers rather than that of celebrities, the customers can feel the more personalised approach which in turn may have a positive returns in terms of attitude and monetary value.

According to respondent 4's point of view followers of these social media influencers have a stronger belief that what they are putting out on their platforms is more genuine. It then may sway their purchasing decisions for that given brand.

4.4: Monetary value:

The theme of monetary value was the final theme to emerge from the interview process. The first two themes of customer preference and advertising exposure were somewhat expected with the ever increasing use of smartphones in daily life with Delottie estimating that 86% of Irish consumers are now using smartphones. However the theme of monetary value was quite unexpected, partially down to the lack of significant research done into the monetary value associated with social media influencers in relation to the content they put out on their respective platforms

and regulation involved in these posts and how that is shaping the social media platform industry in the future.

This topic of monetary value was somewhat unexpected as stated above. With each of the respondents disclosing certain fees they would charge for their services in that the exposure they would give a particular brand. Respondent 1 stated that 'I would make more doing 3 advertisement campaigns through Instagram than I would working in an office job 9-5 on a monthly salary'. This gave the strongest indication that the fees they would be receiving would be relatively high.

However one of the issues that was consistent throughout the process with each of the respondents was that they all agonize from pressures with the brands they endorse. In that yes, they are getting paid for endorsing a particular brand however with this there are pressures from the brands themselves to justify the fees. With respondent 2 and 3 making very similar statements in this regard. They stated the following 'Yes I would charge a particular fee for my services, however these brands don't just expect me to put up a picture on Snapchat and say how amazing this product is, they expect more in that they want to see substantial returns on investment in the form of more customers, but paying customers. One of the ways for them to measure this is through the use of discount codes. In that they would issue me with 15% off code/voucher so every time a customer goes to purchase they would type in my code and get a discount. This then gives them a sort of yard stick to see whether or not I am in fact bringing customers to the company. But that's a lot of pressure, to consistently bring customers to the brand'. With this response, it was important to delve a bit deeper into the psyche of these influencers, in that try and discover whether or not the respondents feel the pushing of these discount codes are working or not in terms of changing consumers purchasing decisions.

Each of the respondents all gave a similar answers in that they felt pushing a discount code every day or every few posts on the different platforms can have a negative effect on consumer's decisions. Due to consumers becoming somewhat infuriated about the constant pushing of a blatant advertising scheme. However they all stated that if it is done right in terms of posting every few days so that consumes are consistently bombarded with these discount codes, it could have positive effect on consumer's decision making.

Chapter 5:

5.0: Discussion:

Throughout this section, the connection between what was found in the findings and the potential implications for the social media marketing industry will be discussed with reference to the key findings from the respective respondents.

The first major theme that was derived from the interview process was that of advertising exposure. In that respondents 1 and 2 made reference to how day to day companies are making a concerted effort to integrate social media influencers into their respective advertising strategy. The rationale behind this movement makes sense, in that according to Baker et al (1986) and Chakravarti et al., (2003) they state that by raising brand awareness it increases the likelihood that a brand will be a part of the consideration set, representing the basket of brands, which are considered when making a purchase decision (Baker et al., 1986; Chakravarti et al., 2003). If brand awareness is increased through the use social media influencers it could potentially lead to positive returns in terms of purchase decisions.

However one element which is critical for brands to be successful in terms purchasing decisions with consumers is that the fit is right amongst the social media influencer and the given brand. In that brands would ideally want a social media influencer who will only endorse a small select number of brands, so that the messages do not get confused amongst the followers of that social media influencer.

Respondent 4 makes reference to this point above where she stated that she would be rigid in her choices of brands to promote. By doing so the exposure for the brands she does choose to promote could potentially be more positive in terms of brand awareness as her followers could clearly decipher her posts as for a set brand.

However, in contemporary culture at the moment the balance between getting the right social media influencer for your brand is challenging mainly down to the level of popularity that each influencer is achieving. With respondent 1's frequency of requests evident of this. Finally from a brand awareness point of view, it is evident that the use of social media influencers is working for particular brands, however social media influencers can work effectively on brand awareness which may in turn affect purchase intentions for a particular product/service.

5.1: Consumer preferences: Brand Attitudes:

The second major theme that was derived from the results of the interview process was that of consumer preferences. This theme in particular linked into the research objective of brand attitudes. Respondent 1 made reference to this concept of consumer preferences and how it can change a social media influencers choices in terms of frequency of content she puts out on her different channels. From this we can distinguish the connection between brand attitude and consumer preferences. In that customers may form attitudes about particular brands in today's climate, these attitudes can be derived based upon who or what is endorsing set brand. It could be a social media influencer, a celebrity or a sporting icon. In relation to a social media influencers being used as an endorser, it can be effective in terms of changing brand attitudes however brands must ensure that the message they want to give out is on the right platform. If not the customers may feel a slight disconnect and may be turned away from the brand. If brands want to be successful in terms of getting the most exposure and forming positive attitudes with consumers they should be aware of the importance of the platform selection.

5.2: Personalised celebrity: Brand Attitudes:

Following on from what was found in the interview process regarding the themes around consumer preferences and increased advertising exposure. The next theme that was discovered was that of personalised celebrity. This also had a considerable connection with the research objective of exploring the role that social media influencers had on brand attitudes of consumers. In that each of the respondents made suitable reference to how social media influencers could be seen as this personalised celebrity. This idea of personalised celebrity links into brand attitudes, in that consumers may feel a stronger connection to a particular brand due to the use of social media influencers over modern day celebrities such as David Beckham or Jennifer Aniston. This in turn could lead to a positive attitude being formed towards that given brand. The rationale why this personalised celebrity concept may work is that consumers may feel the messages from social media influencers are more real and genuine rather than when a celebrity is endorsing a brand. If these messages are more genuine and real, this in turn links into theory of source credibility model put forward by Hovland and Weiss (1951). They believed that communication's persuasiveness is affected by the perceived credibility of the source of the communication. The credibility of all communication, regardless of format, has been found to be heavily influenced by the *perceived* credibility of the source of that communication. In that this concept could be applied to that of social media influencers because they believe that their communication message when it comes to brands has a stronger perceived credibility rather than that of celebrities. Which in turn could positively affect consumers purchasing intentions. In that purchase intention refers to the mental stage in the decision making process where the

consumer has developed an actual willingness to act toward an object or brand (Wells et al., 2011; Dodds et al., 1991).

5.3: Future implications and study:

The nature of this research was limited in some capacity in that the main focus was on the social media influencers themselves. However for this particular piece of research around social media advertising and its effectiveness in regards to consumer behaviour, brand attitudes and brand awareness to be more conclusive. A certain emphasis should be placed on the brands themselves, in that one of the findings from this research was the pressure's that brands are placing on social media influencers in terms of the returns on investment through the retaining and attracting of new paying customers. However in order to understand these pressures more, there should be an emphasis on seeking clarification from the brand managers who are dealing with social media influencers on a daily basis. By doing so, it may give some indication as to why more and more companies are placing an emphasis on using social media influencers.

Finally in order to conclusively offer insight into this idea of social media influencers, the followers themselves should be examined either in individual interviews or through a focus group setting. By doing so, it could potentially give some insight into the areas surrounding brand attitudes, more so the role that social media influencers play in the formulation of set attitudes. Furthermore, by seeking additional clarification from the followers themselves in relation to the impact that social media influencers have on consumer spending. It could be beneficial to not just the influencer themselves, in that the insight the followers give may shape their content in the future. In regards to what platforms are more popular, which platforms

are most applicable to their respective target market? But also the brands themselves, in that if they can derive some level of knowledge from the followers, in regards to what content works for them as followers, similarly enough brands can discover which influencers are working for them and why is this the case?

In truth, for this industry of social media influencers and marketing. Understanding what followers want from their influencer either that being an informative post or a subtle advertisement, is paramount for the sustainability and growth of this market. However one area that should be of considerable concern to brands and influencers themselves is the increased advertising regulation that is becoming apparent in certain countries I.E Ireland. When an influencer declares that X post is an advertisement for a particular brand, the interaction amongst their followers is considerably lower than when it is seen as a more generic post. Respondent 4 from the interview process, indicated she could have over 5000 interactions on an Instagram post when it is an informative post regarding her make up. However once she declares the post is an advertisement, the level of interaction is more than halved.

It is paramount that brands and influencers understand the legislation around posts from the suitable advertising regulatory bodies. More so as to not break the law but it may affect the brand and influencer credibility, which is a key aspect for success in social media marketing.

Appendices:

1.1**:** What would you consider yourself in regards to your social media activity?

1.2: Would you have any interactions with brands/companies, if so what would they expect you to do via your social media accounts?

1.3: How would you classify your relationship with companies from your social media activity?

1.4: Is there a certain fee or charge that you would be expecting from companies when you post content?

1.5: How frequently would you post on your different social media channels?

1.6: Would a lot of the content you put out be related to a target market or more based on general posts?

1.7: Would you classify as your relationship with brands and companies as healthy? In the sense is it just as beneficial for you as is for them?

1.8: Do you feel that your posts via your different social media platforms is having a desired effect for companies in regards to monetary returns?

1.9: What is your general opinion on this social media trend and how more and more companies are now placing a significant portion of their advertising spend on social media?

1.10: What would you consider to be a social media influencer?

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