



The Impact of Social Media Influencers as an
Advertising Source in the Beauty Industry from an Irish
Female Millennials' Perspective.

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Abstract

Millennial females' preference for advertising has changed in recent years, putting immense pressure on brands to consider new and innovative advertising sources. One of the most popular avenues today, particularly in the beauty industry, is influencer marketing. Because of its fledgling nature, literature related to this particular phenomenon is underdeveloped. Although celebrity endorsement has been studied extensively over the years, research on consumer beliefs and practices in relation to social media influencers, particularly in an Irish context, is limited. This has led to a gap in business knowledge.

The main purpose of this study is to explore social media influencers as an advertising source for the beauty industry in Ireland, through the lens of female Millennial consumers. Emphasis is placed on this target audience's assessment of social media influencers, providing insight in to their propensity for potential product placement, stealth marketing and photo editing.

Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with female Millennial consumers, with a common interest in beauty and social media influencers. An interpretivist, inductive approach was used in this study, in an effort to capture a true reflection of female Millennial consumer views. Those views were interpreted using thematic coding. The findings of this research emphasised a need for brands to ensure the life of the social media influencer is portrayed similarly to that of Millennial consumers, to ensure relatability. Female Millennials acknowledged the practice but expressed their dissatisfaction with influencers editing published images. Millennials expressed this level of recognition for edited and non-edited images online was developed through their digital use and age. The strength of views relating to this topic warrant further investigation and therefore justify the need for further research of the topic.

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1. Introduction

Due to the exponential increase in advertising through social media, websites and games, marketers are fighting through the advertising clutter to find new innovative ways to connect with their target audience. This ever-changing online world has given way for new forms and adaptations of previously used advertising vehicles, including celebrity endorsements. In fact, Schimmelpfennig and Hollensen's (2016) study emphasises that celebrity endorsement is less effective than before and there is now a need for a new type of endorser. Therefore, as traditional advertising has lost its impact with Millennial consumers (Newman 2015), brands are moving towards a relatively new phenomenon in advertising, influencer marketing.

The power and reach of a consumers' opinion or reviews online means they have the ability to automatically influence thousands of other consumers, thus giving a reason for the growth of influencer marketing (Yusuf et al. 2018). Social media influencers are now an influential powerhouse of "somebodies" who hold "immense growth and increasing power" (Booth and Matic 2011: 184/190).

Today, it is near impossible to scroll an Instagram feed without encountering influencer marketing. These social media influencers are the new age celebrities and were born from the blogging trend, heavily present in Ireland over the last 5 years. At his talk at 3XE in Dublin this year, Kenny (2018) explained that Irish social media influencers command more power than in other countries, because as a small country, we have very few A-list celebrities.

Due to the recent emergence of social media influencers in the Irish advertising industry, their power and effectiveness as an advertising source has not been thoroughly investigated academically. Therefore, this study seeks to explore and understand how brands in the beauty industry can best

utilise this type of brand ambassador in advertising campaigns by building an understanding of consumers view of the source.

The aim of this study was to build an understanding of the impact of social media influencers for brands in the beauty industry and to provide insight in to how they could be best utilised as an advertising source. The main objectives of this study are outlined below and intend to answer the objective and overall research question of this study; The Impact of Social Media Influencers as an Advertising Source for Brands in the Beauty Industry from an Irish Female Millennials' Perspective.

1. To assess the importance of engagement between a social media influencer and female Millennial consumers.
2. To assess the impact of relatability and credibility of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.
3. To assess the impact of product match-up and the attractiveness of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.
4. To assess the impact of photo editing by a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.
5. To assess the impact of sponsored content from the female Millennials' perspective.

To successfully address these objectives, this study used the appropriate qualitative technique of in-depth interviews with seven female Millennial consumers with similar interests in beauty and social media influencers. These in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to build an understanding of female Millennial consumers' thoughts and opinions on different aspects of social media influencers. Common themes emerged both during the exploration of the relevant literature (Till and Busler 2000; Goldsmith et al. 2000; Jaffari and Hunjra 2017; Wang and Scheinbaum 2018) and during the interview process. The findings of this study were derived through thematic analysis and resulted in core themes emerging such as Life Online, Trust, Fit, Filters and Collaborations.

The findings have provided valuable, meaningful and insightful information for beauty brands as outlined below:

- a) Social media influencer relatability and trustworthiness proved to be of utmost importance for the female Millennial consumers in this study.
- b) The Attractiveness of a social media influencer is significant when the product is beauty-related, but the level of attractiveness needs to be viewed as attainable by Millennial consumers.
- c) Millennial consumers in this study tend to reject sponsored content and editing of images by influencers. This study does however indicate the potential for brands to work with influencers in order to make a sponsored message more effective to the target audience.

The future of this topic could be explored in different countries, particularly European countries such as the U.K, Italy and France. Social media influencers are popular in these European countries, yet their culture is different to Ireland and therefore, may provide different viewpoints and opinions for brands on a European level. It is also suggested that the study may be replicated to understand male Millennial consumers' perspective of social media influencers in a different industry, such as fitness or fashion. A larger study encompassing both male and female views on influencers might also provide useful business knowledge.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to build a greater understanding of the current knowledge relating to the key areas of the research question, **The Impact of Social Media Influencers as an Advertising Source in the Beauty Industry from an Irish Female Millennials' Perspective.**

The context will be provided firstly by building an understanding of Millennials and their relationship with the evolving area of marketing communications. This is followed by a brief review of other related areas such as social media, E word of mouth, stealth marketing and product placement, in relation to Millennials.

Social media influencers are a recent addition to the field of advertising; therefore, the available literature is limited. However, recent publications in relation to social media influencer product-match-up, influencer marketing impact and attractiveness will be analysed. In order to build an enhanced understanding of other influential sources which are by nature comparable to that of social media influencers, this study will examine celebrity endorsement literature in the areas of credibility, brand-fit and attractiveness; it aims to provide an overview of current knowledge, highlight common themes and identify major gaps. This will provide a useful perspective in addressing the research question relating to the impact of social media influencers on millennials.

2.0 Millennials

President of Pew Research Centre, Michael Dimock (2018) defines those born between 1981 and 1996 as Millennials. Millennials have been found to hold a stronger interest and interaction with social media influencers in comparison to other generations (Moore 2012). According to Maoz, in 2017 83.9% of social media posts were produced by Millennial females (Maoz

2018). Therefore, female Millennials as consumers will be the key focus of this study.

From work to dating, technology is embedded in the daily lives of Millennials (Moore 2012) and therefore, they are generally viewed as digital natives. They are the generation who grew with the internet and pushed boundaries online through their passion to seek connections, experiences and meaningful relationships with brands (Hurst 2016). Millennials are empowered consumers, who seek collaboration when it comes to digital advertising (Serazio 2015). They are proactive and no longer want one-way communication by brands; rather, they seek mutually valuable dialogues, in which they co-create with brands (Yeap Ai Leen et al. 2012; Nosi et al. 2017). The hyper-connectivity of this generation means they hold significantly higher rates of satisfaction with the web (Reisenwitz and Iyer 2009; Serazio 2015).

However, the presumption that all Millennials are hyper-connected, digital natives (Serazio 2015) has been disputed by Kilian et al's (2012) study which recognises different levels of digital use amongst Millennials. The first being *restrained Millennials*, who still rely on traditional forms of advertising and are not heavily present online. The second is *entertainment-seeking Millennials* who use social media for entertainment and content creation but still rely on traditional methods for completing daily tasks. The last is the *highly connected Millennial* group, for whom social media is an irremovable fabric of their existence (Kilian et al. 2012). Their daily lives are fully integrated with the technology they use. Any study involving Millennials should take this into consideration.

It is evident in the literature that Millennials actively seek involvement and share information with much larger peer groups, than other generations (Fromm and Garton 2013; Weber 2017). Co-creation is a recent concept which first came to light in the literature by Vargo and Lusch in 2004. The idea is that two parties, the firm and the consumer, come together to create value (Barrutia et al. 2016). This study suggests that companies have been too

insular in their view of resources and missed an opportunity to create brand value through educating, enhancing consumer expertise and co-creating (Barrutia et al. 2016). This generation demands upbeat, co-created and transparent communication online. Co-creation gives the Millennial generation the transparency and involvement they demand (Fromm and Garton 2013; Weber 2017).

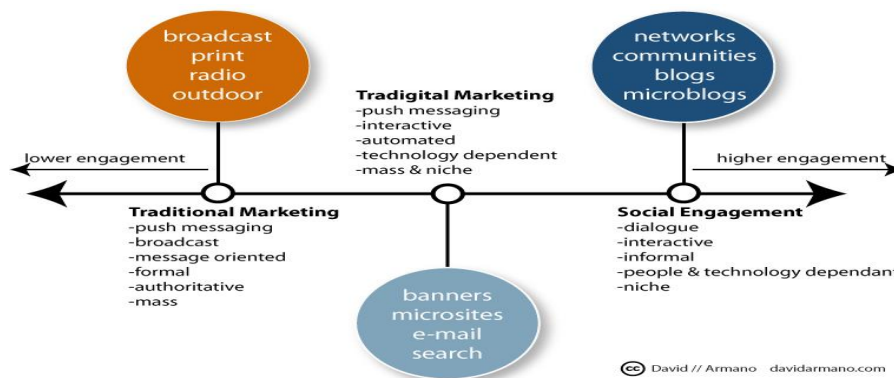
The success of co-creation is dependent on consumers being involved. The success of co-creation is dependent on consumers wanting to be involved with the brand. They found if a brand wants to encourage Millennial consumers to co-create, Millennials expect that the brand is open to consumer influence, thereby validating their efforts to be involved in co-creation (Kennedy and Guzmán (2017). The evolution of involvement and co-creation between consumers and corporations is essential. Chief Marketing Officer of Mastercard, Raja Rajamannar, explained how consumers no longer hold an interest in advertisements (Roth et al. 2017). That is emphasised by the staggering 225,000,000 web users who use ad blockers to avoid advertisements (Roth et al. 2017), supporting the theory that Millennials reject one-way dialogue in online marketing. Barnes (2015) explained that Millennials' filtering of digital advertisements could be because they view themselves as proactive agents. They have well-developed approaches to assessing advertising, basing judgements not just on standard advertising of a brand, but the wider peer review of that brand. This provides insight into the Millennial obsession with social media influencers. After building an understanding of Millennials and their relationship with marketing communications, it is necessary to understand how marketing communications has evolved.

2.1 Evolution of Marketing Communications

Armano's (2009) diagram of the evolution of marketing communications (Image 1) perfectly depicts the change the web has brought to the marketing discipline since its introduction in 1991 (Bryant 2011). It shows how marketing has moved from a passive, low-engagement marketing

environment, that held print and radio advertising at the forefront (Aghaei et al. 2012), to an interactive, hyper-connected and proactive marketing environment. This newer environment intertwines people and technology. Relationships form between consumers and brands through mutually created dialogues and networks (Armano 2009).

Image 1 – Evolution of Marketing Communications (Armano 2009)



The mutually created dialogue is the previously mentioned co-creation in action. The move towards this can be explained by younger generations rejecting one-way communication by brands as referred to by Andrea Roche, “Younger age groups are hard to reach with traditional forms of advertising, but they will relate to somebody that they have chosen to follow, and they trust” (O’Connell 2016). As highlighted by Newman (2015), Millennials have “turned traditional marketing on its head” and consequently, it is no longer as effective with these core groups. Millennials’ more sophisticated expectations of marketing communications mean that they have become cynical towards the constant efforts of brands to merely sell them something (Loda and Coleman 2010). The move from traditional push advertising, to a two-way digital communication between brand and consumer, is now imperative.

The growth of the internet has also impacted these changes. The internet has grown at an exponential rate over the last 10 years, with over 4 billion of the world's population using the internet (Kemp 2018). In Ireland, 89% of Irish households have an in-home internet connection (Central Statistics Office 2017). Core's Outlook Study (2018) found radio advertising has dropped by 5% and print by 14.5% in 2017. Although linear television is still popular among Irish adults, digital is on the rise, with Irish advertising spend growing from €362.2 million in 2016 to €451.3 million in 2017 (Core 2018). Complementary to this, the top five advertising channels for marketers' future investments are all digital (Mediacom 2018). 49% of the 249-marketing decision-makers questioned said that they will spend more of their budgets on social media this year (Mediacom,2018), which leads to the next section dedicated to social media.

2.2 Social Media

The introduction of social media and engagement can be traced back to the beginning of 2007. According to (Tapscott 2008), is about "peering: sharing, socializing, collaborating, and, most of all, creating within loosely connected communities" (p 2). Fuchs et al (2013) describe social media as offering "online social networking, online community building and maintenance, collaborative information production and sharing, and user-generated content production, diffusion and consumption" (p.3). Social media advertising spending in Ireland reached a staggering 114 million in 2016 (IAB Ireland 2016), and worldwide there are 3 billion active social media users (Kemp 2018). Additionally, Millennials devote over 6 hours of their week to their social media accounts (Casey 2017) Therefore, it is clear that social media is one of the vital aspects of marketing communications today.

The key social network of interest for this study is Facebook's sister site, Instagram. Voorveld et al's (2018) study on social media platforms found Instagram is the most popular platform for social interaction. With visuals described as the "direct highway" to Millennials hearts (Arnold Street Media 2016), IconoSquare's study of Millennials and Instagram and found the

platform holds the power to keep consumers' attention throughout the day and is a vehicle for visual storytelling (Clasen 2015). Instagram boasts 720,000 Irish users (Connector 2017) and influencer marketing on Instagram doubled globally from 2016 to 2017, to reach an astounding 1.5 million #ad posts in 2017 (Klear 2018). The same report found the beauty and cosmetics industry to be the second most popular for influencer partnerships and 42% of sponsored posts were created by Millennials, of which 83.9% were female (Klear 2018). According to USA Today, Instagram is a social media favourite because it is perceived as a source where users can avoid fake news and advertisements. Users favour its focus on images associated with Facebook (Guynn 2018). Brands' in the beauty industry have recognised consumer preferences towards Instagram and are using the platform more regularly, reporting 0.880% stronger engagement per post on Instagram in comparison to Facebook (Rival IQ (a) 2018). Similarly, influencer Ciaobellaxo's birthday post held a 0.26% engagement rate on Facebook in comparison to 13.79% on Instagram (Rival IQ (b), 2018). This indicates the shift towards Instagram by brands, consumers and influencers, (Klear 2018) and highlights that the main difference between the platforms is engagement levels.

Richard Sedley's definition of engagement through social media, which he gave during an interview with David Chaffey, was "Repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand" (Chaffey 2007). High levels of engagement for an influencer can indicate how devoted their followers are and hence, indicate how influential they are as a source of advertising (Hurst 2016). Pansari and Kumar (2017) present the idea that "when a relationship is satisfied and has emotional bonding, it then progresses to the stage of engagement" (p.295). This suggests that consumers' engagement on influencers' posts indicate that not only has a relationship been initiated between influencer and consumer, but also that the influencer is potentially a powerful source of advertising. Engagement has been found to impact future sales (Guesalaga 2016) and brand usage intent by consumers (Bolton et al. 2013), but most importantly for this study, engagement with other customers has been found to impact purchase intention (Husnain and Toor 2017). The intention to purchase by a

consumer can be used to predict their actual buying behaviour (Sethi et al. 2018).

Scholars have been researching the phenomenon of social media since the late 1990s, to understand its impact on consumers' purchase intentions. Duffett's (2017) study was conducted using over three-thousand surveys and found Millennials' purchase intentions and overall purchases were positively impacted by Facebook advertising. The study initially appeared to indicate that ethnic influence played a role in purchase intention rates associated with Facebook advertising. However, on closer inspection, this differentiation was actually related to internet access of those ethnic groups which in turn impacted their exposure and cynicism towards Facebook advertising (Duffett 2017). Le Roux and Maree (2016) study of female Facebook usage found that by using communities, creating entertainment and allowing consumers to participate online, female Facebook users' purchase intentions and brand attitudes can be positively impacted. Therefore, although certain Millennials may be sceptical towards advertising, it is reasonable to suggest that with the use of the right content, females' purchase intentions can be altered using social media platforms (Roux and Maree, 2016). In 2018, Sethi et al highlighted the importance of establishing the right content in order to influence purchase intention and their research indicated that the most successful tool was online reviews. This will be explored further in the next section.

2.2.1 Electronic Word of Mouth & Online Reviews

Dichter (1966) first acknowledged the concept of word of mouth (WOM) and proposed consumers used it in two ways; to justify a purchase already made or to help decide on a potential future purchase. The growth of the internet and social media has introduced an unprecedented amount of online or electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Silverman 2011). E-WOM is a critical part of influencer marketing because it is solely dependent on the passing of information online to other users (Yusuf et al. 2018). e-WOM is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former

customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004: 39). Previously, consumers depended on WOM between friends and family to help make purchase decisions (Richins & Root-Shaffer 1988). Through social media, individuals have access to 3.196 billion other users to source reviews and opinion (Kemp 2018). Social media influencers are one of the key e-WOM sources.

In relation to this study’s focus on Millennials, Smith’s (2010) study established similar findings to the 2018 study by Sethi et al (2018). Smith’s (2010) study emphasised how Millennials have an undeniable preference for online reviews, which have the power to positively impact their purchase intentions. As posited by Tang (2017) “online customer reviews are overwhelmingly more effective than corporate press releases in influencing shopper decisions” (p.103). Purchase intention is created based on the level of a consumers’ product knowledge. The level of knowledge alters their product evaluation, consequently, heightening or lowering the purchase intention for the product (Rao and Monroe 1988). For example, Lee et al’s (2014) study using a sample of 199 students aged 18 to 21. It found that when it comes to medical cosmetics online, this group’s purchase intention is affected by both e-WOM and their product knowledge. Although word of mouth and the level of knowledge a consumer has can increase their purchase intention, according to Moore’s (2012) study, Millennials as a target group are less likely to make a purchase online, in comparison to other generations. Therefore, proposing that Millennials are using online sources to gain knowledge about cosmetics which has the potential to heighten their purchase intention, but they probably make the final purchase in-store, rather than online.

Nielson’s (2015) study of trust in advertising found online opinions were the third most credible source of advertising (66%) according to consumers in 60 different countries. Emphasising how online reviews are one of the main reasons why social media influencers have expanded substantially, moving from items reviewed on blogs weekly, to product and service reviews daily

on Instagram. Influencers are ordinary individuals and for this reason, they are viewed as more trustworthy than other advertising sources (Shan 2016). Online reviews are crucial for businesses and they should encourage trustworthy reviewers to review their offerings (Banjerjee, Bhattacharyya and Bose 2017). Although it could be proposed that social media influencers are viewed as trustworthy reviewers, consideration towards the industry's use of stealth marketing is vital.

2.3 Stealth Marketing

Of the many forms of advertising, stealth marketing is viewed as the most deceitful, in that its main objective is to avoid disclosure of a relationship between a source and a brand (Martin & Smith 2008). The brands' objective is to exploit and use the relationship influencers have with their followers, to encourage objectives such as increasing sales. The rise of such secretive 'buzz' marketing attempts is associated with the scepticism and ignorance consumers have towards traditional or highly obvious advertising formats (Sprague & Wells 2010). In recent years in the world of Instagram, the relationship between brands and influencers was surreptitious for the most part. Yet, according to the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI) "consumers voice their concerns about bloggers who may or may not be declaring marketing communications" (ASAI Podcast 2018). Emphasising the scepticism of consumers, who are demanding a transparency within influencer marketing.

As recently as 2017, the ASAI introduced new guidelines for influencer marketing, which clarify that any commercial agreement made between an influencer and brand must be transparent. Therefore, any content produced by an influencer and company must include hashtags such as #AD or #SP, clearly identifying sponsored post, rather than an independent review or opinion (ASAI 2017). An example of this is Meaghers Pharmacy, who over the last year has used a select number of Irish influencers, including Ellie Kelly and Niamh Cullen, to promote a range of products online through Instagram stories, affiliated links and follower discount codes (Cullen 2018).

Aiming to attract and use the relationship these influencers had built with their followers to benefit the Meagher's brand. Rosemary MacCabe, an Irish social media influencer, told the Irish Times how consumers "don't like affiliate links or sponsored content as much as they like everything else" but she suggests that if an influencer is open and honest about it, their followers will accept it (O'Connell 2016).

This recent change in the Irish Instagram scene has led to a gap in current knowledge about whether hashtags such as #Ad or #SP have changed consumers' opinion of influencers' content? This will be explored further in the next section, which focuses on product placement.

2.4 Product Placement

Product placement is defined as "The purposeful incorporation of brands in editorial content" (Van Reijmersdal et al. 2005: 659). Products are deliberately used or displayed within the standard content, drawing on the idea of social media is a platform for performance by the influencer for brands (Hackley et al. 2018). It is reasonable to compare certain influencers' marketing communications to product placement, as the use and display of the product is often intertwined with the influencers organic and natural content. This, in essence is a type of new age product placement in play.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), proposed by Friedstad and Wright in 1994, looks at the potential effect of a consumers' awareness of being targeted by advertising. This model, shown below (Image 2), is highly significant for influencer marketing among female Millennials as it explores the topic of scepticism of consumers (Isaac and Grayson 2017) and Millennials as a generation (Cillizza 2015). The model depicts consumers as the target and firms/brands as the agents. Both the target and agent have three knowledge structures; topic, persuasion and agent. From the consumers' point of view, the topic is the understanding of the message being communicated, persuasion is the knowledge that he/she is being targeted by the advertisement

and agent is the knowledge the consumer holds about the advertiser (Friedstad and Wright, 1994).

Image 2 – Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM)



Their study emphasises how for the target, persuasion knowledge is often the main basis for their buying decision making, particularly if the product is new to them. They depend on assessing the viability of the persuasive attempt and are unable to use their subject knowledge (Friedstad and Wright, 1994). In relation to the target, which in the case of influencer marketing is their followers, their product knowledge can be increased or decreased depending on the type of persuasive attempt made by the influencer. When a persuasive attempt occurs, the consumer analyses, interprets and then finally evaluates how best to respond to the persuasive attempt. If the persuasive attempt is deemed obvious by consumers, their persuasion knowledge could be heightened (Ham et al. 2015). Nelson et al. (2009) found if persuasion knowledge is heightened, particularly without the full relationship disclosure, this can mean consumers distrust the advertisement. Therefore, now that Irish influencers must clearly indicate sponsorships in posts, does this then heighten persuasion knowledge to a level that the influencer's followers reject the persuasive attempt? To understand this better, Hall's (1973) encoder and

decoder model is an important tool. Hall's (1973) paper acknowledged three different types of consumers; oppositional, negotiated and preferred. It can be assumed that oppositional consumers do not really pay attention to influencers and would reject any persuasive messages. Whereas, negotiated consumers are most likely to consume influencer communications, yet, they will also consider other sources, such as peer reviews. Finally, preferred consumers may depend wholly on the suggestions and information communicated by the social media influencer. As mentioned in a previous section, Millennials are now cynical towards advertisements and therefore, if persuasion attempts are obvious through the obligatory display of hashtags, it could suggest that Millennials reject this type of messaging and are moving from negotiated consumers to oppositional, highlighting a gap in the literature.

Isaac and Grayson (2017) refuted the concept of PKM. They found that transparent product placement was positively received by consumers. This difference in opinion may be explained by the consumers' involvement with the content. It has been found that when a consumer is highly involved, they are less likely to notice the persuasive attempt, yet their subconscious allows the attempt to impact their attitudes, even if they do not necessarily remember (Matthes et al. 2007). Therefore, as the style of Instagram Stories is relatively short and intense, is it possible the consumer is so involved that they miss the #SP or #Ad hashtags on influencer posts?

The literature review will now move towards exploring influencer marketing, credibility, brand-fit, attractiveness, and hyperreality.

2.5 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is described as “a process of identifying and activating individuals who have an influence over a specific target audience or medium” (Sudha and Sheena 2017; 16.). These individuals are followed by others because of their content and niche topic areas, such as make-up, fitness or healthy eating. In fact, Mudge and Shaheen (2017) express how these

individuals are normal people, who have now gained a celebrity-like status from attracting large followings and consequently, earning a revenue based upon their content. Influencers are portrayed as a new generation of advertisers who are used by brands to impact consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions (Freberg et al. 2011). Freberg et al (2011) insinuate that the advice of social media influencers is held in a higher regard by consumers than that of chief executive officer's (CEO).

Sudha and Sheena (2017) identified different types of influential endorsers including traditional influencers such as celebrity endorsers and most importantly for this study, emerging digital influencers, accounting for bloggers and social media influencers (Sudha and Sheena 2017). Schimmelpfenning and Hollensen (2016) criticise celebrity endorsements for their overuse in advertising and proposes that there is a need for a new type of endorser with a story to tell. Brands, as with some consumers, are now apathetic towards celebrity endorsers. Their study also suggests that consumers no longer view celebrities as role-models, due to consumers' inability to relate to celebrities' lives (Schimmelpfenning and Hollensen 2016). Emphasising the potential for social media influencers to now take the place of celebrity endorsers in advertising, as they are normal individuals, with their own stories to tell and are therefore more relatable than celebrities.

When considering how social media influencers work as an advertising source, it is merely impossible to avoid the concept of influence. Normative social influence is defined as "an influence to conform with the positive expectations of another" by Deutsch and Gerard (1955: 629). Their study found that other people's judgements are viewed as trustworthy and therefore, are extremely salient for individuals (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). Consumers have shown a preference towards influencers reviews on products because they can relate to the influencer and enjoy receiving opinions from a credible source (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Additionally, in a study of social influence online, Guadagno et al (2013) found that consumers can be influenced by comments of other consumers, positive or negative. Thus, if an influencer posts on Instagram promoting the purchase of a make-up product receives

positive feedback from other consumers, this is found to increase the consumers' willingness to comply with the request or message communicated based on their need for social acceptance (Guadagno et al. 2013; Chen 2017). Rothschild (2014) reminds us that consumers respond positively to the requests of individuals they like, over those they do not, and any similarity between themselves and the individual will increase this. Thus, if a consumer commits to following a social media influencer, it is reasonable to assume they like the influencer and therefore, are more susceptible to the message communicated by the influencer. De Veirman et al (2017) proposed that if an influencer has a large following, they can be perceived as opinion leaders. The concept of someone being a perceived opinion leader leads to the topic of credibility.

2.6 Credibility

Source Credibility is multidimensional to include trustworthiness and expertise (Sternthal et al. 1978). Source credibility captures the extent to which the consumer believes the influencer's advice. Source Credibility theory posits that consumers appreciate content that is editorial, such as organic influencer content, over that of an obvious persuasion attempt by an influencer (Van Reijmersdal et al. 2005) Celebritys' credibility influences purchase intention (Jaffari and Hunjra 2017) and a credible source, who holds a level of authority, has greater influence over attitudes of consumers (Hovland et al. 1953).

In relation to the dimensions of Source Credibility, trustworthiness is the ability of the consumer to view the message communicated by the social media influencer as valid. It is the evaluation of how worthy an influencer is of a follower's trust (Wang and Scheinbaum 2018). The trust and loyalty between a consumer and influencer have been found to positively impact sales and long-term relationships between the influencers' followers and the promoted brand (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). A study by FullScreen and Shareable (2018) found 55% of participants aged 18-24 years old trust influencers' posts and 40% of these consumers said they would trust an

influencer over a brand promotion, which shows how significant trust is between social media influencers and their followers (FullScreen and Shareable, 2018).

Expertise is the consumers' viewpoint that the social media influencer is adept and knowledgeable in making certain claims (Hovland et al. 1953; Sternthal et al. 1978; Erdogan 1999). That is, the influencer holds some qualification in the area they are promoting (Wang and Scheinbaum 2018). In relation to cosmetics, an expert could be viewed as a make-up artist, who is professionally qualified. Expertise holds a strong correlation with the reputation of an influencer (De Veirman et al. 2017) and therefore, appears as a significant attribute for influencers.

There is a debate between the importance of trustworthiness and expertise when it comes to endorsements. If both are used together, it can positively impact purchase intentions and attitudes of consumers (Liu and Teo 2007). It can mean consumers are more likely to positively accept the advertising message communicated by the endorser (Metzger et al. 2003). Yet trustworthiness alone has been found to attract low-involved consumers in the airline industry and considering the number of advertisements consumers are subjected to daily, attracting low-involved consumers is significant (Wang and Scheinbaum 2018). Additionally, trust in a social media influencer has been found to increase based on a consumers' ability to relate to the source (Shan 2016). Yet Shan's study went further and suggested just because relatability is present between the consumer and influencer, this does not necessarily mean the influencer is viewed as an expert in the field or area they are promoting. Insinuating that expertise and trustworthiness are very separate traits, and expertise has no apparent relationship with relatability. However, the preference towards major traits of endorsers is dependent on demographics. European consumers choose trustworthiness and American consumers prefer expertise (Tzoumakka et al. 2016). These findings may be linked to celebrity culture differences and are complemented by a European study by Munnukka et al. (2016), which revealed expertise of peer endorsers can be gained purely through the use of beauty products. A question then

arises as to how important expertise and trustworthiness are for Irish consumers and whether they have a clear preference in major traits when it comes to social media influencers?

Chakraborty and Bhat (2018) emphasise the key to credible online reviews is experiences that consumers can relate to directly and a credible source within a review means consumers view the brand positively. Complementary to this focus on experiences, Djafarova and Rushworth (2018) found not only do personal experiences increase credibility but that in particular, female influencers online gave more weight to influence and credibility, because younger women could relate to them. Relatability seems to also impact engagement, with Gartner L2's Intelligence Report (2018) finding influencers with under five thousand followers held a stronger engagement rate at 8%, compared to bigger influencers who held only 1.6% engagement rates. This reemphasises the power of influencers' relatability and similarity of life experiences to that of consumers (Shan 2016).

Celebrity endorsers are viewed as credible by consumers (Goldsmith et al. 2000) and considering the similarity between celebrities and influencers in Ireland (Kenny 2018), it could be interesting to see if female Millennials find social media influencers more or less credible than celebrities. If credibility is closely linked with relatability, is it possible a social media influencer is capable of becoming too famous or having too many followers, so that their relatability and subsequently their credibility is jeopardised?

Jain and Posavac (2001) found when an advertising message is communicated by a credible endorser, consumers held less scepticism towards the message. This allowed for a more influential and persuasive message to be communicated, insinuating, if social media influencers become too celebrity-like and jeopardise their credibility, this will also impact their influence as a marketing source.

In contrast to the belief that similarity is an important aspect for consumers in relation to influencers, Munnukka et al's (2016) study found similarity to be less important and put emphasis on attractiveness and product match-up.

Wang and Scheinbaum (2018) study opposed this and found trustworthiness of a celebrity endorser in the airline industry to be the most important aspect of an endorser, over that of attractiveness and match-up. Yet, Munnukka et al's (2016) study is within the beauty industry and therefore, holds a stronger correlation with this particular study of social media influencers, emphasised by their statement that "a peer endorser seems well suited to advertising beauty-related consumer goods" (p.190). They found attractiveness to be key in altering consumer attitudes and put emphasis on matching the right endorser with the right product or brand.

2.7 Brand Fit & Attractiveness

Other studies have complemented the findings of Munnukka et al's (2016) study, by shining light on the positive relationship between influencers' attractiveness and consumer attitudes (Lim et al. 2017). However, an American study found expertise to be a stronger match between celebrity and brand than attractiveness (Till and Busler 2000). Yet, the authors indicated that at the time of the study, they felt attractiveness had not yet been measured correctly and they still viewed attractiveness as significant criteria for endorser/product match-up (Till and Busler 2000).

Tsai and Chang's (2007) study found that normally attractive models (NAM) were a stronger option for advertisers than highly attractive models (HAM), for both males and females. Their study of 240, 18-19-year-olds, discovered NAM's had a significantly higher impact on both product attitudes and purchase intentions. They propose this is due to consumers comparing themselves to these endorsers. If an endorser is perceived as unattainably attractive, this can have a negative effect on a consumers' self-esteem (Bower 2001; Sääksjärvi et al. 2016). A negative effect on consumers' self-esteem was found to impact how the consumer viewed the brand but did not necessarily affect purchase intention. Which raises the question whether the level of attractiveness of the social media influencer impacts the female Millennials perception of the source negatively?

Kamins and Gupta's (1994) study found that if a celebrity endorser match-up was compatible in the eyes of consumers, the celebrity automatically became more attractive in the eyes of consumers. Demonstrating the power of the right match-up when it comes to influencer marketing while highlighting the possibility that the right match-up means consumers will view the influencer as more attractive, thus positively impacting their attitudes towards the brand. Considering the present study is focusing on beauty related products, Kamins's (1990) study captured the importance of attractiveness. This study indicated that attractiveness generally becomes a criterion for consumers, when the product was related to attractiveness, for example, cosmetics. This leads to the question, is the attractiveness of a social media influencer only relevant when the product is attractiveness-related i.e. cosmetics for Irish consumers?

The relevance between attractiveness related products and attractive endorsers may be explained by Erotic Capital as proposed by Hakim (2010). The concept is formed using six main elements; beauty, sexuality, sexual attractiveness, social skills, social presentation and liveliness. Erotic capital is similar in power to other capital, such as, economic or political. Society and culture mean women are constructed to possess stronger levels of erotic capital, than men. Hakim (2010) speaks about how in an expectation about what is considered femininity, society expects women to demonstrate some, if not all of the six elements mentioned above. Yet, Green (2013) criticised Hakim's theory as being merely sex appeal and views it as "overstretched" because not all women have a desire to communicate their sexuality through their appearances (p.138). That said. in a study of Korean and Chinese cosmetic advertising, beauty was the most frequently mentioned element which would be provided by the products being advertised (Yu et al. 2015). This could give reason to why attractiveness is of higher importance in relation to cosmetics (attractiveness-related). Women have been conditioned to some extent to meet societal expectations and aim to do so through products that are primarily attractiveness related. Bringing to question the importance of the attractiveness of social media influencer in consumers' eyes?

The concept of women performing for others may be attached to Hackley's (2013) idea that marketing is now a performance by consumers, through brands. Hackley et al (2018) discovered that the selfie phenomenon, driven by celebrity culture, is far more than narcissism in action, rather it was a way for consumers to communicate themselves and their lives to their peers. Potentially suggesting that social media influencers on Instagram are just consumers who are performing for their digital audience. If so, is there a level of attractiveness needed by influencers to fully perform and express themselves to consumers, or is their relatability with the product and consumers of higher importance than their attractiveness for Irish consumers?

The following section will delve into the concept of hyperreality, which stems from the theme of attractiveness.

2.8 Hyperreality

When John Knoll, one of the original creators of the photoshop was asked if there were any major regrets with creating photoshop? he replied, "I do wish there were fewer unethical uses, but I think it's more up to society to put pressure on people in applying appropriate ethics with these tools" (Follow This 2018) Thus, he suggests that societal pressure should fight against unethical use of photo editing tools. However, in an interview, Erin Duffy explained that "Influencers very much feel they need to present themselves authentically while getting the best image possible" (Solon 2018). Suggesting society is pressurising individuals into using such tools and is one of the fundamental reasons for the growth in popularity of image altering tools such as Photoshop and FaceTune across social media platforms like Instagram.

Yet, Duffy continued to explain with the significant "call-out culture" online, influencers need to edit the photo just right, so as the use of an editing tool is not obvious, but that the end product is visually appealing to followers (Solon 2018). Therefore, deciphering genuine filter free photos can be challenging, which was expressed by O'Reilly and Battelle (2009) when they explained the web is "on a collision course with the physical world". This can be directly

related to Jean Baudrillard's (1994) Hyperreality theory. Hyperreality is described as "a play of illusions and phantasms, an imaginary world, made up of simulacra" (Baines et al. 2008: 837) These simulacra become more real than what already exists. Relative to the online world, this concept proposes that the digital imagery and beauty we are subjected to on Instagram have now become more real than reality itself. We now view the edited digital versions of individuals as more real than the real person. In a way, the digital and the physical have collided, proposing we may not be able to tell them apart. Dholakia and Reyes (2013) suggest that the use of social media is not about creating a separate world to reality, it is about adding a layer to one's reality.

McBain (2018) perfectly sums up hyperreality when she describes scrolling a friend's social media page. Even though as users we acknowledge that the image we see online is "only distantly related to their everyday lives", we forget that and begin to compare ourselves, our lives and our bodies (p.36). Alluding to the idea that we no longer hold the ability to distinguish the difference between the physical and digital world, they have collided leaving consumers in a constant state of hyperreality.

Edvardsson et al's (2005) critiqued the idea that hyperreality's purpose is to avoid real life and indicated the use of service experiences is to stage an experience that consumers can relate to in real life. Connecting this to influencers on Instagram, it could suggest they are not necessarily avoiding reality, but instead are portraying a lifestyle or solution that consumers can relate to, in a digital format. This leads to the question of whether followers of social media influencers view the content as credible and relatable because hyperreality means they no longer can tell the difference?

2.9 Conclusion

Social media has exploded in recent years, with the growth of the web and evolution of marketing communications. Millennials are demanding two-way, co-created communication between themselves and brands and it seems

advertising, in general, is evolving digitally. Although celebrity endorsements were previously popular, with the drive towards digital, it was only a matter of time before a more suitable digital endorser entered the advertising market.

As mentioned, influencer marketing has a significant impact on the purchase intentions of consumers, which is vitally important because this generation spend substantial amounts of time online but tend not to make purchases online. Therefore, to attract Millennials offline, brands need to communicate with the them online, and it is suggested that social media influencers can support businesses in achieving this. Through this exploration of literature, knowledge gaps emerged, which gave way for five overall objectives of the study, which will now be used to conclude this section.

The first gap to emerge was the significance of engagement between Millennial consumers and social media influencers (Rival IQ (a), 2018). The power of engagement is well-defined within the literature (Bolton et al. 2013; Hurst 2016; Guesalaga 2016; Pansari and Kumar 2017; Husnain and Toor 2017). Yet, it is not evident whether engagement levels and importance vary between the Millennial groups (Kilian et al. 2012) i.e. entertainment-seeking or highly-connected. It is therefore necessary to explore whether engagement levels are more important to Millennials, as it could impact brand decisions on working with specific influencers. This was the basis of objective one of this study; *To assess the importance of engagement between a social media influencer and female Millennial consumers.*

The second area of interest for brands is understanding the credibility and relatability associated with social media influencers. Celebrity credibility was shown to positively impact consumers' purchase intentions (Jaffari and Hunjra 2017) and brand attitudes (Hovland et al. 1953). Relatable life experiences were found to increase credibility (Djafarova and Rushworth 2018) and mean the consumer views the brand more positively (Chakraborty and Bhat 2018) Trust, a dimension of credibility, was found to impact consumers' long-term sales and brand relationships (Sudha & Sheena, 2017)

while expertise impacts the influencers' reputation (De Veirman et al. 2017). Yet, both are viewed as separate traits of an influencer (Shan 2015) and Munnukka et al. (2016) found their importance to vary between American and European consumers. Therefore, highlighting the need for brands to understand how credible and relatable female millennial consumers view social media influencers and which dimensions of credibility they prioritize. This was the basis of objective two of this study: *To assess the impact of relatability and credibility of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.*

Thirdly, the area of brand-fit and attractiveness is highlighted as a prominent area of interest. The attractiveness of a source has been found to positively impact consumer attitudes (Lim et al. 2017, yet, have the potential to negatively impact consumers' self-esteem (Bower 2001; Sääksjärvi et al. 2016). Kamins's (1990) study found attractiveness to hold greater significance when the product is attractiveness related. Thus, this study focus on the beauty industry means understanding the level of attractiveness and its importance for female millennial consumers is essential. Additionally, Brand-fit was highlighted as an essential aspect for celebrity endorsements and was found to positively impact the attractiveness of the endorser (Kamins and Gupta 1994). Yet, in relation to social media influencers it is unclear whether product or brand match-up is relevant from female millennial consumers' perspective. This was the basis of objective three of this study: *To assess the impact of product match-up and the attractiveness of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.*

In relation to the editing of images, in a digitally and physically colliding world (O'Reilly and Battelle 2009), it was suggested by Jean Baudrillard's (1994) Hyperreality concept that it may be difficult for consumers to tell the differences between what they see online, versus reality. Although Dholakia and Reyes (2013) suggest that the digital world is merely an additional layer to reality, McBain (2018) illustrated that consumers can no longer tell the difference between their physical and digital worlds. It was suggested society was a main factor in the use of editing tools (Solon 2018), whereas, John

Knoll believes it is up to society to fight unethical uses of such tools (Follow This 2018). Raising questions like; Are consumers using editing tools themselves? Do they believe influencers are under pressure to use these tools? Are consumers better informed than the literature indicates? Can they distinguish edited from non- edited photos? Does it impact their view of an influencer's creditability and relatability if the consumer knows they have edited their material? This knowledge is essential for brands interested in the area of the impact of social media influencers on Millennials and gave way for the fourth objective of this study; *To assess the impact of photo editing by a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.*

The final gap that became apparent within the literature was in regard to stealth marketing and product placement. As the growth of influencer marketing is predicted to be substantial, rules and regulations regarding this type of advertising are going to become more prevalent (ASAI 2018). The hashtags associated with sponsored content mean the advertising attempt could be deemed as more obvious to consumers than before, which according to Ham et al. (2015), increases consumers' persuasion knowledge and leads to distrust in the advertisement (Nelson et al 2009). Complementarily, the ASAI (2018) outlined how consumers are more skeptical of marketing communications today and therefore, it is essential brands understand consumers view of such collaborations and use of hashtags in content, so as they can make the best from the relationship between the brand and influencer involved. Leading to the fifth objective of this study: *To assess the impact of sponsored content from the female Millennials' perspective.*

The gaps identified in the literature and the questions leading to those gaps, provide a path for further research in this field of study. The aim of this study is to answer the initial research question in relation to the impact of social media influencers in the beauty industry from the female Millennials perspective, and where possible, address the key questions posed through the literature review. It is hoped that this will build on current knowledge in relation to social media influencers, be a useful tool for businesses in Ireland and encourage others to carry out research in this area.

3. Research Objectives and Methodology

3.0 Research Objectives

This study's aim is to investigate female millennials' view of social media influencers through developing an understanding of their beliefs, feeling and opinions relating to social media advertising practice. The main objective of this study is to build an understanding of how best to utilise social media influencers in advertising campaigns. The literature presented in the previous chapter provides the basis to the overall objectives of the study. The objectives outlined below aim to address the research question; The Impact of Social Media Influencers as an Advertising Source in the Beauty Industry from an Irish Female Millennials' Perspective.

The five objectives created in line with gaps and areas of interest within the literature are:

1. To assess the importance of engagement between a social media influencer and female Millennial consumers.
2. To assess the impact of relatability and credibility of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.
3. To assess the impact of product match-up and the attractiveness of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.
4. To assess the impact of photo editing by a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.
5. To assess the impact of sponsored content from the female Millennials' perspective.

3.1 Methodology Introduction

This chapter will describe the methods used in collecting and analysing the data for this study. A comprehensive justification of both the method and design will be provided. Other topics of discussion will include both the limitations and ethical considerations of the study. The primary objective of

this study is to thoroughly address the impact of social media influencers as an advertising source.

3.2 Layer One: Research Perspective

The research perspective of this piece of research will be explored through Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2009) Research Onion, as seen below in Image 3. This outlines the importance of identifying the appropriate research perspective. It brings validity to the research, which strengthens the prospect of this piece of research and its contribution to business practice and theory going forward (Crotty 1998).

A research perspective or paradigm is a set of common beliefs about how a research problem should be approached. Saunders et al (2016) explained that a research perspective is about “developing knowledge around a particular field” (p.124), so as to understand or answer particular hypotheses associated within the area of the study. Although Saunders et al (2016) emphasise that there is no ideal philosophical perspective for a business research study, there are clear indications as to a suitable philosophical approach, depending on the area under study.

Image 3 – Research Onion

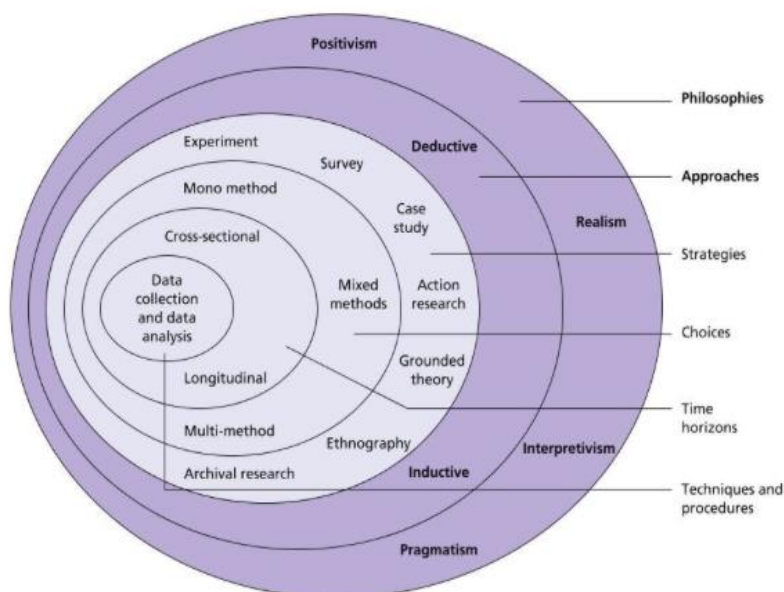


Figure 4.1
The research 'onion'
Source: © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2008

Firstly, the research paradigm or worldview of the research needs to be decided upon, as it lends to the overall view, methodology and outcomes of any research study (Quinlan 2011; Saunders et al. 2016). Saunders et al (2016) introduce two types of paradigms, ontological and epistemological. Ontology “relates to the study of being, the nature of being and our ways of being in the world” (Quinlan 2011: 95) and views the world through a series of events. Whereas, “epistemology represents scientific knowledge focused on different areas of thought, in order to appreciate the relevance of the human being” (Mejías 2018: 362). Epistemology is concerned with the study of knowledge. This study’s paradigm is epistemological, in that the researcher seeks to understand social media influencers as an advertising source, by means of producing “acceptable knowledge” through qualitative in-depth interviews (Bryman and Bell 2011: 15). Yet, epistemology can be value-free or value-laden, in that there are two main approaches, Positivist and Interpretivist. Positivist is value-laden and usually follows a deductive stance, whereas, interpretivism takes an inductive perspective which should be value-free. Positivist epistemology “advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond”, it considers both humans and the impact of natural science (Bryman and Bell 2011: 15). Whereas, interpretivist epistemology considers “the distinctiveness of humans against the natural order” (Bryman and Bell 2011: 16) and believes each individual being has their own valuable thoughts and beliefs which produce acceptable knowledge. According to Creswell (2007) in interpretivist epistemology, the researcher works closely with participants to delve deeper into understanding their viewpoint. This fits perfectly with this study of building acceptable knowledge and understanding the views of Millennial consumers toward social media influencers. For that reason, interpretivism epistemology was the chosen research paradigm of this study.

As illustrated by the Research Onion’s outer layer (Figure 2), there are 4 main theoretical perspectives, Positivism, Realism, Interpretivism and Pragmatism. These are a crucial aspect of the research, as they underpin the focus and creation of knowledge for the study. Saunders et al (2009) outline only four in their research onion; Positivism, Realism, Interpretivism, and Pragmatism,

however, Quinlan (2011) outlines nine additional approaches to include Constructivism, Hermeneutics, Symbolic Interactionism, Functionalism, Structuralism, Critical Theory, Feminism, Post-structuralism and Post-modernism.

As this study's objective is to further understand female Millennial consumer perspectives, the interpretivist approach is deemed most suitable. Interpretivism aims to delve deeper into understanding the social realities of humans and views people as subjective beings, who's individual social worlds, feelings, opinions and viewpoints hold value and meaning (Saunders et al. 2016). Mack (2010) and Dudovskiy (2016) outline the major drawback of interpretivist research is the fact it is subjective and therefore, the findings cannot be generalised for a population or situation. Yet, Greene & McClintock (1991) defend the value of interpretivist approach is because "One individual's perception of meaning in a given setting is likely to differ from others and representing both is needed for an understanding of the whole" (P.14). Thus, each consumer is subjective, in that each individual has their own feelings and experiences in relation to the phenomenon of social media influencers. This study aims to explore those opinions and experiences, to present a study that captures more than data, but interprets what might really be happening in the world of female Millennials' engagement with social media influencers. The next section will outline the research approach and strategies.

3.3 Layer Two: Research Approaches

There are two approaches to research; deductive and inductive reasoning which will be explained as follows. The deductive approach is focused on analysing and testing against pre-existing theories, to find a relationship between the research and the existing theory (Bryman and Bell 2011). This means the researcher's theoretical position is clear, which is opposite to an inductive approach. The inductive approach usually focuses on qualitative methods of small samples, whereas, deductive has larger samples and uses quantitative methods (Saunders et al. 2016). With an inductive approach, the

relevant theory is considered, but the approach seeks to build new theory through the interpretation of the data collected and therefore, the theoretical position is not clarified. This research study is inductive in nature and seeks to build theory around the concept of social media influencers using qualitative research, in line with an interpretivist approach (Saunders et al. 2016).

3.4 Layer Three: Research Strategies

3.4.1 Qualitative Approach

The chosen research strategy and instrument depend greatly on the type of research design chosen (Saunders et al. 2016). Qualitative research is said to “begin with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems” (Creswell 2007: 37). Studies around the social media influencer phenomenon have been primarily quantitative based such as Booth and Matic (2011) or Sudha and Sheena (2017) study which focused on comparing social media influencers, celebrity endorsements and brands. Yet, Thomas (2003) explains that quantitative and qualitative methods vary in their appropriateness in answering questions, that is, each has the ability to answer certain questions that the other does not have the capability to. In an Irish context, the topic of social media influencers is relatively understudied and Kelle (2006) explains how with quantitative research

“a limited knowledge about the investigated life world may bring about problems of operationalization and measurement: researchers who do not know how specific words and actions are understood in the sociocultural contexts of their research domain may ask the wrong questions or misinterpret the respondents’ answers in questionnaires” (p.296).

Therefore, qualitative research in the area will give the grounding for a deeper understanding of consumers’ viewpoints of the source, that may well develop a quantitative study in the future. Qualitative research is a popular choice in

relation to social media, as many studies in the area seek to understand the phenomenon further through the lens of the consumer. An example is Whiting and Williams (2013) study that sought to understand consumers' usage of social media through conducting twenty-five in-depth interviews. Qualitative research is conducted in a more natural way than quantitative, which perspective is scientific (Quinlan 2011). The qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand consumers' perspective through the respondents' own words, giving a narrative of their direct experiences. With a study that views each participant as subjective, qualitative research allows the researcher to understand each individuals' feelings and beliefs around a topic. The information gathered can be analysed and findings presented, that give insight into the target audience's feelings towards a subject through their own words (Saunders et al. 2016).

As with any research approach, the consideration of drawbacks is essential for the researcher to consider, so as measures can be taken to ensure the study is not negatively affected. With qualitative research, there can be difficulty representing the target group accurately due to small samples sizes (Morris 2015). Although qualitative research has evident drawbacks, the topic of social media influencers is underdeveloped. Therefore, qualitative research allows for an initial exploration of the topic, to build an understanding of consumer feelings, opinions and perspectives, which according to Riley et al (2000) "only words can do that" (p99). As the topic of social media influencers is underdeveloped, the author of this study decided that a qualitative approach should provide an explorative and data rich study allowing a more in depth understanding of views and opinions of social media influencers.

3.4.2 Research Strategy

Saunders et al (2016) indicate that an interpretivist perspective combined with an inductive approach using qualitative methods, with small samples, provides better research data than larger sample quantitative methods and for this reason, a qualitative method of in-depth interviews using a small sample

was chosen for this study. Although other methods such as case studies and netnography could have been chosen in interpreting Millennial consumers' feelings on the topic of social media influencers, the ability of in-depth interviews in allowing the participant "to tell their story and give the researcher a range of insights and thoughts about a particular topic" was best suited to the study (Morris 2015: 5). Yet, Quinlan (2011) explains that focus group research can also allow for insights and feelings through group dynamics, which would have also suited this particular study. The researcher must be aware of group power and influence issues, such as "group think", which means participants follow the group thought rather than their own (MacDougall and Baum 1997; Adams et al. 2014). The risk would be that genuine thoughts and feelings of the target group could be missed. Although power and influence issues can play a part in in-depth face-to-face interviews, it is easier to control and recover on a one-to-one interview basis, than to control and guide a group with the same issues. The researcher wanted to ensure that the true thoughts, feelings and attitudes of participants were reflected in the study, ensuring they reflected the target audience and therefore chose in-depth, face-to-face interviews.

Inductive research is about discovering evident themes or patterns associated with a certain phenomenon (Saunders et al. 2016) and interviews allow the researcher to "explore meanings and thus generate rich qualitative data" (Cameron and Price 2009: p367). In-depth interviews aim to explore a phenomenon or people through unstructured or semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to 2 hours (Bryman 2008). Jankowicz (2005) explains semi-structured, open-ended techniques, such as in-depth interviews "provide you with large amounts of rich, fertile, but disorganised data." (p.257). Therefore, it is vital the researcher organises and interprets the data so as to find meaning. There are advantages and disadvantages to using in-depth interviews, some of which will be explored in the next two sections.

3.5.3 Advantages of In-depth Interviews

Brenner, Brown and Canter (1985) consider two major advantages of interviews as dual exploration and time.

Dual Exploration: When in-depth interviews are the chosen data collection tool, they allow for both the researcher and the participants to journey through a topic together. The dual exploration is directed partly by the questions pre-prepared by the researcher, which guide the interview. Due to the semi-structured nature of in-depth interviews, the researcher needs to listen intently and use probing efforts based on the words or statements made by the participant that seem significant in relation to the topic under exploration. The clear, one-on-one communication means that rich and detailed information is collected for the study and any misunderstandings can be easily identified and dealt with immediately. Unlike with the group communication present in focus groups, which can be more difficult to control (Brenner et al. 1985).

Time: The timing of the in-depth interview, which as mentioned previously is 45 minutes to 2 hours, means the topic can be effectively explored in a relevantly short space of time in comparison to focus groups. (Brenner et al. 1985).

3.4.4 Disadvantages of In-depth Interviews

There are some disadvantages of using in-depth interviews as a research strategy. Quinlan et al (2015) highlight two of the main disadvantages of in-depth interviews as time-consuming by nature and researcher bias.

Time-Consuming: Although the length of time of an interview has its advantageous as mentioned above, this type of research method is extremely time-consuming on the researcher. There is a lot of organising and arranging attached to this method, including question preparation, location, timing and transcriptions. (Morris 2015) With this disadvantage in mind, the researcher considered telephone interviews, which offer advantages with time and cost in comparison to that of face-to-face in-depth interviews. However, there were clear drawbacks to the researcher's ability to monitor participants' reactions to questions over the phone, which has been described as an impossible task by Quinlan et al (2015). Additional issues relating to impersonality over the phone were also considered; "The absence of visual

cues via telephone is thought to result in loss of contextual and nonverbal data and to compromise rapport, probing, and interpretation of responses (Novick 2008: 391). If the researcher and participant are strangers, it is a difficult task to build a rapport over the phone (Adams et al. 2014). Additionally, Da Silva et al's (2014) study found it can be more difficult to ensure consistency of the conversation over the telephone in comparison to face-to-face interviews because participants found it harder to hear and understand the questions over the phone. With the obvious drawbacks to telephone interviews, which could affect the data collected, the researcher believed the drawback of in-depth interviews time-consuming nature was justifiably less important than producing a true reflection of the data collected. As posited by Morris (2015) "Certainly, when the research involves obtaining a sense of how individuals view their situation and what their experiences have been around the research topic under consideration, in-depth interviewing is an appropriate method" (p.8).

Researcher Bias: With a one-on-one interview there is a risk that the researcher could influence the thoughts and feelings of the participant. It is accepted that the personal standpoint of the interviewer has the potential to impact the research. As expressed by Saunders et al (2016) "a researcher may allow her or his own subjective view or disposition to get in the way of fairly and accurately recording and interpreting participants' responses" (p.203). That is why for this study a thematic question guide was used, to ensure some structure and guidance was present, but it was also necessary to ensure that the participants were left free to explore the topic themselves without the undue influence of the researcher. To ensure an honest and non-biased narrative of those participating in the study, the researcher made notes directly after each interview, while also recording the interview to ensure a true reflection of participants' words and experiences. Reflexivity is the reflection by the researcher on their role and influence over the interview process (Saunders et al. 2016). The researcher of this study considered role during the process while interpreting the data because doing so is said to "challenge the idea that the words of the subject can be interpreted in isolation from the nature of the interaction between two people" (Brett Davies 2007:

166). Thus, the researcher wanted to take measures in truly reflecting participants' interviews and avoiding her own bias on the subject.

3.4.5 Interview Structure

Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow both the interviewer and interviewee to explore the topic further (Morris 2015). It is possible to adapt the direction of the interview while still maintaining some structure (Bryman and Bell 2011). "The interviewer commences with a set of interview themes, but is prepared to vary the order in which questions are asked and to ask new questions in the context of the research situation" (Saunders et al. 2016: 727). The fluidity of this approach allows the researcher to build a deeper understanding of the individual's viewpoint or opinions, that become apparent during the interview (Saunders et al. 2016). Semi-structured interviews were chosen based on the researcher's need to explore the themes of influencer marketing, that became apparent within the literature review. The flexibility of allowing new themes and patterns emerge, allows the researcher to build an understanding of the situation based on the perspective of participants (Bryman 2008).

3.4.6 Interview Techniques

Projective techniques, ranging from sentence completion to brand mapping, can play a crucial part in in-depth interviews. This can guide participants through the interview journey while using the technique to trigger memories relating to their view on a subject (Cooper and Schindler 2014). The author of this research chose to use one projective technique to encourage reflection on the part of participants. An imagination exercise was carried out, where participants were provided with three A4 pages, each with 4 photos depicting marketing attempts by influencers on Instagram. Participants were then asked to imagine being the brand manager of a business and how they might best utilise the influencer within the advertising. The aim of using a technique like this was to evoke "information, feelings, and memories" in participants, thus, capturing rich data which might not be accessible using other techniques (Harper 2002: 13; Quinlan 2011).

3.4.7 Sample

In qualitative research, sampling is of utmost importance (Saunders et al. 2016) A sample with a strong representation of target groups, gives confidence in the generalisability of the study's findings (Graziano and Raulin 2010). Therefore, the chosen participants must closely resemble the target group under investigation and significant time was given to considering the right sample for this study.

Millennials aged between twenty-two to thirty-seven (Dimock 2018), were the selected target group for this study. 83.9% of Instagram #ad posts were made by female Millennials in 2017 (Maoz 2018) and therefore, the researcher decided to focus on female Millennials, as this area of marketing is popular amongst females. The decision to focus on beauty, more precisely cosmetics and tanning, was because of the number of beauty brands participating in influencer marketing, such as Rimmel, L'Oréal, B-Perfect and Iconic Bronze. In addition, the beauty industry was found to be the second most popular after fashion and accessories in influencer marketing (Maoz 2018).

Probability sampling which "using established statistical procedures, you can estimate the likelihood that your findings for the sample differ from the population" (Brett Davies 2007: 61) differs greatly to non-probability sampling. Non-probability means participants are not chosen randomly, therefore, the sample chosen cannot be generalised to an entire population, but it ensures that participants share certain criteria. Non-probability sampling was chosen for this study and according to Saunders et al (2016), is best suited to qualitative studies. The chosen form of non-probability sampling was purposive sampling, which is described as meaning "the researcher does not seek to sample research participants on a random basis" (Bryman and Bell 2011: 442).

Bryman and Bell (2011) explained that the sampling strategy, quota sampling, which is another form of non-probability sampling, is viewed in high regard by scholars, yet, the researcher of this piece decided snowball

sampling was a better fit for a study of this nature. Saunders et al (2016) describe snowball sampling as “a procedure in which subsequent respondents are obtained from information provided by initial respondents” (Saunders et al. 2016: 728). This sampling technique was employed to meet the specific criteria of the study and allowed the researcher to identify a network of social media followers, whom could accurately reflect female Millennials’ perspectives (Riley et al. 2000). The researcher approached an Irish influencer called Laura Views. Laura agreed to assist in identifying additional respondents. Stemming from this, the researcher was then contacted by 20 people through Instagram private mail, of which participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Age: To ensure the participant was within the Millennial generation (22-37). The researcher also tried to ensure a variety of Millennial ages within the study.
- Gender: To ensure the participant was female, to correctly represent the gender choice for this study.
- Nationality: To ensure the participant was Irish and therefore, represented an Irish consumer.
- Interest in social media influencers and beauty: This allowed for the participant to accurately reflect the target group of Millennials whom hold interest and knowledge of this topic.

3.4.8 Theoretical Saturation

Riley et al (2000) outlined a need for the researcher to consider the studies limitations, objectives and the chosen research instrument when selecting the size of their sample, particularly when it comes to in-depth interviews. Therefore, for this study, the researcher continued to interview until the information being produced reached an adequate level of i.e. theoretical saturation occurred (Saunders et al. 2016). Theoretical Saturation is described as “a point at which observing more data will not lead to discovery of more information related to the research questions” (Lowe et al. 2018: 191). The researcher took an inductive thematic saturation approach, in that she

continued to interview respondents until there were no longer new codes or themes emerging in relation to social media influencers (Saunders et al. 2018). Saunders (2012) critiques the use of theoretical saturation because it does not give a definite number for an appropriate sample size. He suggests between five and ten participants for a semi-structured/in-depth interview. The final sample size of this study was seven participants after theoretical saturation was accomplished. Thus, falling perfectly within the minimum sample size guidelines recommended by Saunders (2012). A table of candidates is presented in Appendix 2.

3.5 Layer Four: Research Method

The fourth layer of the research onion is concerned with the research method. There are three types of methods; the mono-method, mixed-method and multi-method. Multi-method is when the researcher uses two or more quantitative or qualitative instruments to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. Mixed-method is criticised by some because each method is philosophically different, and these differences are missed when mixed (Quinlan 2011). On the other hand, it is also advised by others for example Thomas (2003), who believes both quantitative and qualitative methods answer different questions. Therefore, qualitative allows for exploration of a topic through respondents' own words, while quantitative can add to and generalise the findings through the testing of hypotheses. By using both, the research can avoid any weaknesses associated with each method (Saunders et al. 2016). In fact, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) emphasised a need for students to take on a mixed-methods approach as, without the experience of both methodologies, students were losing their chance to become pragmatic, knowledgeable and experienced researchers. Although a mixed-method approach was a preferred method for this particular study, it was unviable, due to the limited resources and timeframe available to the researcher. A mono-method was better suited, due to said restrictions. Mono-method means there is only one type of research design (Qualitative) and data collection technique (in-depth interviews) (Saunders et al. 2016). In-depth interviews have been used in many studies to understand the thoughts, feelings and

attitudes of respondents. For example, Whiting and Williams (2013) reported that they could explore a topic to the necessary degree using one method. However, a PhD study could consider using a mixed-method approach in the future.

3.6 Layer Five: Time Horizons

The second last layer of the research onion deals with the time horizons, which are cross-sectional or longitudinal in nature. In exploring a phenomenon, a longitudinal study collects the data over an extended period of time and more than once, whereas, a cross-sectional study focuses on a phenomenon at one particular point in time and collects the data once (Sekaran 2003). With the constraints placed on this study, a cross-sectional study was best suited. The researcher collected the data over a two-week period during July 2018 and the data collection was only made once with each participant interviewed on one occasion only.

3.7 Layer Six: Data Collection and Data Analysis

This final layer deals with the data collection and data analysis of the study. Referring back to layer three, this study has taken a qualitative approach and therefore, both the collection and analysis of the data discovered through the interviews were of utmost importance.

3.7.1 Data Collection

Face-to-face interviews can be held in any suitable location. For the purpose of this study, the researcher booked a private room within the National College of Ireland (NCI) library for all interviews. This private room in the centre of Dublin suited all participants as they lived or worked nearby, while the environment was quiet, comfortable, ensuring the interviewee was at ease. All interviews were arranged at a time that suited the candidates. The interviews were held over a two-week period in mid-July 2018 and each lasted between forty minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes.

The questions posed aimed to be unambiguous and succinct, to avoid any bias or confusion on the part of the interviewee. The questions were open-ended in nature, to allow for exploration of the topic by the participants (Quinlan et al. 2015). Usually, questions proposed in an in-depth interview are derived from other sources such as previous studies around the topic, to ensure questions are valid and reliable. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of social media influencers is relevantly underdeveloped and therefore, this was not easily accomplished. However, the researcher had to compromise and developed suitable questions for the topic based on other academic studies, such as those around celebrity endorsements (Jain and Roy 2016).

To create a level of discussion, a thematic question guide was prepared, which followed themes apparent within the literature and questions deemed appropriate for the particular section. The topics covered were; Advertising, Social Media, E-Wom, Influencers, Credibility, Trust & Expertise, Brand-Fit & Attractiveness, Influence, Product Placement and Hyperreality. A sample of the questions chosen for this study were pretested with 5 individuals, to ensure they were understood as the researcher had intended and therefore, the information gathered was appropriate for the study. Following the feedback, the researcher made some minor changes to the context and phraseology of the questions. An example of the thematic question guide used by the researcher of this piece can be found in Appendix One.

To ensure descriptive validity which is imperative for qualitative studies, the researcher took notes during all of the interviews, to ensure any reactions or expressions could be noted (Huberman & Miles 2002). Descriptive validity means ensuring that the words actually expressed by participants are accurately represented by the findings (Huberman & Miles 2002). To ensure descriptive validity, all interviews were audio recorded using the quick voice IOS mobile application and QuickTime player on Mac. All participants were made aware of the audio recording of the interview and its usage in the research. All participants agreed to the recordings. The researcher made clear that all of the recordings and data collected would be destroyed after the study

was completed, by deleting recordings from both the researchers I-Phone and Mac and transcriptions by a paper shredder.

3.7.2 Data Analysis

In relation to the data analysis, a grounded approach was taken as according to Hussey and Hussey (1997), it is extremely useful when a previously established theory is not tested against within the study i.e. there is no theoretical framework. Which is the case of this study which is of an inductive nature and Chapman et al (2015) describe grounded theory as “an inductive method of developing theory grounded in data” (p.202). Therefore, the analysis of this research aims to find theory within the information collected.

One type of grounded theory approach is thematic approach and was the chosen approach for this research. Thematic Analysis can be used under any philosophical approach and whether the study is inductive or deductive as it is described as a stand-alone analytical technique by Saunders et al (2016: 579). Thematic analysis is useful when there is a large amount of disorganised qualitative data, in which one seeks to find relationships among the words of subjective individuals (Saunders et al. 2016). With this approach, all interviews are transcribed and read in detail, seeking out key phrases, ideas or concepts that become apparent. Saunders et al (2016) explain that codes can become apparent in three ways, through participants’ words, through a collection of data the researcher labels, or terms existing in related theory and literature.

Although some studies such as Fereday et al (2006) take on both data-driven and theory-driven data, this piece was wholly inductive and therefore, the researcher focused on developing theory by allowing themes to evolve from the data collection, rather than from the literature alone. Therefore, from the data collection, the initial codes were identified and put into categories or themes, which is known as open coding (Quinlan 2011). The researcher followed the process of theoretical saturation in that she continued to add to the themes, until either the category was well developed or saturated (Bryman

and Bell 2011). Secondly, axial coding was then undertaken to find a relationship between the codes. Finally, selective coding was used in that the codes were appropriately integrated based on these relationships or similarities to produce the overall themes of the research (Saunders et al. 2016). At the end of the process, the researcher had elucidated themes from the qualitative narrative of the interviews, to build theory around social media influencers. Finally, the apparent themes were then compared to the literature, to add an additional layer to the interpretation and produce a relevant and valuable discussion around the topic.

3.7.3 Ethical Considerations

The National College of Ireland's 'Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research Involving Human Participants' were adhered to by the researcher throughout the research process. An ethical review application accompanied the proposal submission for this study.

3.7.4 Voluntary Participation and Confidentiality

Before each interview, the purpose of the interview and the study overall were explained, so as all the participants understood what they were participating in. Each participant was asked to read and fill out a consent sheet, to guarantee they understood the purpose of the study and that their information was being recorded and used for the study (Collis & Hussey 2014). All candidates were informed that the interview content would be used for the purpose of this MSc dissertation, but that they could choose to stay anonymous (Jankowicz 2000). All participants expressed their interest in maintaining their anonymity and therefore, throughout this document, the participants are named in order of interview i.e. Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2.

3.7.5 Limitations

A limitation is described as a "weakness or deficiency in the research" (Collis & Hussey 2014: 110) and as with most research studies of this nature, this piece held two main limitations;

- Firstly, as the topic of social media influencers is still in its early stages in academic research, a longitudinal study would have given a greater insight into Millennial consumers' relationship with social media influencers. However, the time constraints of this study made a longitudinal study impossible. A longitudinal qualitative study would have provided an empirical stamp of approval in relation to the topic but would be more suited to a future PhD study. A longitudinal PhD study could follow engagement and interaction of Millennial consumers with social media influencers, to build a greater understanding of Millennial consumers' thoughts and feelings over a period of time.
- Secondly, although in-depth interviews allowed for great insight into the topic through the consumer lens, an extension of time may have allowed for the addition of focus groups. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) emphasised how focus groups are not a substitute for one-on-one interviews but actually offer a different layer of data gathering. Suggesting that focus groups could have added and complemented the findings of the in-depth interviews if time had allowed. A group interview may lead to interaction among participants that would push them to think about alternative aspects or considerations they may not have thought of alone.

4. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to present an analysis and discussion of the main findings which emerged from the in-depth interviews conducted as part of this study. By exploring the feelings and opinions of Irish female Millennials, common themes shared among the majority of participants became apparent. This section will present each theme and a number of significant direct quotes from the participants, with the aim of addressing the objective of this study, which is to explore the impact of social media influencers on female Millennials.

4.0 Research Objective 1

Research Objective 1:

To assess the importance of engagement between a social media influencer and female Millennial consumers.

Interview Themes

1. Life Online and Visuals
2. Entertain and Engage

4.0.1 Life Online

The data collection process began with participants discussing traditional and digital advertising. Six of the seven participants agreed that they consume digital advertising more often than traditional. The reasoning for the participant's interest in digital over that of traditional advertising was explained by comments relating to their digitised lives, outlined below.

Interviewee A *“I live most of my life online at this stage”*

Interviewee B *“as people we spend a lot of time online”*

There was a consensus amongst participants that visual content was the main reason they enjoyed Instagram.

Interviewee B *“Pictures entice me”.*

Interviewee E *“it is visual” (...)* *“is more our generation”*

Interviewee D *“Watching takes less effort than reading”*

These responses are complementary to the idea that Millennials are hyperconnected and highly engaged digital consumers, whose lives are immersed online (Moore 2012). As proposed by Guynn (2018), Instagram is the winning platform with this target audience because of its focus on images and visual storytelling. This has been found to entice Millennials (Clasen 2015; Arnolds Street Media 2016) and explains their interest in both the platform and social media influencers.

4.0.2 Entertainment and Engagement

Following participants’ discussion about their online life and interest in images, the conversation moved towards social media influencers. All participants follow social media influencers across a range of industries including beauty, fashion and fitness. Participants then explored the reasoning for their interest in social media influencers.

Interviewee E *“They would entertain you as well and catch my attention if I was sitting around”*

Interviewee G *“I find them very interesting”*

These comments suggest that Millennials interest in social media influencers is because they are viewed as a vehicle of entertainment. This can be associated with the idea that Millennials are entertainment-seeking, in that their focus online is to be entertained through content (Kilian et al. 2012). The

participants' view that influencers are merely a source of entertainment may be explained by their belief that some influencers are not open to interaction;

Interviewee F *"I remember I messaged Niamh Cullen before, when she had a really nice top on, I was like just wondering where your top is from and she never got back to me, I was like nooo" (...) "It made me feel like a fool" (...) "Then I know there's other people like Pippa O'Connor apparently always gets back to people and her life is way more hectic"*

This participant's statement indicates that when an influencer is perceived as interested and open to consumer communication, it, therefore, encourages the consumer to interact and feel comfortable doing so. Yet, the importance of engagement was also outlined by participants.

Interviewee A *"I find a lot of them engaging, engagement is a big thing for me".*

It was clear that this respondent had formed a bond with social media influencers, which can be explained by Pansari and Kumar's (2017) study. They found if a consumer has an emotional bond with an influencer, then the next stage of the relationship is engagement. Thus, Interviewee A has an established relationship with social media influencers, that has now resulted in her turning towards engagement. This signifies that she could possibly fall under the segment of a highly connected Millennial, whose relationships can be built and played out online (Killian et al. 2012). Other respondents expressed a relationship and interest in social media influencers to a point of impacting their purchase intentions.

Interviewee E *"She was using it and I was so curious and felt like I need it"*

Demonstrating that a relationship between this consumer and the influencer impacted her purchase intention. However, other participants held mixed

feelings when it came to engagement and interaction with social media influencers.

Interviewee F *“But I don’t interact with them, I don’t comment on their posts” (...)* *“I’d never like comment on their stuff”*

The comment above denotes that engagement, described as “repeated interactions”, varies with different segments of the Millennial population. Giving substance to Killian et al’s (2012) study which divided millennials into three segments which include entertainment-seeking and highly-connected Millennials. Some may not engage on an influencer’s post but follow them for entertainment or relationship purposes, thus they can be seen as the entertainment-seeking segment. Others engage more directly, are proactive (Serazio 2015) and seek a relationship with the influencer falling into the highly-connected group. However, the lack of direct engagement with influencer posts does not mean the influencer has not had an impact in some way. In fact, participants of this study indicated their bond and interest with an influencer can impact purchase intentions, similar to the findings of Husnain and Toor (2017) study. Therefore, demonstrating that engagement between a consumer and influencer becomes apparent after a relationship has been formed. Yet, just because a consumer does not engage on an influencer’s post does not necessarily imply a relationship has not been achieved between the influencer and the entertainment-seeking millennial segment. However, engagement could imply the strength of the relationship, in that those engaging with the influencer have reached a level in the relationship to feel the want or need to engage i.e. highly-connected segment. After all, Hurst (2016) pinpointed that the Millennial generation demand relationships online. This would indicate that a more limited view of engagement may not adequately capture the power of influencers as both a direct and indirect advertising source.

Additionally, these findings also indicated consumers do not always feel comfortable in engaging with an influencer because they do not view them as open to co-creating or engaging with them. Which ties in with Kennedy and

Guzmán (2017) study that found Millennials will only engage in co-creating if the brand seems open, friendly and appears to be interested in consumers. The same could be said for social media influencers. If they are viewed as open to consumers comments and engage with their followers directly, it will encourage consumers to interact and engage. Therefore, although engagement may only tell the brand part of the story, the level of engagement, be it comments, likes or private messages, may indicate how open and connected an influencer is with their followers. Considering the importance of engagement on Instagram, it is essential brands acknowledge engagement levels. However, they must also consider the existence of the purely entertainment-seeking segment of the Millennial population who apparently avoid engagement.

As the research progressed other themes came to life and are dealt with under objective 2.

4.1 Research Objective 2

<p>Research Objective 2:</p> <p><i>To assess the impact of <u>relatability</u> and <u>credibility</u> of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.</i></p>
<p><u>Interview Themes</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relatable 2. Credible 3. Trust 4. Expert

4.1.1 Relatable

All respondents spoke about why they find social media influencers relatable, particularly in comparison to celebrity endorsers.

Interviewee B *“I think they are more relatable” (...)* *“They don’t have the money a celebrity does”*

The comments by participants show that Millennials feel closer to social media influencers because they view them as normal individuals like themselves. The characteristics of the influencer that matters when it comes to relatability were also expressed below.

Interviewee A *“She’s refreshing, she’s just really ordinary”*

Interviewee F *“Normal living and things like that is more relatable because you would eventually go down the same road in life, a normal life”*

Interviewee D *“She is a similar age and puts up about her everyday life and that makes it more relatable and she is not just trying to shove products at us” (...)* *“Whereas, people my age you look at them being so successful and think maybe if I put in as much effort or did what they are doing, I would become as big as them”*

This gives grounding to Schimmelpfenning and Hollensen (2016) study which found the reason consumers no longer connect with celebrity endorsers is that they cannot relate to their lives. In their study, they spoke about how celebrities used to act as role models for consumers, but due to their unattainable lives, there is now a need for a new endorser (Schimmelpfenning and Hollensen 2016). Participants of this study seem to express that social media influencers now have the opportunity to take the place of celebrity endorsers because their lives are both relatable and attainable in the eyes of consumers, as posited by Mudge and Shaheen (2017). Corresponding with Djafarova and Rushworth (2018) study, which found young women can relate to influencers and that’s what makes their presence online credible and influential. Furthermore, participants expressed that the opportunity to build a relationship with the source is also a clear reason for their ability to relate to social media influencers.

Interviewee A *“Better chance of reaching out to them than celebrities” (...)*
“Seems like I can be their friend”

Interviewee F *“You probably don’t know the celebrity as much as you know the influencer” (...)* *“You build a relationship with them whereas with a celebrity you don’t have a personal connection”*

Interviewee A *“With influencers rather than celebrities, there’s a greater chance they can actually interact and maintain that contact on a genuine level”*

Interviewee G *“I’m more relatable with an influencer than I would be with a celebrity because a celebrity is quite out of reach”*

These comments emphasise participants’ view that celebrities are out of reach and relationships are easier to form with influencers, which is important to Millennial consumers. Corresponding with Hurst (2016) who explained that Millennials seek relationships online, it seems if a social media influencer appears accessible by consumers, they then feel more related to the influencer.

Interviewee C *“I think relatability plays a part in the credibility of the social media influencer” (...)* *“If they are relatable you will trust them and try the product”* *“If I did relate to them I am sure I would trust their opinion”*

Interviewee A *“If I find somebody relatable, the likelihood is I’m inclined to trust them”*

Thus, showing the importance of relatability for consumers, as it affects both credibility and trust in the eyes of the Millennial consumers of this study. Credibility stemming from relatability can be explained by Chakraborty and Bhat (2018) study which found for a review to be deemed credible, the experience needed to be relatable by the consumer. Considering respondents emphasised the lives of influencers are relatable, it seems fitting that consumers will, therefore, view the source as credible because they can relate to the influencer’s everyday life and personal experiences (Shan 2016; Djafarova and Rushworth 2018). Credibility was a keen topic among

participants when discussing relatability and leads to the next theme of this section.

4.1.2 Credible

Participants were mixed in their responses to whether or not a social media influencer is a credible source. Some participants described their inability to view the source as credible as of late;

Interviewee C *“No I wouldn’t, to me they are paid to say it’s great and therefore, not credible”*

Interviewee G *“Like So Sue Me, I think she’s now become almost a celebrity, so a lot of her stuff isn’t credible, and she lies a lot”*

Whereas other participants viewed influencers as highly credible;

Interviewee G *“Once they are relatable, you find them more credible, like, you can relate to your friends and so their credible”*

This participant indicated credibility of this source stemmed from her ability to relate to an influencer, as she would her friends. However, there was a mixed response in relation to whether or not an influencer is a credible source, and this could be explained by Instagram pages such as Bloggers Unveiled, which all participants mentioned they followed in the past. Bloggers Unveiled and other pages preceding it focused on calling out irresponsible or unethical actions by bloggers and brands. Therefore, the Irish influencer marketing industry has become more transparent as of late, which is something Millennials demand from brands (Fromm & Garton 2013). However, the findings from this primary research denote that once relatability between a consumer and a social media influencer is present, a relationship can then form and thus, gives credibility to the source. Therefore, brands need to ensure relatability is achieved between the influencer and the Millennial consumer, so as to achieve a level of credibility. Therefore, unlike Munnukk et al’s (2016) study which found that similarity is of less importance than

other aspects of an endorser, this study finds relatability between an influencer's life and that of their followers is of utmost importance in achieving credibility. After all, the credibility of an endorser has been found to increase purchase intention and impact brand attitudes by other studies (Hovland et al. 1953; Jaffari and Hunja 2017), thus emphasising the importance of this finding for brands.

The conversation around credibility brought to light its associated dimensions, trust and expertise by consumers, which is the basis of the next section.

4.1.3 Trust

It became apparent that the trustworthiness of social media influencers among Millennial consumers has been damaged, with some reasons outlined by participants.

Interviewee F *"I have lost trust in some of them"*

Interviewee D *"It used to be people I follow on Instagram I did trust but lately they are switching from brand to brand and we are losing the credibility and trust with them"*

These comments signified that the switching between brands by social media influencers is detrimental to their trustworthiness by Millennials. Furthermore, participants indicated this type of activity by an influencer causes confusion and dislike towards a brand's advertisement by Millennial consumers;

Interviewee D *"You're like which tan do you actually like, you're saying you like B Bold one minute and then it's the B-Perfect the next and then you're like what's going on"*

As the interview process progressed another aspect to negatively affect the trustworthiness of an influencer by participants was the size of an influencer's following.

Interviewee A *"I would trust them less the bigger they get because they're not one hundred percent honest"*

Interviewee D *"Smaller influencers are usually more trustworthy compared to those with a mass following"*

Subsequently, brand switching, and amassing a large following are the two aspects that affect a social media influencer being viewed as trustworthy by participants. This could be explained because Millennial consumers cannot relate to constantly switching products or having an extensive following online. This is explained by Chakraborty and Bhat's (2018) and Shan's (2016) studies which implied Millennials lose their ability to relate to the influencer's experiences, thus damaging their trust towards the source.

These findings indicate that firstly brands need to be more aware of the additional brands that influencers are working with. Secondly, they need to ensure the number of followers an influencer possess online, does not go beyond the point of relatability to a more celebrity-like following and thus, impacts the trust by Millennial consumers. However, Goldsmith et al's (2000) study of celebrity endorsers found them to be viewed as trustworthy in the eyes of consumers and participants of this study expressed certain ways for a larger influencer to be deemed trusted and credible by Millennials was shared by participants.

Interviewee F *"I do if it's someone I have heard speaking bad about a product because I would trust what they are saying. Where some of the people I follow, they never have anything bad to say about a product"*

Interviewee A *“If an influencer says, ‘look this tan was really bad’, I am going to actually think ‘she was honest in this review’ and the next time she says the tan is good I am going to believe her”*

Interviewee E *“Her hair changed dramatically within a few months and she wouldn’t tell anyone about it. Then she released the product and then you trust it as you could see what happened to her hair” (...) “That’s why it’s important to have someone you trust who will tell you the good and the bad of it so you’re not wasting your money”*

Participants showed concern for influencers allowing their followers to waste their money which signifies that social media influencers have an influential presence over the purchase intentions of Millennial consumers. However, this can only be effective when trustworthiness is established and to do so brands need to consider the following.

Jain and Posavac (2011) found if endorsers are deemed credible, which includes trustworthiness, they are more persuasive and influential in disseminating the brand message. Therefore, this study posits that if an influencer appears to only share the positive aspects of the product and to never use the product themselves, it is damaging for the message the brands are hoping to communicate. Consequently, social media influencers should be encouraged to share their real thoughts and opinions of a product or service, good or bad, and to use the product on their platform, outside of the promotion. By doing so they will be viewed as both credible and trusting among Millennial consumers and avoid perceptions such as these communicated by participants.

Interviewee C *“I think they are being paid to say great things, I just don’t trust them”*

Interviewee D *“I think they should be more honest with what they are selling, and people will trust you more that way”*

4.1.4 Expert

All participants shared their thoughts in regard to the need for expertise when it came to social media influencers, however fashioning a divided response. Although three respondents expressed their preference for a social media influencer to be an expert of some kind, to begin with, as the conversation progressed, and participants reflected, they proclaimed a change of stance.

Interviewee F *“Trustworthy more, like some of the girls I follow, they’re not experts, just your normal girl”*

Interviewee C *“No it’s not important in summary, because they would use the product themselves”*

Interviewee D *“It is more important that they are trustworthy and relatable more than an expert”*

Thus, in the end, all respondents agreed that the expertise of social media influencers is not as important to them as trustworthiness or relatability. In fact, **Interviewee A** emphasised the reason for trustworthiness holding more importance than expertise is because;

“They’re ordinary punters trying out products they’re not necessarily hugely skilled, like, you see a makeup artist with a contour kit, you know they have professional skills that go behind that. Whereas I have no formal makeup training and I am able to use a contour kit because an influencer on YouTube was like ‘oww well this is how you do it’ and I was like well you’re an ordinary Joe and I am an ordinary Joe, we have that in common”.

Thus, signifying that Irish female Millennial consumers are not as concerned towards the expertise of a social media influencer, as they are with trustworthiness. Insinuating, similar to Munnukka et al’s (2016) study, it is better for an influencer to gain expertise through the use of a beauty product, in that the influencer builds his/her experience through consistent use rather than professional skills, so as consumers can relate and feel they too can use

the same beauty products. This gives reason for Tzoumakka et al's (2016) finding that European consumers hold preference towards trustworthiness, whereas American consumers focus on the expertise of an endorser. Thus, participants of this study fall in line with other European consumers, in that they prioritise trust over expertise. This is a significant finding for brands, in that their concentration is best spent on the trust and relatability levels of a social media influencer, as previously emphasised, over ensuring the influencer is an expert within their field.

4.2 Research Objective 3

Research Objective 3:

To assess the impact of product match-up and the attractiveness of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.

Interview Themes

1. Fit
2. Attractiveness

4.2.1 Fit

All participants openly spoke about the need for an influencer and brand to complement one another.

***Interviewee E** "If it's paid and it fits ill like it and show a bit of interaction because I'll support them and the brand"*

Thus, indicating when the promotion between a brand and influencer is deemed fitting by Millennial consumers, the level of interest rises for both the brand and influencer. Other Millennials of the study communicated what "brand-fit" means to them during the process.

***Interviewee D** "You don't want to be an MUA (Make-Up Artist) and be advertising a can of Fanta and you don't want to be a fitness guru advertising eyeliner"*

Interviewee E *“Like Pippa was promoting Sally Hansen nail polish the other week. Pippa constantly gets gelish from Michelle B nails, like ridiculously constantly. Like she must have taken these off just to put Sally Hansen nail polish on and then removed it two days later”*

Suggesting brand-fit in the eyes of Millennial consumers necessitates both the usage of the product and the fit between the individual influence’s career or established area of expertise and the product type. The focus on expertise as a critical match-up measure was also emphasised in Till and Buslers’s (2000) study. Demonstrating the need for brands to ensure the influencers’ area of expertise is viewed as compatible with both the product and the brand. It is important to note however, in section 4.1.4, it was denoted by participants that an influencer does not necessarily need to be an expert as relatability was more important. Therefore, it suggests that the influencer needs to be an individual who uses the product, rather than an expert such as a make-up artist. Yet, Kamins and Gupta’s (1994) study linked the brand-fit of an endorser to how attractive the endorser became in the eyes of consumers and is the next theme of this section.

4.2.2 Attractiveness

Attractiveness was discussed amongst all participants and the concept of social pressure was emphasised.

Interviewee A *“Like the commercially acceptable thing would probably be, yes, they do have to be the social standard of beauty”*

Interviewee E *“It’s kind of the world we live in” (...) “We are more likely to stop on a picture of an attractive person, but they still need to be relatable”*

Relatability, along with expertise was emphasised as more important than attractiveness among the majority of respondents, which is contradictory to Munukka et al’s (2016) belief that attractiveness is more important than

similarity. Yet, trust was emphasised as less important than attractiveness by participants because;

Interviewee D *“If they were really ugly looking, you are not really going to trust them or follow them”*

Insinuating that the pressure of society to adhere to beauty ideals for Millennials means they recognise the need for an endorser to be attractive, so they can trust their advice in relation to a beauty product. The societal pressure expressed by the respondents gives grounding to Hakim’s (2010) idea of Erotic Capital, in that women in society have expectations placed on them. Thus, influencers are expected to use their beauty to sell a product. However, respondents also accentuated the level of importance of attractiveness heightens when the product is attractiveness-related.

Interviewee E *“I think it is more for beauty products as you are looking at them face-on”*

Interviewee C *“As it is cosmetics then yes, it is important”*

The finding of increased importance given to attractiveness is similar to Kamin’s (1990) study, which found attractiveness is significant for Millennial consumers if the product is attractiveness-related, rather than any other type of product. Considering participants’ ability to relate with the influencer, which was previously discussed, it seems fitting to assume Millennial consumers are evaluating the level of attractiveness the influencer accomplishes using the product as an indication of what they might achieve with the products use. Therefore, although the societal influence is a major factor for Millennial consumers, it seems they, as individuals, are also concerned with their individual beauty or overall sex appeal and view influencers as role models.

Interviewee D *“Someone who is naturally pretty, then yes that helps, and you aspire to be them”*

Participants expressed their interest in sex appeal and beauty of others as a motivation towards using the beauty product. Stressing Green's (2013) view that Erotic Capital is merely sex appeal seems more realistic to Millennials viewpoint. As previously discussed, Millennial consumers find influencers relatable, suggesting they feel they can compare themselves to the source. Bringing understanding to participants concern for attractiveness rising for a beauty-related product. It can be proposed that Millennial consumers of this study analyse an influencer's attractiveness in hope of understanding the level of sex appeal they would possess by using the product advertised. Thus, a level of beauty is necessary to entice Millennial consumers. Yet the level of beauty must be deemed attainable by Millennials and therefore, brands need to ensure an appropriate level of beauty is achieved but not beyond a certain point.

Interviewee F *"If they're extremely attractive but don't know what they are talking about sure then you're just looking at a face"*

Interviewee D *"You start thinking that they only have that following because of the way they look and wouldn't have it otherwise"*

As demonstrated through the interview process, Millennials concern for attractiveness reaches a certain point, where the influencer is deemed extremely attractive, which in turn damages the relatability for female Millennial consumers. This finding can be associated with both Bower (2001) and Sääksjarvi et al's (2016) studies, which highlight consumers comparison between themselves and highly attractive models/celebrity endorsers is detrimental to their self-esteem.

Therefore, this study proposes brands in the beauty industry need to safeguard the perceived brand-fit between the product and the influencer. To do so it is advised the influencer with whom they collaborate with has previously used the product and has a lifestyle that is relatable to their female Millennial consumers. Along with guaranteeing a brand-fit, brands in the beauty industry

also need to consider the societal influence and that a level of attractiveness is present with the influencer yet deemed attainable by Millennial consumers.

The focus on relatability and attractiveness of an influencer lead the discussion towards false attractiveness and pretence of editing, which is the theme of the next section.

4.3 Research Objective 4

Research Objective 4: <i>To assess the impact of <u>photo editing</u> by a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.</i>
<u>Interview Theme</u> 1. Filters

4.3.1 Filters

This aspect of the data is concerned with the editing of photos, be it through Photoshop, filters or FaceTune from the female Millennials' perspective. All participants expressed their personal use of filters and their ability to recognise an edited photo. There was an agreement among all interviewees that influencers are under pressure to use editing tools, but they clearly communicated their dislike when a social media influencer does so.

Interviewee E *“Completely unrealistic, I would not trust anything she says that is makeup related”*

Interviewee B *“Why pretend to look a certain way”*

Interviewee F *“Influencers I relate to don't really use filters”*

Interviewee F went further by explaining the reasoning behind her dislike of editing tools.

“If someone is trying to promote a makeup product if it’s really that good, why are they putting a filter on it”

In fact, the dislike of editing images by social media influencers was found to affect the credibility of the influencer by Millennial consumers.

Interviewee C *“I think it does defiantly because they are lying and show that they look a certain way because of a product or when using it”*

Interviewee D *“Yes because you don’t know if the product will look like that at all”*

Interviewee F *“Yes, its false attractiveness”*

This indicates that Millennial consumers are aware of the digitised beauty presented online yet, are unwilling to accept it, which can be linked with Loda and Coleman (2010) stance that Millennials are sceptical of advertisers attempts. Yet, it became apparent that the awareness of edited images by Millennials was not always present and that they link maturity with the realisation that what an image portrayed is often times, not reality.

Interviewee E *“The image will have a filter on it and is airbrushed, like come on. When I was younger I didn’t realise.”*

Interviewee F *“Especially with younger girls, I am sure they are looking at this sort of stuff thinking they’re going to look just as good as this influencer that just pops on 50 filters”*

Overall, the impact of edited photos by influencers is damaging on the Millennial consumers' perspective of both the influencer and the brand. Millennial consumers of this study are fully aware of the digital and physical realities of social media influencers. Thus, participants do not view the use of filters as merely an additional layer onto reality as proposed by Dholakia and Reyes (2013). This may be explained by Moore (2012), who emphasises

Millennials are cynical digital natives, who are sceptical towards advertising attempts and therefore, they do not believe everything they consume. It seems McBain's (2018) article was correct in that consumers today are capable of understanding that what they see online is only a snapshot of reality. Consequently, influencers who try to falsely mislead consumers with edited photos, lose their credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of female Millennial consumers. Yet, participants clearly indicate when they were younger they were in a constant state of Jean Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality. In that they could not tell the difference between what they consumed online and what was reality. Thus, signifying a need for brands to consider younger generations, who may arrive to the realisation maturity has given to Millennial consumers' and therefore, they too may begin to reject edited images. Therefore, this study shows the need for brands in the beauty industry to ensure that editing of photos is avoided by influencers they collaborate with if their target audience is that of female Millennial consumers. While also indicating the editing of images is an area for a future study in relation to a younger cohort i.e. pre-millennials.

The emphasis on photo editing and collaborations lead to the final theme emerging within the data collection process; collaborations.

4.4 Research Objective 5

<p>Research Objective 5:</p> <p><i>To assess the impact of <u>sponsored content</u> from the female Millennials' perspective.</i></p>
<p><u>Interview Theme</u></p> <p>1. Collaborations</p>

4.4.1 Collaborations

The final section focused on Millennials feelings towards sponsored posts and the associated hashtags #AD or #SP. Throughout the research process, the concept of sponsored posts was mentioned by all respondents. With the use

of the imagination exercise described within section three, respondents delved into the subject, considering the benefits and drawbacks of such an advertising technique. All participants confirmed their awareness of the new ASAI standards in relation to influencer marketing and claimed to prefer the evident hashtags involved within sponsored posts because they were now aware of what is organic and what is paid content. Participants first shared their thoughts on digital advertising consumption:

Interviewee E *“There is so much you don’t know you are consuming”*

Interviewee F *“sometimes I take it in and I don’t realise”*

This indicates that the Millennials of this study acknowledge that because of their intensive digital consumption habits, they are influenced by advertising and are aware of the growth of stealth marketing because of their interest in digital versus traditional advertising (Sprague and Wells 2010). Matthes et al’s (2007) study, found if a consumer is highly involved in the content, the persuasive attempt can impact their brand attitude subconsciously. Therefore, although the participants indicated they are being targeted without even realising it, they can still be impacted by the advertising attempt. In relation to Friedstad and Wright’s (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model, this study positions Millennial consumers as the target that are aware of the persuasive attempts made by agents, the influencer/brand. Which may explain the majority of respondents expressed concern and scepticism towards sponsored posts by influencers.

Interviewee B *“They do it out of desperation, they are greedy”*

Interviewee G *“I am mixed with it, if they’re endorsed, are they going to give you a real review?”*

Interviewee C *“If it was in collaboration with a brand I would assume that there just saying things as they are getting paid”*

Thus, indicating Millennials believe sponsored posts are driven by a social media influencer's financial gain. Which in turn jeopardises their ability to appear as a credible reviewer. In fact, because of this, participants indicated that sponsored posts have a negative effect on how they consume the brand's advertisement.

Interviewee D *“Most of the time when I see AD or SP, I tend to start flicking past it”*

This participant's statement is complementary to Ham et al's (2015) findings in that it demonstrates that Millennials' persuasion knowledge is heightened because of the evident hashtags now applicable to influencer marketing in Ireland. All participants suggested a preference towards brands sending out their products to influencers seeking a review, or an influencer organically reviewing a product without any affiliation with a brand. Thus, this study questions the findings of Isaac and Grayson (2017) study that found heightened persuasion knowledge was positively acknowledged by consumers as, at first, the female Millennials of this study communicated their aversion and scepticism of such attempts. Yet, some participants indicated that there are sponsored posts that do appeal to the Millennial generation.

Interviewee E *“She uses a product and won't immediately go into a paid sponsorship, she will use it for a few months”*

Interviewee F *“Its credible up to a point where they're not all of a sudden 'this is the B-Perfect tan and its great' and you've never heard them talking about it before”*

Considering Isaac and Grayson (2017) found that heighten persuasion knowledge has a positive outcome and Matter et al's (2007) belief that the effectiveness is dependent on how involved the consumer is with the content, this study indicates something different. The insights from the Millennials of this study propose that a sponsored post can be deemed positive but not dependent on Millennial involvement, but dependent on the involvement of

the influencer and their use of the product. Although Millennials hold scepticism towards sponsored advertising (Loda and Coleman, 2010), an interest in the product by the influencer previous to their collaboration with a brand ensures consumers view the influencers endorsement as credible. According to Jain and Posavac's (2001) study, a review by a credibility source ensures a decrease in scepticism by consumers. Therefore, it became apparent that Millennial consumers are negotiated consumers (Hall 1973), who spend the time to evaluate the message and the source and then decide on whether or not they will accept it based on certain criteria i.e. previous use.

Overall, the findings from this section illustrate that brands sending products to influencers or an organic influencer review, are the most effective option for brands when indulging in influencer marketing. However, this study also denotes the need for brands to be cautious in how they collaborate with social media influencers, ensuring they work with influencers who have previously used their product or service. By doing so, brands guarantee Millennial consumers view the sponsored communication by influencers as credible, which has been found to impact purchase intention of endorsers (Jaffari and Hunjra 2017).

The findings and discussion within this section have brought to light a range of recommendations for both academia and industry, which will be presented and summarised in the following chapter.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this interpretivist study was to understand the relationship between female Millennial consumers and social media influencers, to give brands in the beauty industry a clearer perspective on how to best utilise the advertising source. The study has advanced both marketing and academia by offering insight into the world of influencer marketing through the lens of the Millennial target audience. The areas of Engagement, Relatability, Credibility, Attractiveness, Brand-Fit and Sponsored Posts have all been explored to successfully propose essential recommendations for brands to consider when utilising this type of advertising source and highlighting potential avenues for future studies around the area.

5.0 Implications for Brands

5.0.1 Findings for Objective 1: *To assess the importance of engagement between a social media influencer and female Millennial consumers.*

- a) In relation to engagement, it was found that Millennial consumers are divided in their interest in engaging with influencers. Although engagement may indicate a deeper relationship between an influencer and a highly-connected Millennial consumer, this does not necessarily mean an entertainment-seeking Millennial consumer has not achieved some level of a relationship with an influencer. In fact, although engagement is an aspect a brand should consider, this study found that if the Millennial consumer has formed a relationship, yet does not engage on the influencer's platform, the influencer still has the ability to influence the consumers' purchase intention.
- b) Another key aspect found under this theme which is important for brands in the beauty industry to consider was that Millennial consumers' view certain influencers as approachable online. It was found that engagement by consumers may indicate that a particular

influencer is open and encouraging towards consumer contributions. Therefore, their followers feel comfortable in reaching out and engaging. Potentially indicating the reason engagement may be viewed as the step after a relationship has been established is because the consumer feels that the influencer is interested in what her/his followers have to say or contribute (Pansari and Kumar 2017).

5.0.2 Findings for Objective 2: *To assess the impact of relatability and credibility of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.*

- a) Relatability was found to be a highly significant aspect of a social media influencer for all of the female Millennial participants. In fact, this study proposes that social media influencers are taking the place of celebrity endorsers because of Millennial consumers ability to relate to the source. Relatability means the Millennial consumers view the source as more credible, which has been found to impact purchase intention and brand attitude by other scholars (Hovland et al. 1953; Jaffari and Hunja 2017). Thus, brands within the beauty industry need to ensure the social media influencer they choose to collaborate with is perceived to achieve two main objectives.
- Firstly, live a similar and attainable life to that of their Millennial target audience. By doing so, consumers will view the social media influencers' life as comparable to their own, which gives the source credibility in female Millennials' eyes.
 - Secondly, to appear contactable and reachable by Millennial consumers, as this is an aspect a social media influencer can offer over that of a celebrity endorser, which ensures a level of relatability.
- b) Credibility, as outlined in section 4.1.2 is made up of both trust and expertise. Trustworthiness was found to be of utmost importance for Millennial consumers in relation to social media influencers.

Therefore, it is suggested by the Millennial consumers of this study that brands need to:

- Ensure an influencer avoids switching between brands with a similar product, which negatively impacts trustworthiness, causes dislike and confusion by Millennial consumers.
 - Consider influencers with a smaller following as they are viewed as more relatable and therefore, more trustworthy by Millennial consumers, as their reviews or promotions are less likely to be driven by a brand.
 - Guarantee when using an influencer with a larger following that their communication about the beauty product is both open and honest. Therefore, the influencer needs to be able to tell both the positive and negative aspects of a product so as to be viewed as trustworthy by Millennial consumers. The Millennial consumers emphasised the power of a negative review on their trust of the influencer. If a social media influencer communicates a negative review, consumers automatically view the source as more trusting and less likely to be swayed by the financial benefits of a collaboration.
- c) The findings illustrated the insignificance of expertise in regard to social media influencers from a female Millennials' viewpoint. Consequently, Millennials prioritise relatability and trustworthiness over expertise. Therefore, brands in the beauty industry consider an influencer who does not hold expertise such as a make-up artist, because female Millennial consumers want to view the product being used by someone similar to them, so they feel they too can achieve the same tanning or beauty look.

5.0.3 Findings for Objective 3: To assess the impact of product match-up and the attractiveness of a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.

- a) The participants emphasised that brands are expected to ensure the influencer they use fits the beauty product they are promoting. To achieve a positive fit in the eyes of Millennial consumers, the influencer should be perceived as a person who would use the product normally and whose area of interest is complementary to the product itself. Thus, using an appropriate influencer, who is deemed compatible with the product is essential for brands in the beauty industry.
- b) The recommendation around attractiveness shared by Millennial consumers was that although relatability was found to be held in higher regard to Millennial consumers than attractiveness, brands needed to ensure a level of attractiveness was present so as to achieve trust in the source and message by consumers in relation to cosmetics. Yet, as with other studies, the level of attractiveness should be relatable and attainable by female Millennial consumers so as they can visualise the use of the product by the social media influencer as something they too can achieve.

5.0.4 Findings for Objective 4: To assess the impact of photo editing by a social media influencer from the female Millennials' perspective.

- a) Another major suggestion by the Millennial consumers of this study was to avoid photo editing by the influencer. Their comments explained how this affects how trustworthy they view the influencer and the product. Generally, if a product or person needs to be edited, Millennial consumers do not trust what is being communicated. Therefore, brands in the beauty industry need to ensure the influencer whom they chose to work with avoids the use of filter or editing tools when promoting a product as consumers want to view the real benefits

of the product in the image or video shared on Instagram. The findings also showed this rejection towards false images comes with maturity and digital usage and is discussed further in section 5.1.

5.0.5 Findings for Objective 5: To assess the impact of sponsored content from the female Millennials' perspective.

- a) The final recommendation is that the use of #SP or #AD was noticed by this the Millennial cohort and they tend to ignore or reject the message being communicated. However, to avoid this rejection and scepticism, the Millennial consumers indicated brands should focus on organic unpaid posts by influencers or send the product out to social media influencers without any obligation to review. Therefore, Millennial consumers can see the social media influencer genuinely enjoyed the product and took their own time to present an honest review of the product. Yet, if a brand decided to collaborate with a social media influencer, the Millennial consumers emphasised a need for the influencer to have used the product previous to the promotion. So as to ensure Millennial consumers view the review and promotion of the product by the influencer as honest and trustworthy.

5.1 Recommendations for Future Academic Research:

- This the study could be replicated in other European countries, so as to explore the topic from European customer's perspective. Countries such as the U.K, Italy and France, have a thriving social media influencer community, yet their culture differs greatly from Ireland. Thus, bringing new insights for brands who work within these countries, so they understand consumers' views and which influencer marketing campaigns will work best in each country.
- The Millennial consumers in this study explained that their concern in relation to the impact of editing of images only really became apparent as they matured. Thus, highlighting a potential limitation to this study, in that its focus was the Millennial generation and therefore, did not

consider any other generational cohorts. This study could be replicated with the group after the Millennial generation, pre-Millennials. It is paramount brands consider other consumer generations in relation to social media influencers. This will give insight into whether there is a possibility that their digital usage is further ahead to that of Millennial consumers' and therefore, brands might need to avoid use of edited influencer posts beyond the Millennial generation.

- This study considered both entertainment-seeking Millennials and highly-connected Millennials. Emphasising a limitation to this study, in that neither one was explored fully. Consequently, a future study may consider focusing on one or another of the Millennial segments, to fully understand the importance of engagement in relation to one particular segment of female Millennial consumers.
- Furthermore, a future study could focus on the male Millennial generation, to explore whether similar Millennial practices are apparent within the male Millennial cohort, in relation to engagement and social media influencers. A study of male Millennials could also consider a different industry such as fashion or fitness, to understand the impact social media influencers have on male Millennial consumers.

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Appendix 1- Thematic Question Guide

Advertising:

1. Does traditional advertising attract you?
2. What about digital advertising?

Social Media:

3. Do you use social media daily?
4. What social media sites do you use?

E-Wom:

5. Where do you seek credible and trustworthy information about new or untested tanning or cosmetic products i.e. friends, family, influencers, celebrities?
6. Would you view a Social media influencers (SMI) review as credible or trustworthy as a friend's or family members review? Why?

Influencers:

7. Do you follow social media influencers, particularly those involved with the beauty industry?
8. What do you feel is your main drive to follow social media influencers?

Credibility:

9. Do you view SMIs as normal everyday people like you?
10. What are your thoughts on SMI's advertising or collaborating with brands? (Picture Probes)

Trustworthiness & Expertise:

11. Do you view SMIs as trustworthy?
12. In your opinion, what qualities or experience would an SMI need to have, to be viewed as an expert of cosmetics and tanning?

Brand-fit & Attractiveness:

13. Is it important that the SMI and the product they are promoting seem like a good match? (Probe Pictures)
14. Does it matter how attractive a SMI is? (Relatively attractive, Conventionally, extremely?) (Picture Probes)

Influence:

15. Have you recently bought a product based on a SMI advertisement/collaboration or review?
16. What about the SMI review, advertisement or product motivated you to make the purchase? Or not?

Product Placement:

17. Are you aware of the new ASAI rules in relation to #AD or #SP?
18. Do you notice the #AD or #SP on posts?

Hyperreality:

19. Do you edit your photos on Instagram, using photoshop, FaceTune or filters?
20. Can you tell the difference between edited and unedited photos on Instagram?

Appendix 2- Table of Participants

Age	Gender	Nationality	Interest in Beauty	Interest in Social Media Influencers
32	Female	Irish	Make-up only	Yes, around areas of healthy eating and beauty.
30	Female	Irish	Make-up & Tanning	Yes, yes around areas of healthy eating, fitness and beauty.
29	Female	Irish	Make-up & Tanning	Yes, around areas of vegetarianism and beauty.
29	Female	Irish	Make-up & Tanning	Yes, around areas of fitness, health and beauty.
26	Female	Irish	Make-up only	Yes, around alternative areas such as piercing and tattoos, and beauty.
23	Female	Irish	Make-up & Tanning	Yes, around beauty and fitness.
22	Female	Irish	Make-up & Tanning	Yes, beauty, fitness and health.