An Investigation into Whether the Social Media Efforts of Businesses in the Beauty Industry Influence the Purchase Intent of Irish Females

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Abstract

Background: The power of social media and the impact it has upon consumer decision making processes has been the topic of much debate in recent academic studies. This paper builds upon these learnings to examine how beauty businesses use social media to entice Irish women who follow their brand to buy their products and services.

Investigation: The investigation at hand examines Irish women's purchase intentions toward beauty businesses that they follow on social media and assesses their likes/dislikes on these platforms, what entices them to purchase, as well as establishing the role of social media in their overall purchase journey. The investigation aims to provide insights into the minds of consumers who buy beauty brands in order to provide these enterprises with an in-depth and actionable analysis of their Irish female audience.

Methods: This investigation used a cross-sectional survey to gather data, and undertook quantitative statistical analysis using the IBM SPSS software version 24.

Results: The paper discovered that Irish women have a stronger purchase intent toward beauty brands that they follow on social media, thus the social media efforts of businesses in the beauty industry do influence the purchase intent of Irish females. It discovered that this intent does not increase loyalty to a brand however, and also found that Irish women still prefer purchasing such brands in an offline environment rather than online.

Conclusion: Irish women intend to purchase brands that they follow and see content from on social media more than brands they do not follow on social media. If seeking increased sales then, beauty brands should strive to increase efforts that result in Irish women following their updates on social platforms, though they should be aware that this action does not in itself represent loyalty to their brand.

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Contents

Abbreviations

BC's – Brand Communities

WOM – Word of Mouth

eWOM – Electronic Word of Mouth

1. Introduction

In the past decade social media has taken over the world. Connecting billions of users across a multitude of platforms, the capabilities of online social networks have grown exponentially year on year, to the point where they are now considered a part of the daily lives of users in 2018. The increased strength and reliability of internet connectivity, the availability of mobile devices and improvements in technology have all combined to ensure that staying active online has never been easier.

The emergence of social networks has not just benefited consumers, however. Businesses now also use social media platforms as a quick, cost-effective way of reaching their target audiences. Indeed, even global governments are maximising upon social media's ability to reach their ideal viewers through "eParticipation" campaigns leading up to important elections, as was the topic of much debate during the Trump election campaign in 2016 (Johannessen *et al*., 2016, p. 213). In this way social media is used not only as a communication tool, but also as a medium by which sales can be increased, alongside the ability to expand coverage to new/potential clientele.

The following dissertation will attempt to examine whether the social media efforts of businesses impacts upon the purchase intent of their followers. The paper will research the segment of Irish females and will focus specifically on social media efforts by businesses within the beauty industry.

In investigating whether the social media efforts of beauty businesses has an impact upon the purchase intentions of Irish females, this thesis will attempt to shine a light upon several areas that have not been afforded a focus in academic studies thus far, including: the impact of social media upon Irish female's purchase decisions and the effect that beauty business' use of social media has on Irish females intention to purchase from them.

Research surrounding the demographic of Irish females and their purchase intent is limited, as are investigations into their social media usage in relation to these buying intentions. The topic is particularly worthy of study as it investigates a niche portion of Irish society that has not benefited from quantitative or statistical analysis previously in this context. It will fill knowledge gaps surrounding the attribution of social media marketing efforts toward sales, revenue targets and consumer purchases, and will investigate how these social media efforts by beauty brands are perceived by the Irish female user.

This is a significant area of study for two reasons. Firstly, women are traditionally the target market for beauty brands and thus their spending habits online – particularly those inspired or influenced by social media – should be investigated in order to provide businesses with more insights into their habits and preferences. This is particularly pertinent as, according to the retailer Superdrug, the average Irish woman will spend over €21k on makeup alone (and another €10k on skincare) in their lifetime (Stellar.ie, 2017). Additionally, the average Irish household had €911.55 of disposable income weekly in 2016 from which these items could be purchased, while in the same year some 94% of Irish internet users admitted to shopping online (Virgin Media Digital Insights Report, 2016). With consumers now connected to their online social profiles wherever and whenever they want to be, businesses must ensure they are mirroring these behaviours in order to have their brand in front of consumers who are looking to purchase. Irish women are connected to the internet on an average of 3.3 devices at any one time (Consumer Barometer, 2017) - thus every opportunity to increase awareness of a brand should be taken. Further, by choosing the beauty industry in which to examine the purchase intent of Irish females, the research will gain an in depth an honest analysis of an industry that is predominantly female orientated.

The second reason that this study is noteworthy is related to Irish society as it stands in 2018. The Irish culture is an ever-changing creature, with new ideals, beliefs and movements influencing the population frequently. The country is experiencing a shift from the religious focus of old to a more open, inclusive and liberal society (Sheehan *et al*., 2017). In relation to this, the buying habits of the public are changing along with the culture in which they live. Businesses must invest in up-to-date data about their target base of consumers if they intend to keep up with their new demands and changing trends. In particular, beauty ideals have shifted in recent years with the availability of body image altering mobile applications. Now, the content shared by both brands and celebrities on social media has a strong influence on the public's ideas of what "looks good" – be this in apparel, body shape, makeup styles or personality features. Cultural norms are now at the mercy of social media trends, and attitudes to products are regularly prejudiced by what is being said about them online. Perhaps in no other industry are these trends more prevalent than in the beauty and cosmetics industry, where image is everything.

These observations are reflected throughout existing studies on the topic. Research primarily completed in the USA has found many factors on social media influence users purchase intent. In one study undertaken in Miami surrounding the role of social media during the pre-purchasing stage, researchers found that functional, monetary and hedonic benefits associated with social media platforms impacted upon consumers purchase decisions (Song & Yoo, 2016,

p. 92). Separately, Rieke *et al*. (2016) found that Texan millennial females strongly linked their body image satisfaction to their purchase intentions (ibid., p. 220). Similarly, in Australia, Hume & Mills correlated a woman's self-esteem to their purchase intentions (Hume & Mills, 2013, p. 477).

However, the social media efforts by beauty businesses active on social media has not been examined in order to establish their impact on the purchase intent of the Irish female audiences who follow them on these platforms. These are the knowledge gaps that this paper will attempt to fill. The research will primarily impact the marketing strategies of beauty businesses on social media who target Irish females. However, it will also benefit beauty businesses active within the Irish market in general, as it outlines customer preferences for purchases (online vs. offline), what content they enjoy and what entices them to spend money.

1.1 Structure
This paper will be structured into 6 chapters:

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
4. Methodology
5. Analysis
6. Discussion
7. Conclusion

The Introduction chapter provides an overview and background on the research topic. It evidences why the research is worthy of study and outlines the plan for the piece.

In the Literature Review chapter, the researcher will provide an overview of research into social media and how businesses use this platform to market to their target audiences. In particular, literature surrounding the influence that businesses have over their followers will be examined through loyalty, word of mouth associations and brand communities. Key works on each topic will be outlined.

The Methodology chapter will define the research question and will outline what elements need to be investigated about the topic at hand. It will also examine the research design and rationale, alongside the reasons for using a quantitative approach. The chapter will also outline the data collection methods used. Finally, this chapter will also present the ethical considerations of the research.

The Analysis chapter will describe how the data obtained was analysed and will outline the results of the research. Notable themes and findings will be discussed. The Discussion chapter will review the research findings again but will outline whether or not the researcher has proven the original hypothesis. Areas for future investigation will also be highlighted.

The Conclusion chapter will outline the overall key findings, themes and implications resulting from the paper.

2. Literature Review

As an industry marketing has been constantly evolving over the last number of decades, with the most tangible differences arguably occurring since the increase in accessibility of the world wide web at the end of the twentieth century. Nowadays, many modern marketing departments consider online activities as being of equal importance to offline methodologies. Traditional marketing methods such as flier distribution, print advertisements and expensive broadcasting campaigns have been encroached by dynamic online strategies that reach a trackable, analysable audience across devices in a cost-effective way.

Thus, businesses today need to be active both on and offline in order to keep up with competition and to source consumers in their preferred virtual environments. One of the main online platforms for businesses to connect with consumers in 2018 is via social media. Social media has been defined as online services that provide people and enterprises with the ability to communicate in order to curate, engage with and share content and ideas (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017, p.17).

The study of social media as a platform to influence the behaviours of consumers in order to increase business sales has been the subject of several investigations throughout literature, and the value of these online spaces to companies has been studied by a variety of scholars. This chapter will examine these publications in order to provide an overall picture of the landscape under investigation within this dissertation, particularly the role of social media in the lives of users and the influence it has on their purchase intentions.

This chapter will firstly examine the beauty industry and the popularity of social media for both consumers and businesses. It will explore publications that describe how companies influence consumers through these platforms. The aim of this chapter is to outline the influence that social media has on consumers purchase intentions and seeks to define how businesses might leverage this influence to increase their sales with Irish females.

Whilst person-to-person communication is arguably the most popular way to communicate (Fulgoni and Lipsman, 2017, p. 146), social media bridges geographical, cultural and time barriers by providing platforms on which social relationships can be created on the internet. Examples of these platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. While each platform attempts to entice users via a unique selling point (Snapchat's images disappear after 10 seconds, for example), ultimately the majority of social media platforms are for-profit

business commodities that offer consumers the ability to connect with each other, and present businesses with the chance to connect directly with consumers.

2.1 Irish Females

According to the Central Statistics Office, 69% of Irish businesses were utilising social media platforms to connect with consumers in 2017, some 22% higher than the EU average for the same period (CSO, 2017). This higher than normal usage of online social platforms evidences the appetite that Irish enterprises have for connecting with consumers in virtual environments. With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to investigate whether the social media efforts of businesses in the beauty industry have an impact upon the purchase intentions of Irish females.

In deciding upon this demographic, the researcher observed that 99% of Irish businesses surveyed by the Marketing Institute of Ireland in 2017 considered social media to be important to their business strategy (MII.ie, 2017). As well as this, the researcher noted that the use of Influencer marketing by Irish beauty businesses has grown in recent years – thus extending their reach on social media. The beauty industry is primarily led by influencer marketing, according to research (SERMO Influencer Index, 2017). Thus, investigating the correlation between the social media efforts of these beauty businesses and the purchase intentions of the female buyers of their products and services will bridge knowledge gaps for them, and may help to shape their future strategies when targeting this segment of society.

2.2 Beauty Brands

The area in which this dissertation is focused is the beauty industry, sometimes otherwise known as the cosmetics sector. According to the report "The State of Beauty, 2018", there is not one singular form of beauty consumer - rather, they are a "complex and diverse mix of needs and wants, all of it led by emotions" (p. 25). This diversity label also applies to the products within the beauty category, which range from makeup and skincare, to haircare, perfumes and hygiene.

It is, therefore, a sector primarily focused on appearance and health (Ertekin, 2016) and is a billion-dollar industry today due to consumers desire to attract others (Jones, 2010, p. 350). In the context of social media, beauty industries have a strong influence over their following through loyalty, word of mouth and brand communities. This influence enables beauty brands online to persuade followers to commit to the brand and, ultimately, to purchase their products.

Given that social identity is said to inspire the formation of a "unique self" (Guo and Li, 2016), while other self presentation benefits like feelings of acceptance (Kim *et al.*, 2013) are said to result from social media participation, it is unsurprising then that within the beauty industry modern ideals of beauty and perceptions of attractiveness are now associated with online images, publications and business marketing ploys. This has impacted upon the beauty industry directly - not only in the products that they release but in the marketing efforts employed by these companies, particularly online. This dissertation will investigate this sector and seeks to discover what motivates Irish women to buy more products from it.

2.3 Social Media
2.3.1 Social Media Popularity
Before examining the influence that social media provides businesses with according to literature, it is important to outline how companies are afforded the ability to establish this influence and power over their followers online. This information will underpin the idea that the influence of businesses upon consumer purchase intentions would not be possible to achieve in offline environments due to the benefits that social media presents.

The common point of parity with the majority of publications on this topic evidence that companies have such influence over consumers on social media because of the sheer popularity of these platforms. Of the 4.2 billion active internet users globally this year, some 3.36 billion of these are active users of a social networking site (80%) (Statistica, 2018). Irish females are no exception to this trend; according to the CSO (2017), social networking was the third most popular activity for females in their use of the internet, with 76 % of Irish women using the web for this reason.

The increasing popularity of social platforms is therefore also increasing the power that brands on these networks can yield over their follower base. Theories pertaining to what exactly attracts so many users to consume social media content vary, though most focus on the benefits that these platforms provide users with. Some of the benefits for consumers include: the ability to engage with peers and connections across the globe whenever they want to (Wallace, Buil & de Chernatony, 2014), and the enjoyment of membership in virtual communities (Hassan & Casaló Ariño, 2016). Social media users can also portray their individuality and enhance their own self-concept, according to research (Guo & Li, 2016; Kim *et al.,* 2013; Hur *et al.,* 2011), whilst participants may enjoy the ability to behave and express themselves in ways they cannot when offline (Belk, 2013). These insights are relevant to this investigation because they highlight the many ways in which savvy businesses can manipulate and influence consumer behaviour in social media environments.

Per Cawsey & Rowley (2016), however, co-operation and collaboration are the key to success on social media – so businesses must not only be present on popular social platforms in order to exert their influence: they must engage with their followers too. Here, beauty businesses benefit by using social platforms as a way to reach their target audiences where they are already active, whilst consumers benefit from the content that businesses share, like promotions, demonstrations, and behind-the-scenes information that can establish trust, entice users to purchase, and can encourage user-generated content creation.

Social media platforms also benefit these organizations via the deep data that they provide; statistical and analytical information on consumers can be easily obtained from these platforms, helping to better inform companies about the user's experience, and what habits they have. This data would not be easy to manage in vast quantities in an offline capacity but is now used regularly to target products and services at consumers on social media whom companies believe would benefit from their offering and expertise. These data points increase the reach and influence that brands have over their followers on social media.

Several critics oppose these musings, however, with a growing body of work outlining the negative impact social media has for users. In these examinations, social media is said to be responsible for increased narcissism and loneliness (Lee and Sung, 2016), bullying and harassment (Canty *et al*., 2016) as well as exposing youths to privacy issues and 'sexting' risks (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Further, consumer use of social media has also been critiqued as a performance, played out merely because the user is aware that the audience is attentive (Hogan, 2010). As Yoon and Vargas (2014) attest, social media can allow the user to play the role of the superhero or super-villain depending on their motivations in virtual spaces (Yoon and Vargas, 2014).

Overall, these insights are relevant to this investigation because they highlight the many ways in which informed businesses can manipulate and influence consumer behaviour in social media environments. This knowledge also assists in establishing how companies in the beauty industry may entice users to purchase from their brand.

2.3.2 Social Media Influence

Having outlined the reasons why social media is such a popular medium for both businesses and consumers, it is necessary to examine the aforementioned influence that this popularity presents businesses with, according to published works on the issue. This examination relates to the aim of this chapter, which is to establish whether social media influences the purchase intent of Irish female users. Seminal studies pertaining to the influence that companies possess

on social media have been curated by Duffett (2017), Orzan *et al*. (2016) and Hudson *et al*. (2015) to name but a few.

Duffett's work (2017) is particularly noteworthy for this study as the it highlights the behavioural and attitudinal impact that social media has on its users and observes that female participants have a more positive response to social media brand advertisements than males (p. 31). While Duffett's work (ibid.) is limited by its focus on South African users only, its main strength is that it employs a quantitative survey to conclude that the end goal for brand's influence on consumers is "a predisposition to purchase" from them (p. 31).

The implications of this research are far reaching in terms of this dissertation. The 24-7 nature of social media provides businesses with the opportunity to communicate with (and influence) their followers whenever and wherever they are active. With so many capabilities across a variety of platforms, it can be difficult for brands to assert a singular goal from their social media efforts. Duffett (2017), however, attempts to bridge these knowledge gaps by asserting that purchase intent is their aim; this dissertation will attempt to validate this theory with a focus on the Irish female population.

The influence that social media affords businesses has also been attributed to several additional factors throughout literature on the topic. These include: customer loyalty (Orzan *et al*., 2016), word of mouth and eWOM (Hudson *et al*., 2015; Thoumrungroje, 2014), and the establishment of brand communities (Hung & Lin, 2015). These 3 topics underpin how businesses establish an influence over their followers on social media.

2.3.2.1 Loyalty
Solomon *et al*. (2013) state that brand loyalty is a type of repeat purchasing behaviour in which consumers with positive attitudes about the brand make a conscious decision to repeatedly purchase from them (p. 289). In the world of beauty brands, consumer loyalty can be the difference between the sale of a single product, or a buyer consistently purchasing a variety of items from a brand's range, increasing their value to the business. Beauty brands therefore value consumer loyalty and use their influence and sway over audiences to increase this process.

Orzan *et al*. (2016) asserted that loyalty to a business is heightened in virtual environments due to the increased involvement capabilities with the brand (p. 142). Consumers are dedicated to companies that they engage with online and are loyal to a brand when they trust it (Louis and Lombard, 2010; Hur *et al*, 2011). In order to maximise upon this process, Dahlgren (2011)

proposed the idea that brands should segment loyal users in order to better target each division with the relevant marketing content suited to their behaviours (p. 79). This segmentation can involve both behavioural (purchase) and attitudinal (commitment) elements (Nam *et al.*, 2011, 1015). These findings marry with the musings of Orzan *et al.* (2016) who attest that "social media marketing communication has the capacity to influence brand trust and brand affect, the two main determinants of brand loyalty" (p. 153).

Published works do not solely attribute brand loyalty and increased consumer purchase intent to the content created and shared by businesses, however. Using a quantitative survey methodology, Malär *et al.* (2011) (and earlier Aaker, 1997) provided the theory that brands need to match their personalities to those of their target audience in order to induce loyalty. The Malär *et al.* (2011) investigation is particularly interesting for this dissertation as it examined both versions of the consumer's selves: the ideal and the realistic, which has notable relevance within the world of beauty products where aspirational ideals are tactically employed to induce envy and desire. Yang (2016) also affirmed that implications of social media depend on the user's personality traits. A key idea put forth by Malär *et al.* (p.44) suggested that some online efforts by businesses fail to influence consumers because they are not appealing to the version of self associated with the brand in question. This concept was also asserted by Khaldi (2014), who suggested that psychological factors affecting consumers should be considered within social media strategy and claimed that the focus should not simply be on web technology.

The implications of these theories for this dissertation are helpful in determining how beauty brands on social media should utilise their influence over consumers. Per Orzan *et al.* (2016), beauty brands who both actively encourage interaction with their brands and curate a brand personality that appeals to their audiences can increase the loyalty of their following, resulting in a powerful influence over their followers which helps to establish a stronger purchase intent (Hur *et al.*, 2011).

Beauty brands should also be aware that loyal customers are not just important for the influence that can be exerted over them, however - loyalty acts as a barometer against competitors too (Maehle and Shneor, 2010, p.44). Brand advocates evidence this; they stay loyal to products despite unfavourable changes in the relationship merely because they are loyal and committed to a singular brand (for example, when an increase in price occurs). Here, brand followers enjoy a consciousness of kind and feel attached to both the brand, and to each other (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413). Beauty brands should strive to achieve this level of loyalty through their influence on social media.

2.3.2.2 WOM & eWOM

Word of mouth (WOM) was defined by Arndt (1967) as communication between individuals and is considered to have considerable influence over what people do in relation to brands (Buttle, 1998). For the online world, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) is also topical and is a form of communication taking place online. eWOM is particularly applicable to this dissertation; feedback from peers is influential in the beauty industry where product reviews and demonstrations about how to apply/use products are popular. Where possible, brands encourage user generated content in the form of eWOM to influence the followers of the brand online.

Thoumrungroje (2014) outlined the evolution of WOM, contrasting the peer-to-peer conversations of old to the modern methods which entail brand owners engaging in the "active co-production" of eWOM on virtual networks alongside brand followers (p. 9). Further, Hudson *et al*. (2015) presented the theory that brand relationship quality impacts upon the word of mouth associations of its followers (p. 74). In their quantitative survey assessment, the authors (ibid) established that brands using social media garner positive attachment associations with their followers, which in turn leads to positive word of mouth (p. 74).

These studies are significant for this dissertation, as Thoumrungroje affirms the Engel, Blackwell and Kegerreis (1969) theory that WOM tendencies motivate fellow brand lovers to purchase (p.9). Adding to this with recent evidence, Lee *et al*.'s quantitative assessment (2017) affirmed that WOM is "the most influential" element that encourages consumers to purchase (p. 227). The implications of eWOM for this dissertation are twofold; firstly, the knowledge that beauty brands can exert influence over their followers through the co-production of WOM assessments is impactful for marketers managing these platforms. Secondly, per the research listed, WOM (while not predictable) can be utilised as a marketing strategy to increase the purchase intention of consumers.

It should be noted however that whilst social media users are "ideal targets for participation in word of mouth marketing efforts" (Cao *et al*., 2009), brands cannot control the content of consumer's word of mouth affiliations with the brand. In this instance brands must carefully monitor eWOM to garner the feel of their market, and to assess opinions on new products or launches. Since word of mouth can also lead to negative connotations for a brand (Chiou *et al*., 2013), assessing WOM and eWOM regularly should become part of the social media strategy of all business models, including those in the beauty industry.

2.3.2.3 Brand Communities

Beauty brands establish themselves as being within brand communities (BC's) with their followers in order to exert their influence over them. Defined by Hung & Lin (2015) as "a structured set of social relationships" (p. 191), BC's represent an online gathering of brand enthusiasts that encourage the formation of relationships based around the common love of a brand (Kim *et al*., 2013).

The investigation by Hung & Lin (2015) around BC's has particularly noteworthy implications for this dissertation; the authors affirm that members of BC's are committed to seeing the brand succeed, and thus purchase from - and remain loyal to - the brand in question (p. 193). This was also affirmed by Hassan & Casaló Ariño (2016), who attested that BC's (particularly those on Facebook) are defensive of the brand and may ignore shortcomings due to their commitment to its offering. This in encouraging information for beauty brands looking to influence the purchase intent of their followers. Per this research, establishing a brand community would enable them to achieve these aims.

2.4 Purchase Intent

Given that this dissertation is investigating whether the social media efforts of beauty brands influence the purchase intent of Irish females, this section will examine what this purchase intent might look like. Per Cox *et al*. (1983), purchase intent is represented through the consumer decision making process. This is made up of 5 steps: recognition of need or problem, information search, comparing the alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation (ibid., p. 394).

Need Recognition & Problem Awareness

Information Search

Evaluation of Alternatives

Purchase

Post Purchase Evaluation

In order for beauty brands to fulfil the objective of this investigation they would need to nurture the consumer through these steps via communications sent through social media. This could involve influencing or maximising upon any of the following behaviours:
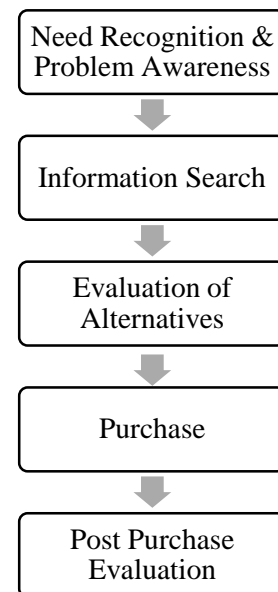
Figure 1. Consumer Decision Making Process (Cox *et al.*, 1983)

1 - Need Recognition and Problem Awareness

During this initial stage consumers acknowledge an external or internal desire for a product or service. Because this stage can involve hedonic motivations or impulsive decisions, companies wishing to maximise upon the potential purchase intent resulting from it need to identify trigger points that they can exploit via consumer research methods (Kotler & Keller,

2012, p.167). Anterior elements like the buyers mood can influence this stage (Solomon *et al*., 2013, p. 300) as can the consideration of products and services that are intangible and harder to mentally assess (Rizomyliotis *et al*., 2017). For beauty brands then, careful management of the messaging being distributed should be at the forefront of their social media strategies; if they want to overcome the unpredictable nature of these elements preceding purchase, they must present an online plan that caters to all situational factors (Solomon *et al*., 2013, p. 300).

2 - Information Search

This stage represents the consumer taking an action following the recognition of desire. This research period can involve personal, experiential, commercial or public information sources being examined in order to help the consumer in their buying decisions (Kotler & Keller, 2012, p.167). This stage therefore reduces the perceived risks associated with purchase. Per this dissertation, this stage is where the influence of beauty brand's social media efforts kicks in; if consumers head to social media to establish ideas or opinions on a brand prior to purchase, the information portrayed by the brand on their page will be under scrutiny.

By employing tactical strategies here, a brand can control the first impressions of their offering by presenting carefully constructed personas aimed at enticing users to buy based upon prior consumer research. In this way, beauty brands can already begin to influence the decisions of consumers well in advance of them placing a product in their basket. In particular, brands who can assess what consumers are searching for and who pre-emptively plan to outdo competitor offerings can benefit hugely from this stage in the purchase funnel (ibid., p. 167). In addition, beauty brands who attest to their ethical sourcing of product ingredients may also entice consumers who employ purchase decisions according to their personal values (Yilmaz *et al*., 2016).

3 - Evaluation of Alternatives

Having examined and researched the necessary information about the desired product or service, this stage involves the consumer weighing their options and deciding what offering best suits their requirements. This process varies in complexity and length depending on the purchase in question. In the Taiwanese medical industry Lee *et al*. (2017) employed a quantitative survey to affirm that information sharing, price, band involvement and word of mouth influences all affected customer evaluation processes. Other publications disagree with these sentiments, however, inferring that the influence of social media for the evaluation of alternatives is in flux and varies from industry to industry. In particular, Atwood and Morosan (2015) asserted via their online questionnaire investigation that consumer attitudes to purchasing hotel rooms online were not impacted by the brand messages, offers or reviews on

social media. They concluded that for this industry consumers were led by necessity and price (p. 309). In the case of beauty brands, then, competitor assessment efforts by the company can mediate this stage and increase buyer confidence in their decision and their commitment to the brand and may also deter users from pursuing competitor offerings (Dimitriades, 2006).

4 - Purchase

The most important stage of the process, the decision to purchase involves the consumer ceasing their evaluations and comparisons and committing to buy. Per Solomon *et al*, (2013), beauty brands should note that the environment of purchase still impacts upon the buyer-brand relationship, thus every touch point from stage 1 to 4 should be seamless, with the brand offering and messaging being consistent (p. 300). Kotler & Keller (2012) present the idea that there is another stage between this and step 3, affirming that unanticipated factors after the decision to buy has been made (such as a product being out of stock) or external attitudinal influences (such as the interactions with staff) can sway a buyer into committing to purchase, or abandoning their plans (p. 171). Aaker (1997) too alluded to the belief that brand attitudes can influence a customer via the presentation of a brand personality. Whilst these are risks associated with the consumer behaviour model that are unpredictable, brands can take steps in advance of this to minimise the impact of such occurrences; Clinebell & Taylor (2016) suggest that all staff within service environments should get training to deal with consumers in a uniform manner, for example.

5 - Post Purchase Evaluation

This stage involves reflection upon the decisions made, and the evaluation of brand and product/service satisfaction. For beauty brands, this stage is the point where a consumer decides to remain loyal to the brand and repurchase from them, or to look elsewhere. While not solely influenced by brand messaging, social media does play a big part here in welcoming buyers into the online community of fellow brand users. By encouraging engagement and distributing targeted communications that keep buyers actively aware and interested in the offering, beauty brands can cultivate their relationships with consumers in order to entice them to purchase again, or to leave feedback encouraging others to do so.

As demonstrated through this process, the consumers relationship with the brand begins well in advance of the actual purchase; therefore it is imperative that brands maximise upon all communications with consumers in order to nurture them through the buying process.

Whilst Cox *et al.*'s process (1983) provides a clear foundation for the representation of consumer decision making, there are several criticisms of this body of work throughout peer reviewed literature. The first and most important of these limitations pertaining to the

investigation at hand is the age of the approach; these theories were presented long before the advent of the internet and thus may not accurately represent online buying behaviours. A significant study of note pertaining to web-based purchases is Xiao & Benbasat (2018) who affirm that the capabilities of online platforms - primarily the ability to leave product recommendations - significantly increases consumer purchase intentions (p. 52). The implication of this study is that beauty brands adhering to a purchase decision process should use their initiative to adapt it to online business needs. Risks associated with online purchase behaviour - including privacy concerns and the lack of person-to-person interaction - should also be of consideration, but were not factored into the original process (Doolin, 2005).

In addition, argue Erasmus *et al*. (2001), the Cox *et al*. process implies that consumer behaviour follows a sequential pattern to conclude in a predefined outcome, which is not a realistic scenario applicable to all purchase decisions (p. 83). Kacen & Lee (2002) echo these sentiments, outlining that impulsive purchase behaviours result in some (or all) steps prior to purchase being skipped. Therefore considerations that consumers behaviour may not follow a rational approach should always be factored into brand marketing strategies in light of this.

2.5 Conclusion
This chapter has outlined just some of the many publications relating to the topic at hand. From these papers it is clear that the aim of this investigation is relevant and timely within the context of Irish society in 2018, primarily to bridge social media marketing knowledge gaps, but also to provide a voice for the under-examined market of Irish females who possess much sway over the beauty industry trends sweeping the country. On a broader scale, this study also has merit outside of Ireland and can contribute to the discussion of purchase intentions and consumer behaviour resulting from businesses social media efforts too. The research objectives can be adapted to be replicated at any local level and would be of interest to marketers within the social media sphere, particularly those involved in the beauty industry. As the evidence portrayed in this chapter suggests, social media strategies are constantly in flux, and thus continual self evaluation by businesses needs to occur in order to stay relevant to their target audiences. The results of this investigation may provide direction for some who are looking to do this.

3. Methodology

This chapter will outline the research methodology used for the study. It will provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks surrounding the research and will outline the objectives of the investigation. Details surrounding the design of the research and the use of a quantitative framework will also be provided, whilst alternative methods will be explored. The chapter will then describe the target audience for the study, and will detail how the data was collected, analysed and recorded. Lastly, this chapter will highlight the ethical considerations of the paper.

3.1 Research Aims & Objectives
3.1.1 Research Question
The research question for this study is:

Investigating whether the social media efforts of businesses in the beauty industry influence the purchase intent of Irish females.

3.1.2 Research Objectives
According to Adams *et al*. (2014) research is an "inquiry or investigation" with the aim of unearthing new information or insights about a topic (p. 1). With this in mind, the primary objective of this research is to establish an answer to the following hypothesis: "Do the social media efforts of businesses in the beauty industry increase the purchase intent of Irish females?"

Four sub-objectives underpin this hypothesis:

Sub objective One aims to ascertain whether Irish females feel more loyalty and a stronger purchase intent toward beauty brands that they follow on social media.

Sub objective Two wishes to assess the types of social media content that increases the purchase intentions of Irish females.

Sub objective Three intends to analyse what factors impact Irish female's purchase intentions on social media platforms.

Sub objective Four will attempt to establish the position of social media in the purchase journey of Irish females.

These sub-objectives will help to provide a wider view on the topic and may present data that can be of significance within the realm of social media marketing and – on a wider scale – potentially psychological and philosophical research for the beauty industry too.

3.1.3 Research Aims

Kothari (2004) classifies the aims of research as finding a truth that is hidden or is yet to be discovered (p. 2). The aims of this research piece marry with Kothari's ideals; the researcher intends to unearth data pertaining to the purchase intent of Irish females as a result of social media participation, and seeks to discover how the social media efforts of businesses in the beauty industry are impacting upon the buying habits of these Irish women. A further aim is to provide data for use within the realm of social media marketing for businesses targeting Irish female audiences as a result of this research.

3.2 Research Philosophy
3.2.1 Research Construct

Smith and Shaw (2018) define four constructs of research: ontology (reality), epistemology (knowledge), axiology (values) and methodology (action) (p.2). As this paper is attempting to garner new insights into the purchase intent of Irish females, the goals of the investigation are knowledge-based and thus an epistemological construct was adopted for this piece.

Quantitative vs Qualitative vs Mixed Method

According to Neuman (2006), measurement of epistemological knowledge is required in order to effectively evaluate and interpret data, to test hypotheses and to "see what is otherwise invisible" (pp. 203-204). The studies by which we calculate these measurements are either quantitative or qualitative in approach, or employ a mixed method combining both concepts. Quantitative research involves assessing data and variables in order to establish a conclusion usually with statistical or numerical findings (Apuke, 2017, p. 41). Contrastingly, qualitative studies involve measuring ideas and opinions about a particular topic through questions and interviews. According to Creswell (2008), a mixed method approach involves mixing "philosophical assumptions" from both quantitative and qualitative methods (p.4).

For the purposes of this research, the author has chosen a quantitative approach. Per Neuman (2006), quantitative research has the goal of accurately representing a data set via a numeric expression (p.203). Therefore a quantitative methodology suits this type of paper as it allows the researcher to investigate large volumes of information about Irish females and their social media usage in a short time frame, and provides an opportunity to discover statistical inferences pertaining to this data.

In considering a qualitative approach, the conversational methodology of this design would result in a small sample with thematic findings. While the data obtained via qualitative research would be rich and insightful, it would not allow for the measurability and replicability that quantitative analysis affords the study. While the triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed methods approach would provide a deeper understanding on the

issue than each method could alone, the complex scale of a mixed method approach to Irish females on social media would go beyond the scope and time limitations of this investigation.

3.2.2 Philosophical Frameworks

The positioning and perspective of research is underpinned by a philosophical framework according to Quinlan (2011). Per this literature, there are 3 epistemological frameworks from which a research methodology can be selected: positivism, constructionism and interpretivism. Described as a "cult of quantification" by Couclelis & Golledge (1983, p. 332), positivism relates to data about one reality (Quinlan, 2011). Constructionism is made up of many different realities, namely those that are socially constructed, while interpretivism assumes that reality is subjective based upon experiences and interactions with others (Quinlan, 2011).

In order to fulfil the objectives of this paper, a positivism framework was adopted by the author. As Major (2017) states, the positivist approach is reliable for quantitative studies as data can be interpreted via variables that explore statistical relationships, but it does not seek to find an explanation about these discoveries (pp. 173-175). This approach works well for the proposed study, as it seeks to establish whether social media influences Irish female's purchase intentions for the beauty industry - but does not attempt to investigate why. Here, quantitative data will allow the researcher to establish the overall state of the landscape being studied, from which a qualitative investigation could be undertaken in future studies.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Research Approach

Per Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2009) "Research Onion", there are two research approaches by which a topic can be studied: via deductive reasoning or inductive reasoning. In order to fulfil the objectives of this paper, the author used a deductive reasoning approach to investigate the influence of social media on the purchase intent of Irish females. By using a deductive approach, relationships between the variables (social media, Irish females, beauty brands, purchase intent) could be examined using pre-existing theories and insights. Indeed, as Crowther and Lancaster (2008) attest, deductive reasoning is mostly used in correlation with a positivism framework (p.22) which suits the design of this dissertation. Further, because an inductive style targets "individual meaning" of a situation (Creswell (2008), it would not work in the context of this paper as causation is not being investigated.

3.3.2 Research Purpose

According to Neuman (2006), there are 3 main reasons why research is conducted: for exploratory, explanatory or descriptive purposes (p. 36). For the purpose of this investigation a descriptive research purpose was adopted. Aiming to "paint a picture" of the situation at hand (ibid., p.36), descriptive research will allow the researcher to establish what a problem

looks like and how it occurs (Ivey, 2016). In adopting this descriptive purpose, the researcher chose to complete a survey; a case study approach would not satisfy all of the outlined objectives, whilst an observational methodology would be difficult to complete as the presence of the researcher might influence the participant to behave differently than they normally would on social media. Descriptive research via survey also allows for the distribution and gathering of research data to take place on social media.

3.3.3 Research Instrument

In order to satisfy the requirements of this thesis, a cross-sectional survey was distributed to respondents. Lancaster (2005) describes a survey research instrument as "collecting data through questioning" (p.146). Using this method relevant information pertaining to participants usage of social media to follow beauty brands (and their purchase intentions on these platforms) could be gathered. On the basis of the findings, these individuals would be classed as having their beauty industry purchase intentions influenced by social media, or not having them influenced by it at all.

The main advantage of conducting research via this survey method is that different variables can be used, for example, having varied social networking sites referenced in the survey. Further, surveys are reliable, easily replicated and provide respondents with the option to fill out their answers at a day/time of their choosing. One risk of this research instrument was that surveys may not be filled in accurately or may be incomplete. For the purposes of this study responses such as these will not be valid. Further, where a limited amount of responses are presented by the researcher the participant may feel forced to choose one even if it does not match with their intended answer. To avoid this the researcher included a number of instances where a "none of the above" answer was selectable.

The survey for this investigation was created via Google Forms. For the purpose of this research the survey was dispensed via social media channels in order to reach a vast quantity of respondents in a cost effective and time efficient way. Some of the questions pertaining to social media and purchase intent used a Likert scale of measurement. Per Malhotra and Birks (2007) the Likert scale has numerous advantages, including its easy-to-read and easy-to-distribute nature (p.349).

Other quantitative instruments considered by the researcher would not enable an accurate investigation into the proposed problem. For example, becoming a complete participant or observer would be virtually impossible for this topic as social networking behaviour is based upon individual profiles that require access permissions to observe - a harder task since the implementation of the GDPR. Plus, as mentioned earlier, participants might feel forced into behaving a certain way online in an observational process. Adding to this, a control group for

experimental design would be difficult to maintain as respondents may not feel they could answer honestly about their personal habits on social media in a group setting.

3.4 Sampling

Sampling enables researchers to determine parameters or characteristics about a given population (Adams *et al*., 2014 p. 73). As this thesis attempts to investigate how social media efforts by beauty businesses impact upon the purchase intentions of Irish females, the target population was Irish women who use social media, specifically those who follow beauty brands on these platforms. Survey respondents were sourced from the social media channels Facebook and LinkedIn.

For the purposes of this investigation a non-probability method was adopted; because the survey required specifically Irish women who use social media and follow beauty brands to participate, the researcher used judgemental sampling techniques to discern individuals they deemed appropriate to partake in the study (Malhotra and Birks, 2007, p.412). Prior to distributing the survey publicly, a draft version was sent to 4 individuals who teach at third-level institutions to garner their feedback and to test that the survey worked accurately. Their responses were not included in the final survey. Following this analysis, several additional questions were added and the skip logic was amended so that the survey ran more efficiently.

The criteria for completing the survey specified that females of Irish nationality who use social media and follow beauty brands on one or more of these platforms could partake in this study. The survey was sent via social media and thus the reach of the posts were perhaps infinite through engagement and sharing capabilities on each platform. However, with the direct connections available to the researcher totalling some 500 individuals across Facebook and LinkedIn, the researcher was hoping for a 1 in 5 response rate. Owing to the time of year that the survey was distributed (Summer time, with many on holidays), the researcher felt that this 1 in 5 figure was appropriate to aim for, particularly due to the length of the survey and the amount of sections it contained. The survey garnered 116 responses, slightly over the desired 1 in 5 ratio.

As will be discussed further in Chapter 4, the average age of applicable respondents was 27, and ranged from 18 (youngest) to 55 (oldest), evidencing the variant in motivational factors for social media participation, as well as the appeal that different beauty brands would have for these varying age demographics.

3.5 Data Analysis

Because the survey was conducted via Google Forms, the responses were automatically computed into a Google Sheets spreadsheet, and this is updated each time a new response was received. However, to be overly cautious the researcher also downloaded each individual

response manually and added it to a spreadsheet containing all variables. This spreadsheet was then uploaded to IBM SPSS software (version 24) for analysis, per Chapter 4. Because these responses were downloaded directly from their source, the researcher had no influence, impact or interference in any way with these answer sets; they represent the true responses submitted to the survey. This approach to data analysis evidences the benefits of a quantitative approach: vast amounts of data obtained were easily handled and maintained without difficulty.

3.6 Validity

Malhotra and Birks (2007) attest that validity in research occurs in two forms: internal and external (p. 307). With regard to internal validity, the research instrument for this investigation was created using pre-validated questions from previous research or utilising a number of pre-validated questions as the basis on which to create more appropriate questions. While the survey conducted was limited in scope and respondent numbers, it does have external validity in that Irish females (who lack focus in peer-reviewed literature) were the prime targets for this study. Whilst an investigation on a larger scale might yield variations in the data, at the present point in 2018 the external validity of the methodology is appropriate.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2008) states that ethical considerations are essential as "researchers need to protect their research participants" (p. 87). Because the research for this paper took place via a survey distributed online, Malhotra and Birks (2007) state that these are hard to regulate and can damage the research industry if conducted inappropriately (p. 296). In order to combat these concerns the majority of the survey questions asked were pre-validated and the survey was completely anonymous, meaning respondents could answer honestly. Participants were informed in advance that the data would be used for a dissertation, and that the questions asked were designed to be exploratory, with no physically identifiable information obtained.

Respondents were not required to participant in or to complete the survey - their actions were entirely voluntary. Once the answers were gathered they were handled in a careful manner and were not available to anyone but the researcher, who had enabled 2-factor authentication to log in to Google Forms to gain access to the replies.

4. Analysis

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The survey data was obtained between June 22, 2018 and July 6, 2018 inclusive (14 days) and was accessible at any time during these dates via the link distributed on LinkedIn and Facebook. Respondents were not rewarded monetarily or otherwise for their participation in this survey. There was a total of 116 responses collected during this timeframe. Of the 116 respondents, 21 were male or non-Irish, thus reducing the valid responses to 95 participants. The median age of the 95 respondents was 27. As the survey was distributed online respondents from any socioeconomic background could participate regardless of their setting (urban or rural). Per figure 2 below, the earnings of the respondents varied. The diverse income bands of these respondents evidence the variety of beauty brands that would appeal to these women and thus would enhance the data obtained.
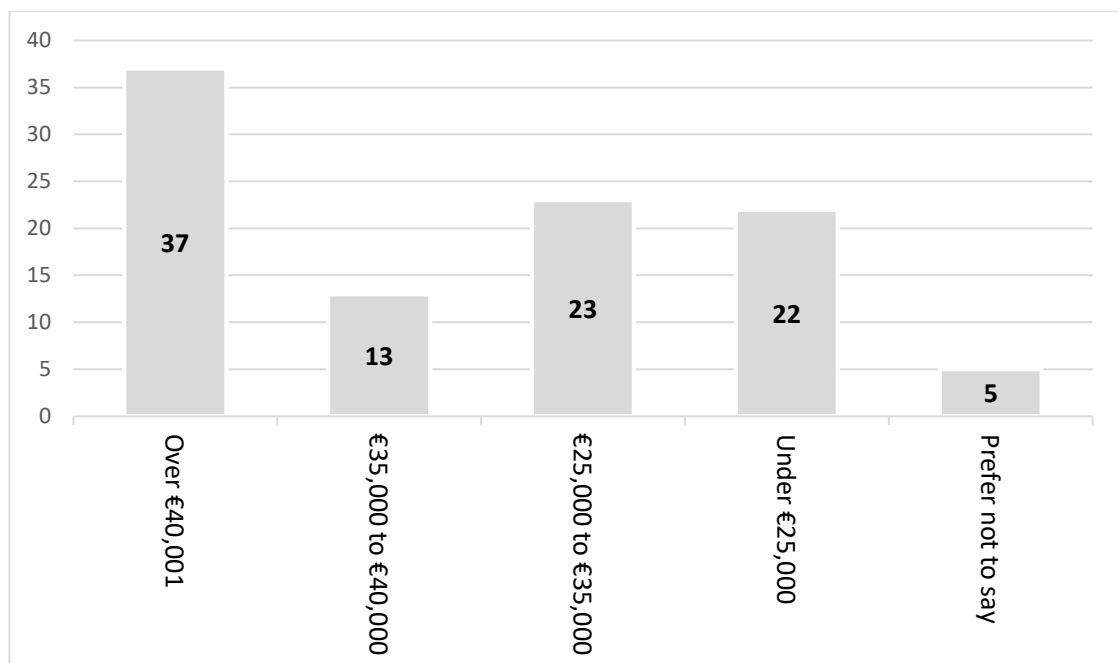

Figure 2. Earnings bands of survey respondents

89 of the respondents indicated that they used social media to follow beauty brands and thus were able to proceed with the survey. The most popular social media sites used for this purpose were Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, according to the data, with Tumblr proving the least popular for this pastime.

4.2 Loyalty & Purchase Intent

The first sub objective of the study wanted to ascertain whether Irish females feel more loyalty and a stronger purchase intent toward beauty brands that they follow on social media. This would act as the basis for the following sub-objectives and shapes the overall premise of the

dissertation. To examine these elements four questions were put to the participants: two focusing on loyalty and two on purchase intent.

Firstly, women were asked to choose an answer most relevant to them regarding brand loyalty. These queries aimed to test the theories of Orzan *et al*. (2016) as outlined in the previous chapter, where loyalty was said to increase in virtual environments due to consumers ability to engage with and interact with the brand. 55 women partook in this question; 25 women said that they were more loyal to brands they follow on social media, 1 was more loyal to brands they do not follow on social, and 29 stated that they are equally as loyal to brands that they follow both on and off social media. Therefore, the hypothesis that women would be more loyal to brands that they follow on social media was not supported in this study. Using the Chi Square Goodness of Fit test to analyse this data, there was a statistically significant difference between frequencies: $\chi^2(2) = [25.01]$, p < .05 for those choosing option 3 – loyalty to brands both on and off social media. Here, the data evidenced that Irish women's social media behaviours do not impact upon their loyalty to beauty brands; they are loyal to them in both realistic and virtual environments.

Another loyalty question was put to the same 55 women, this time attempting to assert the theories of Maehle & Shneor (2010) who put forth the idea that loyalty can be used as a way to measure success against competitors. Here, respondents were asked whether they had ever switched the beauty brands that they use because of content or campaigns that saw on social media; 34 said "Yes", and 21 said "No", represented through the Chi Square calculation $\chi^2(1) = [30.56]$, p < .05. This statistically substantial difference is important to note for marketers of beauty brands. While the previous question evidences that the virtual environment of social media does not in itself increase loyalty, it is clear from the findings of this second loyalty question that the content encountered by respondents on social media did have sway in their decision to remain loyal to one brand, or to switch to an alternative. As a result, social media strategies and advertising methods should be adapted accordingly to reflect the risk that competitor campaigns may have on a beauty brands follower base. Employing tactical solutions here, such as reward schemes or member exclusives, may prevent a significant churn of followers from one brand to a competitor as a result of content encountered on social media.

For the purchase intention element of this sub-objective, 48 out of 55 women indicated that they have a stronger purchase intent toward beauty brands that they follow on social media. This statistically noteworthy finding was again represented through the Chi Square calculation $\chi^2(1) = [30.56]$, p < .05. Thus, the hypothesis for this part of the sub-objective was supported and indicated that Irish women have stronger commitment to buy from brands that they follow on social media platforms. It is therefore of huge importance that beauty brands targeting the

Irish female market consistently aim to not only retain the clientele they already have, but too invest in campaigns and content that expand their reach and entice new members into their community. In this way, these women are then positioned to commit to the brand in a stronger way than they would if the relationship remained purely offline, as the evidence above suggests.

Respondents were also asked when following two or more competing brands on social media, what would influence them to purchase one over the other. This question aimed to delve deeper into the idea put forth by Dimitriades (2006) that loyalty to a brand can deter consumers from engaging with and purchasing competitor offerings. Per Figure 3 below, this question established that ratings and users reviews - which encourage followers to engage with the brand – are the biggest influencer in persuading Irish women to choose one brand over another. Persuasive marketing tactics like special offers are also important for swaying conflicted users, though word of mouth and opinions of friends yields a significantly stronger influence than value, with the price having almost 3 times less responses than friend preference. This data may encourage social media marketers to amend the copy and text of their social ads to exclude prices, and instead add in testimonials from fellow users.
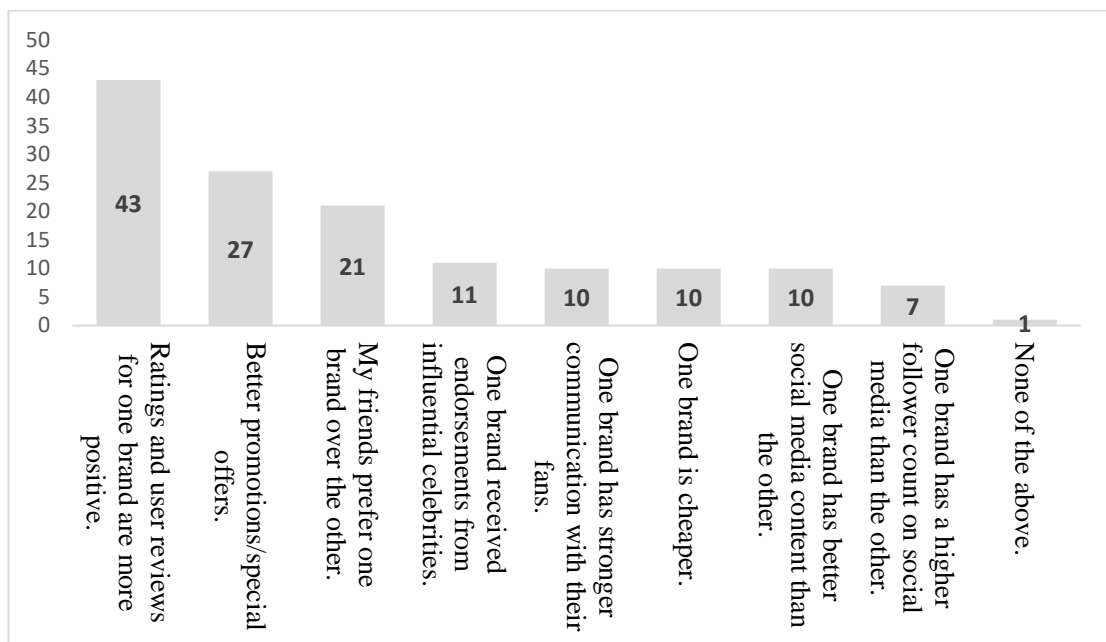

Figure 3. Content influencing competitor purchases

In combining each element of this sub-objective, it has been evidenced that while women have a stronger purchase intent towards the brands that they follow on social media, they do not have a stronger sense of loyalty to these brands purely due to their presence on these platforms, though this presence does assist in swaying them toward new offerings via content in the feed

and campaigns against competitors. The significance of these findings for beauty brands will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

4.3 Influential Social Media Content

Sub objective two wanted to assess the types of social media content that increases the purchase intentions of Irish females. This follows on from the criteria assessed in sub-objective one above and delves deeper into the engagement opportunities that businesses may maximise upon in order to entice viewers to purchase. For this sub-objective, respondents were asked what type of content on social media is likely to influence them to purchase from a beauty brand. As mentioned in chapter 4, should beauty brands wish to segment their content into different user groups per the suggestions of Dahlgren (2011), this question would help to narrow their focus. This query was answered by a total of 55 women. Per Figure 4 below, beauty product reviews were the highest influencer on purchase decisions, followed closely by photos of the offering and looks created using the beauty products. At the other end of the scale podcasts were unpopular and lacked much influence over the purchase intent of the females that encountered them on social media.

In analysing the findings of this survey question, it is clear that content which includes the user or encourages them to engage with the brand are popular; reviewing it, providing tips about using it, writing blogs about it, entering competitions for it and generating content as a user of it are all rated above brand-generated information like case studies, events and interviews. This reiterates the musings of Kim *et al*., (2013) who suggested that users form a relationship with the brand directly.
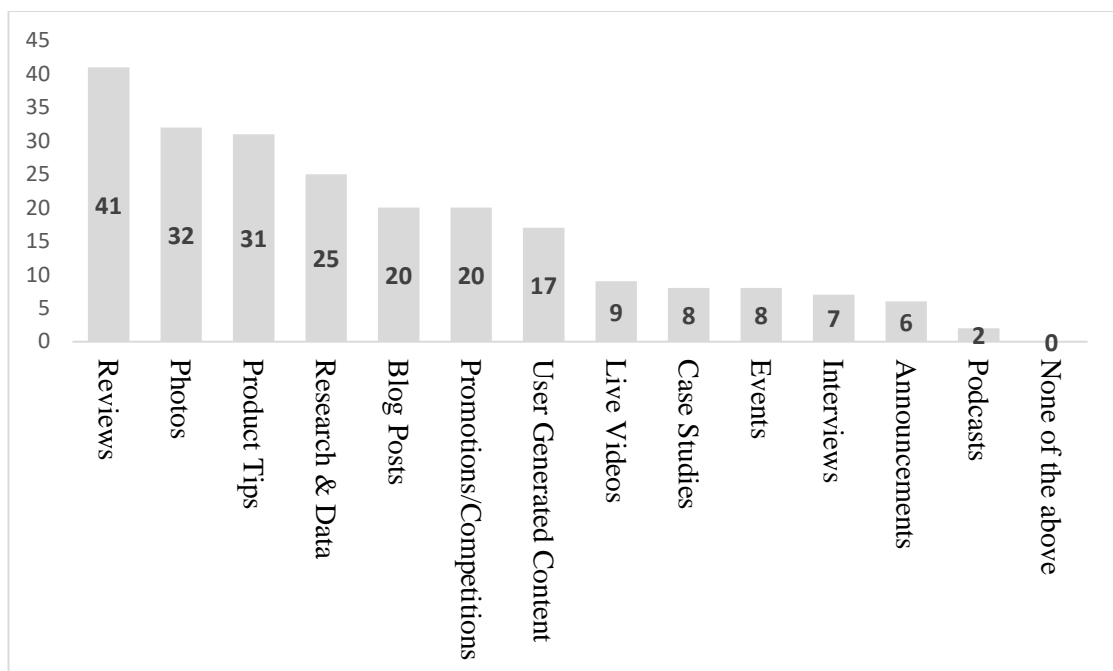

Figure 4: Influential Social Media Content

However, though reviews are the most influential in creating purchase intent, according to the data only positive word of mouth (WOM) elicits this reaction – but negative WOM decreases consumers purchase intentions. Using a 5-point Likert scale of measurement where n=55, 76.4% of respondents indicated that they are unlikely to purchase from a beauty brand with negative ratings on social media. To evaluate if these survey findings showed a difference against the wider population., a single sample T test was conducted in SPSS version 24 to discover if there was a variation between the likelihood that the surveyed women would purchase from a beauty brand with negative reviews on social media compared to the general population ($p < 0.5$). Here, it was discovered that $t(54) = 3.61$, $p = 0.001$, thus allowing us to reject the null hypothesis, proving that there is a significant difference in the amount of women who would shun a brand with negative reviews online. This emphasizes the points raised in the literature outlined earlier, where word of mouth associations were said to have a major impact on purchase intent.

Respondents were also asked what social media content they value the most. A Chi Square calculation of $\chi^2(3) = [9.36]$, $p < .05$ suggested that Irish women value content created by fellow users the most, compared to other options like content created by the brand, by influencers in the sector or by professionals in the sector (trainers, MUA's, therapists etc.). This data together with the findings of the previous sub-objective indicate that Irish women are likely to purchase from brands that they follow on social media who share user focused content and concentrate their campaigns around the users experience and involve them directly in the brand and its online story.

4.4 Factors Impacting Purchase

Sub-objective 3 intended to analyse what factors impact Irish female's purchase intentions on social media platforms. This sub-objective marries with the findings of sub-objective two above to ensure that beauty brands have a clear insight into the what users enjoy about their social media experiences with beauty brands, and how their experiences on these platforms influence their decision to purchase. This information can be of use to both social media marketers of these brands, but also their other respective consumer-facing teams too. For this sub-objective several questions were put to the survey respondents to gather a clearer understanding of their perceptions about the social media activities of the beauty brands that they follow, and the appeal of beauty brands to their different versions of self.

4.4.1 Perceptions

The first finding from these questions established respondent perceptions around beauty brands active on social media. 50 out of 69 women surveyed stated that they perceive brands who are active on social media differently compared to those who are not on it, yielding a Chi Square value of $\chi^2(1) = [13.93]$, $p < .05$. These respondents indicated that their reasonings for

these perceptions were varied. Per the results in Figure 5 below, social media usage by beauty brands assists in establishing a greater understanding of both the brand and the products/services they offer. This was underlined by another question in which 50 of the 55 respondents indicated that social media helps them to recall product lists. Per Figure 5, social media also keeps the business at the top of consumers' minds when considering their next beauty purchase. These are important results for the social media marketing strategies of beauty businesses, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
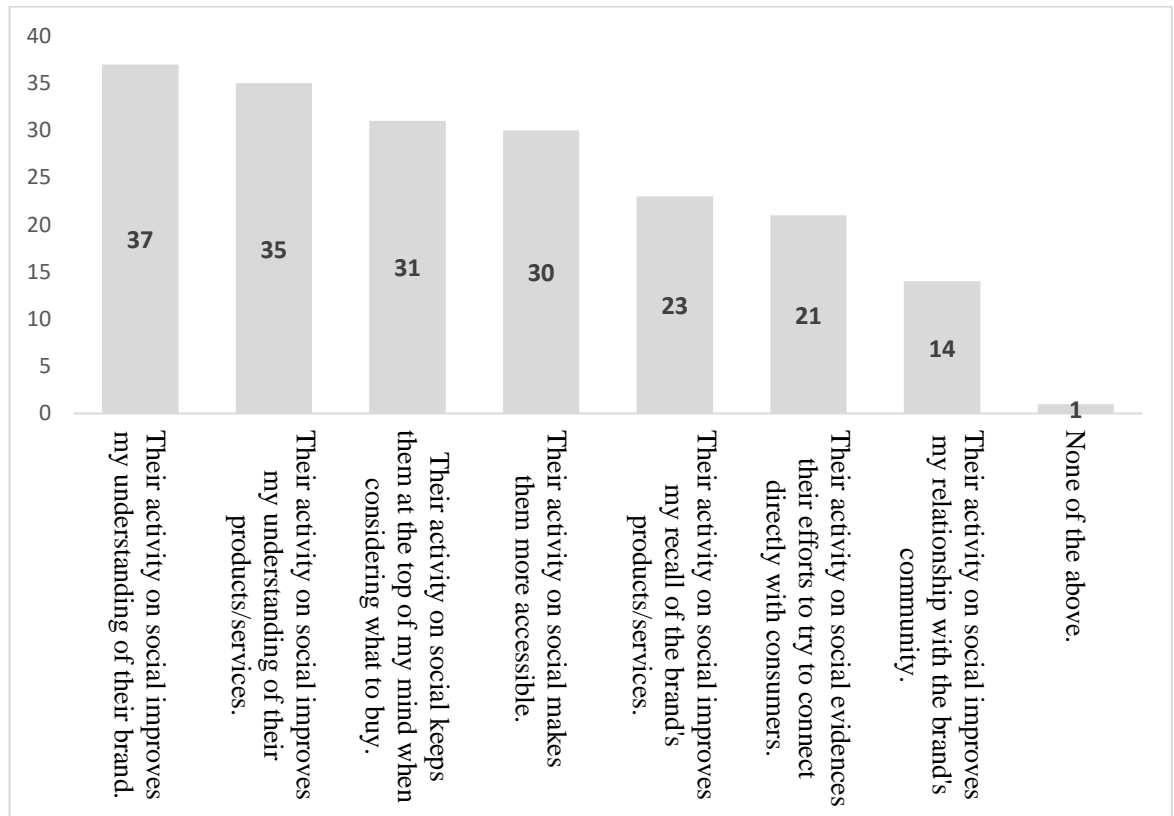

Figure 5. Perception of beauty brands on social media

4.4.2 The Self

With regard to Influencer marketing and Malär *et al*.'s (2011) assertions about the impact of the ideal self upon purchase decisions, the researcher wanted to establish whether Irish women follow beauty brands on social media because they appeal to their realistic lifestyle, or because they appeal to the lifestyle they aspire to have. 55 responses were recorded here. Per Figure 6 below, there is a statistically significant difference between the theoretical value and those discovered via this survey, with the Chi Square calculation being: $\chi^2(2) = [2.44]$, $p < .05$**.** In relation to the appeal of social media, 45 out of 55 respondents indicated that the content that they see posted on social media by beauty brands altered their perceptions of beauty standards. Also, just 6 out of 55 women indicated that social media content made them feel good about

themselves, echoing the assertions of Lee and Sung (2016) that social media heightens user's feelings of isolation.
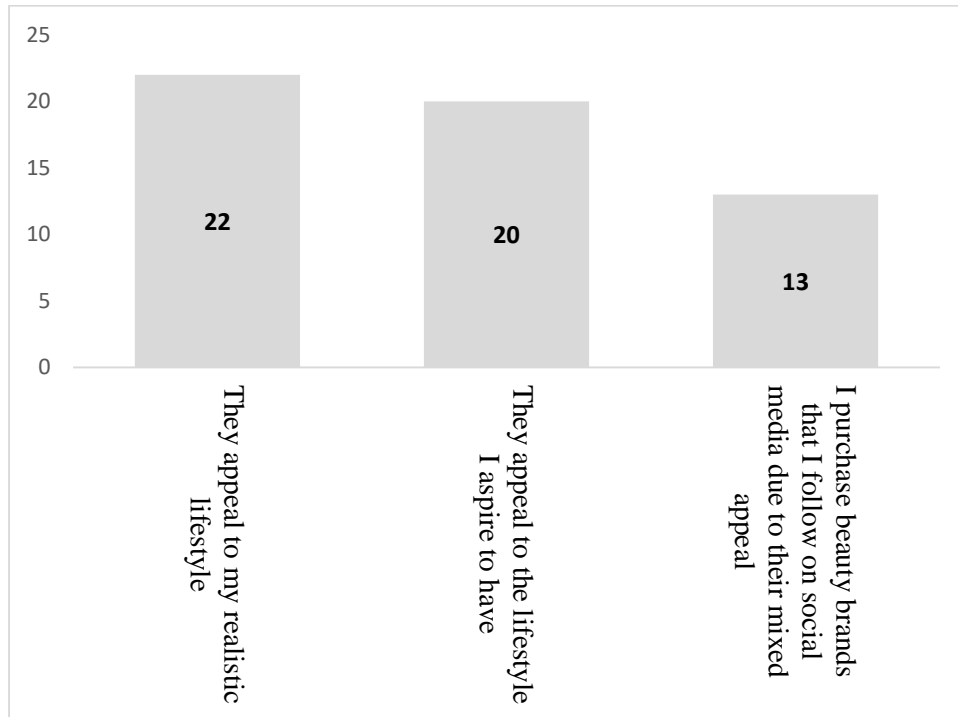

Figure 6. Self appeal of beauty brands

4.5 Social Media in the Purchase Journey

Sub objective 4 aimed to establish the position of social media in the purchase journey of Irish females. Here, respondents were asked to select the purchase behaviour that was most similar to theirs. The results showed that, of 55 respondents, the majority (33 women) said that they see products on a beauty brand's social media and this prompts them to do further research online prior to purchase. Meanwhile just 4 women indicated that they see products on a beauty brand's social media and purchase the product online straight away, while 18 stated that they see products on a beauty brand's social media and make a note to purchase it next time they are in a store. The Chi Square calculation here was $\chi^2(2) = [22.95]$, p < .05 highlighting the significant statistical difference between the expected value and the outcome of the survey results. The data obtained evidences Irish women's preference for purchasing in offline environments, and points to their usage of social media as a research tool within their purchase journey. This impactful finding suggests that there are barriers preventing Irish women from purchasing straight away online, with the majority instead committing to wait to purchase. The reasons for these decisions are beyond the scope of this dissertation, however.

The above question prompted the following, which asked respondents what their preferred method of purchase is when buying beauty products; of the 55 responses recorded 18 stated they prefer buying online, while 37 chose offline methods of purchase. Again, this is an

important finding for social media marketers; if Irish women are going in-store to buy even though the product is available online, two areas must be brought in to focus. Firstly, the beauty brand cannot ignore the impact that the service and store environment will have on the customers intent to purchase – it must match the look/feel of the offering online to seamlessly guide the consumer to buy. Secondly, social media marketers may wish to tackle this trend by employing tactics that encourage online buying, such as providing online sales or discount codes only available to use on the website, or even offering cheap delivery. This may help to increase online sales and deter consumers from heading in-store, before which they may encounter competitor offerings, or may lose the impulse to purchase. This sub-objective therefore established that, for Irish women, social media sits at the Information Search and Evaluation of Alternatives phases of the purchase making journey (Cox *et al.,* 1983).

5. Discussion

In revisiting the earlier aims and objectives of the paper, they can now be analysed to discover whether they were successfully supported through the research undertaken for this dissertation. The main aim of the paper was to establish an answer to the question: "Do the social media efforts of businesses in the beauty industry increase the purchase intent of Irish females?", and it was supported through four sub-objectives to enhance the overall understanding of the subject at hand.

This chapter aims to evaluate the discoveries of the survey and compare these findings against the original dissertation objectives in order to see if they were supported. On a wider scale, this chapter will also critically examine the findings for their implications in academia and current knowledge around social media marketing. This chapter will also outline the limitations of the research.

5.1 Loyalty & Purchase Intent

As examined in Chapter 2, loyalty to brands has been shown throughout academic literature to create a stronger affiliation between brands and consumers. The first sub-objective of this paper aimed to establish whether loyalty to beauty brands occurred in the virtual environment of social media and enhanced the purchase intent of Irish women who followed beauty brands on these platforms.

The data uncovered evidenced that the majority of women are loyal to brands that they follow both on *and* offline – Irish women are not more loyal to brands that they follow on social media. Therefore, the act of engaging with a brand online does not indicate an increased affiliation with the brand in question; Irish women are also as loyal to brands they have engaged with offline too. This contrasts with the theories of recently published literature, primarily the musings of Orzan *et al*. (2016) who suggested that loyalty increases in virtual settings due to more brand engagement opportunities being presented to consumers (p. 142). Therefore, the aim of asserting that Irish women feel more loyalty towards brands that they follow on social media was not supported. The implication of this data is that beauty brands with specifically Irish-based social media channels can no longer consider their follower count or engagement rates as a barometer of loyalty against their competitors, opposing the musings of Dimitriades (2006), Louis & Lombart (2010) and Maehle & Shneor (2010).

Contrastingly however, Irish women did indicate that they have a stronger purchase intent towards brands that they follow on social media, marrying with the musings of Lee *et al*. (2017), Hutter *et al*. (2013) and Thoumrungroje (2014). This intention to buy was said to increase the most when positive ratings and reviews were visible on the social media platform according to the data obtained, fulfilling the aims of sub-objective two which was tasked with

assessing the types of social media content that increases the purchase intentions of Irish females.

Additionally, the data evidenced that intent to purchase was least likely to be increased by a brand's follower count on social media – an interesting contrast between loyalty and purchase intent. Here, the original aim to assert that Irish women have a stronger purchase intent toward beauty brands that they follow on social media was supported - however, the contrast in findings between brand loyalty and purchase intent were unexpected. Since this data suggests that Irish women could be following a beauty brand on social media but be equally as committed to another that they are not following on these platforms, the importance of certain advertising metrics (engagement rate, for example) may yield less results that impact the bottom line than previously thought due to consumers indifference to the offering in front of them.

Irish women may encounter another brand message from a competitor in a real-life environment and be instantly loyal to them despite a lack of any evidence on social media suggesting this is so (i.e. they may not follow this brand on social media). This echoes the thoughts of Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015), who assert that the emergence of social media platforms has encouraged short-lived and transitory relationships with brands (p. 727). Social media marketers must therefore carefully craft their messages to be consistent with their offline offerings, since brand loyalty can be induced equally in either environment according to this data.

5.2 Influential Factors
Sub-objective three aimed to discern what factors impact Irish female's purchase intentions toward beauty brands on social media platforms. It was established here that social media is primarily of value to Irish women for their understanding of a beauty brand, and their understanding of its product/service offering. Social media was also helpful in assisting with product recall. Contrasting with the publication of Hung & Lin (2015), however, the data also evidenced that Irish women perceive the improved relationship with the brands community as the least valuable outcome of a brand's social media presence.

This data marries with the findings of the loyalty investigation discussed above, which too indicated that engagement with the brand on social media does not necessarily mean that consumers value this content or that it is successfully increasing their loyalty to the company. The implication for social media marketers here is that strategies aimed at increasing brand community engagement in order to improve brand perceptions may need to be amended in light of these findings for the Irish market, since one does not appear to impact upon the other according to the data gathered.

A key relationship between user reviews and consumer opinions of a brand was again established through this section, marrying with the findings of sub-objective two. Here it was discovered that Irish women would not purchase from brands with negative reviews on their social media page, opposing their increased purchase intent for brands that have positive reviews on their profile. This increased buying intent has an important implication for the social media strategy for beauty brands; in parallel with the musings of Chiou *et al*. (2013) beauty brands should provide the facility for Irish women to leave open and honest feedback about their experiences with a product/service in order to appear as a transparent, trustworthy brand that can respond satisfactorily to criticism.

5.3 The Purchase Journey

Sub-objective four looked to establish the role of social media in the purchase journey of Irish females. Impactfully here, the data recorded that the majority of Irish women prefer to purchase from beauty brands in an offline environment, using social media mainly as a tool for research or to remind themselves of products to buy next time they visit a physical store. This marries with literature evidencing how social media can be used in the "research online, purchase offline" behaviour of consumers, particularly the writings of Voorveld *et al*. (2016), whose investigation asserted that consumers preferred offline purchase methodologies, particularly when buying a product for the first time (p. 394). Therefore, social media appears to sit at level 2 and 3 (Information Search and Evaluation of Alternatives) of Cox *et al.*'s decision making journey (1983). This data again reiterates the importance of user reviews and feedback as a tool for social media strategy success in the Irish market, as was discovered too through the sub-objectives above. By using social media pages as a tool for research, Irish women compare and contrast their own hedonic reasons for following the brand and aim to assert if their expectations of the product/service will be met by examining other users reactions post-purchase via reviews.

Similarly, the survey discovered that prior to purchasing from a beauty brand, friend feedback is the most sought-after information by Irish women. This preference for comparing real-life experiences about a brand is important for social media marketing managers to note. Though brands cannot control these word of mouth associations per the literature of Thoumrungroje (2014), they can ensure that they maintain and manage their relationships with the consumers who do provide public feedback.

It is important to also note the findings that suggests how few Irish women see content on social media and purchase a product/service straight away; the data evidences that only a small minority of Irish women do this. The implications of this are important for beauty brands. One of the benefits of social media platforms for businesses, particularly Facebook and Instagram, is that they allow specific products to be tagged with links that add them immediately to a

consumers virtual shopping cart, and the tracking of this journey – from social media to the close of sale – strongly reflects upon the abilities of the marketing team to entice users to buy with the content that they are producing.

From the investigation, however, it appears that the preference for Irish women buying beauty brands is very often to take the relationship out of the virtual space, resulting in potentially lost advertising revenue should the consumer encounter competitor offerings at this stage, since they are likely not fully loyal to the first brand anyway as indicated through the findings of sub-objective one. If social media marketing is to be considered on the scale of other marketing methodologies of old that encourage a physical visit to a store – like flyers or newspaper advertisements - then many beauty brands could be impacted by these findings, specifically those who only operate in an online capacity, or those with no presence in Irish stores who rely on online third parties to sell their product to Irish consumers (e.g. through Boots or Amazon). Of note too is the fact that a huge percentage of the most popular beauty brands in the world (e.g L'Oreal) do not have named stores and rely hugely on supply through department stores, where their products are but centimetres from competitor offerings, again putting the purchase intent established online at risk.

5.4 Original Aim
The main aim of the paper was to establish an answer to the question: "Do the social media efforts of businesses in the beauty industry increase the purchase intent of Irish females?" In combining all data points obtained during this investigation it is possible to conclude that yes, the social media efforts of beauty brands on social media do increase the purchase intentions of Irish females – but some efforts are not as fruitful as others, as several of the data findings indicated (e.g. the preference for reviews over podcasts). Thus, the aim of the dissertation was answered, and it did yield more insightful results than was originally expected; it is important to note the many factors that combine to create this purchase intent in Irish women, including user reviews, perceptions of the brand, loyalty and the WOM feedback of others.

5.5 Significance & Implications
There are several important implications of this research for the realm of social media marketing, particularly within the Irish beauty and cosmetics sector. The most significant of these is the mismatch between Irish women's increased intent to purchase as a result of social media participation, but the delay in purchase due to the preference of purchasing offline – during which time the consumer could easily encounter more enticing or relevant promotions by another brand. This finding is a new insight for Irish social media marketers involved in the promotion of beauty brands and will significantly impact strategies going forward. In particular, brands must focus on ensuring the personality and appearance of the brand and all of its touchpoints in offline environments accurately reflect the user experience online, as

Malar *et al*. (2013) agreed. Without this consistent strategy, beauty brands are at risk of losing revenue to competitor offerings or losing a potential buyer if the real-life encounters with the brand do not match the expectations established online. Per Clinebell & Taylor (2016), the service environment must be reflective of the brand as a whole to induce consumer satisfaction.

Another implication of the data is the types of content that consumers value, with the majority of answers indicating that posts containing users feedback on the brand are of the most influence. This is significant for up-and-coming beauty brands, or those with a modest budget, who had been investing money into podcasts and case studies when evidence suggests that free-to-make content from users, like demonstrations and tutorials, are preferred.

Finally, the close survey statistics relating to the appeal of social media to the realistic or ideal self have implications for the content strategies of beauty brands targeting Irish women. Per the data obtained, Irish females follow beauty brands online due to their ability to appeal mostly to their realistic lifestyle, though the appeal of the idealistic lifestyle was not an insignificant statistic either, indicating that beauty brands should aim to include content that targets both versions of the consumers self in order to maximise their reach with each type of user. As suggested by Dahlgren (2011), segmenting user personas here may make this process easier.

Overall, the implications of this paper are likely to be valid primarily within the parameters of the Irish beauty industry; the statistics and findings cannot be applied to other sectors like fashion or FMCG, and because it is a cross-sectional survey the data is likely to differ at another point in time. It would have little appeal beyond the marketing realm of the Republic of Ireland, and this therefore limits the global significance of the dissertation overall.

5.6 Limitations
The timeframe in which this investigation took place was over a 4-month period, from May to August 2018. Because of this the depth of the research was limited by time and by the scope of the study. In addition, the paper was created to just one researcher, which further limits the breadth of the analysis. In relation to sampling, a sample size could not be accurately obtained due to the vast nature of social media, though the researchers own 1:5 ratio did attempt to combat this. Also, by its very design the study is limited through its focus on Irish females, thus the generalisation of data obtained is also a limitation.

A lack of prior peer-reviewed research relating to beauty brands selling to Irish women also hindered the investigation. The researcher was also limited by their lack of experience in creating surveys; several questions could have been worded differently. Further, the researcher used a subjective line of questioning that may have skewed results more than an objective

questionnaire would have. In retrospect, the researcher could also have benefited from including additional questions that probed why respondents prefer to purchase in offline environments more than online ones; this could have enhanced the learnings of the paper.

5.7 Strengths

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, this investigation also resulted in a number of strong findings. Firstly, it successfully achieved the aims of the research question through logic based on a vast array of prior studies in order to paint a clear picture of Irish women's purchasing landscape on social media. The paper also provided new insights previously unreported into Irish women's attitudes toward the content that they see being shared by beauty brands, including what entices them to buy, or dissuades them from purchasing. Several of these were deemed statistically significant findings for the wider population through the SPSS software. The discovery that Irish women's loyalty to brands does not directly affect their intentions to purchase from these brands is an impactful finding for both the social media marketing realm, and the beauty industry in Ireland. Further, the data is reliable, replicable and has been statistically analysed to reflect its validity against the wider population.

5.8 Future Research

Future research could benefit the social media marketing realm by investigating why Irish women decide to purchase offline rather than immediately after encountering the brand offering on social media. As outlined in the literature review, females are the target audience for the beauty industry, though the inclusion of males for the purpose of examining their purchase intent toward male beauty products could have expanded the scope and findings of this research significantly, as could examining not just Irish people. These are other areas of potential study in the future.

6. Conclusion

This study focused on the influence that the social media efforts of beauty businesses have on the purchase intent of Irish females. The aim was to discern whether these efforts influence Irish women's purchase intentions and sway them into buying their beauty products and services. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey methodology, the research findings evidence that women do have a stronger purchase intent towards brands that they follow on social media, and that this intent is increased when they can see reviews and other user-generated content visible by the brand. Thus, the social media efforts of beauty businesses do influence the purchase intent of Irish females. Irish women admit that their loyalty is not increased by following beauty brands on social media though, and thus they can be persuaded to buy a competitor brand via content on these platforms.

In analysing the survey data obtained it can be concluded that social media is not a landscape on which loyalty to brands is curated, but it's content can influence the purchase behaviour of consumers present there. Importantly, competitors appear to have sway on these channels and use them to entice users into becoming members of their community through content that focuses on the users experience, and endeavours that clearly and honestly portray reviews of the brand. It is important to note though that while social media may shape and influence purchase intent, it is still used by the majority of Irish women as a research tool, with most admitting that they still purchase offline. These findings did, for the most part, support the hypothesis of the paper, though Irish women's lack of loyalty to brands that they follow was an unexpected result.

This investigation has successfully demonstrated that papers in the academic world pertaining to the influence of social media on purchase intent do not wholly reflect the views of Irish females; they differ from the peer-reviewed standards of consumer behaviour in many instances, primarily in their loyalty affiliations and their indifference to price. This information is valuable to the social media marketing landscape for beauty brands and – on a wider scale – may entice other sectors to conduct similar research to ensure their strategies marry with the values, desires and preferences of their Irish female audience.

7. References

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8. Appendix

Survey Questionnaire

- **What nationality are you?**

Irish

Other

- **What sex are you?**

Male

Female

1 - What age are you?

2 - Please select the income band closest to your current earnings.

Under €25,000 per annum

€25k – 35k

 €35,001 – 40k

€40k+

Prefer not to Say

3 (a) - Do you use any of the following social media sites: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, Reddit?

Yes

No

3 (b) - Which of the following social media platforms do you use?

Facebook

Twitter

Snapchat

Instagram

YouTube

LinkedIn

Pinterest

Tumblr

Reddit

4 - Do you follow any beauty brands on social media?

Yes

No

5 - Please select the statement that is most relevant to you as a follower of beauty brands on social media.

I perceive beauty brands who are active on social media differently than beauty brands who are not on social media.

I do not perceive beauty brands who are active on social media differently than beauty brands who are not on social media.

5(b) - In what way(s) do you perceive beauty brands on social media differently compared to those who are not on it?

Their activity on social improves my understanding of their brand.

Their activity on social improves my recall of the brand's products/services.

Their activity on social improves my relationship with the brand's community.

Their activity on social evidences their efforts to try to connect directly with consumers.

Their activity on social improves my understanding of their products/services.

Their activity on social keeps them at the top of my mind when considering what to buy.

Their activity on social makes them more accessible.

None of the above.

5 (i) - You stated that you do NOT perceive beauty brands that are active on social media differently than those who are not on it. Why is this?

6 - Have you ever purchased a product/service from any of the beauty brands that you follow on social media?

Yes

No

6(a) - What type of content on social media is likely to influence you to purchase?

Blog posts

Case Studies

Product Tips

Promotions/Competitions

User Generated Content

Live Videos

Reviews

Photos

Interviews

Research and Data

Events

Podcasts

Announcements

None of the above

6(b) - Please select the statement that is more relevant to you.

I have a stronger purchase intent toward beauty brands that I follow on social media.

I have a stronger purchase intent toward beauty brands that I do not follow on social media.

6(c) - On a scale of 1 - 5, how often does the content that you see on social media influence you to buy beauty brands?

6(d) - Does following a beauty brand on social media help you to recall their product list, compared to beauty brands you do not follow on social media?

Yes

No

6(e) - Please select the purchase behaviour that is most similar to you.

I see products on a beauty brand's social media and purchase the product online straight away.

I see products on a beauty brand's social media and make a note to purchase it next time I'm in a store.

I see products on a beauty brand's social media and this prompts me to do further research online prior to purchase.

6(f) - Please select the statement that is most relevant to you.

I am more loyal to brands that I follow on social media.

I am more loyal to brands that I do not follow on social media.

I am equally as loyal to brands I follow both on and off social media.

6(g) - Have you ever switched the beauty brands that you use because of content/campaigns you saw on social media?

Yes

No

6(h) - What type of content by the beauty brands that you follow on social media do you value the most?

Content created by the brand.

Content created by customers / users.

Content created by influencers in the sector.

Content created by professionals in the sector (trainers, MUA's, therapists etc.).

6(i) - When following two or more competing brands on social media, what would influence you to purchase one over the other?

Better promotions/special offers.

Ratings and user reviews for one brand are more positive.

One brand has stronger communication with their fans.

One brand is cheaper.

One brand has a higher follower count on social media than the other.

One brand received endorsements from influential celebrities.

One brand has better social media content than the other.

My friends prefer one brand over the other.

None of the above.

6(j) - Are you more or less likely to purchase a beauty brand that uses celebrities to endorse their products on social media?

6(k) - Please select the statement that is more relevant to you.

I feel more trust in beauty brands that publicly respond to customer queries and complaints on social media.

I feel less trust in beauty brands that respond publicly to customer queries and complaints on social media.

Publicly responding to customer queries and complaints on social media does not influence my trust in beauty brands.

6(L) - In your honest opinion, do you follow beauty brands on social media because they appeal to your realistic lifestyle, or because they appeal to the lifestyle you aspire to have?

They appeal to my realistic lifestyle.

They appeal to the lifestyle I aspire to have.

I purchase beauty brands that I follow on social media due to their mixed appeal.

6(m) - On a scale of 1-5, how likely would you be to purchase from a beauty brand that had mostly negative ratings and reviews on their social media page?

6(n) - On a scale of 1-5, how likely would you be to purchase from a beauty brand that had mostly positive ratings and reviews on their social media page?

6(o) - In your opinion, how likely are you to purchase from a beauty brand that has no social media presence at all?

6(p) - On a scale of 1-5, how often do you engage with content shared by beauty brands on social media?

6(q) - In your opinion, has the content that you see posted on social media by beauty brands altered your perceptions of beauty standards?

Yes

No

6(r) - As a follower of beauty brands on social media, how does their content in your feed usually make you feel?

It empowers me.

It entices me to buy.

It excites me.

It makes me envious.

It increases my interest.

It makes me feel good about myself.

It distracts me.

It annoys me.

It is unrealistic.

It entertains me.

6(s) - What is your preferred method of purchase when buying beauty products?

Online

Offline

7 - Before buying a new beauty product, which of these actions would you normally take prior to purchase?

Visit their website.

Check their social media.

Ask your friends about their experiences.

Go in store for a demo.

Check a third party website (e.g. Department Store, Forum, Blog).

Buy it without research/reviews.

8 - In your opinion with regard to sales, how important is it for beauty brands to have an active social media presence?