The Impact of Social Media Influencers in the Cosmetic Sector based on 20 – 25-year-old Irish women.

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Abstract

The internet has resulted in a huge change in how people shop with online shopping emerging as an increasingly popular method of shopping. Alongside this certain platforms such as Instagram have established a commanding position and the role of celebrities and influencers is growing at pace. This small-scale research study sought to investigate the impact of social media influencers in the cosmetic sector on 20 to 25-year-old Irish women. An interpretivism world view was adopted and an interview study with seven participants was carried out. This qualitative approach allowed for the views, thoughts and perspectives of the participants to emerge. The data was analysed using open coding and a number of interesting findings emerged. The findings suggest influencer marketing is of real significance in terms of the buying trends of this age group within the cosmetic sector as they are seen as relatable and credible. The importance of having an emotional connection with an influencer was clear and emphasises the need for brands to engage with influencers that are transparent and passionate about the brand they will be endorsing. An interesting finding was the growing importance of sustainability and ethical standards when promoting a product within the cosmetic field and this appeared to be driven by the consumers. These consumers feel that it is important to make ethically conscious decisions when buying cosmetics and this is therefore an important consideration for brands and influencers. Overall, the study concluded that influencer marketing has become more popular for brand advertisement and can attract females within this age group when the influencer is seen to be genuine and authentic

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Table of Contents

Research Chapter 1 ..... *1*

Introduction *1*

Introduction **1**

1.1 Research Rationale **1**

1.2 Research Question and Objectives **2**

1.3 Research Approach Overview **2**

1.4 Layout of Study **3**

1.5 Conclusion **3**

Chapter 2 ..... *4*

Literature Review *4*

2.0 The move from Traditional Marketing to Digital Marketing **4**

2.1 Influencer Marketing **5**

2.2 The Cosmetic Industry **9**

2.3 Millennials and Generation Z **11**

2.4 Social Media **13**

2.5 Credibility and Trust **15**

2.6 Conclusion **16**

Chapter 3 ..... *18*

Methodology *18*

3.0 Methodology Introduction **18**

3.1 Layer One: Research Design/ Research Perspective **18**

3.2 Layer Two: Research Approaches **20**

3.3 Layer Three: Research Strategies **20**

3.3.1 Qualitative Approach 20

3.4 Layer Four: Research Method **21**

3.4.1 In-depth Interviews 22

3.5 Layer five: Time Horizon **23**

3.6 Layer Six: Data Collection and Data Analysis **23**

3.6.1 Ethical Issues 23

3.6.2 Sample Selection 24

3.6.3 Data Collection 24

3.6.4 Data Analysis 25

3.6.5 Limitations 26

3.7 Conclusion **26**

Findings, Analysis and Discussion *27*

4.0 Research Objective 1 ..... **28**

4.0.1 Engagement with Social Media 28

4.1 Research Objective 2 ..... **32**
4.1.1 Relatability 32
4.1.2 Expertise 36
4.2 Research Objective 3 ..... **37**
4.2.1 Peers 38
4.2.2 Trending Products 39
4.2.3 Ethics 39
4.3 Research Objective 4 ..... **41**
4.3.1 Credibility and Trust 42
4.4 Conclusion **44**
Chapter 5 ..... ***46***
Conclusions and Recommendations ***46***
5.0 Findings for Objective 1 ..... **46**
5.1 Findings for Objective 2 ..... **47**
5.2 Findings for Objective 3 ..... **48**
5.3 Findings for Objective 4 ..... **48**
5.4 Recommendations for Future Academic Research **49**
5.5 Conclusion **49**
References ***50***
Appendices ***63***

Research Chapter 1

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This research study examines the impact of social media influencers in the cosmetic sector on the buying trends of 20-25-year-old Irish women within the last 5 years. A qualitative approach was adopted in order to gain useful insights on the topic under investigation.

This chapter opens with an overview of the context and background that frames this study. Following this, research and objectives are presented, and the chapter will conclude with an outline of the chapters to follow.

1.1 Research Rationale

There is no doubting the impact of digital marketing on the buying trends of Irish females in the age 20 – 25-year olds and the buying of cosmetic products is a huge area in terms of his demographic. The consumers approaches when making a purchasing decision which can be down to a number of factors – brand recognition, brand perception, influencer marketing, brand loyalty and many more factors to be taken into consideration. With the growth of digital marketing in the past five years it is crucial to understand the buying trends of your consumers. The move from traditional to digital marketing has been significant in all sectors and is here to stay (Slijepcevic et al. 2020). This move has shifted companies into rethinking their marketing strategies in order to remain competitive in the new digital market (Baltes, 2015). This has been done by changing the way they market their product or service, whether that be content marketing, social media marketing or influencer marketing. According to online surveys dated in 2015, 80% of B-to-C and B-to-B companies planned to increase their digital marketing

budgets over the next 12 to 18 months (Maddox, 2015). There has been significant growth since then and majority of companies that are on or offline hold a strong online presence depending on the preferences of their target market. Although there are many differences between traditional and digital marketing it is important to note that knowing your target market, satisfying their needs and wants while filling a gap in the market still plays an important role in both strategies. These roles will be different depending on the chosen target market which for the purpose of this study will be females between the ages of 20 – 25-year olds.

Studies involving social media influencers have been mainly qualitative according to Schouten et al (2020) who discussed the area of celebrity vs influencer endorsement. They also concluded there was a the lack of study in the field of influencer marketing and this was a clear rationale underpinning the study undertaken by the researcher.

1.2 Research Question and Objectives

The overall aim of this dissertation is to investigate the impact of social media influencers on the cosmetic sector with a specific focus on 20 – 25-year-old Irish women.

The objectives of this research are

1. To explore the role of social media for young Irish women.
2. To analyse the credibility and expertise of social media influencers from an Irish females perspective in terms of the cosmetic industry.
3. To assess the main factors impacting the cosmetics buying choices of this cohort
4. To assess the impact of paid or sponsored content from a female perspective.

1.3 Research Approach Overview

This investigation makes use of qualitative research methods and semi-structured interviews were the sole method of data collection. Interviews were conducted with seven individuals. and the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for the data analysing stage.

1.4 Layout of Study

The research study contains six chapters. Chapter one introduces the reader to the study undertaken. This chapter gives an overview to the aims and objectives of the research study in addition to outlining the rationale for purpose researching the topic. Chapter two is a review of literature regarding the impact of digital marketing with a focus on the buying trends of 20 – 25-year-old Irish women within the past five years. Chapter three outlines and evaluates the methodology adopted within this research study and considers the ethical parameters and limitations of the study, as well as the procedures of data collection and analysis. Chapter four outlines and discussed the findings of this research in the light of relevant literature. Chapter five concludes the study. This chapter aims to consolidate the main findings and draw conclusions from the research as a whole and offer some recommendations for future research.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter serves as a concise introduction to the matter of the impact of digital marketing in the cosmetic sector and the buying trends of Irish women as well as providing insight into the rationale behind the researcher's topic selection. Within this chapter the wider context in which the study is situated in is discussed in detail. The research aims and objectives are clearly outlined while also giving a summary of the research approach. Lastly, this chapter gives an outline of the structure of the chapter and chapters to follow.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review aims to examine the relevant literature in order to understand the current state of knowledge relating to the key areas of the research question, the impact of Social Media Influencers in the Cosmetic Sector from an Irish Female Perspective. The literature review will build a greater understanding of millennials and generation Z while looking at their buying trends in regard to the cosmetic industry. This is followed by the study of the influence of social media with a particular focus on social media influencers and Instagram. Social media influencers are more and more frequently used within brands marketing strategies. Influencer marketing will be looked at in order to distinguish whether this type of advertising is appealing to the target age group in question. Influencers will also be critically examined in order to distinguish whether this age group have trust or are reluctant to engage with these influencers. In order to build a greater understanding of influencer marketing celebrity endorsements will be looked and compared to influencers in the area of credibility and trust.

2.0 The move from Traditional Marketing to Digital Marketing

There has been a very big move from traditional marketing to digital marketing in the last ten years. Traditional marketing relied on physical means and took account of the following characteristics affect consumer buying – cultural forces, social forces, personal and psychological forces (Harvard Business Review, 2010). The introduction of digital marketing presented both opportunities and threats for businesses. The way in which businesses once caught the attention of their consumers had begun to shift as their needs and expectations were different. In order for brands to gain competitive advantage and improve their performance, companies have developed new strategies to attract new customers and keep the existing ones satisfied (Ungerman et al. 2018).

There are mixed feelings on digital marketing and whether it is a trend at the moment but Slijepcevic (2020), believes that digital marketing is here to stay and businesses should change their business models accordingly. He also outlines that changes in the digital marketing field are constantly innovating and the introduction of social media, content marketing, search engine optimism (SEO), pay per click and more account for significant yearly shifts (Slijepcevic at al. 2020). This marketing can be done through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok and Twitter which will be looked at in greater detail. Another platform and one of the most important is the website, which is essentially known as the face of the business and when done correctly can be one of the most effective. If businesses want to stay connected with their target market they must adapt to this changed landscape and establish a strong digital presence. A business having a strong online presence including website and social media depending on the needs and wants of their consumers will resonate well with the target market which in turn will lead to brand recognition.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

As previously discussed the move from traditional marketing to digital has become more apparent. This move has been significant and as a result has made businesses look at their marketing model and see what they needed to do in order to keep up with the evolving markets. Research has shown that online word of mouth has a strong impact on consumers decision making process in comparison to traditional advertising methods (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Influencers are known as people who have derived a large following and are regarded as trustworthy individuals in one or several niches (De Veirman et al. 2014). Influencers are individuals who are paid to promote your brand whether that be through instagram stories, Tiktok videos or Facebook posts. According to Zhang and Benyoucef (2016), influencers

opinions have an impact on the decision making process of a product which can have a positive or negative effect on the brand.

The amount an influencer will be paid is determined by their following and engagement. The influencer selection is a very important process as the chosen influencer is associated and linked to your brand. Selecting an influencer that suits your brand image is hugely important for brand morale. Influencer marketing began in 2014 when the founder of IZEA (an influencer marketing platform), Ted Murphy, identified a gap in the market which was individuals creating content and not getting income or recognition for the work they were doing. 'PayperPost' which was established ion 2006 allowed influencers to connect with brands in order to gain revenue for their work (IZEA, 2021). Since then, the influencer marketing sector has grown and any brand that has a significant online presence will have a social media influencer connected to their brand alongside it.

Influencers can be split into many different categories. The first category is micro influencers. These influencers are not celebrities and have a smaller following but usually they have a very specific area of expertise e.g skincare, fashion or make up (Ismail, 2018). Micro influencers are a lot smaller than macro or celebrity influencers but they have the advantage of having a very specific target market and knowing them very well. Ki and Kim (2019) in their research came to the conclusion that brands should not focus on the number of followers an influencer has as this does not always affect the engagement levels they have. In saying that, celebrity influencers usually have a huge following and engagement levels and brands try to engage with these as much as possible. There ae also are macro influencers who are essentially celebrity influencers. They are well known celebrities who have developed a role as influencers and are

also well known because of their social media profession. There are many subcategories which are as follows (Mediakix, 2020):

- The Icon: these are celebrities that are influencers also. The content they post may not be promoting a brand as such but sharing their everyday lives and a good example of an Icon is Kim Kardashian. When a celebrity influencers posts about a brand it can cost the brand $500k per post. Many brands cannot afford to pay influencers of this kind so they opt for a smaller influencer. In many cases these celebrities will be ambassadors of well established brands such as Justin Bieber for Calvin Klein.
- The Adventurer: these influencers are known for the high activity levels and aesthetically pleasing posts. These are photographers, videographers, travellers or adrenaline junkies. The content they post is very aesthetic and they visit cities in order to create this content. Brands that may sponsor these kind of influencers are Patagonia, GoPro or Red Bull.
- The Guru: this category can include influencers that have a specific niche. This could be food, fitness, fashion or lifestyle, usually one topic that they cover in detail on their platform. An example of this is Roz Purcell, a well-known Irish influencer who's instagram is based around living a healthy lifestyle. Roz has many best-selling cookbooks and organises hikes all over Ireland for her following.
- The Creator: these are influencers that use special effects in order to make their posts more attractive. They may make revenue from a short post that could be 15 seconds long. These followers will follow these accounts for aesthetic purposes.
- The Entertainer: These are influencers that were originally found on YouTube and have moved onto other platforms throughout the years. They may make content that is humorous and create content that is entertaining for the viewer (Fraculj et al. 2021).

There are many pros and cons when looking at influencer marketing. Some of the benefits of influencer marketing are the cost element, more trust in influencers and in recent years influencers have been used in order to enhance the reputation of corporations (Dijkmans et al. 2015). This aspect of digital marketing has shown that influencer marketing resonates more with consumers in comparison to celebrity endorsements. Brands usually pay a well-known celebrity in order to sell and engage with their target market but the introduction of influencers has made consumers opinions shift. This shift has occurred as a result of consumers feeling that influencers are more authentic leaving consumers to feel more of a connection than they do with celebrities (Forbes, 2016). This in turn leads customers to imitating and wanting to be like these influencers which reflects positively in the buying trends of consumers (Tran et al., 2014). This has allowed brands to make significant changes in their marketing campaigns from celebrity endorsements to paid influencers. The price and allocation of an influencer will depend on the engagement levels and willingness to endorse the brand itself (Lincoln et al, 2016). Smaller influencers that are only starting out will be sent products rather than physical revenue as this is a way of the brand promoting their product and also the influencer building their following by collaborating with a brand.

Although there are significant advantages to companies from influencer marketing there are some drawbacks that can be identified. There is a difficulty in measuring results and finding the correct fit for your brand can be a challenge. It is important for a brand to analyse the influencer and make sure that their content and image fits what their brand aspires to be and what the product or service offers (Fraculj et al., 2021). As influencers share every aspect of their life it is important to establish if this goes with the personality of your brand and whether the brand is comfortable sharing with the chosen influencer. Another disadvantage of influencer marketing is the risk of mistakes made. Some controversial issues that influencers

share on their platform may not be appropriate for a brand and this is a consideration that needs to be looked at when selecting the influencer. A well-known example of this is the 'Frye Festival', a 'prestigious' festival with tickets being prices at $1,500. This festival was driven by a fraudster who ended up in prison for 6 years (Haenlein et al. 2020). This fraudulent festival had many well-known celebrities and influencers promoting it. So it is really important for brands to ensure the integrity of the products being marketed by the influencer to ensure that they are not associated with scam activity. A happening such as this affects a brand and individuals as they are linked to something that ended up losing a lot of consumers trust and money. This draws attention to the on-going risks to brands and influencers from fraudsters and the importance of vigilance in this regard.

2.2 The Cosmetic Industry

The cosmetic industry has always been a successful industry and will continue to be over the coming years. One of the largest sectors of this industry is skincare and it would appear that consumers do not hesitate when spending their disposable income on these products. The cosmetic industry has always relied on conventional forms of advertising such as department stores, pharmacies, supermarkets, direct sales, TV and magazine. However digital advertising has resulted in a significant shift in the way consumers purchase their products which has impacted how cosmetic brands operate (Quitong, 2019). In a study by Cosmetics Europe it was reported that 51% of consumers find information on cosmetics brands on websites, blogs, social media networks, beauty forums and applications. The introduction of influencer marketing campaigns grown in recent years and become an important forms of advertisement in the cosmetic industry. Beauty Gurus have come to social media platforms in order to share beauty tips and products whilst also by showing off their talent and love for makeup. This has resulted in a benefit for the cosmetic industry as they are spreading awareness around brands they get to work with while also becoming monetised (Hassan et al. 2021). Social media influencers

have become more and more popular over the years with brands now employing influencers specially picked for their brand in order to engage with their target market to promote their products. Brands such as MAC, Charlotte Tilbury, NYX, L'Oreal and Milk Makeup are all well known for using influencers to promote and use their products (Hassan et al. 2021).

When looking at the beauty industry as a whole, statistics show that within the age bracket of 18 to 29 year olds there is a 33% spend of $26 to $50 per month on a new product in the US. This is a higher percent than older groups (Kunst, 2019). Although this age bracket may have less disposable income than older consumers, they prioritise their income on skincare and make up. This is where the importance of establishing the target market for a brand is significant.

Ethical issues have arisen over the years within the cosmetic industry in particular, the lack of the environmentally friendly products and also cruelty free products. One of the main shifts that can be seen in the cosmetic industry over the last decade is the interest in sustainable products as having a low environmental impact has become important for many consumers. Terms such as safety, lack of toxic substances and tolerability and all terms that are looked for in a cosmetic product on the market today. This has allowed companies to pay particular attention to the way they manufacture and package their products as they are more aware of how sensitive consumers are towards environmentally friendly goods in particular with the demographic being studied as according to Spehar (2006) they are conscious of the long term effects on the environment. This needs to be taken into consideration without altering the quality of the products which is another aspect that consumers are concerned about. Lu (2013), found while surveying American undergraduates that one of their concerns was the quality of environmentally friendly products. Thus the need for brands to focus on this area.

Another aspect in terms of ethics are the issues with animal testing for cosmetics. This has been an issue for many years but has come to light significantly as celebrities and well known individuals are speaking out about it and not using these brands that are testing their products on animals. A brand that had been in the spotlight for this topic is NARS, a well-known make up brand. After 23 years they announced they were no longer cruelty free which caused some upset with their consumers. It resulted from the decision to sell their products in China meaning NARS have to comply with the rules in China where all cosmetics must be tested on animals (Cosmopolitan, 2017). Unfortunately this can be seen in many brands today and in a lot of cases profit comes before the ethical issues. Kat Von D which is another cruelty free make up line made the point that many companies were choosing 'pay check over compassion'. However many younger consumers are taking into account animal testing as a consideration before purchasing a product. In a survey taken by Close up Media found that 36% of women would rather purchase cruelty free products. The survey was taken on the Perfect 365 app with 15,000 taking part (Perfect365, 2018). A perfect example of a brand which has a focus on ethical considerations and has achieved much success is The Body Shop. The Body Shop was founded in 1976 by Dame Anita Roddick who had a strong passion for the planet (The Body Shop, 2021). The early adoption of animal cruelty free products, sustainability and avoiding the exploitation of the individuals making the products has contributed to their success (Kent and Stone, 2007).

2.3 Millennials and Generation Z

The target group for the research is the age cohort 20 – 25 year old Irish females and this group is on the cusp of millennials and Generation Z. Generation Cohort Theory was first discussed by Ingelhart (2015) in order to divide the population into segments by generation. Generational cohorts share cultural, political and economic experiences which allows practitioners to

question whether they have similar views on life and values (Kotler and Keller 2006). According to President of Pew Research Centre, Michael Dimock (2018) millennials are born between 1981 and 1996. Millennials are perceived as confident and optimistic (Guha et al. 2010) having grown up during the period of economic growth and technological advancements including the introduction of internet, social media and globalisation (Parment, 2011). They can also be referred to as 'The Internet Generation'. Millennials are also known for growing up in a more digital age in comparison to Generation X and the Baby Boomers and the Millennial name came from the closeness in age to the new millennium (Kaifi et al., 2012).

Overall both Millennials and Generation Z are known for their familiarity and knowledge of digital media. Millennials who are known as digital natives are individuals that were born after the widespread adoption of digital technology (Solomon, 2017). The exposure they have had to technology in their early years is believed to give digital natives a greater understanding in comparison to individuals who were born at an earlier time (Nielsen, 2017). Generation Z are another generation that can be classed as digital natives as they have never lived without the use of internet, computers and mobile phones (Fromm & Read, 2018). Millennials and Generation Z are seen as an age group that relate more to social media influencers than they would to celebrity figures. According to Nouri (2018) this age cohort feel that influencer are more relatable than celebrities. It was found that over 72% of millennials and Generation Z follow at least one influencer (Morning Consult, 2021). These individuals seek to imitate influencers and this in turn leads them to purchase the products, services and brands that are being promoted (Hassan et al. 2021). Evidence suggests that social media influencers have a positive impact in the online beauty market as they are seen as role models with tastes, ideas and attitudes that this generation of females want to copy (Hassan, et al. 2021).

Although this age cohort are familiar with technology they can be an age group that is very hard to market to. According to Nielsen (2017), digital natives have a very short attention span for digital marketing and advertising. This should be taken into consideration by brands in the industry when marketing a product to millennials. As they have grown up with technology for most of their lives many have become accustomed to advertisements and promotions online and do not have interest in lengthy advertisements (Roth et al. 2017).

One way a brand could engage with consumers and grab their attention is by making a connection with them as this generation seeks to find influencers and brands that are transparent in order to establish a connection with them (Weber, 2017). When this age group establishes trust with the influencer or feels that the influencer is being transparent and truthful to their following they feel a sense of connection with that influencer and see them as more credible (Abreu, 2019). Glossier is a brand that grabbed the attention of this age cohort very well by establishing themselves purely through Instagram. They introduced products that were sustainable and them to influencers who then began to spread the word. This worked really well for the brand which made an impact in the market through the influencers promoting the products which they had a passion for (Glossier, 2021).

2.4 Social Media

The introduction of social media can be seen as early as 2004 when Facebook was established. Carton (2009) believes that throughout much of human history technologies have been developed in order to make it easier for individuals to communicate. There are ongoing conversations as to when social media first started, some believe around the date of Facebooks appearance and others date it back to the introduction of the computer and internet. However there is no doubt that since 2004, social networks have evolved and provide for society and business with a strong digital media presence. Platforms that were set

up in order to keep in contact with past pupils and work colleagues are now used to share pictures of your everyday life to the world. Social media has been one of the fastest growing online platforms.

The evidence is clear that Ireland's social media advertising price is growing rapidly per annum. In 2020, €272 million was spent on social media advertising as oppose to €223 million in 2019 (Statista, 2021). According to the Pew Research Centre (Perrin, 2015), 90% of all 18-29-year old's in the U.S use at least one from of social media and spend up to 6.19 hours per week on it (Casey, 2017). This is clear evidence that social media should be a vital aspect in any business model in todays world. This is crucial for brands that are looking at targeting millennials and Generation Z.

The main focus for the purpose of this study is the sector involving influencer marketing through Instagram. Voorveld et al's (2018) published the results of a study on social media and concluded that that Instagram was the most popular platform for social interaction. This platform much like others allows users to share pictures, videos and reels of their everyday life. As of March 2020, Instagram has 1,895,000 users from Ireland and 25% of these fit into the age group if 18 – 24 years (Napoleon, 2021). This platform is very attractive for cosmetics brands as it gives the consumers a clear representation of the product on hand. This meaning the influencer using the product gives a clear indication of the look, feel and use of the product and this is very beneficial for the consumer who feels they known what the product will be like before spending their money on it.

It is clear to marketers that the engagement level on Instagram is significantly higher than other platforms such as Facebook. Instagram changed the way of advertising for social media

influencers in 2016 with the introduction of 'stories'(Instagram, 2021). This allowed users to share pictures or videos on their profile with the expiration of 24 hours. This gave brands a chance to buy ad space within these stories and made the ads with the ease of tapping through stories and looking at brand advertisements with swipe up links and discounts as a result.

2.5 Credibility and Trust

Credibility and trust is a vital issue in influencer marketing. It is important for influencers to establish a relationship with their following by ensuring a trust element in their content (Abreu, 2019). This will be established over time as beauty influencers build their platform and recommend reputable brands that suit their target market. If a social media influencer recommends a brand or product that is not reputable or up to the standard they claim it to be they will lose the trust from their following. On the other hand when an influencer has promoted good products over a period of time, this builds consumer trust for the consumer and it has a positive impact on purchasing power and relationships between the consumer and the influencer (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). According to Abreu (2019), millennials develop a trust when they feel a source is credible. As previously mentioned, authenticity in influencer marketing is crucial and if they are authentic while focusing on quality they will gain following and engagement from this age group. As millennials and Generation Z have grown up in the era of digital marketing saturation (Roth et al. 2017), they find it easier to distinguish between authenticity within influencer marketing and influencers that are looking to make quick revenue.

If you are considered a credible source social media users are more likely to respect and act on your opinion (Weber, 2017). Thus, the issue of trust has become more apparent in recent years with the increase of influencers over Ireland and worldwide. Issues have been raised in some areas as some consumers feel that influencers are not being authentic. Consumers feel

influencers may be promoting brands they do not engage with regularly in order to earn revenue rather than the love for the brand and products involved. However, as of 2017, the ASAI (Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland) stated that influencers must fully declare marketing communications. This action was put into place in order to protect consumers and ensure that they were not being misled by influencers through advertising or social media. This means that when an influencer is gifted or paid to promote a product or service they must clearly show with the use of '#Ad, #SP or #Gifted' on their post from the beginning of the story/post (ASAI, 2021). Indeed with the increase in social media influencers more rules are being put in place. In the UK, the use of filters on Instagram when promoting a skincare product is banned as this can lead to an unrealistic representation of what the product is capable of. This is again protecting the consumer in order to avoid deception and all of these regulation ultimately results in greater credibility for the influencers and enhance the role they have in marketing products.

2.6 Conclusion

The increase of social media as a whole in the past ten years has been huge with the growth of the web and the evolution of marketing communications. Millennials and Generation Z are experiencing overload in terms of digital advertising and celebrity endorsements are less effective than previous generations. The increase in influencers has made people engage more with this forum of advertising as consumers feel they are more relatable then celebrity figures. Although celebrity endorsements have been effective in the past, this has changed and the role of the influencer has grown in importance. There is no doubt that influencer marketing has a significant impact on the purchase decisions of consumers and this makes it vital for brands to include them in their advertising plans for the future. However it is crucial for brands to establish when and where their target market are using social media in order to engage with

them. The growing importance of ethical issues for the younger cohort is another factor of importance for brands. There is no doubt that the influencer marketing sector has grown and any brand that has a significant online presence will have a social media influencer connected to their brand alongside it.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.0 Methodology Introduction

This study aims to investigate the impact of social media influencers within the cosmetic industry on Irish female millennials and generation Z. In this chapter the underlying philosophy for the research is discussed and the research design is outlined and discussed. Data collection and analysis is explained and the ethical issues pertaining are discussed and limitations of the study addressed.

3.1 Layer One: Research Design/ Research Perspective

The research perspective of this study is presented using the Research Onion developed by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2009) for business students. This model outlines the importance of understanding the appropriate model for your research.

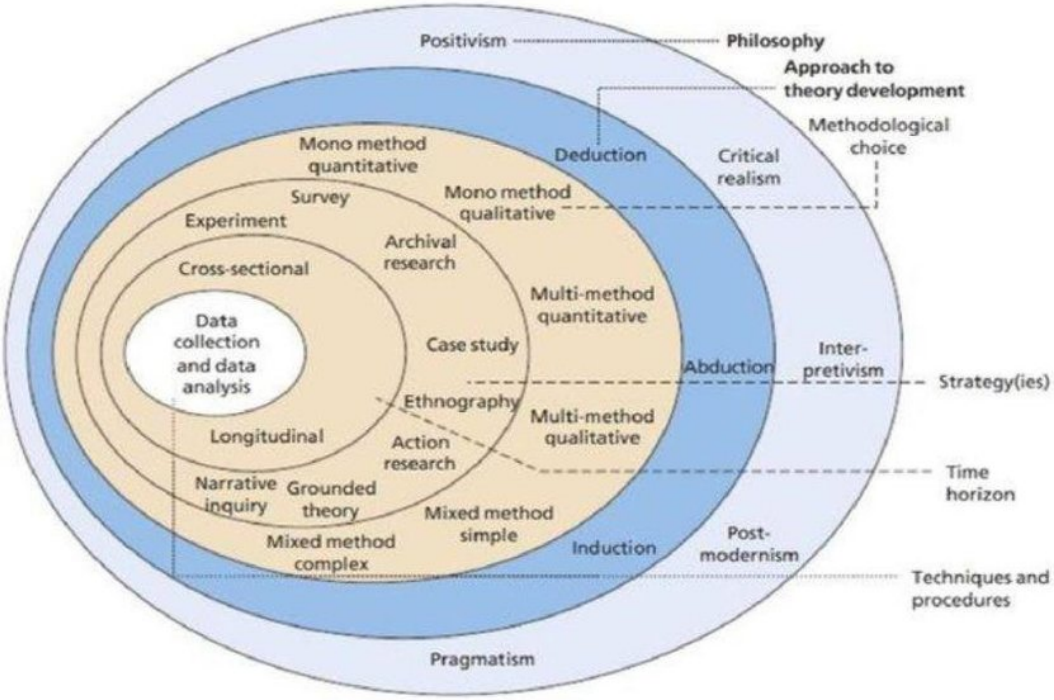

Image 1: “The Research Onion” by Saunders et al. (2019)

As seen in the above diagram of the research onion there are four main theoretical perspectives; Positivism, Realism, Interpretivism and Pragmatism. These relate to the research philosophy which is the layer that forms a basis of the research which can be facts, sources of knowledge, ethics, beliefs or values of how research should be approached (Melnikovas, 2018). Positivism is often used when a research is concerned with observing and predicting outcomes, this is usually used in scientific research and can be referred to as the ‘scientific method’ as it tests theories with data that is highly structured and measurable (Saunders et al. 2013). Realism is not unlike positivism as it undertakes a scientific approach (Saunders et al. 2009). Pragmatism is based on assumption that throughout the research it is possible to adapt both positivist and interpretivist positions and decide on which is best suited to the research question (Melnikovas, 2018).

For the purpose of this study the Interpretivist perspective was deemed the most appropriate. It assumes that reality is subjective and when considering different individuals it can differ. This approach takes into account the unpredictable events of the future and the multiple realities that exist (Melnikovas, 2018) and thus was appropriate for this study which sought to ascertain the different perspective of a particular group. There are some limitations and according to Mack (2010), interpretivism can tend to be subjective rather than objective and this means that the research outcomes are affected by the researchers interpretation, beliefs and cultural preferences. Another drawback to note is that interpretivism aims to gain a deeper understanding of the research at hand rather than generalising these results to other individuals (Cohen et al., 2011). The information that is gathered through this technique is not generalised as the data is mainly dependent on individuals viewpoint and values (Saunders et al., 2012).

However this approach does result in a more deeper understanding of an issues and thus was appropriate for this research. Interpretivism is linked with the qualitative approach which is focused on words not statistics and this study uses in-depth interviews from seven participants in order to understand the impact of social media influencing in the cosmetic industry.

3.2 Layer Two: Research Approaches

According to Saunders et al (2012), there are two different approaches, inductive and deductive. The deductive approach is mainly used when the outcome of the study is already known to the researcher. It involves quantitative data with larger sample sizes allowing for the data to be collected on the patterns and relationships of individuals in the chosen field of study. The inductive approach deals with qualitative approaches focusing on smaller groups of people. The inductive approach seeks to develop the theory after the study has been completed whereas the deductive approach is based on pre-existing theories. (Saunders et al. 2016). This research was qualitative and used an inductive approach in order to establish the impact of social media influencers on generation Z.

3.3 Layer Three: Research Strategies

3.3.1 Qualitative Approach

According to Saunders et al (2019), using interpretivism philosophy in combination with an inductive approach and using qualitative methods drawing on a small sample can produce more significant data to allow an understanding of the research in question. A qualitative approach was adopted for this study. Qualitative Research can be described as the "study of things in their natural settings, attempting to make things of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005. Pg. 3) and is known to be flexible rather than fixed (Robson, 2011), and inductive rather than having strict sequence from previous studies and decisions. Qualitative research takes place in a more natural and

comfortable setting for the participant in comparison to quantitative which is a more scientific approach to data collection (Creswell, 2016).

The use of qualitative data with the topic of social media influencers is popular as it allows for the research to be thorough and understand the participants feelings, understandings and beliefs around the subject. For qualitative research the use of in-depth interviews can be beneficial for many reasons. One of the main benefits of this technique is being able to talk freely throughout the interviewing process and having the participants as comfortable as possible in their most natural setting (Crewell, 2016). This allows for the participants to talk about issues or feelings they have about the topic and also allows for the interviewer to have detailed questions for the interviewee and to probe issues raised. With this piece being an interview-based study, it allowed the researcher to gather information and seek to understand the feelings around the topic being discussed.

3.4 Layer Four: Research Method

The fourth layer off the onion is research methods. There are three types of methods that can be chosen: the mono-method, mixed-method and multi-method. The first method is the mono method. This is a method used when combining either QA single qualitative data collection with quantitative data procedures e.g. questionnaires or a single qualitative data collection technique e.g. in-depth interviews.

Mixed methods is the use of both qualitative and quantitate research. Mixed methods uses both data collection techniques and analyses these at the same time or one after the other (Creswell, 2016). Lastly, multi mixed method is when you combine two or more qualitative methods in the research or two or more quantitative methods in a single study. For the purpose of this study the mono-method was used and in-depth interviews were conducted

3.4.1 In-depth Interviews

There are many advantages to in-depth interviews one of them being that they allow for the interviewee to express their overall perceptions, opinions and experiences (Dickson-Swift,. *Et al.* 2007). In depth interviews allow for the exploration into the interviewees lives and their personal experiences which is more complex than asking generic questions (Seary and Liamputtong, 2001). Another advantage of in-depth interviews are the lack of time delay between each question. This allows for some of the answers to be spontaneous rather than giving the participant time to go and reflect on the answer which might lead them to change their initial reaction or answer. This spontaneity allows for more accurate answers and their own opinion rather than an opinion they may feel it more appropriate or more popular. There are many advantages when looking at in depth interviews but there are also drawbacks to be noted.

Researcher Bias: Subconsciously the interviewer may be biased towards the subject they are studying and this may reflect in their research (Boyce, *et al*. 2006). This is very hard to avoid and in most cases will not be seen by the researcher at the time. The researcher should keep this in mind when conducting the interviews. In order to avoid this in this study the interview was organised around the objectives of the study which allowed for the researcher to stay on the topic and have clear and concise questions to be asked throughout the interview. With that in mind, the interviewee was also able to talk freely which allowed the researcher to collect relevant data and this ensured a clear focus on the issue under investigation.

Another disadvantage that can be seen with in-depth interviews is the time it takes. As they are individual that means that the time it takes for the participant to reply and agree on a time can already start the process of a few days. When the interview has then taken place it can take

hours to transcribe them. However, the researcher used an App called Otter which allowed for the interview to be recorded and transcribed.

3.5 Layer five: Time Horizon

In the second last layer of the onion time horizons are outlined which are cross-sectional and longitudinal.According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016) longitudinal study is a type of research that analyses activities and conducts by means of concentrated examples over a prolonged period of time and a cross sectional study is "the study of a phenomenon (or phenomena) at a particular time" (Saunders et al., 2016 p.48) which. Tends to be a shorter period of time. . The reseracher collected the data over a two week period during July 2021.

3.6 Layer Six: Data Collection and Data Analysis

The last layer in the "Research Onion" by Saunders et al (2019), involves the qualitative data collection and analysis. Before undertaking a discussion of data collection and analysis, the ethical issues pertaining to the study are discussed.

3.6.1 Ethical Issues

The integrity of a piece of research depends on the ethical considerations adhered to by the researcher (Bryman, 2001). It is a responsibility for all researchers to conduct research ethically. The first stage of the ethics process involved filling out the National College of Ireland (NCI) Ethics form, as prior approval was required for the research to be carried out.

Participants in this research were asked to consent voluntarily, anonymity was guaranteed and also the right to withdraw at any stage of the research was made clear. Letters of consent were sent out to each participant providing detailed information about the study, and the relevant ethical issues which can be found in Appendix 1.

No incentives were offered to participants and all interview data and recordings were stored on the researcher's personal iPhone and computer which are both password protected.

3.6.2 Sample Selection

When carrying out research a significant part of the process is deciding on where and who to conduct the gathering of data (Maxwell, 2013), this process is called sampling. In the context of this research purposeful sampling was used. Purposeful sampling involves selecting people or settings due to the knowledge and experience they have on a topic, in other words, who best can inform the researcher on their chosen research topic (Maxwell, 2013). For this research, it was decided to sample 20 to 25 year old Irish females. Seven people in total were interviewed.

3.6.3 Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, the primary use of data collection was through the means of qualitative data with in depth interviews. These are mostly conducted face to face but have also more recently been conducted over the phone or via web cam (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009). Due to COVID, all of the interviews took place online which worked well for each participant ensuring they were in a quiet and comfortable environment. A set of open-ended questions were asked which related directly to the topic under investigation.. These questions were strategically designed in order to allow participant to express their opinions and thoughts on the topic of the study. Some of the topics that were discussed throughout the interview were: social media, influencer marketing, trust and credibility, cosmetics and sustainability. In developing the questions for interviews the approach was based on Kvale (2008) who suggests that the research objectives are written out and then a series of questions are drafted in regard to each of them. This was a very helpful strategy as it ensured that the questions were designed to get the maximum information on the topic under investigation.

Throughout the interviews the researcher took any relevant notes which the participants were made aware of at the beginning along with the interview being recorded on an iOS App called Otter. The participants were also made aware that after the research had been conducted all of

the personal information relating to the individual interviewees would be deleted and destroyed.

3.6.4 Data Analysis

It is important to adopt a rigorous approach to data analysis and Denscombe (2017) presents a five stage approach to data analysis which was adopted by the researcher. The first stage in this approach being 'data preparation' which involves transcribing the text from the in-depth interviews. This was done using the APP as detailed earlier.

Following on from this is the 'initial exploration of the data' which involves looking for any issues that may have been recurring throughout the data collection. Also this involves adding notes to the data and highlighting any information that may be deemed important to the findings and analysis. This allows the researcher to capture ideas from the interviews.

Stage three is 'analysis of the data' and this is where the researcher starts to code the data. Coding is an important way of sorting through the data that has been collected so that the most important issues emerge. "Open coding involves reading the data and developing your coding categories based on what data seems most important" (Maxwell, 2013, p.107). This was the approach taken by the researcher. Once the codes had been arrived at the codes were grouped into themes. From this process a number of themes emerged and these will be discussed in the next chapter.

Stage four is the 'presentation and display of the data' which involves presented the findings through direct quotes from the participants of the interviews. This gives the reader an idea of how they felt on the topics being discussed and what thoughts, words and emotions are evident in the data. This is also presented in Chapter 4. The last stage is the 'validation of the data'. This is done after the interviews are complete. The researcher communicates with the

participants and outlines the common themes that were most appropriate to describe the overall findings in order to ensure validation and this was the last stage carried out in this research.

3.6.5 Limitations

Creswell (2009) highlights the importance of setting the parameters for a study, establishing the boundaries and outlining the limitations and delimitations when producing research. Delimitations are used to narrow the focus of the study. This research explored the experiences of a specific group of individuals. These 7 individuals were Irish females between the age of 20 to 25 years old.

Limitations are used to highlight potential weaknesses of a study as a result of certain constraints (Creswell, 2009). As there was a restricted amount of time to execute and analyse this research, the findings are confined to a small group of participants and thus the findings may not be generalisable as there were only 5 participants. Also as all participants were from Dublin, this depicts a narrow experience. Finally, given the small-scale nature of the study, the findings may not be representative of the entire population of 20 to 25-year-old Irish females.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined the research methodology adopted for this study. It provided a description of the processes used in sampling, data collection and interviewing. The ethical procedures used were discussed and the limitations addressed. Chapter four will present, analyse and discuss the findings from the data collected in the light of relevant literature.

Chapter 4

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse and discuss the main findings from the in depth interviews conducted as a part of this study. From the interviews with Irish females between the ages of 20 to 25, some clear themes and similarities emerged in regard to the opinions and the feelings of this demographic. In this section the themes which emerged from the interviews will be discussed in the light of the objectives with quotations from the participants in order to address the objective of this study which is focused on the impact of influencer marketing on Irish females within the cosmetic sector.

Objectives

1. To explore the role of social media for young Irish women.

   Theme: Engagement with social media

2. To analyse the credibility and expertise of social media influencers from an Irish females perspective in terms of the cosmetic industry.

   Themes:

   - Relatability
   - Expertise

3. To assess the main factors impacting the cosmetics buying choices of this cohort

   Themes:

   - Peers
   - Trending Products
   - Ethics

4. To assess the impact of paid or sponsored content from a female perspective.

   Theme: Credibility

4.0 Research Objective 1

To explore the role of social media for young Irish women.

Theme: Engagement with Social Media

4.0.1 Engagement with Social Media

At the beginning of the interview the topic of social media was introduced in order to get an understanding of how many of the participants were active users and to ascertain whether it was a daily/weekly use. The responses clearly show that every participant used social media for an hour a day and in most cases more. The responses can be seen below:

Participant A *"Probably every hour"*

Participant B *"I would say I use Instagram everyday"*

Participant C *" I would probably say I use Instagram the most and probably scroll for an hour a day"*

Participant D *"On a daily bases, it would be Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter"*

Participant E *"On a good day, like 20 minutes, on a bad day, probably like an hour throughout the day"*

Participant F *"I'd probably go on Instagram at least five times a day"*

Participant G *"I spend like 75% plus of my time on Instagram"*

According to Suciu (2021), Generation Z spend on average 58 minutes a day on Instagram which is clearly reflected in the responses of the Irish participant. These responses are a clear indication of the recent findings within the literature review that most, if not all, of this age group spend a large amount of their time online. Indeed this age group account for 25% of Instagram's users in Ireland (Napoleon, 2021).

Interesting issues emerged in terms of how and why they engaged with the platform. Many of the participants as previously discussed said they would spend at least an hour on social media a day. For this hour it is seen that many of the participants felt that they spent their time 'aimlessly scrolling' and did it out of boredom rather than using social media to find out information.

Participant C *"I would use Instagram the most and probably scroll for an hour a day"*

Participant E *"I feel like I scroll aimlessly a lot. I probably spend, I'm gonna say on a good day, like 20 minutes, on a bad day, probably like an hour throughout the day"*

Participant F *"I kind of just mindlessly scroll to be honest"*

The comments above show that a lot of the time spent on social media platforms is made up of boredom and scrolling aimlessly. One participant even referring to a good and bad day, the bad day involved spending a longer amount of time on social media. This negative feeling towards spending too much time online has been seen in many studies as it can have a negative effect on your well-being and leading you to feel emotional exhaustion, fatigue or dissatisfaction (Maier et al., 2014). All of these feelings result from the fact that you are having a negative experience online and in turn will affect the way you engage or do not engage with the platform. In saying that, some people who feel this way will still continue to use social media as they feel if they are not using it they may miss out on something (Whelan, et al., 2019). It is also reported that even if the users on social media are bored and not taking in any of the information they will continue to overload on social media platforms which again can have a negative impact on well-being (Bench and Lench, 2013).

Learning

One of the reasons that many participants engaged with the social media platforms in the beginning was that they wanted to learn how to apply their make up and different techniques they could use. The ability to learn how to apply your make up from looking online has changed significantly over the past 10 years as there are thousands of online blogs, websites and influencers that allow you to learn how to apply your make up. One article on Cosmopolitan had a list of twenty different accounts to follow from learning how to do basic makeup techniques to more advanced make up looks (Kwarteng, 2019). However for this demographic, the role seems to have shifted and is more focused on their lifestyle, fashion trends and beauty products rather than learning how to apply make up. The responses below are telling in this regard.

Participant C *"I feel like they tried out new products or they do reviews online or they would do like live tutorials putting on their makeup and stuff like that. And so I feel now I see like the different products they use and how it looks on their skin instead of learning how to apply it"*

Participant E *"I wasn't very good at makeup. So it was kind of also learning"*

Participant F *"I think I used to look more makeup kind of people when I was learning. And that's just kind of my age.*

So for the participants their use for Instagram has changed from learning how to apply products to focusing on what new brands are out and what make up suits different skin types. This is a commonality between all of the participants and it would appear to be related to age. When they were younger they looked for different things but now that they know how to put on their

make up they look for other things in an influencer. This is important again for influencers to establish who their market is and what kind of content they are looking for.

Connection

Another reason for the participants using social media platforms was for connection with their peers. Many participants felt that it was a good way of connecting whether that be through Instagram stories, Snapchat or WhatsApp.

Participant A *"Right now, social media is our way of connecting with others because we can't really connect all that well"*

Participant B *"Snapchat would be more as kind of communication or connecting with friends I guess"*

Participant D *"Snapchat and Instagram DM's would be more for communication or like sending my friends stuff"*

All of these comments showing that they use some social media platforms for communicating and connecting with friends. Many participants said that they have relied on this over the last year where it was made harder to connect with friends and family. This is in line with Whiting's study of the use of social media as one of the clear themes was 'social interaction'. Many of the participants used social media in order to connect with friends and family they do not see regularly or live abroad. Some of the participants even outlined that they have more interactions with some of their friends online that they do face to face (Whiting, 2013).

4.1 Research Objective 2

To analyse the credibility and expertise of a social media influencers from an Irish females perspective in terms of the cosmetic industry.

Themes: Relatability

Expertise

4.1.1 Relatability

The relatability within influencer marketing was a clear theme that emerged in each of the interviews and played an important role in terms of this demographic.

Micro and Macro Influencers

The relatability within micro and macro influencers was a commonality in the interviews as most of the participants felt that celebrity (macro) influencers were not as relatable as micro influencers. Some participants felt they were more inclined to look at their style and some felt they relied on them for make up recommendations. Some participant reflected that influencers were not as relatable as they once were, however nearly all of the participants thought they were more relatable than celebrities and celebrity endorsed products. This is in line with the literature as discussed by Forbes (2016) who argues that this age group connects more with influencers rather than celebrities.

Participant A "*You kind of share similar interests, and especially Keilidh Cashel because she's an Irish influencer and she's an Irish makeup artist"*

Participant E *"it's more enjoyable to follow somebody like an influencer, then a celebrity? I feel like you kind of think almost that a celebrity has more endorsements and stuff like that. Like, it's less. You think they're going for the most expensive products and stuff like that? Whereas, like, the influencers, I feel like would be more likely to use everyday stuff."*

These comments show that the participants engage with micro influencers as they find the experience more relatable as oppose to celebrity influencers that are not seen to be authentic in the opinion of the participants. This is backed up by Nouri (2018), who also outlines that consumers feel as though they can relate to a social media star who is known to be a normal person with a passion for fashion, beauty or cosmetics as opposed to someone of high status or wealth. As mentioned in the comment above, when a celebrity is endorsing a product one participant felt that the product they would be endorsing would be too high end and out of her price range. Whereas the micro influencers promote products that are still good quality products with a lower price point. This is again backed up by Nouri's (2018) findings as she found her participants within the age of 18-30 had the same opinion that a lot of celebrity endorsed products were overpriced which therefore this resulted in them being influenced by smaller influencers. The participants felt that these 'lower-scale' influencers were more credible and relatable to females of this age group.

Lifestyle Influencers

With many participants the topic of lifestyle influencers came up. These are influences that not only share their love for fashion, beauty or cosmetics but their life as a whole. Many of the influencers that were mentioned by the participants are ones that are in the cosmetic line but also share their life online. This is where engagement levels seems to be very high as people within this age group are interested in 'lifestyle influencers' and as a result they are more likely to buy the products they sell or promote as they seek to try and imitate their lives in a sense. These lifestyle influencers that share their life via vlogs or stories and they get the engagement from this age group who feel it is more genuine as it is considered an 'unedited' look into their lives (Nouri, 2018). Vlogging is the activity of individuals who talk freely into a camera about

various issues relating to their life experiences (Lange, 2007). It emerged that following Irish influencers was a real trend that came up over and over. As previously discussed micro influencers seem to have a higher engagement within this age group as they are seen as more authentic whereas macro influencers are living a lifestyle that at this age may seem unachievable or unrealistic (Bernazzani, 2017).

In this context, some names that have been mentioned repeatedly by the participants were Rosie Connolly, Suzanne Jackson and Sophie Murray, all of whom are Irish and within the cosmetic industry.

Participant D *"Probably Sophie Murray would one that I'd look at a lot"*

Participant E *"I follow Sophie Murray and Rosie Connolly"*

Participant F *"Yeah like I love SoSueMe (Suzanne Jackson) tan"*

Although all of these are in a cosmetic field they all share the same similarity as they all share most of their life online whether that be where to stay abroad, what they eat in a day or the shops they shop in. The focus of the research was on the cosmetic industry but an interesting finding that emerged was that participants engage with the influencers not just for the cosmetics they share but also the lifestyle.

Emotional Connection

Many of the participants felt that it was important to have an emotional connection with an influencer in order to engage with them. One participant said they look at an influencer they have followed for years as a friend which shows they have built a strong connection with their following. This connection that influencers have built with their following increases their engagement levels and also makes their following want to imitate them and buy the clothes

they wear and the products they use as a result (Hassan et al. 2021). This is in line with previous literature that when followers feel they have a connection with influencers they try to imitate them and look up to them in both a fashion sense and a lifestyle sense (Tran et al., 2014).

Participant A "*I follow up because I have an emotional connection with them.*"

Participant C *"They come across nearly as friends as if you know them because they are talking so honestly"*

These comments show that having a strong connection with an influencer is important to this age group. This connection can also be built when an influencer is authentic and somewhat unedited. This allows the follower to feel as though the influencer is being more genuine and living a life that may be more realistic or relatable.

When paid advertisements was looked at, the participants said that they had purchased products from influencers knowing they were sponsored. This was because they had been following them for years and had built up the trust and emotional connection with them.

Participant C *"I think all of my experiences have been positive, you know, with the mascara from Sophie Murray and as I've already said, Charlotte Tilbury also from Sophie Murray"*

Participant D *"I've also really enjoyed using the Bahama Body tan by Terrie McAvoy"*

This connection meant that they had more time for the products the influencers were endorsing as they felt they had trust in their opinion which can take years to build. This relationship as a result has led to some of the participants buying from influencers. According to Morning Consult approximately two thirds of this age group follow influencers and 50% of these feel as

though they can trust what they say (Morning Consult, 2020). It is unclear whether they have had to build a connection with the influencer from this finding but from the interviews and statements above the researcher found it important to build a relationship before purchasing a product from the influencer.

4.1.2 Expertise

Throughout the interviews the area of expertise was one that was touched on in order to gauge how important this was to the participants when looking at influencers. Many of the participants felt that they would not consider qualifications necessary in this field with many saying they would not think about looking for these within the influencer community.

Participant C *"I do know for a fact that a couple of the girls I do follow like Hannah Ennis and Sophie Murray have either been like qualified or have worked in the industry before. I wouldn't really take it into account. For example, Charleen Murphy, I don't think she is qualified or has worked in the cosmetic industry I just felt like I've built a relationship with her and like I would find that credible in itself and I've seen how she would put on her make up and would kind of base it off that."*

This participant is clearly stating that a qualification is not something that is looked for within influencers. This participant relies on her own judgement as to whether the influencer is good or skilled at doing her make up rather than looking to see where she worked previously.

Another participant was of the view that qualifications were not a deciding factor but rather they made their purchasing decisions based on personal experience and judgement on how well they apply make up or how they are as a person.

Participant E *"it wouldn't really come into my head it would more just be if I follow them and I see that they do their make up well. I would rely on that rather than a qualification"*

On the other hand, Participant B had a slightly different opinion when it came to the issue of qualifications.

Participant B *"I suppose some people don't always need a qualification like it can be just gained through like experience. Like just trial and error of their own products and that kind of thing. But I suppose if their looking at sustainability and animal cruelty all that kind of stuff, I would see like, have they done the research you know?"*

This suggests that in the area of sustainability and animal cruelty a certain background knowledge was expected. However, the majority of the participants felt that it was not necessary to have a qualification in the cosmetic industry as an influencer as many participants rely on their own judgement within both makeup and skincare. According to studies the area of qualifications and expertise is not looked for in beauty influencers but is looked for in fitness and healthy living influencers as they are giving advice on 'healthy recipes' or 'low calorie' diets that may need qualifications as opposed to make up recommendations (Sabbagh, 2020). That accords with the findings in this study. Indeed, there is no doubt that as the literature contends influencers have an impact on the decision making process which can lead to a positive or a negative effect on the brand (Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016).

4.2 Research Objective 3

To assess the main factors impacting the cosmetics buying choices of this cohort

<u>Themes: Peers</u>

<u>Trending Products</u>

<u>Ethics</u>

4.2.1 Peers

One of the factors that affected the purchasing decisions of the participants was their peers. For many of the participants they felt it was important to ask their friends or family for recommendations and not rely completely on the recommendation of the influencer or advertisement. According to Cheong (2008) many feel it is important to ask their friends for recommendations as they feel can buy a product with more confidence if their friend has used or recommended it. Yoon and Han (2012) concluded that individuals will look for advice from their peers for personal and shopping experiences which is backed up in the comments below:

Participant A *"I do think if I'm going to be influenced, it's most likely going to be through my peers, and my friends"*

Participant B *"Ask your friends and then like where did they get that information from, did they like it etc"*

Participant C *"I wouldn't completely base it off what they (the influencers) were saying but I would like if I saw a product that they use I really liked on them I think I would definitely notice and I would look at reviews or I would say it to my friends"*

Overall the general opinion of most participants was that they would seek other advice or recommendations when purchasing not only products within the cosmetic industry but in everyday purchases also. Another study taken concluded that young women are more likely to take marketing information from their friends posts rather than posts they see from influencers or brands on Instagram (Chen, 2018).

4.2.2 Trending Products

Although most of the participants felt they would not rely on an influencer fully they had a different view of a product that was 'on trend' at the time. In regard to trending products they did purchase products promoted by influencers and did not mention asking any peers or family for recommendations.

Participant F *"In regards to trends, make up pages, like things like fluffy brows.."*

"…Those kinds of things like people doing tutorials on those, I've bought products based on things I've seen that are on trend on Instagram from some influencers"

And I also like looking now, like in regards to trends, makeup pages, like things like fluffy brows rather than learning how to put on my make up."

This participant along with a lot of other Irish females purchase products that are on trend at that time. According to Higgs (2021) some of the trends that are circulating at the moment are fluffy brows, which have been mentioned by this participant, jade-rollers for skincare and Olaplex a hair are product that originally Kim Kardashian was seen using (Shunatona, 2019).

4.2.3 Ethics

One of the clear themes that came to light was the importance of ethics in terms of the buying choices of consumers. This aspect of the purchasing decision seemed to be very important within this age group with many saying that they would try and make better ethical decisions and even one participant describing how they unfollowed a brand due to testing on animals. From the literature it is very clear that in the last decade ethical issues regarding the cosmetic sector has become an aspect of purchasing decisions that would not have been considered

previously. This has had a huge impact on business decisions when it comes to products used, packaging and branding.

Participant E *"If an influencer was talking about a product, and then they're like, and it's ethical and cruelty free, that would stick with me much more."*

This participant is clearly stating that sustainability and cruelty free products are important. Another participant developed this point further.

Participant B *"My course which is actually on environmental science like I would kind of like looking into like any products or you know kind of any person's life I would look at other sustainably made like products and you know where the resources come from and so on."*

Clearly she has more of an understanding of sustainability and the importance of it, in comparison to some of the other participants because of her studies. The participant also felt that while some influencers were promoting cruelty free and sustainable products they actually may not have had the expertise to do so which can be misleading to their followers.

This was further reinforced by other participants who were prepared to stop engaging with an influencer because of this issue.

Participant E *"Yeah, there was certain brand recently that I unfollowed because of the fact that they were testing on animal. I purposely would not buy from them because of that."*

The importance of cruelty free emerged in terms of the purchasing choices of this age group with some even feeling so strongly about this issue that it would lead them to unfollow or stop

engaging with a brand that was not conscious of this as is evidenced from the comment above. Sustainability was another issue that was raised.

Participant G *"I would be more inclined to buy sustainable products now or sustainable brands as much as I can. I think I'd try unless I think it's like an investment piece and I'm like I'm gonna wear all of the time."*

Overall it is clear that this age group are interested in a more sustainable lifestyle and would be conscious of the choices they make, in this regard and also in terms of cruelty free products which did not test on animals. According to Spehar (2006), this age group is more conscious of the long term effects on the environment, community and health. That being said there was evidence of a contrasting viewpoint.

Participant G *"I think I'd try unless it's like an investment piece and I'm like I'm going to wear it all of the time"*

So there is a willingness to try to make ethical choices but on occasions such as the buying of an investment piece they can be swayed as it is felt that if you are shopping sustainably you may be sacrificing the high quality you get from other non-sustainable products. This accord with a survey carried out with American undergraduates it was found that many of the students were reluctant to try economically friendly products as they felt they may have been inferior to the original product they would purchase (Lu, 2013).

4.3 Research Objective 4

To assess the impact of paid or sponsored content from a females perspective.

<u>Theme: Credibility and Trust</u>

Paid content on social media platforms has become a way of influencers selling and recommending products to their following while being able to promote and work with brands. This increase in brand advertisement online has had some participants feeling overwhelmed and some feeling the advertisements are helpful.

At the beginning it was important for the researcher to establish the participants feelings on sponsored content as a whole. There was mixed feelings on the topic as seen in the quotations below.

Participant B *"it's obviously very appealing to take part in and obviously on the other hand it can be quite disappointing, like if you're following somebody, an in influencer because you loved their opinion and then it tends to change just because they're being paid to do so. And, you know, kind of changes the game a little bit."*

Participant C "I mean, if I saw a lot of sponsored content, I definitely wouldn't give it the time of day."

Participant E "I think that it's not a bad thing to be paid for a promotion."

Overall, the participants opinions were mixed on the use of paid promotion with many of them feeling slightly negative towards it. As previously touched on many participants are likely to switch off or ignore content that is sponsored.

4.3.1 Credibility and Trust

The issue of credibility and trust within influencer marketing was spoken on by the interviewees particularly in the context of brand advertisements and sponsorships. Participants

felt that it was important to be transparent when promoting a product and share products they use regularly in order to build trust with their following as oppose to products they have got sent or paid to promote.

Participant B *"if they are giving their own opinion and they're not just being paid to do it and you know, I think you can kind of tell whether somebody has actually put their own research into it"*

Participant C *"I think if posts aren't always being sponsored, or if its something they repeatedly use on their own accord"*

The participant's perspective is that the trust may be lost if they feel the influencer is not being truthful and they have not been consistently using the product they are promoting. As previously discussed in the literature this supports Abreu's (2019) contention that if an influencer is able to establish trust with their following they are more likely to be seen as credible. Young (1983), defines credibility within a brand as "the believability of the product information contained in a brand, which requires that consumers perceive that the brand have the ability and willingness to continuously deliver what has been promised".

Another participant felt that in order for an influencer to promote something they would need to have been using it over a period of time. If the influencer was using the product regularly previous to being paid to promote it, it shows their followers they are promoting the brand or product because they love using it not just because they are being paid to do so.

Participant D *"If they are being sponsored by a brand and promoting it, they need to be consistent and if so, not just one random post they are getting paid for"*

Some participants also touched on the area of paid and sponsored content and how they felt it made them trust an influencer more. The introduction of measures put in by the ASAI had led these participants to feel more positively about influencers.

Participant E *"I do like the way on Instagram now you've to say whether something has been gifted or paid for, I think that definitely makes me more confident in what they are promoting especially if I've seen them promote the product before and only now they are getting paid to do it"*

Participant F *"I do always like when some influencers talking about a product and they're like, "Oh, this isn't sponsored" by the way, then I know they're genuine and it would actually make me consider buying something if they are showing sponsored stuff then I might actually trust their judgement because they aren't all about getting paid promotions I guess"*

These participants feel that an influencer is seen as more credible and trustworthy when they are honest about products they love and share them even when they are not getting paid. As previously discussed in the literature influencers have to now disclose if the product they are speaking about is paid, gifted or sponsored (ASAI, 2021).

4.4 Conclusion

Much of the findings of this study reflect the literature. The findings suggest for most participants of this study a strong engagement with influencers as oppose to celebrities, a clear focus on ethical issues and the importance of relatability, credibility and trust within influencer marketing. The participants all displayed a broad range of engagement with online forums. In conclusion it seems that many participants were strongly influenced by social media influencers on many levels including their cosmetic buying trends which was the focus of this

study. Of course, the findings of such a small scale study are not generalisable and the findings may be open to alternative interpretations but they are interesting in shedding a light on this age group. Of course, the findings of such a small scale study are not generalisable and the findings may be open to alternative interpretations but they are interesting in shedding a light on this age group at a point in time.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this interpretivist study was to understand the impact of social media influencers in the cosmetic industry with a particular focus on 20 to 25 year old Irish women. From the data the themes of engagement with social media, relatability, trending products, ethics and credibility have emerged as important and these have been explored in order to further understand the role of influencers in marketing cosmetic products and to draw attention to considerations for influencers operating within this area.

5.0 Findings for Objective 1: To explore the role of social media for young Irish women.

- In relation to engagement, social media as a whole plays a huge part in the lives of this age group. Social media at the beginning was a way for people to learn how to apply make up but has developed from this to a space which allows people to connect with social media influencers.
- However it was also clear that a lot of the time spent on social media platforms is made up of boredom and scrolling aimlessly. This is a concern as within the relevant literature there is a growing consensus that too much time spent engaging with social media can have a negative effect on your well-being and leading you to feel emotional exhaustion, fatigue or dissatisfaction (Maier et al., 2014).

5.1 Findings for Objective 2: To analyse the credibility and expertise of social media influencers from an Irish females perspective in terms of the cosmetic industry.

- Relatability was a theme that emerged strongly from the data. This age group made it very clear that relatability played a huge part in their engagement with social media influencers. In this regard, they felt that they were not able to relate to celebrities as they lived an unrealistic lifestyle and promoted products that were out of their price range. This led them to relate to social media influencers more and trusting their opinion as opposed to celebrities (Forbes, 2016). This should be looked at within brands that tend to promote their products with well established celebrities as they may not be getting the engagement they once did due to the lack of relatability with their consumers.
- Within this age group there was a huge interest in lifestyle influencers. Many were interested in seeing every day content as well as the cosmetic side. Interestingly, they felt that influencers from Ireland and locally had more of an impression on them than international influencers. This could be important for Irish brands in terms of focusing their marketing. Many of the participants felt more of a connection towards the Irish influencers therefore a recommendation would be to use more Irish influencers with Irish brands.
- The importance of having an emotional connection with an influencer emerged within this age group and this emphasises the need for brands to engage with influencers that are transparent and passionate about the brand they will be endorsing. This would increase the engagement for the brand but also build a relationship between the influencer and the consumer.
- Lastly in terms of relatability, expertise was an area that this age group did not feel was necessary in terms of cosmetic influencers. The findings illustrated that this age group

prioritise the genuine connection and ability with cosmetics over a qualification. This could be of interest to brands seeking to identify influencers

5.2 Findings for Objective 3: To assess the main factors impacting the cosmetics buying choices of this cohort.

- The participants emphasised that influencer recommendations was the most important factor but not the sole factor as they also would get a lot of information from their peers.
- Another impact on the buying trends of this age group was trending products. This could be used to the brands advantage if they made a change in their marketing strategy to promote more 'on trend' products as oppose to repeat purchases.
- Lastly, ethics within the buying trends of this age group was a big issue for many participants. These consumers feel that it is important to make ethically conscious decisions when buying cosmetics and this is therefore an important consideration for brands.

5.3 Findings for Objective 4: To assess the impact of paid or sponsored content from a females perspective.

- This age group outlines the importance of credibility and trust within the influencer marketing sector. This age group feel very strongly that if they do not feel the influencer is giving their honest opinion or they are promoting something they have never talked about on their page it is likely they will stop engaging with them. Many of the participants felt that they were avoiding paid or sponsored content which means there needs to be a change in the brands advertising. This could be done through making the advertisements more genuine and organic which is seen to be more effective within this demographic (Chen, 2018).

- The last important recommendation is to not saturate the Instagram feed with paid and advertised content. This is having negative effects on the users of this age group and they are switching off to any advertisement they come across. If the advertisement is sporadic and on products they actually enjoy using they are more inclined to engage with and trust the influencer promoting them.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Academic Research

- As this study was focused on 20 to 25 year olds it could be interesting to look at a different age cohort and establish the similarities and differences between the two.
- Given that in this study there was a strong interest in the local influencers, it would be interesting to see further study in different countries in order to see if this is a worldwide trend.
- As this study was small scale there remains scope for a more broad-based enquiry with greater numbers examining into the impact of social media influencers in the cosmetic sector. Furthermore, larger scale studies involving different demographic breakdowns could yield to more comprehensive results.
- The themes of trending products and peer influence may also warrant further research.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion this research study met its objectives by incorporating a comprehensive literature review and the study also generated original data from interviewing 20 to 25 year olds examining their experiences and synthesising their perspectives on the impact of social media influencers in the cosmetic industry. The study has coincided with a huge increase in online buying trends due to the Covid 19 pandemic which has changed the global buying landscape at-least temporarily. However regardless of this, the buying trends of this age group will continue to rise as they are known as 'digital natives' and are used to living their lives online as well as purchasing most of their products online (Solomon, 2017).

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Participant Sheet

Letter to Participants

Date 14th of July 2021

To whom this may concern,

My name is Victoria Carroll and I am an MSc in Marketing student at National College of Ireland. As part of my masters coursework, I am conducting a research project entitled 'The impact of social media influencers in the cosmetic sector based on 20-25 year old Irish women'. I am writing to ask you to participate in this research project which would involve a short voice recorded interview. The purpose of the interviews is to ascertain information from 20 – 25 year olds about their personal experiences and thoughts on social media influencers in the cosmetic industry. Each interview will take approximately 20 minutes. I wish to assure you that the data collection will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. I wish to make it clear that you are free to withdraw from the research at any stage without having to offer a reason. Strict confidentiality is central to my research and, in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying details will be revealed in my project. The data will only be used to write up my dissertation and may be put into The National College of Ireland Library. I would be very grateful if you could consent to participate in my research study. Please sign at the end of this information sheet and return.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours Faithfully,

Victoria Carroll

Appendix 2 – Interview Questions

1. **To explore the role of social media for young Irish women.**

   Talk to me about the social media sites you engage with.

   How often do you use social media?

   Does it play an important role in your life in terms of your decision making processes?

   Do you follow social media influencers in the cosmetic industry?

   When did you begin to follow influencers?

   What is the main reason that you follow social media influencers?

2. **To analyse the credibility and expertise of social media influencers from an Irish females perspective in terms of the cosmetic industry.**

   Can you tell me a little about what makes an influencer credible?

   Who is the most influential for you?

   In your view, what makes the influencer trustworthy?

   Do you think they have the knowledge/expertise to give you advice?

   Have you come across any influencers that are not credible in your opinion and why?

3. **To assess the main factors impacting the cosmetics buying choices of this cohort**

   What draws you to a particular influencer?

   Do you find it an enjoyable experience?

   Does it make you doubt yourself?

Do you relate to these social media influencers?

Does it make you purchase the products they are endorsing?

Can you give me an example of a recent product you purchased?

4. **To assess the impact of paid or sponsored content from a female perspective.**

To what extent in your experience do influencers use sponsored content?

What is your view on sponsored content?

Would you still have trust in the product they are endorsing or would it make you question the reliability of the information?

Do you purchase products that are endorsed through either paid or sponsored content?

Have you had any bad/good experiences?

Appendix 3 – Participants

Participant	Age	Interest in Cosmetics	Interest in Social Media	Interest in Social Media Influencers
Participant A	21	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant B	23	Makeup only	Yes	Yes – but not following them directly
Participant C	22	Yes	Yes	Yes for beauty
Participant D	23	Tanning products rather than makeup	Yes	Yes for tan
Participant E	22	Not huge interest but would wear makeup	Yes	Yes – lifestyle influencers
Participant F	22	Yes	Yes	Yes – tan, beauty and lifestyle
Participant G	23	Somewhat	Yes	Yes – lifestyle, health and fitness mainly