



How does the promotion of fast fashion through
influencer marketing on Instagram impact
Millennial's purchase intentions, from an Irish
female Millennial perspective?

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Abstract

The rise of influencer marketing has changed how brands target consumers, posing the topic of conversation within recent research papers seeking to identify how effective this form of advertising is. While many papers discuss the philosophy and evolution of influencer marketing within the beauty and cosmetics industry, they are limited in their analysis of consumer's interpretations within a fast fashion context, particularly Irish female Millennial consumers. The recurring issues highlighted in the literature vary from the concepts, components, and antecedents of influencer marketing, occasionally referring to a generalised Millennial. The lacking emphasis on this cohort's beliefs, perspectives, and opinions in relation to social media influencers (SMIs) and their purchase intentions is evident, particularly from an Irish context.

This paper bridges a gap pertaining the impacts influencer marketing has on Irish female Millennial's (IFMs) purchase intentions within a fast fashion context on Instagram. Particular emphasis is shown toward the key drivers of this cohorts purchase intentions, their rationale for relating to SMIs and how this promotion of the fast fashion environment impacts their day-to-day lives. As consumers purchase intentions stem from building a relationship with SMIs, an exploration into their interpretation versus the factual data is emphasized.

Six in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with active Instagram users with an interest in fashion SMIs, fitting the IFM consumer demographic. Thematic analysis was conducted through an inductive approach to identify salient themes, capturing a true insight into IFM consumers opinions and understanding surrounding the topic. The findings demonstrate the importance of trust and relatability in relation to purchasing SMIs recommendation's, with a negative perception toward paid advertisements. Despite Millennial's viewing SMIs publishing paid promotions through a negative lens, the factual data proved this form of advertisement is effective in achieving sales for brands, thus, warranting further research of this topic.

Declaration

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background of Influencer Marketing

Advertising tools have evolved throughout the last 50 years and are ever-changing with the evolution of technology and social media. Prior to the ‘*tradigital*’ era, otherwise known as the technology revolution (Armano, 2009), consumers were influenced by celebrities, blogs, and magazines (Wicks *et al.*, 2011). The rise of the internet and social media has brought about innovative ways to promote entities and capture target audiences, resulting in the dismissal of traditional advertising methods for the young generations (Chaney, Touzani and Slimane, 2017). These young cohorts include Millennials and Gen Z, who find hours of their days are consumed by social media.

In recent years, influencer marketing has gained popularity on social media due to the increase of users who are the new-age consumers for brands (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). Platforms such as Instagram who have over one billion users (Tankovska, 2021a), have become the hub of influencer marketing, meaning they are a prime advertising tool for businesses. The Millennial cohort are regular users of this platform as it is considered it is the best method for captivating them, thus, they are found to be the target audience for many brands. This generation follow SMIs on Instagram, connecting and engaging with those who they resonate and relate to best (Chopra, Avhad and Juju, 2020).

With the rise of social media, came the increase in fashion trends and the emergence of hundreds of online fast fashion outlets (De Lenne and Vandenbosch, 2017). This vibrant market caters to Millennials and is often promoted through influencer marketing using SMIs. The low cost, fast production model appeals to this hyperconnected generation who are always looking for the next new trend, fitting in with social desirability bias (Anguelov, 2016). Marketers have learnt that to connect with Millennials they must build relationships, however, this is difficult for brands due to their cynical nature. Hence, SMIs are called upon to speak to this target audience on behalf of brands (Ki *et al.*, 2020).

1.2 Gaps in the Literature

While it could be argued that the topic of influencer marketing is over-researched (Chetioui, Benlafqih, and Lebdaoui, 2020; Chopra *et al.*, 2020; Žák and Hasprová, 2020; Bognar, Puljic and Kadezabek, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019), it too, remains under-researched in various aspects as this fast-paced consumer environment is ever-changing.

Taylor (2020) calls for an urgent need in future research surrounding this topic, as many papers report on generalised findings. While establishing the effectiveness of influencer marketing on a general scale is worthwhile for understanding the concepts which perform well and how to best utilize it as an advertising tool, there is a gap in the literature surrounding influencer marketing within an Irish context. This has led to the formation of important questions which have yet to be explored in this field:

1. Does influencer marketing have a positive or negative effect on Irish female Millennial's purchase intentions?
2. Are Irish female Millennial's concerned about the environmental and sustainable impacts caused by SMIs promoting fast fashion?
3. Is influencer marketing an effective advertising tool for fast fashion retailers targeting female Millennial's in an Irish context?

1.3 Overall Aim for the Research Study

The questions derived from the gaps in the literature formed the basis for this study. The aim of this study was to ultimately define the impacts influencer marketing has on IFMs purchase intentions, explicitly regarding the promotion of fast fashion on the social media platform Instagram. The questions acted as research objectives, which helped to achieve a greater understanding of the impact's influencer marketing has on consumers purchasing decisions, from an Irish context.

To achieve these objectives, the researcher incorporated qualitative, semi-structured interviews with six IFMs who are regular Instagram user and are familiar with SMIs. The interviews provided an in-depth understanding regarding this cohort's feelings, opinions and perspectives surrounding influencer marketing and fast fashion. The emergence of salient themes saw correlations appear within existing literature (Chopra *et al.*, 2020; Žák and

Hasprová, 2020), enabling the researcher to conduct a thematic analysis of the data collected. A netnography approach was also conducted, monitoring three SMIs promoting fast fashion to observe follower engagements with the aim of finding correlating or contrasting data. While no direct themes were derived from this data, the triangulation approach of interview findings, netnographic observations, and analysis of pre-existing data, enabled the researcher to get a true understanding of the SMI and fast fashion appeal.

Various avenues were explored to answer the research question, such as environmental and sustainability concerns, gaining a true insight into the thought-process of Millennial consumers and their considerations. The researcher explored other aspects such as social desirability, sense of self, trustworthiness, and credibility among others, to establish the main drivers behind the fast fashion craze and the rationale as to why this SMI market has such an influence over this cohort.

1.4 Research Justification and Rationale

Previous studies researching influencer marketing explored areas such as beauty and cosmetics (Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2018), however, as fast fashion is a vibrant market desired by young consumers and is expected to grow further (Sabanoglu, 2021), it was chosen as the topic for this study. As Taylor (2020) states, more research is needed for the topic of influencer marketing. As the growth of the global fast fashion market continues, along with the expanding SMI industry, research into the impacts of these factors on different countries should be explored. Research studies often focus on topics from a general consensus or within the U.S. (Ki *et al.*, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Freberg *et al.*, 2011), however some also explore the Indian consumer market (Sudha and Sheena, 2017). As Ireland is a small nation, it is not heavily researched, therefore the researcher aimed to generate valuable resources surrounding the influencer marketing and fast fashion environments.

This research study aimed to establish the positive or negative impacts SMIs promoting fast fashion on Instagram have on IFMs purchase intentions. As previous studies heavily focused on quantitatively researching this topic (Chetioui *et al.*, 2020; Žák and Hasprová, 2020; Bogнар *et al.*, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019), there was scope for qualitative studies to explore insightful rationales and provide additional in-depth explorations to the existing literature.

In-depth interviews with open-ended questions were chosen to provide the participants the opportunity to express their emotions, perspectives and opinions on the topic and add any relevant information they deem necessary to the study. The netnography approach was incorporated to increase the validity and credibility of the research findings, cross-examining the interview findings and existing literature to determine whether the data collected was consistent and ensure accuracy.

A thematic analysis was conducted to uncover hidden drivers that lead this cohort to SMIs promoting fast fashion, to wholly understand their appeal and how effective they are as an advertising tool. As mentioned, themes such as trustworthiness, relatability and social desirability were derived from the interviews and explored further to compare with previous literature in determining complementary or contrasting findings. Environmental and sustainability factors were explored as the Millennial cohort, who continue to contribute to these factors, will face the major issues and implications in the near future. Therefore, the findings derived from these themes will be valuable for future research and enhance the existing literature.

1.5 Structural Overview of the Research Study

The first chapter outlines a brief introduction to the topic of this research study, the gaps within the existing literature and the rationale and justification for conducting this research. The overall aim of the study is identified, with the use of research objectives.

The second chapter provides a detailed insight to the existing literature on the phenomenon surrounding fast fashion, the evolution of marketing communications, social media, the Millennial cohort, and influencer marketing. Various aspects of each topic are explored such as fast fashion in Ireland, the Instagram platform, and the promotion of fast fashion during Covid-19. This provides an overview and understanding of existing research, to which this research study contributes to.

The third chapter outlines the research question, objectives, and the chosen qualitative methodological approach to achieve these objectives. The gaps in current research are outlined, justifying the rationale for conducting this research topic.

Within the fourth chapter, the chosen sample group are defined, along with the justification for the methodological approach which is outlined using Saunders Lewis and Thornhill.

(2019) 'Research Onion' framework. The research instruments, comprising of interviews and netnography observations are outlined along with the rationale for incorporating a triangulation approach. An explanation of the in-depth analysis is carried out before clarifying the research limitations and ethical considerations.

The fifth chapter focuses on the critical discussion of the over-all findings from the interviews and netnography using a thematic approach, where salient themes are outlined relating to the research objectives and existing literature. These relevant themes are further explored and synthesised with the existing theory from the literature review. The integrated findings provide a theoretical understanding regarding the research phenomenon on approach to concluding the study.

The final chapter concludes the research study by outlining the value of the overall findings and determines whether the research objectives and the answering of the research question were achieved. The recommendations provide the scope for future studies regarding this research topic.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the existing literature surrounding fast fashion, the shift in marketing communications which promote fast fashion, and the Millennial cohort. The fashion/apparel industry is an attractive growth market valued at \$1.5 trillion U.S. dollars, with the global demand for clothing shaping a predicted increase surpassing \$2.25 trillion by 2025 (Shahbandeh, 2021b). The industry is dynamic in nature as fashion is cyclical, ever-changing with cutting edge fashion designs (Joy *et al.*, 2012). Most recent changes have seen the adaption of the clothing industry within the Covid-19 pandemic, where retailers were kept on their toes with constant regulations, lockdowns and guideline changes impacting the sale and manufacturing of garments worldwide. The industry was forced to react quickly and respond to new markets as seen with the increase of essential items and ‘*loungewear*’ (Hardcastle, 2020) due to the high volume of people working from home longing for comfort and style (Zhao and Kim, 2021; De, Pandey and Pal, 2020).

Fashion and clothing can be defined as forms of expression/representation or hedonic sense of self, acting as symbols that enable individuals to establish their identity, be it social or personal (Chaney, 2014; Belk, 1988; Gardner and Levy cited in Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). However, for the remit of this study, the main focus will be on the social values based on impacts such as sustainability, which will be examined further in *Section 2.3*. The literature has demonstrated the societal norms and expectations in terms of fashion, with specific industries, cultures, genders, and age demographics expected to dress in a particular fashion i.e., banking professionals wearing suits or the acceptance of cropped tops for the young demographic (Anguelov, 2016, p.2; Escalas and Bettman; Elliot; Penaloza, all cited in Chaney, 2014). These societal norms and expectations have expanded into digital environments with the rise of social media; thus, the purpose of this study was determined. Social media for instance, has not only provided individuals with a platform to voice their opinions, attitudes, and beliefs, it has acted as an e-retailer flooded with content about new products promoted by bloggers and influencers (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021; Lindergrén, 2017, p.4). Consumer behaviour has adapted due to persuasive marketing forms such as influencer

marketing, commonly promoting fashion trends and enabling consumers to gain access to diverse ranges of information about offerings through fashion reviews, otherwise known as ‘hauls’ or “*electronic word-of-mouth*” (e-WOM).

The clothing market consists of subcategories; ‘*menswear*’, ‘*womenswear*’, ‘*footwear*’, ‘*childrenswear*’, ‘*activewear*’ and can be further segmented into ‘*luxury apparel*’, ‘*couture*’, ‘*high-street*’ and ‘*fast fashion*’. The leading consumer markets ranked for this sector are China and Japan, where Chinese consumers are considered more “*fashion-conscious*” (Simmers, Parker, and Schaefer, 2014), while Japanese consumers are deemed to favour fast fashion due to “*societal trends*” and the increase in low disposable income (Assmann, 2018, p.51).

Amongst these factors rationalizing the demand of fast fashion, throughout the youth population there is a growing appeal toward clothing with contemporary consumers visualising their apparel as a form of expressing ‘*fantasy*’ or ‘*escapism*’ (Szmigiera, 2021; Lai and Perminiene, 2020). Studies found individuals gain a sense of ‘*fantasy*’ through their clothing as it allows them to express how they would like to be perceived and how they perceive themselves. For some, these fantasies can incorporate various meanings (Lai and Perminiene, 2020). Gabrielli, Baghi and Codeluppi (2013) complement these findings, suggesting that fast fashion provides consumers the opportunity to live their ‘*luxury dreams*’, albeit compromising on the quality and durability of their garments. This form of fashion sparks creativity from individuals, enhancing their lives through self-expression, boosting self-esteem, social encounters and offering a sense of fun, freedom and ‘*fitting in*’. Moreover, for many, clothing can be seen as a form of ‘*escapism*’ or ‘*mental*’ and ‘*emotional break*’ from societal norms, allowing one to express themselves freely (Chaney, 2014) and feel a sense of distraction from reality through their clothing, as seen at festivals or at the pool on holidays.

While these factors demonstrate the positive effects of fashion on individuals and their mindsets, there is a larger scale concern, fashion sustainability. Sustainable clothing refers to garments created without the use of sweatshops, harmful materials or with organic cotton (Su *et al.*, 2019). This is a major concern due to the devastating environmental impacts from mass producing garments using chemicals, high volumes of natural resources such as water and generating significant volumes of waste (Bianchi and Gonzalez, 2021; Su *et al.*, 2019). This study will explore such impacts of fast fashion with the IFM generation.

The Millennial cohort account for 46% of the global population (Ha and Angus, 2021), thus are deemed as an important consumer market. According to Euromonitor they are a generation who consider factors such as “*sustainability*” and “*wellbeing*” within their purchase decisions which are reflections of their “*values*” and “*life priorities*” (Ha and Angus, 2021). Studies find other factors such as “*long lasting*” and “*ethical*” are at the forefront of Millennials minds when purchasing items with a willingness to pay higher amounts for eco-friendly products (Su *et al.*, 2019). Bernardes *et al.* (2018) found many Millennials understand and support sustainability, however, associate sustainability with the consequential belief they must pay a higher price. As the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic unfold with a decrease in income for this cohort, value and cost are predicted to heavily influence purchase decisions.

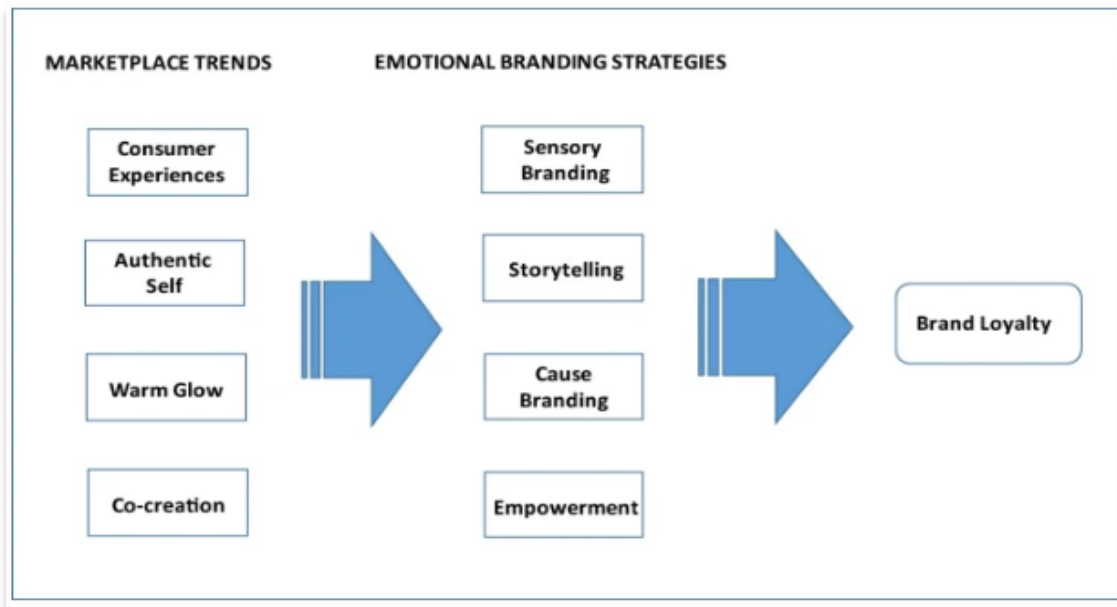
Social media plays an important role in recent times with promoting sustainability and has acted as an information hub for users to educate themselves on the environmental status of fast fashion (De Lenne and Vandenbosch, 2017). Female Millennials’ views on the topic may be swayed however with the vast number of SMIs promoting fast fashion brands regularly. As this cohort look up to these opinion leaders, otherwise known as influencers or almost considered as peers, it can appear as though purchasing fast fashion is socially acceptable and the ramifications of sustainability may not cross one’s mind at that time (Sanmiguel, Guercini, and Sádaba, 2019). Literature corroborates this, with findings suggesting SMIs play a role in influencing impulsive purchases amongst their consumer followers, especially female Millennials who trust and perceive online shopping methods as efficient (Chan *et al.*, 2017; Huang *et al.*, 2015; Verhagen and Van Dolen, 2011, all cited in Styvén, Foster and Wallström, 2017). These impacts and their correlation with SMIs and Millennials will be discussed further in 2.7.

2.2 What is Fast Fashion?

'Fast fashion' is a vibrant market, desired by young consumers, which has grown from generating revenues of \$22 billion in 2009 to \$36 billion in 2019, with a further expected growth reaching \$43 billion by 2029 (Sabanoglu, 2021). It consists of designing, manufacturing, producing, and marketing large volumes of short-lived '*disposable*' clothing for low prices in keeping with current trends (Anguelov, 2016; Joy *et al.*, 2012), while '*fashion*' is the term used for items, markets, and industries where short-lived style is concerned (Christopher, Lowson and Peck, 2004, p. 367). Fast fashion is an unpredictable, heavily competitive, and volatile market, otherwise known as a '*red ocean*', where industry players aggressively compete for limited market share (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005). Retailers battle for the largest market share depends on the speed of which they can get their newly produced items to market (Hayes and Jones, 2006). Rocamora (2017) criticizes these practices, believing the mediatization of fashion has disrupted its true meaning with designers and brands creating garments across various categories that will solely be appealing on screens.

The increase in fast fashion offerings for low prices has enhanced the disposable nature of the industry. The reason retailers want cheap and accessible transitory fashion is due to consumers desired representation to feel like '*fashionista's*' or as previously stated, to gain a sense of self (Gardner and Levy cited in Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). This ideology of demonstrating one's identity or sense of self through their clothing dates back to the 1980's (Belk, 1988), however remains relevant today (Lai and Perminiene, 2020; Ladik, Carrillat and Tadajewski, 2015). It could be argued that they play on these factors to encourage consumers disposable perception toward their garments with the constant offering of new, affordable, and seasonal trends (Anguelov, 2016).

Figure 1 – Emotional Branding



Source: Kim and Sullivan (2019)

2.2.1 Fast Fashion Brands

Fast fashion brands Zara and Primark have taken the European market by storm with considerably lower prices and are renowned for providing consumers with the newest trends. They play on an ‘exclusive’ and ‘scarcity’ ambience with rapid production timeframes, as illustrated by the quote below. Zara are considered ‘pioneers’ of fast fashion due to their quick reaction and manufacturing of evolving trends, seeing profits of €3.37 billion in 2019 (Shahbandeh, 2021a). They see new designs arrive twice weekly, enabling the creation or modification of fashion lines dependant on the current season. Inditex international director Luis Blanc stated, “*we want our clients to enter a beautiful store, where they are offered the latest fashions. But most important, we want our customers to understand that if they like something, they must buy it now, because it won’t be in the shops the following week*” (Ghemawat and Nueno, 2006, p. 13).

Originally founded in Ireland, retailer Primark operate 373 stores across 12 countries and are considered the leaders of fast fashion within the retailer market alongside Marks and Spencer, H&M and Inditex (Coppola, 2020). In 2018 they were recorded to have sold 989 million items across their clothing, footwear, accessories and most recently their homeware ranges (Coppola, 2020), while generating over £7 billion British pounds in 2019 (Sabanoglu, 2020). Part of the Association of British Foods, the company are valued at €18.4 billion and saw

Irish consumers spend €2.5 billion on clothing and €536 million on footwear in 2016 (Fashion United, 2016). These figures are predicted to be considerably lower in 2020 and into 2021 due to the prolonged closure of Primark stores throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and their absence within the e-commerce market. However, Primark alongside Zara have adapted to the contemporary digital environment by incorporating influencer marketing on social media along with their website platforms (Sabanoglu, 2020; Anwar, 2017).

It appears Zara have captured '*Evangelism*' with their customer-centric approach.

Evangelism sparks word of mouth and strong consumer beliefs within a brand and is amongst the '*new 4E's of marketing*' (Al Nawas, Altarifi and Ghantous, 2021; Konhäusner, Shang and Dabija, 2021). The '*new 4E's*' replace the traditional '*4P's*' which competitor H&M continue to utilize, replacing 'Product' with '*Experience*', 'Price' with '*Exchange*', 'Place' with '*Every Place*' and '*Promotion*' with '*Evangelism*'. Zara's focus on their customers journey is at the forefront of the business, creating seamless shopping experiences through in-store, online or through their app, while rotating their offerings regularly to retain relevancy. They understand their value proposition, providing the contemporary consumer, such as female Millennials, with their purchases and garments in a timely fashion (Danziger, 2018; Sandler, 2018).

Studies have found a positive correlation between customer brand engagement, value co-creation and evangelism, creating a strong brand perception and advocacy, complementing Vargo and Lusch's (2004) service logic by which consumers feel an ownership over a brand (Harrigan, Roy and Chen, 2021). Evangelism is a measurable tool that enables marketers to understand their customers' interactions and loyalty toward their offering. This supports the ideology of Grönroos and Gummerus (2014) that brands should form genuine connections and understanding with their customers (Grönroos, cited in Harrigan, *et al.*, 2021). Brand evangelism can be seen when SMIs promote brand's that influence followers' behaviours such as their purchase intentions (Hermanda, Sumarwan and Tinaprillia, 2019), e-WOM and positive reviews (Bognar *et al.*, 2019). These behaviours correlate with brand support and trust; thus, brand evangelism can be cultivated by marketers through third party digital platforms such as Instagram (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013).

There are stark contrasts with the operations of contemporary retailers such as Primark and Zara in comparison to traditional fashion retailers. Prior to the 1990's era, new fashion trends

were launched just twice a year due to the six-month lead time for new ranges to hit stores, whereas contemporary retailers release approximately 50 fashion launches a year with a lead time of roughly two to three weeks (McAlpine, 2019). Throughout the 20th century, the modern e-commerce environment saw the rise of online fast fashion retailers such as Boohoo and ASOS, targeting the '*digital natives*' and online users, inclusive of Millennials (Duffy, 2019). The online fast fashion industry generated \$481 billion in 2018 with an estimated increase of \$231 billion by 2022 (Qasem, 2020). Although '*cheap clothes*' are the main focal point of fast fashion, they do not define the retail model. It is an endless cycle of producing and purchasing clothing often (Moore, 2020).

2.2.2 Fast Fashion during Covid-19

The rapid pace for manufacturing and producing garments is due to retailers' pressure to be present within the '*right place at the right time*' to ensure they are fulfilling the fashion-conscious consumers ever-changing desires and purchase intentions (Hayes and Jones, 2006). The Covid-19 pandemic brought the high-speed dynamic environment of fast fashion to a halt with many retailers forced to shut stores, accumulating stock now considered '*out of season*' (Grimson, 2020). While some brands struggled, online fast fashion retailers Boohoo and ASOS saw sales surge, enabling them to purchase collapsed brands who failed to survive the pandemic. Boohoo purchased retailer Debenhams while competitor ASOS purchased the Arcadia Group, owners of Topshop, Miss Selfridge, and Topman (Eley, 2021; Irish Times Business, 2021). E-retailers proved to encapsulate the market during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Boohoo generated profit increases of 47% by August 2020 while ASOS saw a staggering 329% increase by the same time (Hardcastle, 2020).

The Spanish group leading the EU market '*Inditex*' who own Zara, Massimo Dutti and Mango, are market leaders of this sector selling 2.9 billion units 2019 (Shahbandeh, 2021b) and €971 million in 2020 (Inditex, 2021). Despite the effects of the pandemic resulting in a 70% decrease in profits, Inditex generated €1.1 billion in 2020 with their flagship chain store Zara ranking as the profit leader (Inditex, 2021). Meanwhile, Primark suffered losses of approximately €736 million due to their digital absence of online offerings (Grimson, 2020) which has proven to be essential during these times (Murray, 2020; Roggeveen and Sethuraman, 2020).

2.3 The Impacts of Fast Fashion

2.3.1 The Challenges Faced from Fast Fashion

While fast fashion is an incredibly lucrative market and the endless cycle of producing multiple fashion trends a year has benefits such as increasing customer satisfaction, fulfilling customers desires, and catering for current trends (Cook and Yurchisin, 2017), it should be noted that there are damaging impacts to be considered (Peters, Li and Lenzen, 2021). For instance, as previously mentioned, the sustainability on the environment and irrational consumer spending resulting in high wastage volumes (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020) are subsequent circumstances that criticize and tarnish the industry's reputation (Anguelov, 2016, p.4).

European consumers are predicted to use 26kg of textiles annually with approximately 11kg of that disposed of within the first year of purchase, illustrating one of the many impacts fast fashion has on a broader scale (Rreuse, 2019).

Wastage is one of the largest impacts from fast fashion (Moore, 2020). The clothing industry currently produces higher greenhouse gas emissions than global shipping and flights collectively, ranking as the highest contributing source of global emissions with a mere 1% being recycled worldwide (Clancy, 2019). The clothing industry in Ireland has grown by 2.3% from 2016 with the market size sitting at €2 billion (Ibis World, 2021). However, Thompson (2019) believes the fast fashion market in Ireland has plateaued and it is now time for us to consider the planet and environmental impacts, stating “*reducing the volume of clothing produced and sold is key*”.

In Ireland, textiles fill 63,000 tonnes of landfill each year with an estimated 50% donated to clothes banks or charity (Clancy, 2019). As a response Ireland launched a ‘*Waste Action Plan*’ in September 2020 with a ‘*cheap clothes tax*’ taken into consideration (Moore, 2020). This action plan aims to increase awareness, so individuals and businesses consume less material resources and reduce the circularity gap by 2030 in line with fellow EU countries. Grant schemes have been put in place to encourage innovations for businesses and community projects to work toward achieving these objectives (Gov.ie, 2021).

Oxfam state the dumping of textiles in Ireland generates 12 tonnes of carbon emissions every minute, emphasizing climate activist Greta Thunberg's global call to ‘*wake up*’ to the disaster we are facing and causing to our planet. While it is noted that Greta resonates best with the Generation Z cohort, these younger generations are said to contribute to educating older generations such as Millennials with their “*fight for intergenerational climate justice*”,

(Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020; Meade, 2020), thus, is relevant in this context. As the findings of Sorensen and Jorgensen (2019) previously illustrated, female Millennials are aware of the devastating impacts of fast fashion and have intentions to do their part in preventing further damage. However, it could be argued that there are representational benefits from fast fashion, enabling these consumers to fulfil their fashion desires, dress for special occasions or ‘*once off*’ events and to purchase affordable clothing in-stores and online (Mrad *et al.*, 2020; Sorensen and Jorgensen, 2019). However, there is a paradox and contradiction of self with wanting the product but also wanting sustainability.

These impacts can be seen worldwide, however, as mentioned, Irelands emergency climate action plan along with Green Party support aims to rank Ireland as carbon neutral by 2050 in aiming to combat these issues (Buckley *et al.*, 2021; Duffy, 2019). As the fashion industry ranks the second highest polluting industry worldwide due to the excessive use of chemicals, water and fuel, Irish Millennials studying retail and fashion have begun contributing toward more sustainable fashion movements. These movements known as ‘*GROWN*’ and ‘*The Upcycle Movement*’ are in collaboration with Irish fashion colleges and big brands such as Brown Thomas, IKEA and Arnotts (Keogh, 2020; Duffy, 2019). The aim of these movements is for people to connect and collaborate to protect the environment from future harm, inspire and educate people in sustainable fashion with the hope to change their attitudes toward the over consumption of materials i.e., fast fashion (Grown, 2021).

Additional challenges/issues involve globalization and pollution (Peters *et al.*, 2021). This industry is responsible for sweatshop practices, 79 trillion litres of water consumption, 92 million tonnes of waste and significantly contributes to microplastics polluting the ocean (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020). Within the last 40 years the rapid evolution of globalisation has coerced many retailers to opt for outsourcing the production of their garments to developing countries as a solution to keep costs low and keep up with change to prevent distinction (McAlpine, 2019). Zara and online brands such as Boohoo manufacture most of their clothing locally, however, they outsource manufacturing and production to Asian suppliers for economies of scale (Camargo, Pereira and Scarpin, 2020; Orcao and Pérez, 2014). While outsourcing can be a great cost saving measure and help to retain relevancy within fast paced markets, there are negative consequences as a result. Many factories in developing countries operate in poor working conditions with low wage exploitation with the added pressure for quick turnaround times seeing workers put in 18 hour shifts seven days a week (Chang, 2020; Lawrence, 2004). The repercussion of such issues has seen the preventable disaster of the

‘Rana Plaza factory collapse’ in Bangladesh which claimed the lives of 1,138 workers, injuring 2,600 (McAlpine, 2019).

2.3.2 Fast Fashion and the Millennial Consumer

These challenges are particularly evident for Millennial consumers, who are aware of the damaging effects, yet continue to purchase from these brands. This generation are an important cohort for fashion retailers and marketers to consider as they are the new young working professionals, thus are an attractive target market to gain sales from (Munsch, 2021). It is presumed their consumption of fast fashion is due to factors such as social desirability, bias for brands and affordability. The study of Sorensen and Jorgensen (2019) found this was the case with female Millennials stating they purchase fast fashion items despite knowing the environmental impacts due to the ‘*exciting*’ accessibility and affordability of remaining ‘*on trend*’ amongst peers. The study of Park, Park and Lee (2014) demonstrated similarities, with female Millennials stating their high level of concern for the effects of fast fashion, however, the data indicates the fashion-conscious cohort are still considered prime customers (Vuong and Nguyen, 2018). Zara, Primark, and H&M have incorporated sustainable fashion lines as seen within their Irish stores, to complement Millennials values and continue to resonate with the cohort (Sorensen and Jorgensen, 2019). While these retailers provide consumers with the desired affordable clothing under the ‘*sustainability*’ title, they are still mass producing the garments at a high-speed, meaning the pollution and wastage cycle has not been broken (Peters *et al.*, 2021).

2.4 The Millennial Generation

Individuals born between the years 1981-1996 are defined as Millennials, otherwise known as ‘*Generation Y*’ (Jacobsen and Barnes, 2020). This cohort are ranked after ‘*Generation X*’ also known as ‘*Baby Boomers*’ and before ‘*Generation Y*’ or ‘*Centennials*’. Due to the rapid development in technology within their lifetime, Millennials are identified as ‘*digital natives*’, thus, are considered to be captivated with the realm of SMIs (Dimock, 2019; Smith, 2019; Moore, 2012). This cohort became accustomed to digital lifestyles and learning capabilities early on, with technology moulding their cognitive, psychological, and social

behaviours (Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Aikat, 2019). This provided the cohort with technological advantage as it was second nature, in comparison to previous generations, otherwise known as ‘*digital immigrants*’, who were accustomed to traditional methods and mindsets (Cora, 2019).

2.4.1 Digital Natives

Aikat (2019) states Millennials ‘*live*’ and ‘*breathe*’ technology with their high usage of the internet on various digital devices. 92% of Millennials are recorded as smartphone owners in comparison to 85% of Generation X, which is remarkably high considering this cohort had to essentially learn and become accustomed to technology from scratch. The internet is considered a ‘*key element*’ of individuals lives with the rise in smartphone usage. Deloitte reports Irish smartphone users check their phones 58 times daily with 87% of those recorded are within the first hour of wakening (Deloitte, 2021). This remains consistent on a European scale, with 92% of young people, inclusive of Millennials, recorded to use their smartphone to access the internet rather than the 52% who use a computer (Eurostat, 2020). Smartphones have obtained the highest penetration rate for online shopping as they are most likely to shop through social media and use contemporary retail technologies, e.g., Amazon’s ‘*Alexa*’ smart speaker (Johnson, 2021b). 70% of Millennials are likely to make impulse purchases, with 82% willing to purchase an item for the first time (Loeb, 2020).

They are a ‘*dominant*’ cohort who use social media as a tool for purchasing online and are easily influenced by their followers and peers on sites such as Instagram and Facebook, shaping how brands conduct their business. Generally, female Millennials have higher social media usage rates as seen with Facebook where 70% of users are male and 78% female, and Instagram with 69% of male users in comparison to 79% females (Tankovska, 2021d).

However, Millennials are not considered ‘*big spenders*’, potentially because of their upbringing throughout the recession, therefore, feel strongly about brands values and beliefs which impact their purchasing intentions, as previously mentioned by Ha and Angus (2021). This potential barrier to fast fashion sales justifies why brands such as Zara and Primark collaborate with SMIs to tap into these consumers’ minds, attitudes, and purchase intentions (McQuillan, 2019; Sudha and Sheena, 2017).

2.4.2 Co-Creation

Millennials seek co-creation with brands and involvement within large peer groups such as online communities and forums (Weber, 2017). Co-creation is an ideology prompted by Vargo and Lusch (2004) which consists of a brand and consumer collaborating to create value, meaning the consumer is no longer deemed as an '*external factor*', but rather an '*internal*' element contributing to the marketing ecosystem. Co-creation can spark engagement and interactions with consumers as recommended by Grönroos and Gummerus (2014), aiding the construction of relationships, and creating a customer base. This is evident with social media users '*following*' SMIs sponsored branded posts, engaging with their page, and '*liking*' or '*sharing*' their content. While it is SMIs who are co-creating and collaborating with brands for commercial intentions and rely on engagement from their followers to gain these commercial opportunities, Millennials still receive the transparency they long for through co-creation with SMIs. They feel they are contributing toward the end-product with their reviews and opinions (Weber, 2017) and are perceived as '*pro-active*' which is demonstrated through their tech-savvy control over what advertisements they are subject to as previously discussed (Statista Research Department, 2021a; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016). Kim and Sullivan (2019) state the importance for brands to understand and acknowledge co-creation, as it can positively impact sales and customer retention rates when consumers feel '*heard*' and '*empowered*'. Primark have somewhat achieved this by resharing customers images on Instagram of them wearing Primark clothing, as seen in *Figure 2*, feeding into the sense of co-creation which female Millennials in particular long for (Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016).

Figure 2 – Primark's Co-creation

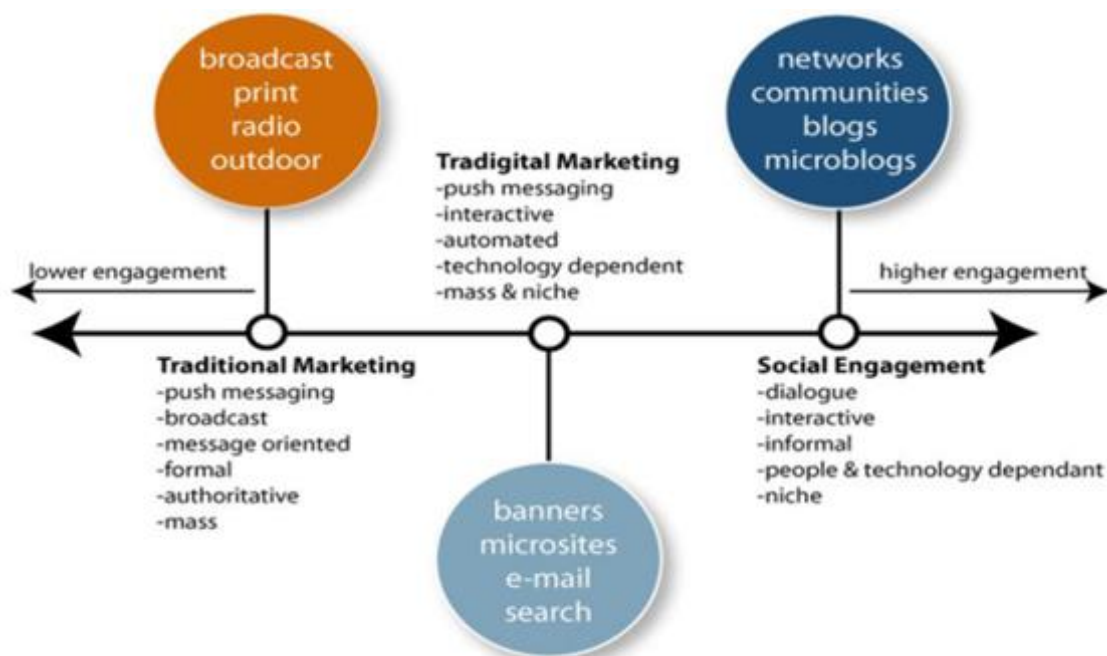


Source: Primark (2021)

2.5 The Evolution of Marketing Communications

In response to digital natives desired form of communication, marketing strategies have shifted toward more digital formats, using predominantly social media in many cases (Adeola, Hinson and Evans, 2020). This demonstrates the impact the rise of broadband internet and smartphones has had on the marketing discipline since its 1993 debut (Faraj, Kwon and Watts, 2004). The advancement in technology devices has transformed how we think, shop, work, socialize, and communicate with 4.6 billion internet users (Clement, 2020) and 3 billion smartphone users in 2020 (O'Dea, 2021). While the evolution of marketing communications has moved away from low-engaging traditional methods such as print and radio, these formats are still used for other generations (Chaney *et al.*, 2017; Williams and Page, 2011), thus, creating 'Tradigital' marketing communications as depicted in Armano (2009)'s diagram (Figure 3). The term 'Tradigital' outlines the modern environment, combining technology and individuals, allowing brands to interact and build relationships with consumers based upon their network and reciprocal dialogues (Armano, 2009).

Figure 3 – The Evolution of Marketing Communications



Source: Armano (2009)

Armano's diagram demonstrates the evolution of marketing communications from disruptive, traditional push methods to contemporary communications focusing on more interactive and high-engaging approaches that add intrinsic value within hyperconnected environments, such as forums, blogs, and online communities (Paul and Mas, 2020; Gilal *et al.*, 2019). Armano (2009) complements Florenthal (2019) study which suggests marketers need to adjust their advertising techniques to best capture the tech-savvy, hyperconnected and cynical consumer, a significant proportion of which are social media users. Adler (as cited in Turner, 2015) expresses his beliefs regarding the importance of social interactions and human connections, which now incorporate digital interactions and connections for those accustomed to digital environments, i.e., Millennials (Turner, 2015).

The diagram's shift interrupts the media and what they truly want to achieve because with the advancement of technology, consumers have more choice for engagement and collaboration through means such as instant messaging or video communication, which is what Millennials and centennials expect (Llopis-Amorós *et al.*, 2019). Marketing communications have evolved due to Millennials "*turning traditional marketing on its head*" and has been made possible due to the advancement of technology (Newman, 2015). Such disparity between '*traditional*' and '*contemporary*' tools are seen to be led by digital natives with cynical Millennials seeking more advanced marketing communications that are more than a sales pitch (Gilal *et al.*, 2019; Naumovska, 2017). Traditional marketing mainly focused on getting the brands' offering message to reach consumers, whereas modern marketing is more customer-orientated, as the value of loyal customers has become apparent for businesses (Rakic and Rakic, 2017).

It is evident that this one-way communication no longer works as seen with the previously mentioned 763.5 million internet users enabling ad blockers (Statista Research Department, 2021a). Two-way communication with SMIs has proven successful and the way forward (Childers and Boatwright, 2020). Millennials are proactively searching social media without companies pushing information at them, finding authentic information with peers, engaging, and collaborating with like-minded individuals through SMIs and online communities (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). This ideology links back in with Vargo and Lusch (2004) as value is created through this form of communication.

Where traditional marketing mix looked at '*product*', '*place*', '*price*', and '*promotion*', the contemporary marketing mix focuses on '*conversation*', '*connecting*', '*consumption*', '*community*', '*contact*', and '*consideration*' (Constantinides, 2006). This emphasizes the shift in marketing communications as marketers now look to establish meaningful '*connections*' and '*communities*' to '*connect*' consumers, sparking '*conversation*' amongst those who have '*consumed*' their offering, encouraging evangelism and loyalty amongst customers (Al Nawas *et al.*, 2021; Constantinides, 2006). This corroborates with Grönroos and Gummerus (2014), as mentioned above and more recently Araujo *et al.*, (2020), that marketers have moved away from one-way communications to dialogue, satisfying Millennial's standards for engaging with collaborative and co-creative brands. Moreover, incorporating the consumers' needs and desires within the brands strategy is common practice for modern marketing as it is easier to target specific demographics through digital means as seen with '*search engine optimisation*', where marketers use key search words to direct consumers to their website (Papagiannis, 2020, p.25).

91% of households in Europe had access to the internet in 2020 (Johnson, 2021a). These high levels of broadband penetration have facilitated the adoption and growth of engagement marketing through social media as more consumers are present online, allowing marketers to track, capture and attract them best (Ratchford, 2019). The recent introduction of 5G internet allows faster data transmissions, greater levels of remote connections and higher numbers of devices (Condoluci and Mahmoodi, 2018). This advancement adds convenience for both consumers and businesses and can provide optimal opportunities. The growth of the internet has enabled the evolution of online shopping for consumers with fast powering networks (Ratchford, 2019). As previously mentioned, the Millennial cohort have a '*mobile first*' mentality which is how they primarily access the internet (Aikat, 2019), and Instagram is their social media platform of choice. This is due to the easily consumed repository of information, media, and messaging, optimized for the compact screens (Wang, Kim and Malthouse, 2016), which delights Millennials and facilitates co-creation and collaboration (Jain and Yadav, 2017).

Zara have adopted an integrated marketing communications approach, whereby they continue to use traditional formats such as in-store marketing to grasp customers' attention. However, they have also introduced digital features to attract the tech-savvy Millennial cohort as seen with their mobile app. Complementing Vargo and Lusch (2004), Zara delivers a co-creative platform where consumers can shop and view items through an enhanced '*real life*',

interactive digital experience known as augmented reality (Rauschnabel, Felix and Hinsch, 2019; Scholz and Duffy, 2018) as well as QR codes on Zara's shop windows using their smartphones (Carmigniani and Furht, 2011). These engaging elements allude back to Armano's (2009) model, enabling Millennials to tailor personal, relevant experiences with the brand.

2.6 Social Media

The internet, originally known as '*ARPANET*' and '*NSFNET*' networks which allowed researchers to communicate quickly, was founded in the 1950's (Campbell-Kelly and Garcia-Swartz, 2013) along with the early adoption of blogs which acted as a source of information for readers (Wicks *et al.*, 2011). The '*Commercial Internet*' launched in the 1990's by private firms who noticed its effectiveness and potential growth with elements such as e-mail, thus, created their own networks, i.e., Google and Bing (Townsend, 2001; Zook, 2000). Such technology advances have paved the way for online networking sites i.e., social media. Social media is a digital community which essentially first launched in the early 1950's with the evolution of '*blogs*' and digital site '*Sixdegrees*' in 1997 (Fuchs *et al.*, 2011; Wicks *et al.*, 2011). They are online interactive technologies that give users a platform to '*peer*', '*communicate*' and '*share*' content with fellow users, building and retaining relationships (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Tapscott, Williams and Herman, 2008). Despite most platforms remaining free of charge, social media is estimated to generate \$260 million in 2021 (Statista, 2021). Over time, social media evolved with the launch of '*Facebook*' in 2004 alongside sites such as '*MySpace*' and '*YouTube*', which focus mainly on photo and video content where individuals can interact with like-minded people. Microblogging platform '*Twitter*' was then launched in 2006 and in later years '*Instagram*', '*Snapchat*', '*LinkedIn*', and '*TikTok*' followed suit forming a large online digital community (Fuchs, 2021; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). This evolving industry has become a contemporary marketing communication tool, key for engaging with Millennial consumers.

2.6.1 Advertising Tool

Social media has become a ‘*hotspot*’ advertising platform for marketers due to the 3.78 billion users worldwide (Tankovska, 2021b). This figure is predicted to reach 4.41 billion by 2025, justifying its increased presence within brands marketing strategies. Within 2020 in Ireland, digital advertising saw revenues of €726 million, €272 million of which was due to social media, inclusive of the contemporary advertising method of influencer marketing, which is the interest of this study (Stedman, 2021). The expected spend across social media in 2020 amounted to \$1.4 trillion (Loeb, 2020). It is a prime location for brands to engage and focus on customer journeys, from brand awareness to their intent to purchase, using question boxes, polls to capture opinions or competitions (Jauman, 2018). Social media can amplify sales and brand perception when users engage with influential individuals i.e., SMIs and peers, gaining various perspectives on the offering (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2014). The literature demonstrates SMIs can deliver brand awareness, positive perceptions and added value to promoted offerings through their emotional, relatable connection with followers (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021; Childers and Boatwright, 2020). While it is not the remit for this study, there is room for this theme to be explored in future studies. Studies find brand engagement is generally instigated from “*social connectivity*” through instant messaging of videos or images, “*interest immersion*”, sparking conversations on common ground, “*a sense of presence*” enabling users to feel that they belong, and “*the consumption of information*”, where users analyse and digest the information given, potentially sparking resonance (Smith and Gallicano, 2015). Samala and Katkam (2019) posit the importance for fashion brands in particular to be present and interactive on social media sites as this is where many Millennials exchange information, share reviews and inform peers of the brands they wear and their e-WOM. Their study verified the need for brand engagement, especially with Millennials, to obtain brand loyalty and use it as a prime tool to share brand information and product launches.

2.6.2 Social Media Platforms

Facebook is ranked as a ‘*key player*’ and most popular platform, exceeding one billion accounts and 2.5 billion active monthly users (Tankovska, 2021b). Instagram is not far behind seeing one billion active monthly users and is considered the road to Millennials hearts due to its visually engaging nature (Tankovska, 2021a; Loeb, 2020). Although Facebook has established a popular perception, its status is rapidly declining amongst

Millennial users. The platform has lost followers of the younger generations due to their concern regarding the privacy of their information that could potentially be sold to advertisers, making them more cynical and strengthening their hatred toward one-way, unsolicited marketing communications (Durkee, 2020; Fulton, and Kibby, 2017). This was evident most recently when Facebook-owned messaging app ‘*WhatsApp*’, updated their privacy policy to allow sister site Facebook the right to access users’ data. This was at the dismay of WhatsApp users and consumers across Europe, demonstrating the cynicism toward marketers and their protectiveness surrounding their core mode of communication, the smartphone (O’Brien, 2021). As a result of this, ‘*millions*’ of users are said to have left the platform with competitors ‘Signal’ gaining 7.5 million users and ‘Telegram’ gaining 25 million users (Doffman, 2021; The Irish Times, 2021).

This is of great disadvantage for Facebook as it has been recorded that these users spend approximately 144 minutes daily on social media with the global usage rate recorded to be 49% in 2020 (Tankovska, 2021b). The high usage rates stem from the popularity of smartphone devices used a mode of communication (Johnson, 2021b). Facebook’s sister site, Instagram, is particularly popular with Millennials who do not like to read a lot of writing online, due to its captivating pictorial appeal of visual storytelling and ease of access on smartphone devices (Dabas *et al.*, 2017). They are attracted to the instantaneous nature of the digital environment, and as previously stated, long for clarification, honest peer reviews, co-creation, and collaboration (Weber, 2017). Instagram’s 15 second stories which stay live for 24hours appeal to this cohort, thus, traditional marketing methods no longer suffice (Hootsuite, 2019; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016). On this platform, users can edit photos with filters, hashtags, locations and geotags to enable one’s content to reach more viewers, with the aim of connecting like-minded people (Alassani and Görtez, 2019).

Instagram’s Irish userbase surpassed 2.1 million users in 2020 with a penetration rate of 43% the year previous (Tankovska, 2021c). Of the 2.1 million users, 58% were female (Napoleoncat, 2020) and studies find 57% of Millennial users are interested in and discover fashion trends on the platform (Loeb, 2020). The interactive video and photo-sharing platform is popular amongst SMIs and in 2016 was ranked as the “*most influential social platform in the world*” (Alassani and Görtez, 2019). Many brands have recognised the business potential of utilizing Instagram’s platform and paying SMIs to promote their offerings (Alassani and Görtez, 2019; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2014) with 6 million sponsored and branded posts recorded on Instagram in 2020 (Guttmann, 2020). Surveys

found 63% of users enjoy viewing content posted by SMIs, thus, advertising through influencer marketing is a new marketing phenomenon (Facebook, 2019). As previously mentioned, Millennials prefer peer-to-peer communications rather than traditional methods, thus, influencer marketing is a strong contender for marketers to consider if looking to build consumer relationships due to its interactive and engaging nature (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019; Smith, 2012).

2.7 The Rise of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is essentially a form of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, or in a digital context, electronic word-of-mouth marketing (e-WOM) (Bakker, 2018). Kotler *et al.*, (cited in Bakker, 2018) defines “*WOM influence’ as a form of personal communication about a product that reaches buyers through channels not directly controlled by the company*”. While the term is yet to be academically defined, influencer marketing is essentially a form of communication where brands use individuals with a substantial online following/audience who admire and trust them, to target consumers, create brand awareness and build customer loyalty (Childers *et al.*, 2018). Influencers are persons considered to have a power or ‘*influence*’ over a specific group of individuals (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). This marketing form was once associated with celebrities, however, it has adapted and merged into the evolution of the digital environment which is seen with influencer marketing on social media (Backaler, 2018, p.17). The industry was worth approximately \$10 billion in the U.S in 2020, accounting for 5% of the online advertisement market, worth \$250 billion (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020).

2.7.1 Social Media Influencers

SMIs are categorised dependent on their number of followers within segments known as ‘*nano*’, ‘*micro*’, ‘*macro*’ and ‘*mega*’ (Oliveira, Barbosa and Sousa, 2020). Nano influencers obtain between 1,000-10,000 followers, limiting their consumer reach, however, they have an established social presence and are often perceived as more ‘*trustworthy*’ due to their small following (Oliveira *et al.*, 2020). Micro influencers have between 10,000-100,000 followers and therefore, have higher credibility and engagement levels, interacting with followers regularly and publishing content consistently (Oliveira *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, macro influencers also post regularly, although obtain follower numbers of 100,000-1 million, thus,

are deemed less ‘*credible*’ due to their ‘*artificial*’ perception from consumers (Bakker, 2018). Mega influencers are commonly known as celebrities with follower numbers surpassing 1 million due to their personal talents, i.e., footballer Ronaldo or singer Beyoncé (Oliveira *et al.*, 2020; Alassani and Görtz, 2019).

Although SMIs are not necessarily famously known, they obtain a ‘*celebrity-like*’ status due to their large online following (Mudge and Shaheen, 2017). These followings are often developed due to the influencers focus on key, intriguing, areas such as cosmetics, fitness, or fashion, which they can earn a commission from when working alongside brands related to their focused area (Sudha and Sheena, 2017).

Literature has found Millennials to be associated the most with SMIs within specific fields relevant to them, most commonly fashion, travel, and beauty (Bakker, 2018). Popular celebrity influencers that Millennials follow on Instagram are the Kardashian sisters and Selena Gomez. However, findings state Millennials favour this platform for SMIs authentic, genuine content as they are uninterested in advertisements, thus, the authenticity of such celebrity’s content could be argued (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Within Chopra *et al.* (2020) study, Millennials stated SMIs are preferred as they are “*in-sync with the latest trends*” however they are cynical of some SMIs credibility due to their publishing of misleading information.

2.7.2 Advertising Source

SMIs have been identified as an advertising source in recent years due to their ability to influence and persuade consumers purchase intentions, attitudes, and behaviours, establishing relationships thematically relating to believability and authenticity (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). This is evident with Chopra *et al.* (2020) study, finding 70% of respondents perceived brands positively when recommended by an SMI, while 25% purchase the products mentioned. While each theme is equally important, it should be noted for the remit of this study, only themes relating to SMIs promoting fast fashion impact on IFMs purchase intentions and attitudes will be discussed.

Ki *et al.* (2020) state SMIs who build relationships and resonance with their ‘*followers*’, see increased engagement for their partnered brands and develop a credible reputation with the cohort as they believe the influencer to be authentic and their word to be true. They are considered ‘*opinion leaders*’ (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Childers *et al.*, 2018) due to their

influence, which is reliant on the size of their following (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021; Oliveira *et al.*, 2020). IFMs are commonly present on Instagram, where the majority of SMIs can be found (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). As Baker (2018) uncovered in recent findings, IFMs long to relate with SMIs, paying attention to their opinions and trustworthiness. As previously stated, Millennial's value engagement and authenticity with SMIs (Munsch, 2021), which has proven to help build relationships and rank the SMI as more credible (Ki *et al.*, 2020). Despite the cohort's cynical status toward advertisements, Maduako (2020) discovered a 72% increase in advertised content on social media throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in higher rates of engagement with SMIs. This is likely due to the large volume of people at home on their phones scrolling social media, however, further verifies Armano's (2009) diagram that was previously discussed, highlighting this marketing communication shift. This particular instance demonstrated traditional methods such as billboards or transport modes were not sufficient advertising methods.

2.7.3 Social Media Influencers in Ireland

Viewing SMIs from an Irish context, in 2020 RTÉ ranked "*Ireland's top 40 online influencer*", consisting of fashion and lifestyle SMIs Rosie Connolly, Rozanna Purcell, Courtney Smith, and Melissa Mills Bari (Kenny, 2020). Collectively, these SMIs have 1,348,000 followers on Instagram, with most obtaining over 140,000 followers individually, therefore, are considered '*macro*' influencers (Bakker, 2018). Their high following is due to their resonance with IFMs which is reflected in their content, relating to Irish businesses, and being accustomed to Irish trends and cultures i.e., working with Irish-born Primark (Coppola, 2020). Ireland is known to be a small country where "*everyone knows everyone*" (Wulff, 2017, p.306), creating a greater sense of familiarity when building relationships between Irish Millennials and Irish SMIs. For instance, Millennial Rosie Connolly works with Primark, and promotes their clothing for women, men and children which is relevant to her content consisting of her family life. Zara is another brand Rosie wears often, however, does not work with the brand, thus, followers deem this content authentic as she is not being paid to wear the garments and the believability theme shines through, similar to one trusting their peer's opinion over a branded advertisement. This sort of content resonates with IFMs as Primark and Zara are stores which they frequent often, therefore Rosie's fashion sense appeals to many followers as they are within the same age demographic.

2.7.3.1 ASAI Influencer Guidelines

To provide consumers with transparency, Irish online influencers must abide by guidelines to clearly state when their content is an advertisement using the hashtag ‘#ad’, sponsored ‘#sp’, ‘collaboration’ or ‘gifted’ as stated by the regulating body, known as the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI, 2021). The ASAI regulates all communication sectors to ensure that every campaign meets ‘the highest standards, and are honest, legal and decent’. Research undertaken by the ASAI regarding consumers’ opinions of influencer marketing among a broad demographic of 1,224 adults found there was an overall lack of trust surrounding the guidelines. More than 51% of people questioned the levels of transparency within the industry, and this lack of trust has consumers calling for the current guidelines to become regulations (Quann, 2021).

66% respondents were highly vigilant of the social media terms ‘#brandambassador’, ‘#sponsored’ and ‘#ad’ when linking to advertisements, while 40% were assured that SMIs are more credible and responsible in comparison to the previous three years. Three in four understood influencer marketing practices, however 57% felt irritated by high volumes on sponsored content. Almost 60% of respondents stated SMIs who lack authenticity were labelled ‘annoying’, while 80% were under the impression that every ‘#ad’ post meant the brand were paying the influencer for a positive review only, followed by 75% believing any sort of content mentioning a brand was some form of advertisement (ASAI, 2021).

Their study found 76% of respondents’ purpose for using social media was to uncover ‘tips’ and ‘inspiration’, while almost 60% found heavily edited photos and unauthentic influencers ‘annoying’ as they believe they are fabricating real life. Cynical consumers are noticing specific behaviours amongst SMIs such as repeating content and capitalizing from gullible and trustful followers with approximately 50% finding such behaviours irritating. The findings suggest transparency and authenticity are key when establishing a trustworthy and credible relationship between SMI and follower, and such considerations can benefit the influencer and their future collaborative campaigns with brands. Overall, the research suggests that the influencer industry has built strong foundations over the years as a form of advertising, with the digital advertising tool predicted to grow from strength to strength in the coming years (ASAI, 2021).

2.7.4 The Social Media Influencer Era

Although these findings suggest influencer marketing is a strong method going forward, speculation has occurred whether it has '*had its day*'. It was reported that influencer engagement and conversion rates declined from 2019-2020 (Kowalewicz, 2020), and due to the financial impact of Covid-19 on businesses with Irish small medium enterprises seeing losses of between €10.3 billion and €11.7 billion (Ihle, 2020), many cut their marketing budgets, decreasing the use of influencer marketing (Hickman, 2020; Hedreen, 2019). Taylor (2020) has contrasting views, appreciating the findings of previous studies demonstrating consumers engage with SMIs 75% of the time but only 36% were wholly convinced, although the author believes the advertising method is not yet '*dead*'. The rationale behind this viewpoint is backed up by 58% of Generation Z and 48% of Millennials having purchased items based upon an influencer's recommendation, thus, demonstrating the continuing success of influencer marketing (Taylor, 2020).

Lee and Theokary (2021) and Vrontis *et al.*, (2021) state the "*aggressive*" market is growing "*exponentially*" with the increase in popularity for SMIs. The industry is predicted to grow by 30.3% annually from 2021-2028, reaching approximately \$84.89 billion by 2028 (Grand View Research, 2021). Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) and Alassani and Görtz (2019) also support Taylor (2020), with findings that influencer marketing is a '*promising*' strategy for brands and consumers alike as it acts as a middle ground for building relationships, interactions, and has the potential to positively effect consumers behaviours such as purchase intentions (Chopra *et al.*, 2020). Many influencers picked up on consumers' need for '*escapism*' and '*co creation*' and therefore adapted their content offering, excluding the woes of Covid-19 talk and focused more on fashion or workouts to keep followers occupied. Followers could interact and collaborate with SMIs joining in on '*Instagram Live*' workouts, giving the sense of co-creation the Millennial cohort in particular crave. Studies found throughout this period, SMIs saw a spike of 51.3% in engagement through comments and 67.1% in likes, which further reiterates the importance and validity of Armano's (2009) diagram demonstrating the digital shift (Maduako, 2020).

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter depicted the current state of literature surrounding fast fashion and influencer marketing on social media. The fast fashion industry is a booming, competitive trade which feeds into fuelling social desirability, while contributing to devastating environmental impacts. It is clear that these ranges are popular amongst the Millennial cohort due to the low-price tag and constant evolution in styles, which are often promoted by SMIs.

The literature verifies that the shift in marketing communications has paved the way for new advertising methods to target the hyperconnected young consumers, as seen with social media influencer marketing. Traditional methods no longer suffice to capture this audience as we are now living in a digital era. Where celebrities once influenced the purchase intentions of consumers, SMIs have now filled this position particularly in the fashion, cosmetics, and beauty sectors.

Salient themes have emerged from the literature which provide a deeper insight into why Millennial's are influenced by SMIs, such as trustworthiness, relatability, social desirability, price, and a sense of self. Environmental impacts have been outlined with authors contrasting views surrounding Millennial's perceptions, while social media usage was explored to gain a fuller understanding of how Millennial's acquire new information.

These factors each contribute to understanding and answering the research question at hand, however, gaps are identified within the literature such as focusing on the promotion of fast fashion on Instagram from an Irish context. This study aims to build on the existing literature, delving deeper into how SMIs impact IFMs purchase intentions, and to provide valuable findings for Irish marketers in understanding their female Millennial target audiences.

Chapter 3: Research Question & Objectives

3.1 Research Question

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), the research study is based upon the research question. This centralised approach is recommended to enable the researcher to incorporate every aspect of the study. Easterby-Smith *et al.*, (2018) state the importance of research questions, which allow the researcher to determine the focus of their study. Analysing the literature has revealed that there are various impacts caused by fast fashion, both environmentally and toward consumers. The rise in popularity with social media and influencer marketing established a new platform for promoting fast fashion, targeting a large proportion of female Millennials. Subsequently, the research question asks:

“How does the promotion of fast fashion through influencer marketing on Instagram impact Millennials’ purchase intentions, from an Irish female Millennial perspective?”

3.2 Research Objectives

Research objectives are sub-questions which outline the various layers to explore within the central topic (Creswell and Poth, 2016). The purpose of this research is to build on the existing literature in the relatively unexplored area regarding the impacts of promoting fast fashion, targeting female Millennials through influencer marketing on social media. In order to answer the main research question effectively, the following sub-objectives were accumulated.

3.2.1 Research Objective 1

To establish whether influencer marketing promoting fast fashion has a positive or negative impact on female Millennials’ purchase intentions.

Fashion can provide consumers with a sense of self, positively impacting brands sales (Kim and Sullivan, 2019), while SMIs have been found to have an influence over consumers purchase intentions (Chopra *et al.*, 2020; Freberg *et al.*, 2011). SMIs build a relationship and

connection with their followers, aiding in the influence to purchase their promoted items (Ki *et al.*, 2020). The first objective is to unearth the positive or negative impacts SMIs have on contemporary female Millennials' purchase intentions when promoting fast fashion. Due to the gap in literature surrounding the Irish consumer cohort, this objective will be examined through the lens of IFM perspectives.

3.2.2 Research Objective 2

To determine whether female Millennials are concerned about environmental impacts such as sustainability when looking at SMIs promotion of fast fashion.

Fast fashion is known to negatively impact the environment, contributing to climate change (Clancy, 2019) and the high volume of carbon emissions daily (Meade, 2020). While female Millennials are found to be aware of such impacts (Sorensen and Jorgensen, 2019) and are committed to the growth of sustainability (Gazzola *et al.*, 2020), Lee *et al.* (2019) argue that this cohort are the main customers of fast fashion, contradicting such statements. As there are conflicting perceptions surrounding this topic within the literature, this study will gain new insights, adding to future theory. This objective is set to establish whether this cohort see a correlation between such impacts and SMIs promoting fast fashion and what, if any, effects this has on purchase intentions.

3.3.3 Research Objective 3

To evaluate the effectiveness of influencer marketing as an advertising tool for fast fashion retailers targeting female Millennials.

The literature has found influencer marketing to be effective for creating brand awareness and to communicate with consumers (Childers *et al.*, 2018). While previous research has explored SMIs impact on consumers purchase intentions in areas such as the cosmetic industry (Chen and Dermawan, 2020), this study is focusing on fast fashion. This objective is set to determine the effectiveness of the advertising method specifically for fast fashion retailers targeting female Millennials through SMIs on the Instagram platform.

These research objectives are proposed to determine the depth of research to gain a greater insight into the correlation with fast fashion retailers and SMIs' true impact on the contemporary IFM. Environmental impacts such as sustainability are examined to determine the broader scope of impacts effecting the Millennial cohort, which Hasbullah, Sulaiman and Mas'od (2020) found impacts SMI/brand credibility. The purpose of this study will allow the researcher to compare the literature with lived experience and behaviours through semi-structured interviews, enabling a greater understanding of female Millennial's perceptions on the topic, contributing contemporary and insightful findings to the literature.

3.3 Gaps in Research

While previous literature has been published outlining the impacts of influencer marketing on consumers attitudes (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017) and purchase intentions within the fashion sector (Sudha and Sheena, 2017), there appears to be a gap in research surrounding such impacts relating to fast fashion on the female Millennial from an Irish perspective. The aforementioned studies predominantly focus on the U.S. consumer market (Ki *et al.*, 2020; De Veirman *et al.*, 2017; Freberg *et al.*, 2011) or the Indian consumer market (Sudha and Sheena, 2017) thus, the purpose of this study was determined to narrow the focus on the Irish Millennial consumer. The conflicting literature relating to the impacts of fast fashion on Millennials (Gazzola *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2019) posed this research question to add to literature findings and bridge the existing gaps.

The subsequent chapter will outline the research methodology based upon the research objectives discussed.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline and thoroughly discuss the methodological considerations behind this study. The methodological approach relates to the theory of Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) of how research should be conducted and will apply the Research Onion to determine the various layers; the research method and philosophical reasoning, the research approach and strategy, an outline of the sample group, data collection and analysis, before finally discussing the study's ethical considerations and limitations.

The research methodology chosen for this study is qualitative research, which allows the researcher to explore and understand individual's subjective perceptions surrounding a social phenomenon before comparing the findings with the existing literature (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Meanwhile quantitative research focuses on an objective, scientific perspective through statistics and numerical analysis (Quinlan, 2011) which would hinder the researcher's opportunity to gain an in depth understanding of the IFMs true opinions and beliefs. The qualitative research method will be demonstrated through an '*interpretivist*' (also referred to as '*post-positivism*') approach using informal interviews and will be discussed further in *section 4.2.4.1*.

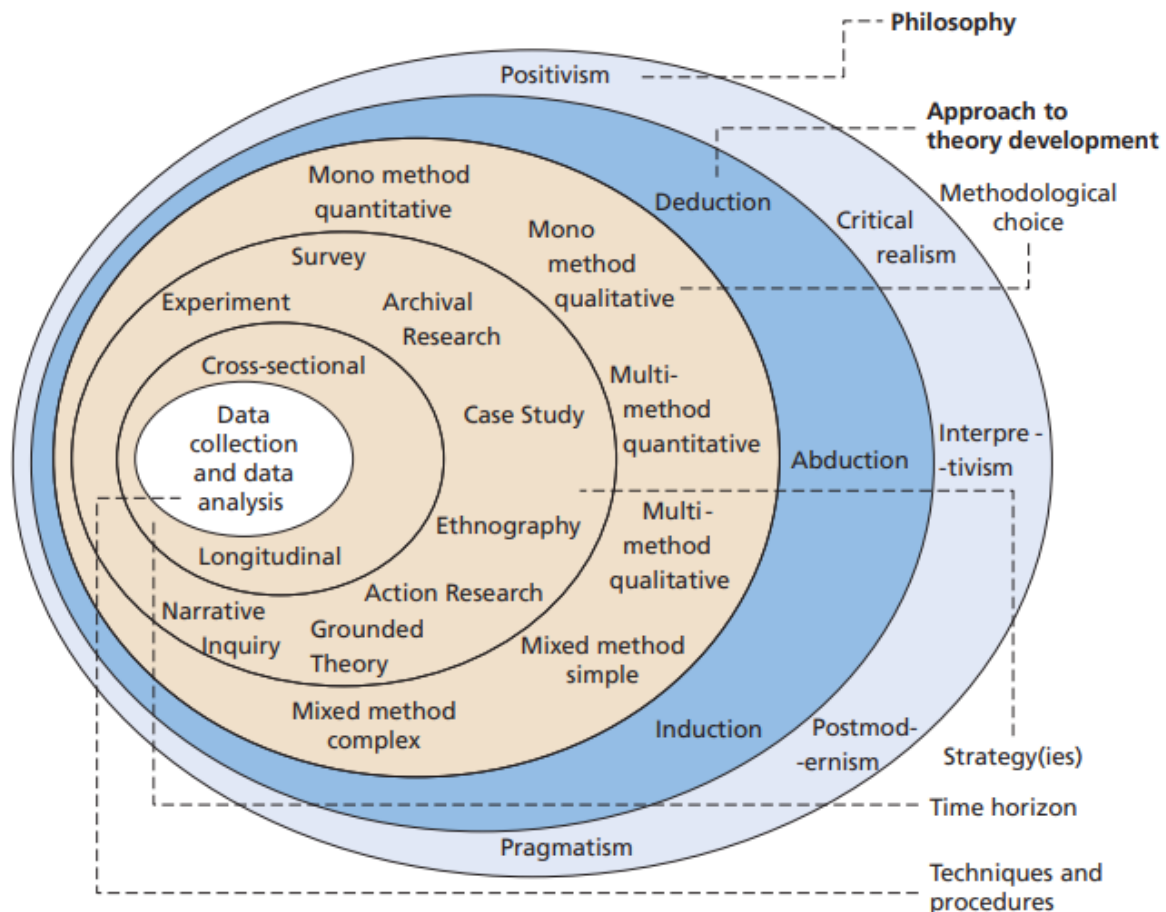
4.2 Saunders' Research Onion

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009; 2016) recommend the "*Research Onion*" as a tool to establish a best practice research design. Research design has been defined as "*the framework for collecting and analysing data to answer research questions and meet research objectives, providing reasoned justification for the choice of data sources, collection methods, and analysis techniques*" (Saunders *et al.*, 2019, p.815).

This method symbolizes a tangible approach that formulates best practice, representing the several layers to explore throughout the design process. The tool was formed to support the various stages within the research methodology process (Saunders *et al.*, 2016), aiding the researcher to determine the appropriate strategy and approach based on the research topic and

the researcher's ontological and epistemological views (Bryman, 2016). The context of this research study will be outlined through the six layers demonstrated in *Figure 4*, “Philosophy”, “Approach”, “Strategy”, “Choice”, “Time Horizon”, and “Data Collection and Data Analysis”.

Figure 4: Saunders Research Onion



Source: Saunders *et al.* (2019, p.130)

4.2.1 Layer One: Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is defined as “a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge in relation to research” (Saunders *et al.*, 2019, p.815). According to Saunders *et al.* (2016), there is no such thing as a universal philosophical perspective for business matters, however, dependant on the research topic, researchers can embark on various philosophical approaches. Quinlan (2011) similarly states philosophical frameworks underpin every research study. The Research Onion’s outer layer represents the philosophies, determining the researcher’s ‘ontological’ perspective

based on whether it is believed that there is an objective reality or not and the ‘*epistemology*’ of how we believe we can come to understand knowledge based on our ontology (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

4.2.1.1 Epistemology

Epistemology is derived from the Greek word ‘*episteme*’, meaning understanding or knowledge, and ‘*logia*’ meaning study or science (Krauss, 2005, p.758). It is the study of knowledge in general, its validity, legitimacy, and scope (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). It aids the researcher to frame their study when comprehending knowledge and has been defined as “*the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline*” (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.15). The researcher deems this appropriate as this study’s paradigm is set to seek an understanding of SMIs influence through in-depth interviews and netnography. Brey (2005) states that computer systems problem-solving and information-processing qualities broaden the human cognition, therefore, the epistemic netnography approach is deemed appropriate for this study.

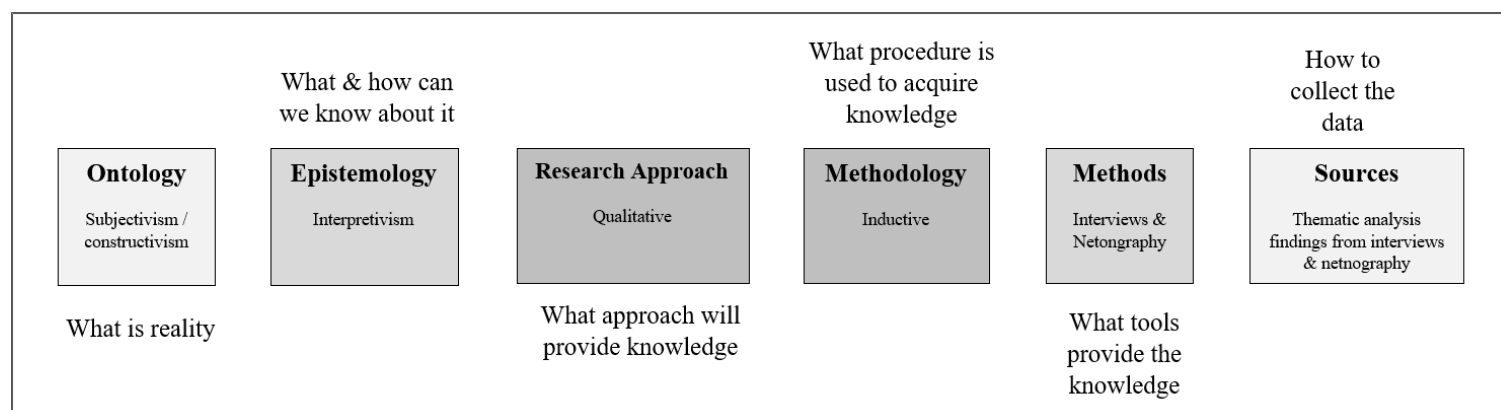
Philosophical epistemology can be broken down into ‘*empiricism*’ and ‘*rationalism*’ (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Empiricism is true knowledge found from the empirical world around us through our senses, observations, and experiences (Quinlan, 2011). This will be demonstrated through the in-depth interviews which will provide the researcher with a contextual understanding surrounding the impacts SMIs promoting fast fashion have on the purchase intentions of IFMs. Rationalism focuses on logical reasoning as the primary basis for justifying beliefs and statements as opposed to observations and experiences (Bryman and Bell, 2011). It considers the human mind as the logical source of new knowledge rather than the ‘*materialistic*’ world around us (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Table 1 – Epistemology Vs Ontology

	Qualitative	Quantitative
Epistemology	Interpretivism	Positivism
Ontology	Subjectivism/constructivism	Objectivism

Source: Adapted from Bryman (2016)

Figure 5 – The Purpose of Epistemology and Ontology in Research



Source: Adapted from Bryman (2016)

4.2.1.2 Ontology

Similar to epistemology, ontology is derived from the Greek words ‘*onto*’, meaning real or existence, and ‘*logia*’, as mentioned, meaning study or science (Slevitch, 2011). It is the study of what exists or what is real in general. Quinlan (2011, p.95) regards ontology as “*the study of being, the nature of being and our ways of being in the world*”, with concern surrounding the reality of these factors (Slevitch, 2011). It enables discussions surrounding research questions to build theory with the aim to understand the ontological status of the world. This fits the paradigm of this study as the researcher seeks to uncover multiple subjective realities and any societal factors which may influence these realities. IFMs past experiences with SMIs, their purchase intentions and their surrounding rationale are explored. Ontology can be broken down into ‘*ontological materialism*’ and ‘*ontological idealism*’ (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Materialism is the belief that material objects are more ‘*real*’ than the human mind, whereas idealism is the belief.

The ‘*Research Onion*’ highlights the importance of establishing a research perspective or corresponding tool to ascertain robust prospects and validate the research topic, while determining the relationship between relevant theory and practice (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012; Crotty, 1998). “*Positivism*”, “*realism*”, “*interpretivism*” and “*pragmatism*” are the four philosophies discussed within the ‘*Research Onion*’ in Saunders *et al.* (2016). Bryman and Bell (2011) refer to ‘positivism’ and

‘interpretivism’ as epistemological factors within sociological research studies. Positivist research is often quantitative and scientific in nature, whereas interpretivism provides objective knowledge on subjective matters in a positivist manner, satisfying researchers’ findings. Unlike positivism which allows universal laws or principles to dictate how everything works, interpretivism addresses the subjective views of the IFM consumer cohort, thus, is more appropriate for this study.

4.2.1.3 *Interpretivism, Positivism, Pragmatism and Realism*

An ‘*interpretivism*’ approach is taken with this study as it investigates the subjective nature of Millennial consumer perceptions and how they come to understand the marketing world and make purchase decisions. This approach gains a substantial volume of information from a smaller sample group, thus, relating to a qualitative styled approach (Brand, 2009). Rahman (2017, p.103) defines qualitative research as “*any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification*”. The aim of the study is to understand and interpret the participants view of their world (Saunders *et al.*, 2019), gaining insight to their experiences (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007), specifically with SMIs promoting fast fashion. Millennials are subjective with their opinions (Weber, 2017), henceforth, in line with grounded theory and due to the inductive approach taken, in-depth interviews were needed to adapt new data to further validate existing literature.

Bryman and Bell (2011) believe it is influenced by Alfred Schutz’s phenomena ideology where studies investigate how individuals live and experience the world. A ‘*positivism*’ philosophy focuses on the scientific empirical analysis of logic and language (Brand, 2009); therefore, it was not considered for this study. ‘*Pragmatism*’ is an approach that acquires knowledge through practice and can be subjective in nature (McBride, Misnikov and Draheim, 2021). It is considered a ‘*mixed method*’ methodology whereas this study’s objectives are to achieve knowledge dependent on Millennials values and beliefs through lived experiences. While pragmatism and mixed methods are relevant and optically ideal, they are not feasible for this study due to the limiting variables and restraints placed on the researcher such as restricted time to conduct a thorough research and analysis. ‘*Realism*’ is an ontological philosophy that can be adapted to both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2018). It focuses on the belief that real entities influence human experiences in a

non-predictive manner (Bryman and Bell, 2011), however, it was not deemed feasible for this study as this research is based upon exploring IFMs' perceptions and their subjective beliefs, which are crucial in answering the research question.

Table 2 – The Analogy of Positivism, Interpretivism and Pragmatism

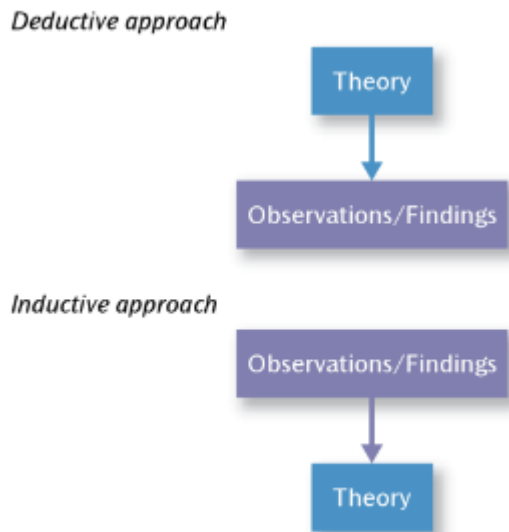
	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology
Positivism	Objective reality	Knowledge is real and objective, obtainable via measurement and statistics (reductionism)	Surveys, experiments, statistical analysis
Interpretivism	Subjective reality	Knowledge is dependent on beliefs, values, and lived experience (constructivism)	Field studies, case studies, hermeneutics, phenomenology
Pragmatism	Objective/subjective	Knowledge is obtained by doing and acting	Mixed-methods research, action research, design science

Source: McBride *et al.* (2021)

4.2.2 Layer Two: Research Approach

Selecting the correct research approach is crucial for determining the appropriate research design which is informed by research philosophy (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015). While there is a selection of two research approaches, “*inductive*” and “*deductive*”, which will be outlined in greater detail within *section 4.2.2.1*, the nature of this research study is deemed ‘*inductive*’ due to the qualitative approach with a small sample group (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Deductive approaches focus on the analysis of pre-existing theories and are typically used within a quantitative study due to the use of large sample groups (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). While adopting both approaches can enable the researcher to develop a complete understanding of the research topic, due to resource limitations and time constraints, this mixed approach was unfeasible for this study.

Figure 6: Deductive Vs. Inductive Approach



Source: Bryman (2016, p.21)

4.2.2.1 Grounded Theory

A grounded theory approach has been taken, which allowed the researcher to examine the study topic and the participants related behaviours, gaining comprehensive and relevant interpretations and explanations (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Glaser and Strauss founded this concept to validate qualitative research and define it as “*the theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process*” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.12). The theory is essentially ‘grounded’ in the actual data collected and enables the analysis and further development of theories to occur following the collection of data (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Studies which demonstrate grounded theory typically begin with a research question and the collection of qualitative data in an attempt to answer the question (Chapman, Hadfield and Chapman, 2015). Similar to this study, the researcher will review the concepts and perspectives emerged from the collected data before categorising them within codes, or in this instance, using thematic analysis. The key themes become the basis of the new theory, differentiating this method from quantitative scientific research models.

A thematic approach is a branch of grounded theory which enables the researcher to generate concepts that outline how individuals perceive and interpret the study topic

by categorising themes within the data collected. The researcher will analyse the interview transcripts to identify the key themes contributing to the impacts toward IFMs purchase intentions, thus, dealing with an ‘*inductive*’ approach (Khan, 2014). However, this will be discussed further in *section 4.2.6.2.1*.

4.2.2.1 Inductive Vs. Deductive

A ‘*deductive*’ approach concentrates on the relationship between existing literature and theory regarding the study topic which is often of a scientific nature (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Previous studies and existing theories surrounding the studied phenomenon are analysed, followed by testing the hypotheses that arose from the theories. Bognar *et al.* (2019) demonstrate this within their quantitative study where survey findings provided the data for the authors to test their hypothesis. This approach enables the researcher to have a clear theoretical focus resulting in a confirmed hypothesis (Saunders *et al.*, 2019; Bryman, 2016). As this study is concerned with exploring the impacts SMIs have on IFMs purchase intentions, their subjective opinions and beliefs will be examined. This enables the researcher to understand how this cohort interpret the world of SMIs within a more flexible method, therefore validating the adoption of an inductive approach rather than deductive.

Figure 7: Deductive Approach



Source: Adapted from Bryman and Bell (2011)

An ‘*inductive*’ approach consists of the researcher gathering relevant data surrounding their research topic before analysing and identifying patterns within the collected data (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Categorizing and analysing the patterns enables the researcher to develop a theory and rationale regarding the relationship between these patterns

and the research phenomenon (Bryman, 2016). This observational approach was a better fit for this study as the researcher is focused on erecting new contemporary theory and interpretations regarding SMIs and fast fashion from semi-structured interviews. This conforms to an interpretivist approach, complementing Hiller (2010) who mentions such approaches naturally steer toward a qualitative-based research strategy (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). It will be beneficial for this study as it will provide an insight into the participants feelings and emotions surrounding the topic of fast fashion and SMIs, allowing the flexibility to understand how the participants interpret their social worlds. Similarly, Chopra *et al.* (2020) demonstrated an inductive research approach when exploring the experiences of Millennial's consumer behaviours in relation to influencer marketing, further validating the researcher's choice in approach.

Figure 8: Inductive Approach



Source: Adapted from Bryman and Bell (2011)

4.2.3 Layer Three: Research Strategy

The research strategy is influenced by the research design, therefore the strategy for this study is based upon a grounded theory/inductive approach to build theory surrounding the topic. It is important to understand IFMs' subjective perspectives, beliefs, and opinions in relation to SMIs and fast fashion to grasp the salient themes that contribute to this cohort's intent to purchase. The inductive approach establishes relevant patterns and themes within the data found from the interviews and netnography (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

While quantitative data refers to specific quantities contributing to the defined hypothesis, qualitative data focuses on an entire environment, establishing descriptive patterns to gain a context and understanding of a research problem. As this study demonstrates similar

qualities, it is further verified for a qualitative approach (Davis *et al.*, 2013; Brand, 2009). The researcher opted for a qualitative approach as the focus is defined as subjective, enabling the collection of data, signifying the perspectives, understanding, ideas and feelings of the participants (Quinlan, 2011; Warren and Karner, 2010), whereas a quantitative approach concentrates on numerical data and hypotheses. Qualitative research will be discussed further in *section 4.2.4.1*.

According to Saunders *et al.*, (2019), conducting an interpretivist study while adopting an inductive approach using qualitative tools with small sample groups, can provide richer data and findings in comparison to quantitative. The inclusion of a netnography approach enabled the researcher to gain a fuller understanding of SMIs promoting fast fashion through readily accessible information on Instagram. This approach provided additional resources for the comparison between interview findings and existing literature (Kozinets, 2015), demonstrating the triangulation approach outlined in *section 4.2.6.1.2*. While focus groups were considered as an approach for this study, the researcher would not have the same level of control over the conversation compared to face-to-face interviews. The researcher needed a level of control for in-depth interviews to ensure they received a true understanding of the researched cohort.

This research strategy enabled the researcher to conduct a thorough examination into the research topic and IFMs perspectives, feelings, and thoughts of SMIs promoting fast fashion.

4.2.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

This research topic was inspired by Žák and Hasprová (2020), although rather than the authors quantitative approach using surveys, the researcher opted for a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to gain further depth and insight into consumers perceptions. Semi-structured interviews involve a series of open-ended, predetermined questions which are asked within a flexible manner to encourage a conversation-like meeting (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). As mentioned, this decision was made to enable the researcher to best capture the participants perspectives and viewpoints on the topic. A quantitative approach, particularly surveys, threatened to limit the participants and the researcher from fully disclosing their beliefs and perceptions (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). This is due to the pre-determined questions in a Likert-type scale which minimise people's true thoughts and doesn't allow the researcher to gain true insight (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Whereas the qualitative

approach using interviews assists the participants to wholly convey their opinions and beliefs as it facilitates the consumers voice, gaining the sentiment behind what they are saying (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). However, the adoption of qualitative research has advantages and disadvantages.

4.2.3.1.1 Interview Timings

In-depth interviews provide the researcher with a platform to connect with participants to explore the research topic in a relaxed, flexible, and subjective manner (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The prepared questions enable the researcher to guide the conversation in the direction necessary to answer the research question, while allows them the time to listen and digest the participants responses. This is recommended by Sekaran and Bougie (2010) to prevent the occurrence of social desirability bias. Face-to-face interviews help to build a rapport with participants, encouraging them to ask questions, when necessary, which provide the researcher with rich data contributing to the thematic analysis (Morris, 2015). Although interviews could not be conducted in person due to Covid-19 restrictions, face-to-face interviews occurred digitally via video call, ensuring rappers were not lost. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes to one hour, enabling the researcher to ensure the topic was explored to their satisfaction.

Quinlan (2011) outlines the time-consuming nature of in-depth interviews, as the researcher must organise setting's, prepare questions and coordinate each interview to facilitate each participant. This factor was considered in the initial research stages along with the possibility of telephone interviews to combat the time restraints faced. However, the researcher felt a true representation of the participants feelings and reactions may not be received through this method, complementing Quinlan *et al.*, (2015) beliefs. The face-to-face interviews were important to build a rapport with participants and to capture unspoken data through their facial expressions, which could prompt the researcher to alter a question or provide clarification (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

4.2.3.1.2 Researcher Bias

According to Saunders *et al.*, (2019), researchers' subjective viewpoints may be evident within a one-to-one interview, manipulating the participants response. While this was a risk the researcher faced with this topic as it touched on the negative

impacts fast fashion has on the environment, the use of a thematic interview guide allowed for a structure to be put in place, ensuring the downfalls topic was discussed last. This was to prevent social desirability bias from the participant who may have felt pressured to answer differently to please the researcher or to portray a more sustainable version of themselves. Each interview was recorded, and transcriptions and notes were taken directly after to ensure the responses were documented correctly, preventing bias. The researcher then reflected upon each interview to interpret the data and identify salient themes to ensure the findings provided a true reflection of the participants.

4.2.3.1.3 Interview Structure

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher and participant flexibility in exploring the topic, with the potential of gaining richer, unforeseen data (Morris, 2015). While there is flexibility, the researcher still has control over the direction of the interview using their thematic question structure, however, can adapt this guide to suit the flow of conversation (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Incorporating a flexible approach allows the emergence of patterns and salient themes, providing the researcher with a deep insight into the participants mindsets, while identifying correlations within the literature (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

4.2.4 Layer Four: Research Choice

4.2.4.1 Qualitative Research

The choice of research was a mono-method, one approach in a qualitative format. As previously mentioned, there are stark differences between qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Warren and Karner (2010) believe logic are fundamentally critical when deciphering between the appropriate method and approach. Qualitative approaches are commonly seen through interviews, ethnography, and focus groups (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). It adopts a worldview of a research topic, taking into consideration assumptions based upon theoretical viewpoints and aids with establishing social problems and perspectives (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of participants perceptions to fully comprehend the nature of their experiences (Brand, 2009). A qualitative approach is beneficial for a study such as this one, where a hypothesis for a

particular objective is unnecessary as a whole subjective environment is explored. This allows for the exploration of salient themes within the collected data and can uncover unpredicted, yet relevant, information due to the unstructured approach.

A qualitative approach is applied to this study through the production of six informal interviews with IFMs who regularly use Instagram and follow SMIs. This approach ensures that the participants are relevant to the study and be capable of providing rich data which will contribute to the existing theory surrounding the topic. Kvale and Binkmann (2009) claim informal, semi-structured interviews are advantageous when seeking to gain insight into lived experiences relating to the research phenomenon, while Hiller (2010) believes they are likely to provide honest and authentic data, complementing the aims for this study. A netnography approach was also conducted to observe and identify salient themes from the SMIs Instagram accounts for additional clarification on their societal status. Ensuring the participants feel at ease and comfortable in seeking clarification before answering questions is recommended by Barriball and While (1994), which is found with this approach. The interview structure incorporated relevant themes to help spark conversation, encouraging the participant to disclose their true thoughts surrounding the topic in question. This interview style was inspired by Chopra *et al.* (2021); however, modifications were made such as specifically incorporating IFMs only.

While key authors such as Chopra *et al.* (2020) similarly explored the impact of influencer marketing on Millennial consumers by incorporating a qualitative approach, there are a number of authors who explored this area using a quantitative approach (Chetoui *et al.*, 2020; Žák and Hasprová, 2020; Bognar *et al.*, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019). This further justifies the need for more qualitative research surrounding the topic of SMIs, particularly within an Irish context. Taylor (2020) agrees, as his recent study states there is an “*urgent need for more research on influencer marketing*”. Chopra *et al.*, (2020)’s findings outlined a general state of Millennial’s consumer behaviours in relation to SMIs, while Žák and Hasprová (2020) found influencer marketing is an effective advertising tool, which impacts various consumer segments differently. However, the researcher opted to specifically explore the IFM consumer segment and their purchase intentions in particular, contributing to and enhancing the existing literature.

Renchen (2020) demonstrated a mixed method approach which allowed him to uncover both the supply and demand aspects of influencer marketing in a fashion context using surveys and interviews. If the researcher had greater resources and time, this optimal approach of qualitative and quantitative would have been applied. The researcher will cover this within the implications and recommendations section in *Chapter 7*.

This study required a subjective approach rather than objective to gain full exposure and understanding of the context and reasoning relating to how individuals perceive and act within the realm of social media. The emphasis of the qualitative interviews was to derive rich data that provides voluminous amounts of information from a multitude of perspectives, to gain insight and lead to building theory and narratives surrounding this topic. Therefore, a hypothesis was unnecessary (Warren and Karner, 2010). The researcher aims to gain a deeper understanding into the manner of behaviours and actions of consumers as a result of SMIs, their reasoning for such actions and how these actions impact the cohort. It is crucial to understand the participants perception to determine the “*how*”, “*why*” and “*nature*” of their encounters (Davis *et al.*, 2013).

4.2.5 Layer Five: Research Time Horizon

4.2.5.1 Cross-Sectional Vs. Longitudinal

The nature of time horizons is classified as “*Cross-sectional*” or “*Longitudinal*”. ‘*Cross-sectional*’ is considered the ‘once-off’ collection of data within a restricted timescale, whereas a ‘*longitudinal*’ approach concentrates on the collection of data during a lengthier timescale (Saunders, *et al.*, 2018; Sekaran, 2003). The data for this study was collected from individual, semi-structured interviews with six participants throughout a two-week period in June 2021, therefore it would be deemed as cross-sectional (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). While the netnography approach is deemed as longitudinal due to the five-month timeframe (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018), it was not the main source of data. The online aspect required less resources and contributed valuable information to the cross-sectional findings, therefore was beneficial to overall research study.

Rindfleisch *et al.* (2008) critique cross-sectional approaches, stating that it is easier to allow bias between the variables i.e., the researcher and participant. This can be portrayed by tone of voice or the wording of the interview questions. However, to combat this the researcher employed multiple participants to gather various viewpoints of data and ensured to refrain from expressing emotions when speaking about certain topics. The interview questions were created with this in mind to ensure no social desirability bias would occur.

While longitudinal is a more robust option to monitor individuals' behaviours, purchase intentions and how things change overtime (Gill, 2000), the researcher was limited in resources with a five-month time frame to complete the study, which is not sufficiently optimal for a longitudinal study, therefore opted for cross-sectional interviews (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Arguably, longitudinal research is less useful in an industry that changes seasonally, such as the SMI industry. However, SMIs were monitored on Instagram for the duration of the research process, for the netnography approach, but this was considered an added resource only exploring broad themes. This demonstrates '*found data*' and facilitates the triangulation approach to provide greater validity (Kozinets, 2015; Hair *et al.*, 2010).

4.2.6 Layer Six: Data Collection & Data Analysis

4.2.6.1 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from six IFMs' within a semi-structured, in-depth interview format. The collection of data occurred using the digital platform Microsoft Teams' video call feature. This online portal recorded and transcribed the interviews, allowing the researcher to analyse and identify key themes or patterns throughout and prepare for interpretation (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; 2019). The researcher intended to conduct as many interviews as possible until theoretical saturation arose in line with best practice.

The researcher's intention for the data analysis is outlined in *Figure 9*. The researcher is confident these factors were successfully achieved throughout the interview process and data analysis which will be later discussed in *section 4.2.6.2*.

Figure 9 – Intention for Data Analysis

Identify salient themes/codes relevant to the research topic within the interview transcripts and netnography observations.
Establish a correlation between the themes from participants perceptions, netnography observations and existing literature.
Determine whether the identified themes correlate with the sample group's perceptions of SMI's promoting fast fashion and their willingness to purchase.

4.2.6.1.1 Theoretical Saturation

Theoretical saturation is the best practice approach whereby interviews are conducted until no new information is found. (Saunders *et al.*, 2016) After the fifth and sixth interview, the participants no longer provided any significant new information, therefore the author determined that theoretical saturation occurred (Bell *et al.*, 2019; Saunders *et al.*, 2019). The interviews lasted no longer than 1 hour and were led by open-ended questions so that participants were not coerced, which facilitated the participants to articulate their own sentiments, allowing them to articulate how they feel (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). This format enabled the researcher to develop a rapport with the participants, flexibility with questions and allowed the participant to voice their opinion throughout the interview. Therefore, the articulation of questions was crucial to avoid social desirability bias by creating open-ended questions, giving the participant control on how they would respond (Larson, 2018). While Saunders *et al.* (2019) critiques theoretical saturation due to the inability to predetermine the sample size, the final quantity of six participants complemented his recommended sample size of five to ten participants for semi-structured interviews.

4.2.6.1.2 Triangulation

Triangulation is the use of multiple research methods to uncover various perspectives, patterns, and themes regarding the research topic (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). This approach increases the validity and credibility of research findings and enhances the understanding of the research phenomenon (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Although interviews are a good source for revealing individuals' perspectives, thoughts and feelings toward a phenomenon, triangulation has been recommended by scholars to discover new paths of inquiry and unearth thought-provoking findings (Bell *et al.*, 2019; Davis *et al.*, 2013; Shaw *et al.*, 2005). The researcher carried out triangulation through netnography, interviews and exploring pre-existing theory (Kozinets, 2015; Bell *et al.*, 2019). The principle of triangulation research is to deliver more robust data which was provided by interviews, netnography and research within the literature (Warren and Karner, 2010). Therefore, recommendations are more rigorous because of these three varying factors.

Without a triangulation approach, the research findings would not have provided the same insights as there would have been a lack of comparison between approaches. Sekaran and Bougie (2010) recommend triangulation approaches as they provide the researcher with confidence that their results are valid due to the various sources of data collected.

4.2.6.1.3 Netnography

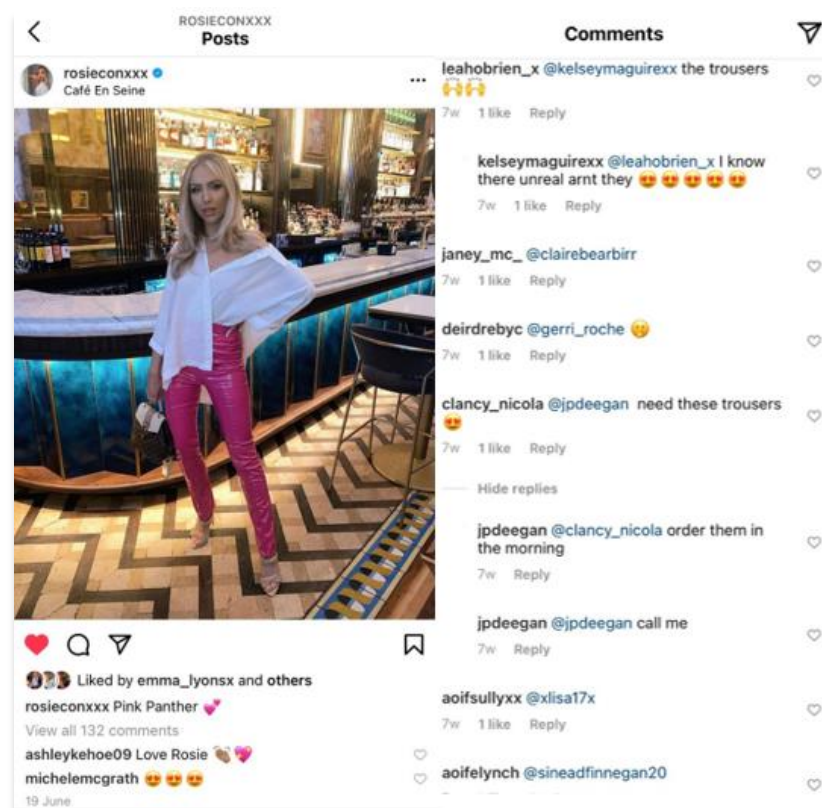
“Billions of individuals joined into networks partake in a complex world that not only reflects and reveals their lived experiences but is also, itself, a unique social phenomenon. Netnography can help you to understand that world” – (Kozinets, 2015, p.1). It is essentially an online research method derived from ethnography, which focuses on the descriptive research of a human society (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). Netnography allows the researcher to observe social interactions in order to collect data for analysis and identify patterns or salient themes. It can often lead to richer data as it is not thematically guided like semi-structured interviews. While this research method is a useful tool to triangulate findings, it can be limiting as there is no scope to ask questions or include relevant themes.

The researcher adopted the online observational research-based fieldwork to view three selected public SMIs Instagram accounts who promote fast fashion, to identify any obvious themes which may contribute to the impact of IFMs' purchase intentions (Morris, 2015; Hair *et al.*, 2010). As individuals create pseudonyms on social media platforms, they tend to be more critical, therefore, netnography can help to determine whether there are any correlations between the interview findings and their online

observations (Ford and Strauss, 2008). In this instance, the researcher observed SMIs' comment sections under posts promoting fast fashion, personal posts, and paid promotion posts to establish any differentiating themes. Identifying patterns and themes through these comment sections help to build theory surrounding the topic as the findings are compared to the interviews and existing literature. Stark differences in positive/negative findings from the interviews compared to netnography may suggest the influence of online pseudonyms.

Instagram was the chosen platform due to its interconnectivity between brands, SMIs and consumers, sparking debates and online communities which contribute to the decision-making process for consumers (Bellavista, Foschini and Ghiselli, 2019). This is evident with SMIs followers tagging peers in the comment sections to discuss purchasing an item shown as depicted in *Figure 10*. These themes will be further explored within *Chapter 5*.

Figure 10: Instagram Netnography Example



Source: Connolly (2021a)

The research was conducted using Kozinets (2010) five stage approach, beginning with defining the ‘*research focus*’ and appropriate platform as illustrated in *Figure 11*. Instagram was the chosen platform to build new theory regarding SMIs within this space as recommended by Taylor (2020). This will enable the researcher to distinguish any identifiable patterns within the interactions on SMIs posts which may relate to salient themes such as trustworthiness or relatability. These thematic factors are analysed to determine whether they correlate with the existing literature and interview findings regarding IFMs relationships with SMIs and their purchase intentions.

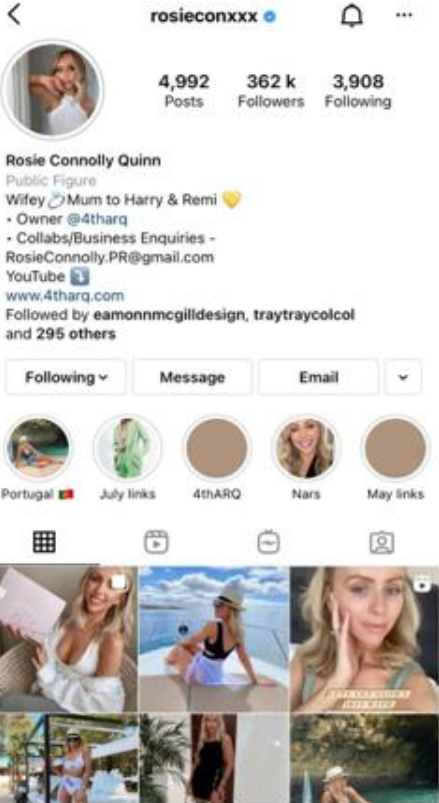
Figure 11 – The Five Stages of Netnographic Research




Source: Adapted from Kozinet (2010)

The following stage focused on the ‘*community identification and selection*’, and as this research is focused on the fashion influencer community, the researcher selected three fashion influencers’ from the Instagram platform. The SMIs’ selected were Rosie Connolly, Terrie McEvoy, and Sophie Murray as each SMI promotes fast fashion brands, fits the IFM demographic, and have built their audiences through the Instagram platform. An outline of these SMIs profiles is depicted in *Figure 12*.

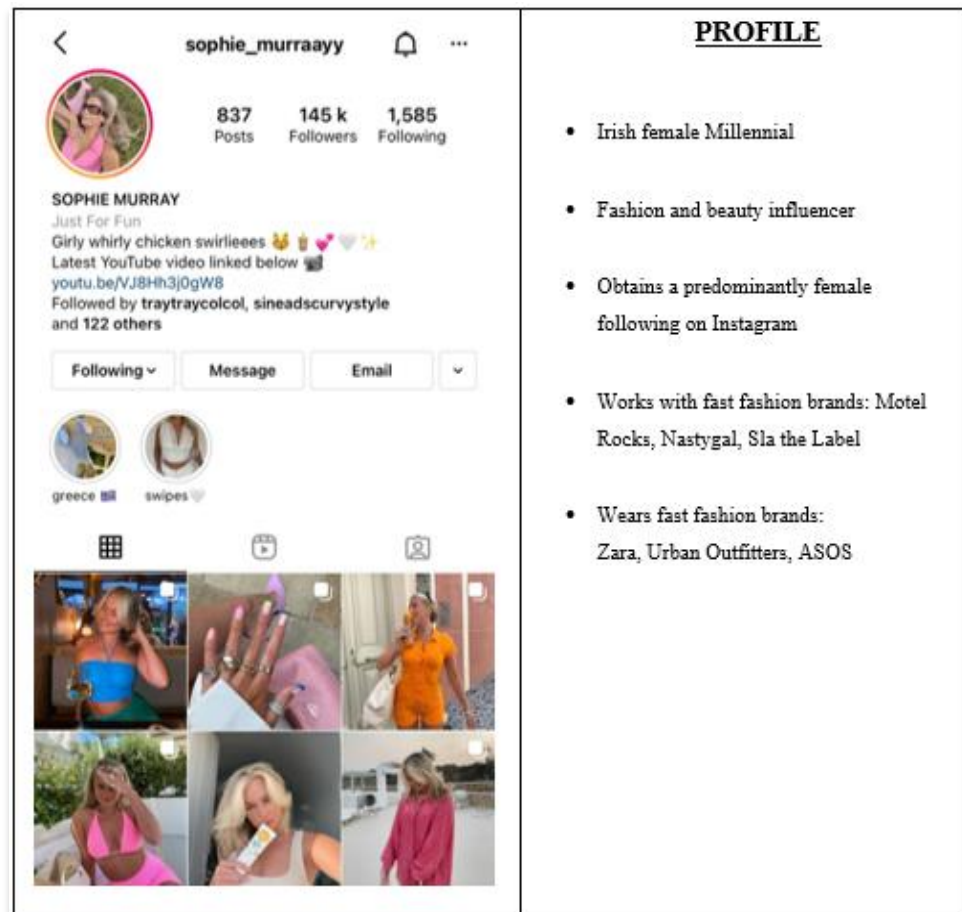
Figure 12 – Chosen SMIs Profiles

	PROFILE
 <p>rosieconxxx 4,992 Posts 362 k Followers 3,908 Following</p> <p>Rosie Connolly Quinn Public Figure Wife 👉 Mum to Harry & Remi • Owner @4tharq • Collabs/Business Enquiries - RosieConnolly.PR@gmail.com YouTube www.4tharq.com Followed by eamonnmcgilldesign, traytraycolcol and 295 others</p> <p>Following Message Email</p> <p>Portugal July links 4thARQ Nars May links</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish female Millennial • Fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencer • Mum of two • Founder of 4thArq clothing brand • Obtains a predominantly female following on Instagram • Works with fast fashion brands: Primark, Boohoo, Nastygai • Wears fast fashion brands: Zara, River Island, H&M, ASOS

Source: Connolly (2021b)

	PROFILE
 <p>terriemcevoy 5,078 Posts 244 k Followers 1,520 Following</p> <p>Terrie McEvoy Fitzpatrick Public Figure Life Beauty Style Travel Mama to be Nurse Creator of @bahamabody Slobhan@23theagency.com Shop looks below liketoknow.it/terriemcevoy/ Followed by eamonnmcgilldesign, sineadscurvstyle and 219 others</p> <p>Following Message Email</p> <p>Bump Style Croatia Covid&Travel Baby list Books</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish female Millennial • Qualified nurse • Fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencer • Mum to be • Obtains a predominantly female following on Instagram • Works with fast fashion brands: Primark, Boohoo, Nastygai • Wears fast fashion brands: Zara, River Island, H&M, ASOS

Source: McEvoy (2021a)



Source: Murray (2021a)

The third stage involves the ‘*engagement, immersion and data collection*’, which as recommended by Russmann and Svensson (2016), focuses on the management of images, perception, interactivity, and integration. The management of images will refer to the quantity of fast fashion posts each SMI has published within a five-month time frame from March 2021 to July 2021. This factor was deemed important for the researcher as these content uploads are how the audience will view the products or services shown, thus, act as an influencing factor to purchase (Fahmy, Bock and Wanta, 2014). The perception and interactivity look at the interaction and engagement rates between the SMIs and their followers. This is a crucial element for analysis as previous findings suggest SMIs who have built a relationship with their followers are deemed more credible and trustworthy, thus, positively impacting their purchase intentions (Chopra *et al.*, 2020; Ki *et al.*, 2020; Freberg *et al.*, 2011). The integration factor will determine whether the post is a paid promotion or an organic post

indirectly promoting a fast fashion brand. The engagement rates on both types of content will be analysed to establish any discrepancies.

Within the fifth month the data collected will be ‘*analysed and interpreted*’ in accordance with Kozinet’s (2010) fourth stage, where any trends or correlations will be established in relation to the key themes. Finally, the fifth stage of ‘*presented findings*’ will be discussed in *Chapters 6 and 7*, where the findings from each triangulation method of existing literature, interviews and netnography will be compared.

Table 3 – The Netnography Research Areas

Shared Content	Promoted Posts
The content shared from March 2021 to July 2021 was observed and monitored to aid the researcher in establishing any correlations between types of content and Irish female Millennial’s purchase intentions.	The number of promoted posts / advertisements from fast fashion brands was monitored to provide the researcher with an understanding of what sort of content consumers like/dislike by analysing the post’s visible analytics.
Consumer Engagement	Following Traffic
The level of consumer engagement was monitored by analysing the number of comments on the SMI’s published posts regarding fast fashion. This data provides the researcher with insight as to whether SMI’s followers have a positive or negative perception toward such posts by benchmarking fast fashion posts against promoted/advertised posts and personal posts.	The researcher tracked the selected SMI’s interactions and engagement by taking note of the number of comments on randomly selected posts each month across three categories; ‘ <i>standard posts</i> ’, ‘ <i>promoted posts</i> ’ and ‘ <i>personal posts</i> ’. This enabled the researcher to calculate an average engagement level for each category and determine whether there is a positive or negative correlation between SMI’s relationships with consumers and promoting fast fashion.

4.2.6.2 Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis of this study was carried out based upon an interpretivist research philosophy and inductive approach. Qualitative data analysis can focus on themes, topics, languages, or process (Saunders *et al.*, 2019); however, the data collected for this study was analysed through a thematic analysis as demonstrated by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Smith (2015). Each interview transcript and netnography observation was thoroughly analysed to identify any relevant patterns or

themes. The thematic coding was conducted in line with Creswell and Poth's (2016) guidelines, which allowed the researcher to delve deeper into participants rationale, feelings, and emotions regarding each theme. The themes identified were relevant to achieving each research objective, however, there were additional miscellaneous findings which are outlined in *section 5.4*. Table 4 outlines the six phases of thematic analysis.

4.2.6.2.1 Thematic Analysis

Table 4 – The Six Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p.35)

Thematic analysis is flexibly suitable for any philosophical approach and enables the researcher to understand the individualistic meanings and experiences from research participants, thus, was chosen for this inductive study (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2012). The method enables the detection, analysing, categorizing, defining, and reporting of themes uncovered within a data set (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

This form of analysis is a grounded theory approach that provides a systematic, yet sophisticated, insight when analysing a large amount of varying and subjective data, by identifying relationships, patterns, and trends throughout (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; 2019).

Through the establishment of patterns and trends, this form of analysis will answer the overall research question when correlated with the theory. In line with best practice, the researcher's rigorous analysis of the interview transcriptions and netnography observations detected key words, concepts or phrases that correlate or contradict with the existing theory, otherwise known as '*open coding*' (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; Quinlan, 2011). The main themes identified throughout both methods are 'trustworthiness', 'credibility', 'sense of self', 'inspiration', 'relatability', and 'advertising tools'. However, miscellaneous themes were uncovered throughout both interviews and netnography observations, consisting of 'price', 'social desirability' and 'the SMI era'. These themes will unearth hidden feelings and emotions surrounding the topic and provide a deeper understanding and context. '*Axial coding*' intertwines the collected data into relevant themes/codes, providing a general synopsis of the findings. Once the relationship between the themes and topic is established, '*selective coding*' occurs to accumulate the grounded theory based on the research. It is then determined whether to define a new theory or modify an existing theory with this data (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

Previous studies demonstrated a similar thematic approach (Chopra *et al.*, 2020; Žák and Hasprová, 2020), while some studies adapted theory-driven and data-driven data (Chetioui *et al.*, 2020; Žák and Hasprová, 2020). The researcher allowed theoretical saturation to occur, adding relevant themes as they occurred throughout the interview process until participants no longer contributed new information (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed by Microsoft Teams and analysed by the researcher, allowing them to delve into themes, inclinations and cultivate conclusions, which is appropriate for this study's thematic, qualitative approach (Hilal and Alabri, 2013). Automated transcriptions can be considered unreliable due to their tendency to pick up words incorrectly, however, Bokhove and Downey (2018) found it is possible and useful to use such transcripts for an initial version. They also found

this method saved time in the research process which was important for the researcher who was under time constraints. The data collected was thoroughly read and listened to by the researcher, providing the opportunity to digest the findings and correct any misinterpretations from the automated transcriptions, verifying the completion of each transcript ahead of the rigorous analysing (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

The researcher evaluated and operated the '*found data*' collected from the netnography research, highlighting any related themes or tendencies (Thanh and Kirova, 2018; Bowler Jr., 2010; Hair *et al.*, 2010). A manual thematic approach was conducted, which gave insight to correlations between the literature and the netnographic findings (Thanh and Kirova, 2018; Kozinets, Dolbec and Early, 2014).

Optically, the researcher would have liked to incorporate software devices such as NVivo to control, analyse, and evaluate the data. However, due to time constraints and limitations of this research study, it was not feasible (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013).

4.4 Research Sample

4.4.1 Sampling Technique

Sampling is an important stage within qualitative research as it represents an entire population, aiding in the generalisation of the research topic and the study findings (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). In this instance, the population represented are IFMs. As it was unfeasible for the researcher to collect data from an entire population due to limited resources and time constraints, a sample group was selected for the purpose of this study. Sampling helps to establish the accuracy of research findings and are categorized as "*probability*" or "*non-probability*" (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

"Probability samples have the distinguishing characteristics that each unit in the population has a known, nonzero probability of being included in the sample" – (Henry, 1990, p. 8-9).

The researcher chooses a sample group from a large target population where each member has a chance of being included within the sample (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The methods used are 'systematic sampling', which involves selecting a precise sample, 'stratified sampling', which focuses on specific cohorts, 'cluster sampling', where smaller groups are selected known as '*clusters*', and 'simple random sampling', which acquires a small randomly selected group to represent an entire population (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; 2019).

On the other hand, ‘non-probability’ sampling differs as it does not involve random selection, therefore, samples are selected based upon a subjective judgement to meet specific criteria (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). A non-probability sampling has many variations such as ‘convenience’, ‘self-selection’, ‘snowball’, and ‘purposive sampling’. Convenience sampling consists of collecting samples from a convenience setting or location, whereas self-selection is a method where there are no criteria, and any individual can join. Snowball sampling involves participants assisting in the recruitment of additional participants, while purposive sampling relies on the researcher’s judgement when selecting participants who are knowledgeable within a particular area (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate as this study required the uncovering of information from a particular cohort, IFMs, to fulfil the research objectives (Etikan *et al.*, 2016).

4.4.1.1 Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling refers to the researcher’s own judgement when selecting their sample population (Bryman and Bell, 2011). There are two variations of purposive sampling: “*heterogeneous*” and “*homogenous*”. Heterogeneous consists of participants with considerably varied characteristics whereby homogenous consists of participants with comparable characteristics (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Purposive sampling is also categorized into ‘*quota sampling*’ and ‘*judgement sampling*’ (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). Quota sampling refers to a prearranged group of individuals that represent a population, whereby judgement sampling represents a sample group chosen based upon their suitability for the study topic (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). The sample group was chosen using the judgement sampling method.

The sample group was selected through a ‘*question box*’ sticker on the researcher’s Instagram account, speaking to any IFMs who wished to partake in the interview process and the criteria needed for participants was outlined (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Adopting this sampling technique allowed the researcher to connect with the target sample group, meeting the study’s criteria. The researcher ensured that participants met the criteria of IFM within the consent form sent and filled out to each participant prior to the interview, and again at the beginning of the interview.

4.4.1.2 Sampling Selection

In keeping with the context of qualitative research, participants were selected for the sample group through Instagram dependant on their age, social media use and levels

of interaction with SMIs. Therefore, this sample is deemed ‘homogenous’ using a ‘non-probability sampling method’ (Vasileiou *et al.*, 2018). Instagram was a key factor in the selection process as it is the social media platform where most SMIs can be found (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). The demographics were equally as important for the selection process as it enabled the researcher to secure a true understanding of the participants beliefs, perspectives, and opinions regarding the impacts of SMIs promoting fast fashion. Choosing a homogenous sampling technique lessens the likelihood of differences occurring, enabling the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of participants (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Bryman and Bell (2011) highly value quota sampling due to its accessibility for study’s which face resource limitations and time constraints. However, as it lacks detailed accuracy, judgement sampling was more appropriate as this study sought detailed accuracy to understand the impacts of influencer marketing on IFMs purchase intentions (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). While a predetermined quantity of participants was not initially outlined, the researcher conducted interviews until theoretical saturation occurred (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Marshall *et al.*, (2013) argue that a specific quantity of interviews within a subjective study is unwarranted, as high volumes of data can be obtained from lengthy interviews, complementing the researchers interviews which lasted no longer than one hour.

4.4.2 Sample Size and Target Population

While there are no rules outlined for the number of participants for non-probability sampling, it is suggested that homogenous purpose samples range from four to twelve participants (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The researcher conducted interviews until there were no further insights and theoretical saturation had occurred, resulting in the total number of interviews being six.

This study aimed to unearth the views and perceptions of IFMs regarding SMIs promoting fast fashion on the Instagram platform, from their personal experiences. It was crucial participants were regular users of social media, particularly Instagram, and followed SMIs who promoted fast fashion. The participants needed to be based in Ireland and fall within the female Millennial bracket to gain an informed insight of how this particular cohort are impacted by the promotion of fast fashion by SMIs. Although interviews could not be

conducted in person due to the current Covid-19 guidelines, face-to-face interviews continued to proceed online via the Microsoft Teams video call feature. As mentioned, the researcher verified that all respondents were indeed IFMs, adhering to the set parameters within the signed consent forms and at the beginning of each interview.

4.5 Study Considerations

4.5.1 Ethical Considerations

Saunders *et al* (2019, p.815) define research ethics as “*the standards of behaviour that guide conduct in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work or are affected by it*”. For ethical purposes, the researcher adhered to GDPR for the collection, storage and usage of data and followed the National College of Ireland’s (NCI) “*Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research involving Human Participants*”. The “*Human Participants Ethical Review*” form was completed, and the researcher considered the “*MRA Code of Marketing Research Standards*” throughout their research. Each participant chosen was of the age 18 or older and prior to the interview, completed a consent form which illustrated the purpose of the interview, demonstrating how their data will be collected, stored, and used. Within this consent form, each participant was given the opportunity to maintain anonymity throughout the study to safeguard identity, opinions, and beliefs and were assured that their data will be destroyed upon completion of this study. The participants data will be stored within an encrypted, password protected file on the researcher’s computer for the duration of the study only.

4.5.2 Research Limitations

Limitations are influences which are out of the researcher’s control and may prejudice or restrict research findings and conclusions. Thus, any known limitations should be exclaimed to abide by ethical considerations and to facilitate forthcoming research (Greener, 2018; Drotar, 2008).

4.5.2.1 Covid-19

While the limitations caused by current Covid-19 Government guidelines prevented face-to-face interactions, the researcher combatted this issue by conducting interviews digitally on Microsoft Teams. The researcher believes this digital format may be

preferable with participants as they are digital natives and are accustomed to communication in digital formats. The participants digital competence was evident when using Microsoft Teams, but the interviews further emphasized this when exploring their vast social media usage. While the small sample group could be posited as a limitation as the findings cannot be widespread to the general population, Saunders *et al.* (2019) state this limitation is an impact from adopting a qualitative approach and is not exclusive to this study. As a result, the researcher garnered the opinions of IFMs using the triangulation research method, which provided sufficient information and insights in an attempt to answer the research question and objectives.

4.5.2.2 Narrow Research

An additional limitation is the researcher's tunnel-vision for the Instagram platform only. As this platform is proven to be the home of the majority of SMIs (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020), it dismisses a large volume of IFMs and their perspectives on SMIs across other platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. If time constraints were not in place for this study, a longitudinal approach would have enabled the researcher to explore the various social media platforms over a longer period of time. Nevertheless, this posits a topic for future research which would be best suited for a panel of academics where each researcher studies a particular platform.

4.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the research objectives, strategy and methodology used within this study. The research design was outlined using Saunders *et al.*, (2019) 'Research Onion' framework, where the 'inductive' methodology and 'interpretivist' philosophy were determined. Warren and Karner (2010) and Chopra *et al.*, (2020) aided in the verification for the qualitative research choice and methodological approach.

The research strategy outlined the qualitative nature of this study using semi-structured, informal interviews where the IFMs opinions, perspectives and feelings could be explored in-depth until theoretical saturation occurred. The sample group chosen contributes to Taylor's (2020) appeal for further research surround influencer marketing. A cross-sectional approach was determined to collect the data, which was analysed using the 'six phases' of thematic analysis.

The netnography approach was outlined through the 'five stages', contributing to the triangulation method of the research. The interviews' digital structure was outlined, accompanied by the rationale for this method along with the research limitations and the ethical considerations discussed.

The subsequent chapter will outline the findings of the research, originally set within the research objectives in *Chapter 3* and further constructed by the research methodology.

CHAPTER 5 – Analysis & Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the six in-depth interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams with IFMs between the 15th and 28th of July 2021 and the digital netnography approach conducted from March to July 2021. The netnography approach consisted of observing and monitoring the accounts of three fashion SMIs who fit the Irish female demographic on Instagram, namely, Sophie Murray, Rosie Connolly, and Terrie McEvoy. Both the interview transcripts and netnography observations were coded using a thematic analysis approach (Glaser and Strauss 2017), as were the observed comments on SMIs Instagram posts through the netnography approach. This enabled the researcher to categorize the participants viewpoints and opinions, along with observed Instagram comments, into key themes that were outlined throughout the literature in *Chapter 2*. Following the interview transcriptions, the researcher manually coded the transcripts into the relevant thematic categories to identify the findings behind each theme. The qualitative format allows for the insertion of themes within the researchers open-ended questions and observation of SMIs followers comments, enabling a greater understanding of the research on a broader scale i.e., IFMs consumer behaviours or the association with SMIs and their credibility when promoting fast fashion.

5.1 Research Objective 1

Research Objective 1	<i>To establish whether influencer marketing promoting fast fashion has a positive or negative impact on female millennials purchase intentions.</i>
Interview Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Trustworthiness ○ Credibility ○ Sense of Self and Social desirability

5.1.1 Trustworthiness

5.1.1.1 Interview Findings

Trustworthiness relates to an individual's integrity and ability to be reliable and honest (Reichelt, Sievert and Jacob, 2014). To some degree, every participant admitted to trusting SMIs opinions and recommendations. Participants expressed their trust within those who had previous experience within their field, demonstrating a positive influence. Some participants stated their desire to purchase exactly what SMIs wear or to buy similar clothing to replicate their outfit choice, illustrating their trust in fashion sense and style. Other factors which appeared to spark trust was SMI's

"I would trust her (Rosie Connolly) opinion, purely because she's come from a fashion background where she used to be a personal stylist. She now owns her own clothing range as well so from that regard, yeah, so I would trust her recommendations and her opinions for most clothing and like for different outfits and stuff" - (Participant #1)

"I love following. I like to see what's going on and see if I can put my own spin on those outfits. But with different brands" - (Participant #2)

"I do like seeing the stuff they put up ...I'd go on and buy something if I thought it was really nice to be fair like I'd actually just copy it straight out but sometimes the stuff is lovely, and they have good finds" - (Participant #3)

"Most of the people I would follow would have been in the field before they we're influencing. So, I would have followed them because of their background in the field and they fell into influencing, so I would trust them in that sense. But I think there's a lot of influencers who don't have a background and just kind of start it or like fame and free stuff and I wouldn't trust their opinion" - (Participant #4)

"I'd say the ones I follow yeah, I would just kind trust the information they are giving but I am aware that there are a lot of influencers out there that kind of especially with the young following, they have such power over what people can think, and sometimes the information their giving might not be fully trustworthy" - (Participant #5)

"I bought the Chanel les beige bronzer and I'd seen that Roz Purcell put it up and she said she loved it and wore it all over her face ...I was a bit sceptical, but I do trust her quite a bit because she's fairly down to earth" - (Participant #6)

attitudes and the participants perceptions of them as seen with Participant #6's relationship toward Roz Purcell.

While these factors positively influence the level of trust within IFMs, some consumers are conscious not to generalise this positive outlook as some SMIs cannot be trusted.

The main driver for mistrust derived from the interview findings were the use of paid promotions posts which include #AD/#SP/#Collab. When asked if seeing #AD effects their opinions on an SMIs trustworthiness and authenticity every participant stated yes as they felt the SMI only says positive things about the promoted item because they are getting paid. The researcher found many participants expressed a sense of resentment toward SMIs when speaking about the paid elements of Instagram posts. Participant #6 feels it is too easy to earn money this way which suggested to the researcher that participants may feel social media is a platform purely for entertainment and for individuals to post about their hobbies. Therefore, the notion of SMIs receiving payment and fulfilling a career may appear unrealistic and unjustifiable to the Millennial consumer.

"There are many influencers today that are kind of just in it for the #AD, the PR bundles and the event invites" – (Participant #2)

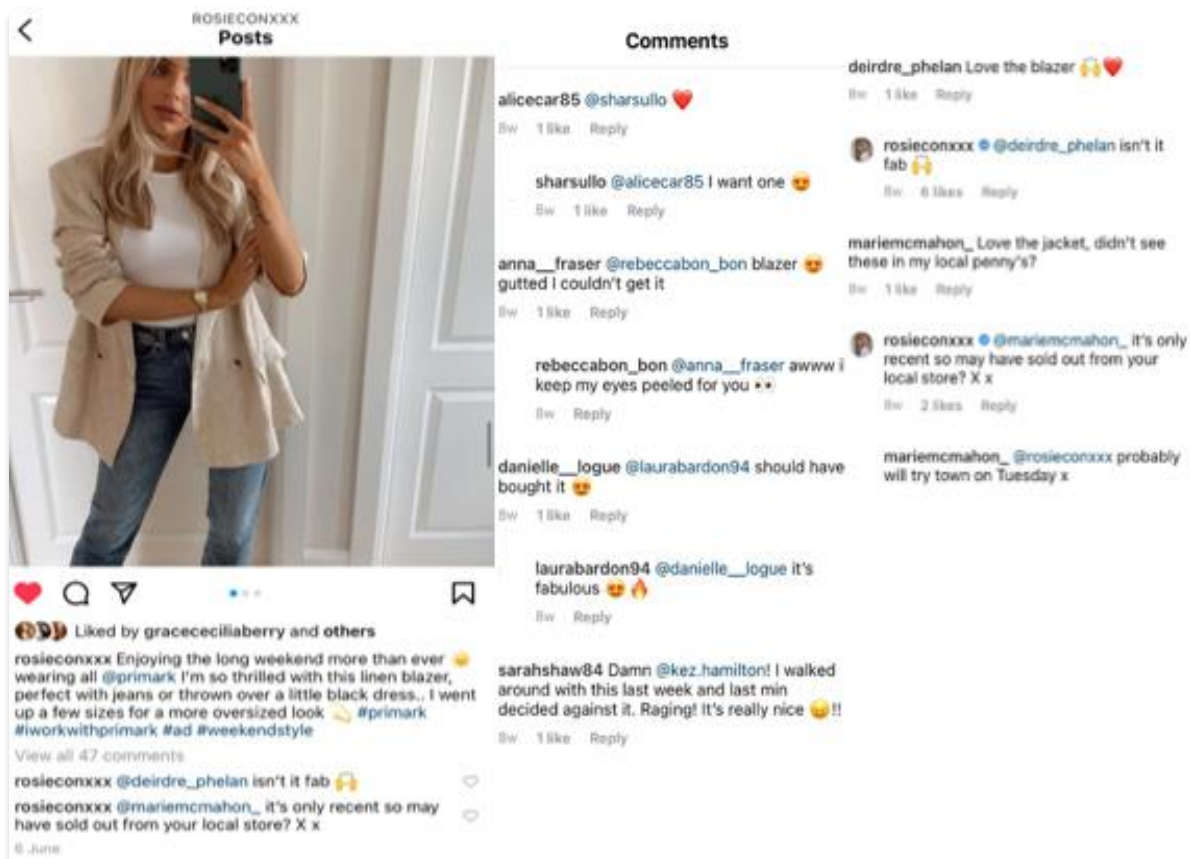
"It would really depend on if it was an ad or not, to be honest, I know that sounds kind of bad, but I do become more hesitant when I see ad and a lot of the time, I would trust their opinions on clothes and stuff because you can physically see it" – (Participant #4)

"If I'm saying this is a genuinely good quality t-shirt, reasonable price and I'm not being paid to say that, then that's obviously going to be more trustworthy and reliable information" – (Participant #5)

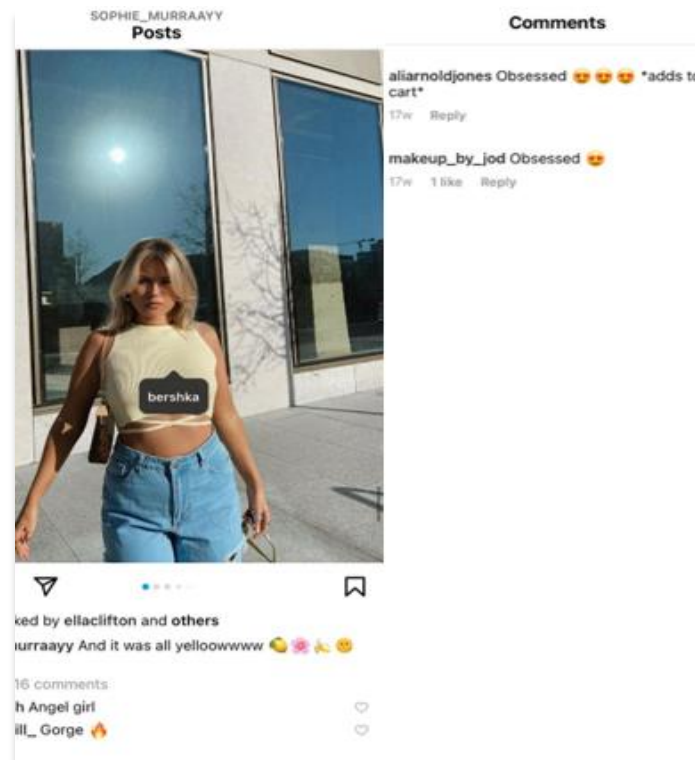
"I would never swipe up and buy from affiliated link. I always just go off the website and buy myself. I don't know. I think it's just a pride thing that I'm just like oh you shouldn't be able to earn money that easy" – (Participant #6)

5.1.1.2 Netnography Findings

Across the sample group of three SMIs, the level of engagement within the comments for advertised posts remained low, consistent with the interview findings. Despite this, each SMI's followers appeared to trust their recommendations as followers' comments throughout their posts stated they had purchased the item they showed. Rosie saw followers expressing their longing to purchase the same items, while others expressed their regret of not purchasing before seeing Rosie wearing them. Sophie's followers remain consistent with their intent to purchase her promoted recommendations as seen with comments stating, *"need to try this"*, illustrating their trust in her recommendation of a tanning product and intent to purchase fashion items with comments such as *"adds to cart"*, implying that they have added the item to their online shopping cart.



Source: Connolly (2021c)



Source: Murray (2021b)

5.1.2 Credibility

5.1.2.1 Interview Findings

Credibility relates to the ones believable or plausible characteristics, those who provide information that recipients believe to be true (Reichelt *et al.*, 2014). The theme credibility followed on in association to trustworthiness, hitting key points regarding an SMIs expertise in their field but mainly paid promotions and advertisements. When asked whether advertisements effect an SMIs credibility, every participant stated their negative perception toward SMIs posting paid advertisements which has a knock-on effect to their purchase intentions and their opinion regarding the credibility of the SMI. The findings suggest IFMs dislike the commercialization of influencer marketing as depicted by Participant #1 who believes once SMIs sign on with a media agency, they promote more advertisements and are deemed less credible.

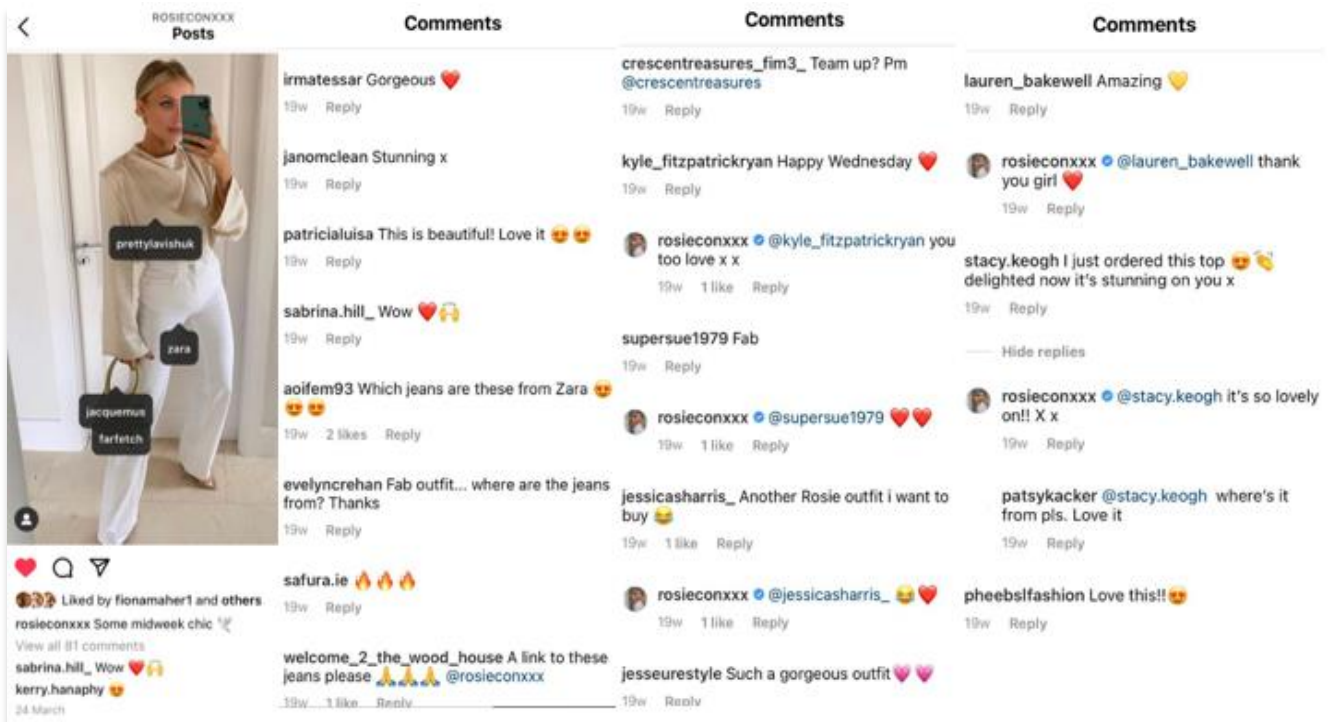
“if somebody who has a history of working in the fashion industry, I would find them more credible than somebody who is suddenly taking on doing all these fashion roles, who might be brand new to a social media company (representative agency) and then suddenly you can see a jump in the amount of stuff that they're advertising ... once I see that coming up, I know that they're just saying whatever they need to say because they're getting paid for it and they want to get sales out of it .. other influencers could genuinely believe in the product, and you believe them ... they might have advertised those products before they were ever working with that company, and they advertise them because they liked them ... I wouldn't think that their credibility is gone down” – (Participant #1)

“Up until a while ago I would have said no. I'd think they just be kind of in it for money ... but I think nowadays the way Instagram is going people have kind of found their feet and what they're promoting, so I would say they are credible ... I know even one of my friends, every time she sees #AD or a swipe link for a jacket or whatever, she purposely goes on to their own website and will have not used their link because I think they obviously get more money the more clicks they get” – (Participant #5)

The general consensus from the interview findings were that SMIs who often used and openly spoke about a product without being paid were more credible and participants were more likely to purchase off their recommendation. Participant #5's views stood out as they expressed their change of opinion, stating they feel SMIs have found their niche for what they promote, however, stated their peers have conflicting views as they refuse to purchase items via an affiliated, commissionable link. From this, the researcher noticed how SMIs finding their niche was more credible for Participant #5, linking back to the expertise element outlined *section 5.1.1*.

5.1.2.2 Netnography Findings

As demonstrated in the participants interviews, Rosie is deemed credible and an expert in her field amongst her followers due to her background in fashion. This is demonstrated through the comment sections whereby many followers ask for the website link for the items she is wearing with their intent to purchase, which portrays a level of credibility they have toward Rosie, linking in with her trustworthiness. The lack of engagement and interaction across each of the SMIs advertised content corroborates with the interview participants, classifying SMIs as less credible when publishing paid promotional content. However, the netnography observations contrast with the interview findings as participants stated they would not purchase off an affiliated link, unlike the SMIs followers in the comment sections. In saying this, it appears Rosie is credible and an expert in her field, which could explain the reasoning for followers seeking outfit links, corroborating with interview Participant #5, who deems SMIs credible when they have established a niche.



Source: Connolly (2021d)

5.1.3 Sense of Self and Social Desirability

5.1.3.1 Interview Findings

Throughout the six interviews, the researcher noticed that each participant gained a sense of self through following SMIs promoting fast fashion. In most instances, the participants received a ‘*feel good*’ factor from viewing the fashion content, which sparked their intent to purchase. Consumer’s sense of self can be identified through brands and products (Mittal, 2006), which is depicted particularly with Participant #2 and Participant #6. Both participants view SMIs as a form of window shopping, expressing their likening for browsing on the Instagram platform for this very reason. Participant #6 outlined their belief in retail therapy to gain a sense of achievement or accomplishment, which can be derived through SMIs promoting fast fashion. This indicates that SMI’s have a positive impact on this cohort, influencing their purchase decisions.

"I love anything I see online ... whether it's on Instagram or browsing through an app like I could spend hours just looking through what's new in and its anything from high-end to the Bershka and Zara" – (Participant #2)

"I'm a strong believer in retail therapy ... there's something nice about going and treating yourself, even if it's like a €5 top in Penney's, to know that you got something that you know is going to make yourself feel nice" – (Participant #6)

However, some participants felt SMIs promoting fast fashion has resulted in the young generations losing their sense of self and ability to find and express their own fashion sense.

".. if Penney's are releasing a summer collection, suddenly all of the influencers at the same week all have the clothes" – (Participant #1)

".. some of the Irish girls I find that we are producing one mass clone of individual, and it's happened for so many years. It's the same thing just being repeated over and over" – (Participant #2)

".. you want to wear nice stuff and when you see someone wearing something that is obviously new then it's gone in a week and then the next week something else that's coming in that's lovely but yeah you do, you want to have the nice new stuff like everyone can kind of tell whether something is new or like last week or last month" – (Participant #3)

The researcher observed an underlying theme of social desirability throughout each interview. The desire to 'fit in' with societal norms in terms of fashion sense and style appears to have created a 'monotonous' vibe in the perspective of female Millennials. This added pressure to fit in appears to be sparked by fast fashion, so although it is considered valuable for this cohort to purchase trends they can afford, the never-

ending cycle of social desirability and the consumption of fast fashion is clear. Participants expressed their opinions that SMIs promoting such fashion trends are responsible for this “*mass clone of individual*” and looks to be viewed in a pessimistic light. Participant #5 disclosed further insight into their thoughts on the topic, stating this monotonous look, fuelled by social desirability, is destroying individual’s creativity and sense of self with the expectation to dress a certain way by society. The below quote expresses the societal pressures female Millennials are under to ‘*fit in*’ by wearing items of clothing that were deemed acceptable by SMIs, however, may not be their desired style. This sort of behaviour can hinder self-esteem as consumers could feel a sense of restriction. Although this is not SMIs intentions, it illustrates the striking influence they have on young consumers and posits a thought-provoking avenue on the topic.

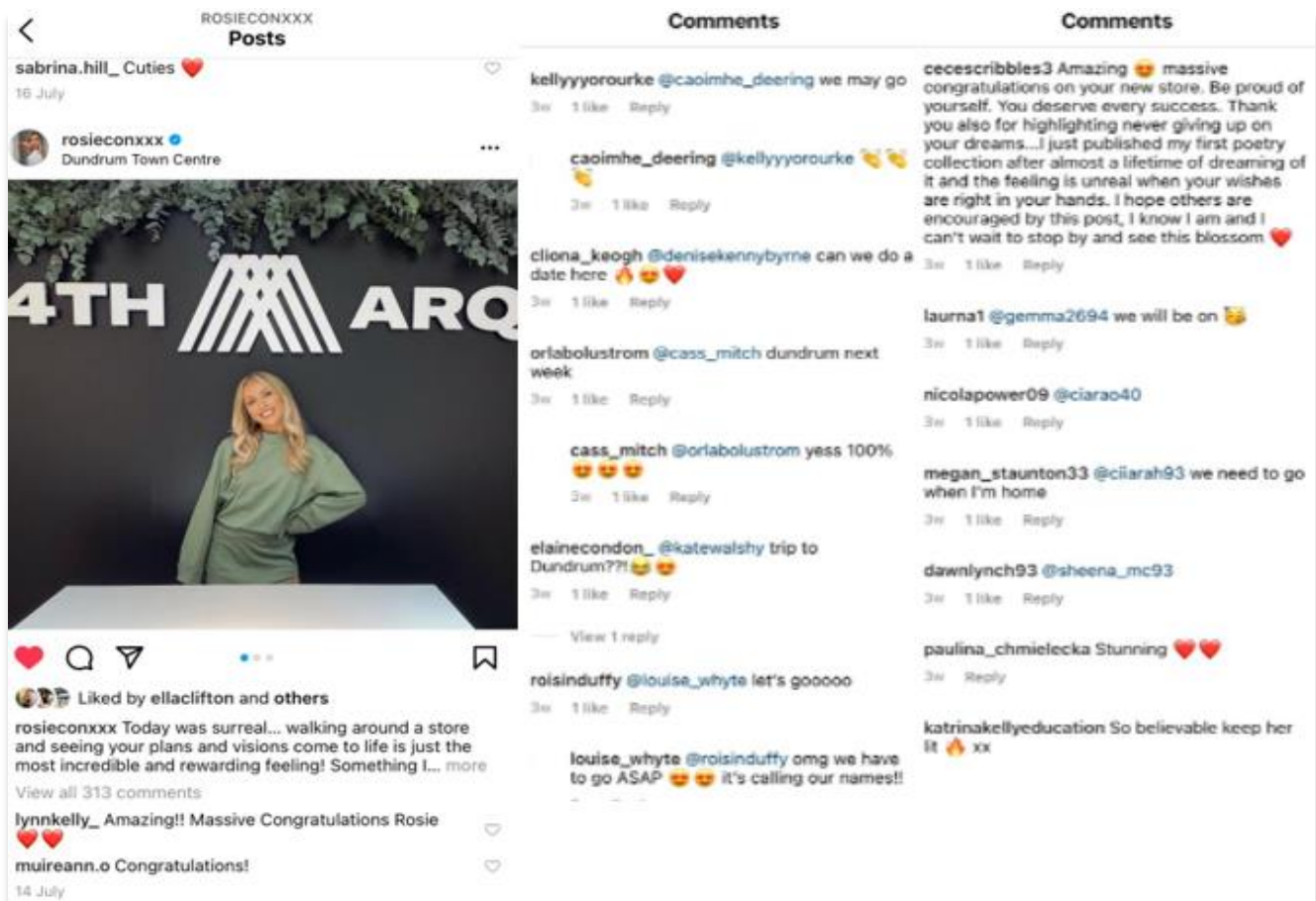
“I think especially younger generations as they are growing up are kind of scared to be different. Like people always get the same short dresses, when you're going out there's kind of like an unsaid rule of what you have to wear ... I think it does mainly focus on young people like older people are kind of past that stage and they didn't grow up with social media as much”

“I definitely think there's less striking clothes and differences among people's fashion sense, like I always notice, especially you know the saying of like you're going out in 'jeans and a nice top', like that's such a definition these days, and I think if you were to show up in a big maxi dress or something that you might find suits yourself better, people might be looking actually at you like 'oh we said we were wearing jeans?'. You know that kind of thing, but there's less space for creation and diversity among your own clothes these days, I think”

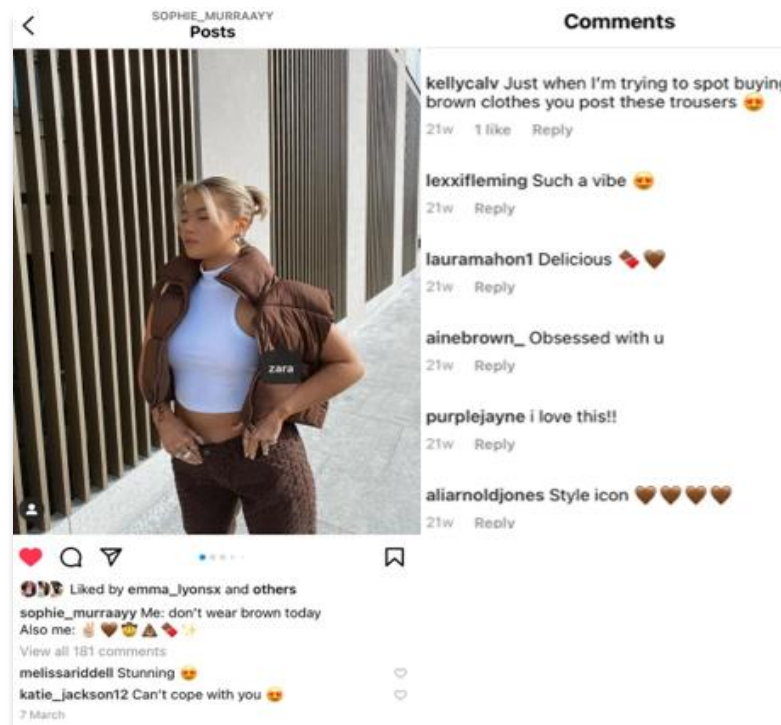
– (Participant #5)

5.1.3.2 Netnography Findings

Each SMI received comments from followers expressing their style appeal, with Sophie and Terrie being referred to as “*style icons*” and Rosie an “*inspiration*” as she encourages others to believe in themselves, thus, contributing to enhancing Millennial’s sense of self. The researcher observed followers’ interactions with SMIs to source the clothing worn, tag friends, and send compliments. This suggests that the SMIs fashion sense and likability portrays a perceived self-image for their followers. The followers appear to gain a sense of self-consciousness when viewing these accounts as the variations of fashion and content brings about an awareness of oneself.



Source: Connolly (2021e)



Source: Murray (2021c)

The researcher noticed each SMI promotes some of the same fast fashion brands such as Zara, demonstrating a popular common ground amongst followers. This mirrors the interview participants statements where styles are becoming monotonous as everyone is purchasing and wearing the same style from the same brand as promoted by SMIs because of societal pressures. While these sorts of posts do appeal to the SMIs audience, it demonstrates social desirability bias as seen with comments such as “*purchased it*” and those demonstrating keen interest in the displayed garment.

5.2 Research Objective 2

Research Objective 2	<i>To determine whether female millennials are concerned about environmental impacts such as sustainability when looking at SMIs promote fast fashion.</i>
Interview Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Perception of Environmental and Sustainable Impacts○ Correlation Between Impacts and Purchase Intentions○ Price

5.2.1 Perception of Environmental and Sustainable Impacts

5.2.1.1 Interview Findings

When asked toward the end of the interviews about any possible negative impacts associated with fast fashion, every participant provided the researcher with their knowledge of the environmental, sustainable, and labour impacts. This theme was explored toward the end of the interview to prevent social desirability bias influencing the remainder of the interview questions. Participants mentioned the poor working conditions of the never-ending cycle of fast fashion, however two participants mentioned fast fashion brands H&M and Zara who incorporated sustainable ranges within their product. While they demonstrated their consciousness about new sustainable ranges, they are still purchasing in and supporting these fast fashion brands who are not wholly sustainable.

"I feel like you're living under a rock if you don't know the severe implications. The impact the fast fashion industry is having on everything today, the environment, the unfortunate labour issues going on in Third World countries ... when I shop now even if it is somewhere like H&M, I'm always drawn towards the conscious action ... I wouldn't necessarily say I'm a sustainable shopper, but I do buy capsule products that last a long time ... it's like a consistent conveyor belt of issues just going round and round ... but I don't know if it's ever going to stop to be honest. These companies are so powerful, I see fast fashion lasting for a long time " – (Participant #2)

"I know that like plastic goes into clothes and it's difficult to try and recycle and break that down ... certain shops like Zara are doing that whole range where it's recycled clothes. But I know long term it's not that sustainable " – (Participant #6)

Participant #2 mentioned that they strive to shop capsule pieces of clothing, however, would not consider themselves a sustainable shopper. This suggested that they favour receiving value for money when buying items of clothing that they could wear for years, rather than consciously shop for sustainable items which would not last as long. This opens up a broader perception of IFMs attitudes toward fast fashion, basing their decisions upon price, which was identified throughout the interviews and will be explored in *section 5.4.2*. While most participants outlined their knowledge on the topic, not many appeared to be interested in it, however, Participant #4 did disclose their fondness of innovative ways to combat the environmental issues. They recalled a collaboration that celebrity Stacey Solomon did with the UK fast fashion brand 'In the Style', where the recyclable clothes tag contained seeds so the whole tag could be planted. This demonstrates the influence SMIs, and brands can have over IFMs to help in making sustainable choices.

"I did see Stacey Solomon did a collection with somebody and apparently you know the little size tags, apparently like you can plant them. They were like seeds. I thought that was quite clever " – (Participant #4)

5.2.1.2 Netnography Findings

The researcher noticed that none of the observed posts referred to environmental or sustainability factors, therefore, this was reflected within the comment section of each SMI's accounts. The researcher observed that this topic is rarely discussed amongst the SMIs with their content mainly surrounding their interest areas, which are predominantly fashion, as well as cosmetics and travel. From observing the revealed sense of identity and happiness consumers feel when viewing SMIs' fashion posts, the researcher believes that this may be a factor as to why this topic is not often discussed. Many interview participants outlined they follow SMIs for inspiration and entertainment, therefore, viewing it as an outlet. The researcher believes these consumers may sub-consciously block any hindrance's which may interfere with their sense of achievement and happiness, such as feeling guilty for purchasing fast fashion and contributing to the negative environmental and sustainable impacts.

5.2.2 Correlation Between Impacts and Purchase Intentions

5.2.2.1 Interview Findings

Despite every participant acknowledging the negative, damaging impacts caused by fast fashion, all six respondents disclosed they were still fast fashion customers. Participant #1 expressed how their knowledge of improper working conditions and recalled a previous alleged incident where sinister messages were written on product labels in Penney's, which was then embedded in their mind when shopping in the store. Despite their concerns for these factors, Participant #1 admitted to continuing to shop in Penney's and disclosed that these impacts do not impact their purchase decisions.

".. a few years ago, when there was stuff found on labels in Penney's shops where whoever was working in the sweatshops left little messages on the back of the labels, then I was more conscious going into Penney's afterwards purely because of those stories that had come out. But in general, most of the time, as bad as it sounds, no I don't think about it (when purchasing)" – (Participant #1)

Most participants stated environmental impacts do not cross their mind when shopping for fast fashion, which corroborates with the researcher's speculation regarding sub-consciously avoiding the topic, as mentioned in *section 5.2.1.2*. Meanwhile, Participant #6 discussed the possibility of purchasing sustainable, however, their perception of such ranges was that they are 'hippy' or not stylish. As findings previously discussed, consumers are beginning to dress the same as many SMIs promote the same or similar fashion trends. Overcoming these personal self-confidence issues is not the responsibility of SMIs, however, their influence could be used to promote the sustainable fashion ranges, so they are perceived as more stylish and be deemed as societally acceptable, while helping the environment.

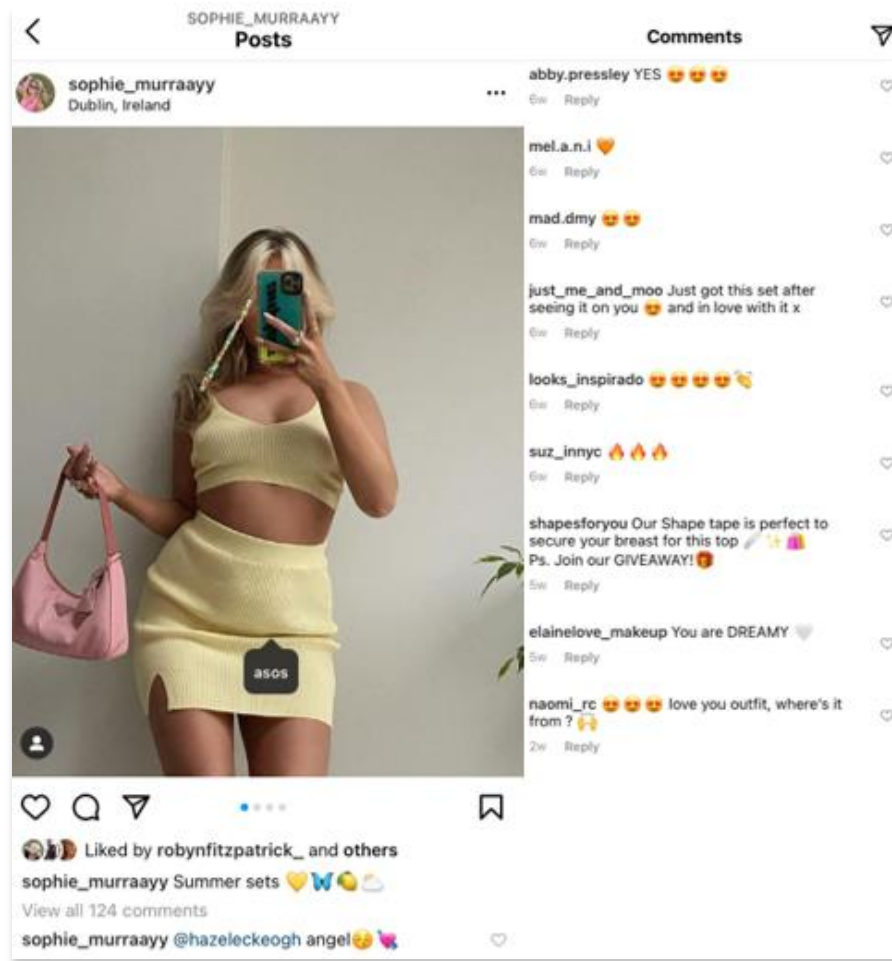
"Yeah, I'm sure it's bad for the environment and workshops (sweatshops) like I don't think about it only you asked me now to like I never go on and start looking at something and be like oh what about workshops (sweatshops) like it just wouldn't even cross my mind" –
(Participant #3)

"But I know I mean certain shops like Zara and things like that and I doing that whole range where it's recycled clothes. But I know long term it's not that sustainable ... if the clothes that come out that are recyclable are stylish, then I'll buy them, but if they come out and they look like they're just all vegan range type thing where you just look a bit hippy, then I'm not going to buy it" – (Participant #6)

It appears the dominant factors throughout the interviews that overshadow the negative impacts that the participants are aware of, and which explain the rationale of their purchasing fast fashion are social desirability, price, and relatability. The researcher would deem social desirability and price as the outlying factors, closely followed by relatability.

5.2.2.2 Netnography Findings

As there were no observations of followers mentioning the environmental factors in the comment sections on the SMIs posts, the researcher is unable to state whether there is a definite correlation between the impacts and their followers purchase intentions. However, as outlined in *section 5.1.1.2*, followers did leave comments on posts stating they had purchased the items shown or demonstrated their intent to. This leads back to social desirability, which was a theme derived from the interview findings, which appears to be also demonstrated within the netnography observations.



Source: Murray (2021d)



Source: McEvoy (2021b)

These findings outline the lack of environmental consciousness within the SMIs comment sections, while demonstrating the consumers keen interest in purchasing the fast fashion items shown. This harmonizes with the interview findings whereby IFMs are continuing to purchase and consume fast fashion, with little regard to the negative implications. Subsequently, the netnography observations outlined that there is no correlation between the impacts and purchase intentions.

5.2.3 Price

5.2.3.1 Interview Findings

Throughout the six interviews, price was a popular feature across the various themes, particularly with the participants intent to purchase. Majority of participants saw fast fashion favourably due to its low cost which Participants #5 and #6 coincided with their low incomes. Therefore, SMIs who promoted fast fashion were relatable and

viewed through a positive lens. This relatable factor appears to draw IFMs to these SMIs, while providing them with a sense of self as they can purchase new trends at affordable prices. This links in with social desirability, as fast fashion ranges drop quickly and often, purchasing cheap clothing is favourable among the cohort as they will generally be worn for one season only.

"...I would say from when I was 17 to 21 years old I would get most of my products from a fast fashion brand on a price point basis ... in Penney's regardless of whether I need it or not I'm looking to see what's new, knowing that they duplicated something that I've probably seen online and just haven't purchased, and they're doing it for a cheaper price which is probably the pitfall that happens to all of us, I think" – (Participant #2)

".. it appears so cheap ... like you could get four items in River Island for €100 or you could get six or seven items if not more from Missguided or Boohoo and they do obviously have great trends at affordable prices" – (Participant #4)

".. like as I said for my age group, I wouldn't have a huge income so as much as I'd like to support small boutiques and one of a kind type things it's just more feasible and like easier to buy fast fashion stuff because it's just cheaper mass produced, like yeah, that's a big factor aswel is money " – (Participant #5)

".. price is a huge thing because I'm not on huge money" – (Participant #6)

The researcher noticed throughout the interviews that the participants 'lit up' when they spoke about the low costs of fast fashion and that it appeared to be a favourable aspect of the topic. Denham and Onwuegbuzie (2013) state the importance of non-verbal communication as it enables the researcher to understand and interpret the message conveyed, which can be just as effective as words. It is clear that the low-price factor delights Millennial's, which could correlate with the previously discussed statements regarding their low-income levels. This aspect of fast fashion appears to fulfil this cohorts desire to remain on trend and prevents exclusion from the societal norms. While quality was mentioned as a repercussion of purchasing cheap clothing,

it does not appear to be a factor withholding a lot of merit as the participants continue to purchase from these brands.

".. if you're promoting fast fashion people need to realize like you're not going to be getting quality .. to be honest, I know fast fashion isn't the best way forward, but for someone who can't afford to be spending and buying quality pieces and the amount I shop I couldn't afford to keep up with my lifestyle with the amount I like to shop with the cost of expensive things" – (Participant #6)

Participant #1 highlighted a realisation which no other participant mentioned, being the dependence on low-cost fashion. This is an important factor worth highlighting as it relates to every society and enables the researcher to understand the breadth of reasoning, opinions, and perceptions of consumers like Participant #1. It opened the researchers own mind to the potential reasoning for some participants purchasing fast fashion, as individuals with lower disposable income may have no choice but to shop fast fashion. This rationalises a potential reason for the lack of correlation between their concern for environmental impacts and purchase intentions, however, as the researcher does not know the social classes of the participants, this can only be a hypothetical possibility.

".. there are people in our country at the moment who rely on fast fashion and if they didn't have stuff that cheap, they wouldn't be able to clothe themselves or clothe their children, so some people are relying on it from a financial aspect ... influencers are reaching out to all people, from all socio economic backgrounds, not just the people who are in middle class, which I consider myself to be .. they would probably be reaching out to people who are lower cost, middle class and yeah people who might be upper class as well" – (Participant #1)

5.2.3.2 Netnography Findings

The researcher did not discover any obvious comments regarding price across each of the SMIs accounts, however, it was noted that Rosie's posts promoting Primark and Zara in particular, had generated higher levels of interaction among followers. These interactions differed to the typical platitudinous comment as they were more concerned on purchasing the items worn, contrasting with Sophie and Terrie's posts. A promoted post published in June 2021 saw Rosie promote Primark, a brand mentioned by majority of the interview participants as they related to SMIs wearing this clothing as it is within their price range. As the interview participants stated these brands are desirable due to their low price point, matching their low-income rates, it appears this is reflected within the comment section.

5.3 Research Objective 3

Research Objective 3	<i>To evaluate the effectiveness of influencer marketing as an advertising tool for fast fashion retailers targeting female millennials.</i>
Interview Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Relatability○ Advertisements○ The SMI Era

5.3.1 Relatability

5.3.1.1 Interview Findings

When seeking an understanding of why the participants follow SMIs on Instagram, the common theme exposed across all six interviews was relatability. Participants shared factors to which they related to SMIs inclusive of similar body type, age, Irish nationality, and similar fashion sense. This relatability appears to have helped participants to make outfit decisions when viewing clothing they like styled on an SMI, particularly those with a similar body type, as mentioned by Participant #1. This demonstrates the power relatability has for impacting consumers purchase decisions as if they can envisage themselves through the SMI it makes the decision-making process shorter and easier.

The researcher noticed Participant #5 mentioned their relatability toward Irish influencers due to their local shopping. This sense of ‘home’ can link back to a sense of self, as the consumer may identify similar cultural mannerisms which are both relatable and are seen as socially acceptable. Typical Irish mannerisms could be evident with how the SMI speaks, phrases used, or their loyalty with shopping from Irish brands, correlating with the findings as many participants stated they shop in Penney’s, which the Irish SMIs also promote.

"AliDee just because she's hilarious and Rosie Connolly, Terry McEvoy, Lisa Jordan, just to name a few, more for fashion, and they are similar ages to what I am so similar interest in like buying houses, buying cars, family ... and similar body shape as me, so anything that looks good on them would generally, I think, look similar enough to what it would look like on me" – (Participant #1)

"I follow them purely for the style ... I love the content ... I like to see what's going on and then from there I kind of take it and see if I can put my own spin on those outfits. But with different brands ... anyone that I engage with on social media shares a similar viewpoint, similar style on a product, or even a brand" – (Participant #2)

"I often relate to Irish influencers more ... because they'll post stuff that are in your local shopping centre rather than huge multinational companies. So, I like to support local or follow local influencers" – (Participant #5)

"I like the clothes that come from those websites, and they are generally what's in trend and it's in the range of what I can afford" – (Participant #6)

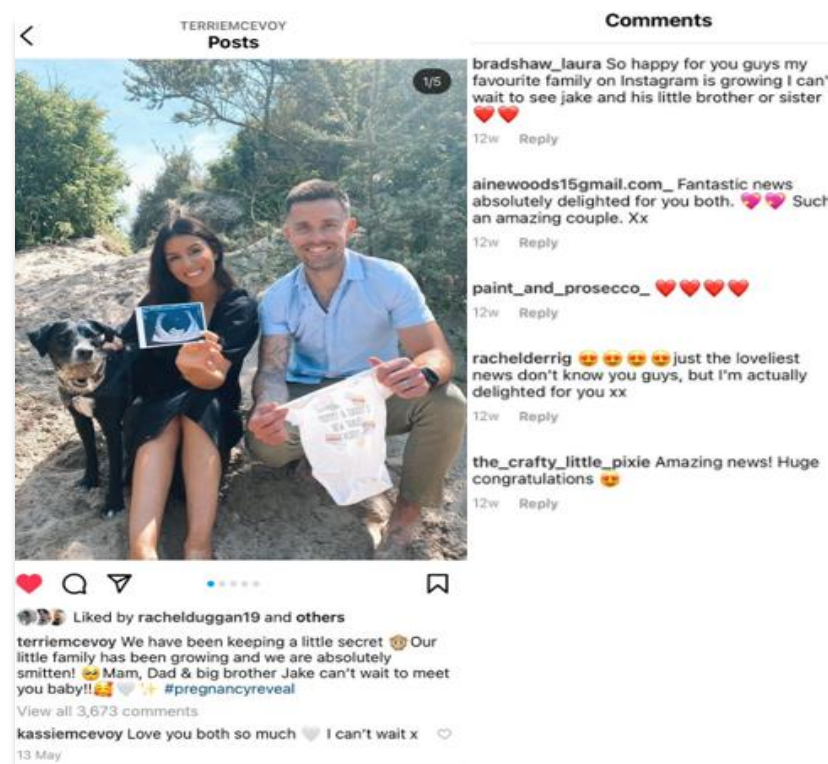
Although the participants discussed their relatability factors toward SMIs, Participant #4 stated SMIs who promote high-end designer brands are unrelatable yet appreciates those who continue to promote fast fashion. This demonstrates the unrelatable price factor which has occurred throughout the various themes. This participant cannot envisage themselves with high end designer brands, therefore, this sort of content does not appeal to them and is not likely to influence a purchase. On a broader scale, this is apparent with every participant as many mentioned low costs as a deciding factor when purchasing fast fashion. This is depicted with Participant #6 in the above quote; therefore, this sort of content would be irrelevant for this cohort.

".. when you've got them standing there and head to toe designer like Louis Vuitton and Chanel and everything ... you just scroll past it. You're like, well, that won't be me. But even I do find now that a lot of them, once they get a bit bigger, they're still promoting the fast fashion" – (Participant #4)

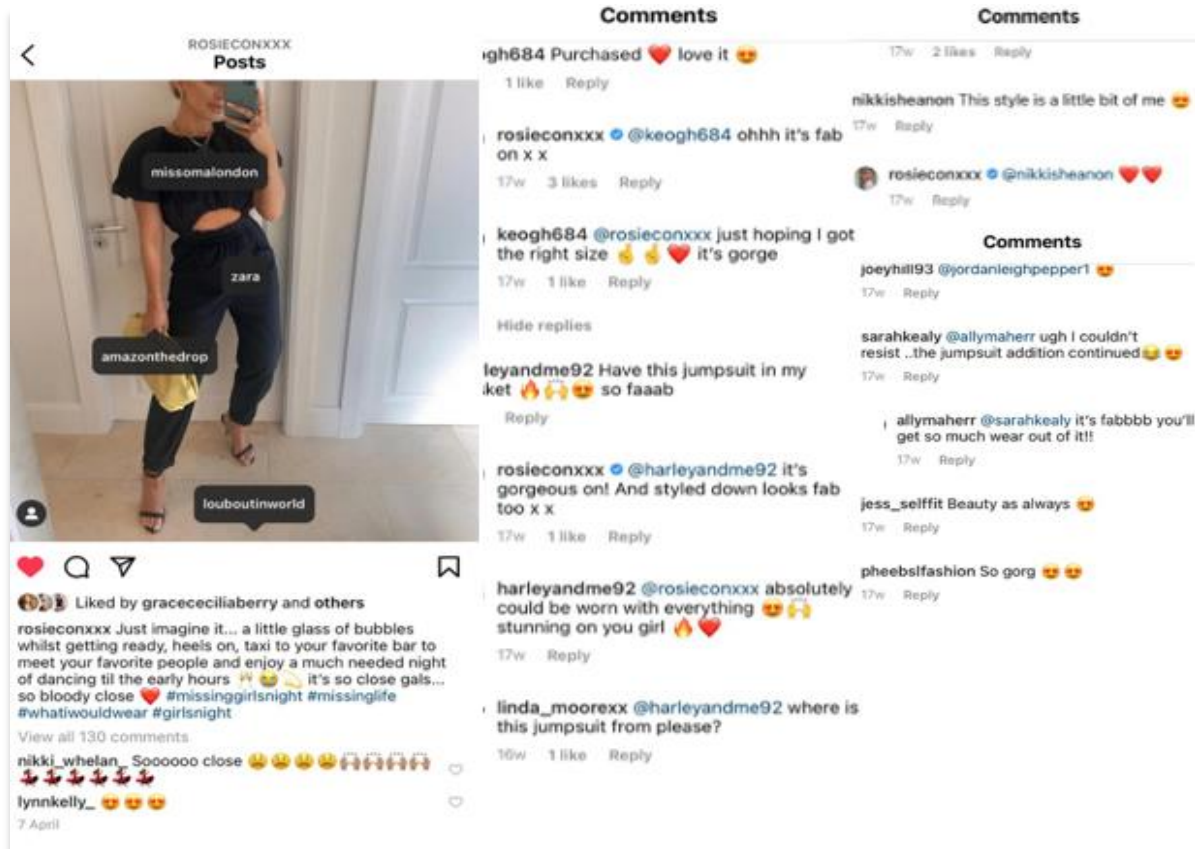
5.3.1.2 Netnography Findings

Overall, the researcher would deem each SMI observed as relatable to their followers as they share fashion interests and followers enjoy seeing SMIs personal posts. This was evident with Rosie and Terrie who received a spike in interactions on posts which were not advertisements or fast fashion related. Rosie received 130 comments on an April post 2021 where she expressed missing girls' nights out while in the midst of the Covid-19 lockdowns, in comparison to 64 comments on an advertised post that same month. The comments were divided between those querying her outfit details and those agreeing with her statement, highlighting their relatability to her feelings and personal life.

Similarly, Terrie received 3,673 comments on her pregnancy reveal post in May 2021 with followers posting their well wishes, meanwhile, an advertised post that same month saw 24 comments. As this is a qualitative study, these figures (as seen in *Table 5* in *section 5.5.2*), were noted to establish the significance of correlating themes within various SMI posts, therefore, the findings were not based upon these figures. Sophie does not publish personal posts therefore could not be analysed. This level of interest on each SMIs posts highlights the interest shown from followers, therefore, their content is appealing and relatable.



Source: McEvoy (2021c)



Source: Connolly (2021f)

Nevertheless, the researcher did notice individuals are solely on Sophie's account to view her fashion content, corroborating with each interview participant who stated they follow SMIs for inspiration and to see what the current trend is. This finding would suggest that Sophie's personal life is not relatable to her followers, while she wears and promotes fast fashion, her frequent usage of designer luxury brands may suggest this factor is the cause for the lack of resonance. This statement is based upon the participants rationale for following fashion SMIs who promote fast fashion as it appeals to their desired price range. While Sophie does fulfil that element, her mixed promotion of designer luxury brands may increase one's social desirability bias, leaving them with a sense of disappointment as they are unable to afford such items, therefore, unable to keep up with Sophie's fashion trends. This is evident within the comment section of a post where she tags Zara and Prada as approximately 90% of comments from followers relate to the Zara dress, while the remaining 10% relate to the Prada bag.



Source: Murray (2021e)

5.3.2 Advertisements

5.3.2.1 Interview Findings

Finally, the theme of advertisements was prompted throughout the interviews to provide the researcher with insight into the effectiveness of SMIs on IFMs purchase intentions. Every participant saw advertisements posted by SMIs through a negative lens, as previously stated negatively impacting their perceived trustworthiness, credibility, and overall appeal. In saying that, the findings demonstrate a contradiction with these previous statements as five out of the six participants revealed that they have purchased an item because of an SMI's recommendation or their promotion of a product.

This appeared to have linked back to previous themes of relatability and sense of self where if the participants could envisage themselves wearing the clothing or a similar style, they would most likely purchase the items. However, they did express this dislike toward advertisements, which suggests to the researcher that they do not want

the advertisements to work, although the findings demonstrate that they do regardless. The researcher also noticed that participants stated they found SMIs more credible when they promoted a product which they previously used without it being an advertisement, which could explain the rationale for the contradiction.

"I remember just scrolling through I think it was Terrie McEvoy's Instagram page and she had shoes that were from River Island so that kind of influenced me to go onto the website and buy a whole load of shoes that I didn't need purely to make myself feel better because they were pretty looking" – (Participant #1)

"A few weeks ago, I saw Lisa Jordan, one of my favourite influencers, she posted a picture of her outfit, and I really liked the blazer ... she had given the code and the details of where she got it, so I went straight online and bought ... I was actually happy that she showed that to me because I wouldn't have seen it otherwise. I am very happy with it" – (Participant #5)

"I saw online there is an influencer that I followed, and she got this corset top from PrettyLittleThing, and it fit her so well. So, then I ordered it and it was literally the most unfitting, unflattering thing I've ever worn in my entire life. And it was totally not what she was wearing. She must have had it altered I'm convinced" – (Participant #6)

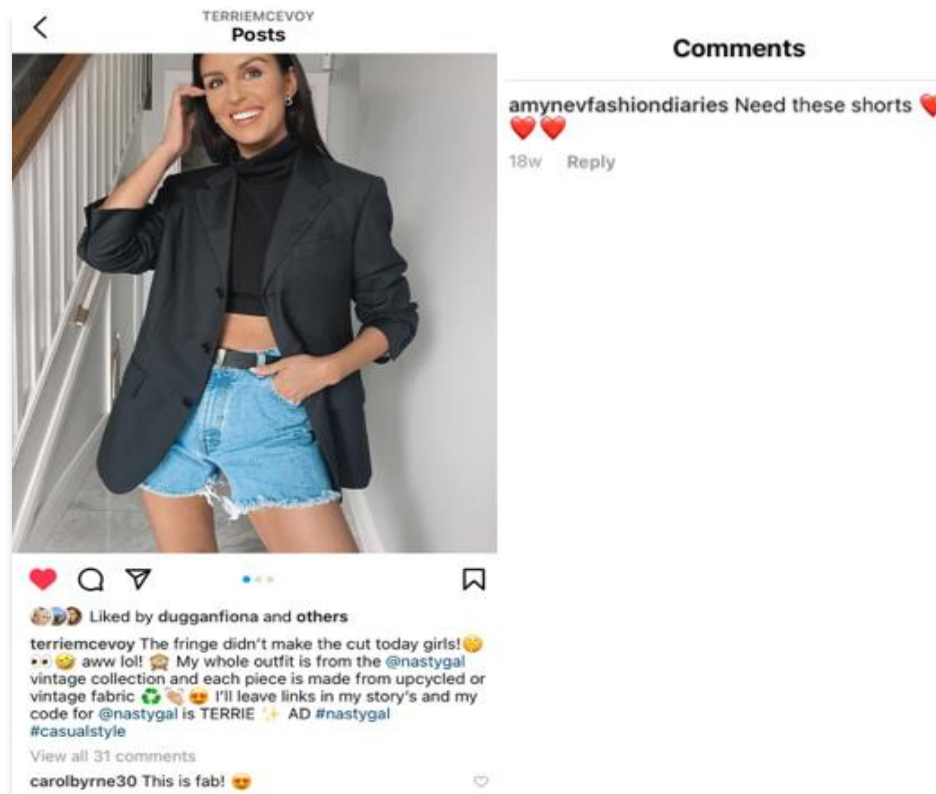
The 10% of participants who stated they would not shop through an SMI regarded themselves as a cynic as they know the items shown would not suit them. However, this demonstrates to the researcher that this participant follows SMIs who they don't relate to, and their only appeal may be somewhat similar fashion senses. Social desirability may be present here in the reasoning for consumers following SMIs that they do not relate to, which the researcher believes may resonate with many IFMs who contribute to the monotonous fashion sense.

“.. hopefully we can see with the new age influencers coming out some more genuine content and genuine connection between the brands which would then make someone who’s a cynic like me, want to actually buy from the brand. I don't personally shop through them ... purely because nine times outta 10 I know that the items that they're showing will not fit me ... I'm tall, five eleven, slightly curvier than the average Instagram girl and I know that the styles that they're promoting will have absolutely nothing to give for me, but I do love following” – (Participant #2)

These findings illustrate that although the participants don’t believe SMIs are a good advertisement tool, they remain an effective promotional tool for brands. The above quote demonstrates a lack of trust and relatability in the 10% who declare they are non-consumers of SMIs, further verifying the correlation between these key themes and female Millennial’s intent to purchase.

5.3.2.2 Netnography Findings

Each SMI promoted content remains the lowest in terms of engagement within the comments, which is consistent with the interview participants scepticism surrounding paid advertisements. However, while the level of comments is less, Terrie averages 72 comments per paid post with followers commenting to mention their purchase of her promoted clothing, or their desire to purchase with statements such as “*need these shorts*”, further verifying her influence over her followers purchase intentions. Sophie and Rosie’s accounts depicted a similar scene, demonstrating their continuation for grasping appeal and traction as the IFMs desire to keep up with trends appears to outweigh their subconscious feelings toward advertisements, similar to that of the environmental impacts. Posts from March and April 2021 had fast fashion brand Zara tagged, sparking followers commenting to ask for the link to the items shown, while some followers stated they had purchased Rosie’s clothing or intend to. This demonstrates the influence Rosie has on her followers purchase intentions, which appears to be linked with the relevant themes of relatability and inspiration.



Source: McEvoy (2021d)

5.3.3 The SMI Era

5.3.3.1 Interview Findings

When discussing the SMI promoting fast fashion market, 34% of participants considered it an over saturated market, 16% were undecided, while 50% believed it was not over saturated. Of the 34%, each participant felt that they were seeing repetitive content and again touching on a monotonous fashion nature. Meanwhile, the 50% of participants believe that due to the large range of styles and interests, there are plenty of SMIs to meet every individual's needs. The 16% of participants reasoning mirrored both parties as they saw it from two perspectives.

From the overall interview findings, the researcher observed that this cohort generally follow SMIs that they relate to, have built a relationship with, or admire. Therefore, its suggested that IFMs should take some responsibility for seeing the same content promoted across the various SMIs, as they have chosen to follow very similar SMIs. Some participants stated there is room for more SMIs in the market due to the various brands and fashion senses that appeal to consumers, which would hypothetically help

to rebuild the sense of self lost in young consumers by changing social desirability bias. As the findings highlight, SMIs are conveyed as fashion icons or role models, thus, have the power to promote various styles and trends to suit those who do not conform to the monotonous fashion. Witnessing SMIs wear niche styles can shift the social desirability bias and allow young consumers to feel a more authentic sense of self. These insights are useful for future research and to predict the potential direction influencer marketing is heading toward.

".. generally, I don't think it's over saturated because a lot of the time different influencers will be focusing on different brands" – (Participant #1)

"Yes, absolutely. I feel like it's all that you see and it's all that these people are known for unless they have begun their influencer career in some other way, I think that there's serious over saturation in the market now ... it's the same thing different day" – (Participant #2)

"Definitely yeah ... they are literally everywhere like as soon as you go on Instagram ... you see the impact on the people around us, like the fact that you see everyone wearing it (the same thing), it's like well they picked up on it from the social media influencers you know " – (Participant #4)

"Yes and no. Yes, because it feels like every second person is becoming a social media influencer. But no because a lot of people that are doing this are kinda piecing these pieces together with their own style so you can get a bit different inspo (inspiration) from different people" – (Participant #6)

5.3.3.2 Netnography Findings

The researcher observed no indication to determine the future status of the SMI industry within the SMIs comments. However, it was noted that Sophie Murray was the youngest and most recent of the SMIs observed and demonstrated the highest levels of engagement with followers. While Sophie still remains within the Millennial demographic along with Rosie and Terrie, she lives a very different lifestyle. Rosie and Terrie are both parents and share that element of their lives, whereas Sophie showcases her outgoing, carefree lifestyle, which could suggest the current IFM cohort don't resonate with family life as much as carefree, light-hearted content. According to Statista Research Department (2021b), the older Millennial cohort are the largest group of Instagram users, therefore, the findings of increased interactions on posts by the younger, less family orientated SMIs was an interesting observation as it would be assumed the numbers of interaction would be higher for the older SMIs. This demonstrates the potential for upcoming content creators within the SMI industry to appeal to this audience's desires.

5.5 Summary of Key Findings

5.5.1 Interview Findings

The above findings clearly depict that SMIs promoting fast fashion on Instagram persuade the IFMs who participated in this study to purchase from the fast fashion brands shown. It was discovered that SMIs content taps into personal factors for the cohort when it comes to fashion, such as sense of self, trustworthiness, and credibility. Participants argued both positive and negative effects this has on individuals gaining and losing their sense of self, while the overall consensus indicated that trustworthiness and credibility were strong factors which determine their intent to purchase.

It was found that participants who follow SMIs who promote fast fashion, do so due to relatability, the low cost of the fashion they wear and promote, and due to social desirability. Many participants voiced their opinions on the social desirability theme whereby they felt Millennial's are dressing the same and the styles and trends are becoming monotonous due to the similarity between SMIs styles. These societal pressures are believed to hinder the self-confidence and esteem of the young generations, although appear to also provide a sense of 'fitting in', which can be positive in more introverted individuals. Meanwhile, the price factor was a topic of conversation with every participant, as it was revealed this was a major influencing factor when purchasing clothing.

The environmental impacts were discussed with participant's where they each expressed their knowledge of the negative effects. The researcher observed a change in body language during this topic of discussion and many participants voiced their feeling of guilt for purchasing from fast fashion brands, however, verified their need to due to low incomes and social desirability.

Finally, the researcher uncovered the participants viewpoints on the status of the SMI market in regard to fast fashion, where half of the participants indicated that they felt there is still room due to the various styles and sense of selves, whereas some felt it has "*had its day*" or were unsure.

5.5.2 Netnography Findings

The netnographic findings from the five-month analysis between March 2021 to July 2021 focused on the engagement levels with SMI's and their followers. The researcher monitored and observed a sample group of three public fashion SMI's on Instagram who regularly promote and wear fast fashion brands, namely, Sophie Murray, Rosie Connolly, and Terrie McEvoy. These SMI's were chosen as they fit the IFM demographic and promote and wear fast fashion.

The factors observed were engagement levels across three variations of posts, '*standard fast fashion content*' which typically consists of the SMI wearing and tagging a fast fashion brand, '*promoted post*' where the SMI is being paid and has tagged #AD, #SP or gifted, and a '*personal post*' which is based on the SMI's personal life and is not affiliated or tagged with any brand. The three variants of posts were chosen to determine what content the SMI's audiences engage with best, indicating to the researcher which type of content they find more appealing and relatable, therefore, having a higher influential impact on their purchase intentions. The quantity of comments recorded did not define the basis of the research findings and was conducted solely to determine the significance of the study and to support or establish conflicting aspects within the themes derived from the qualitative findings.

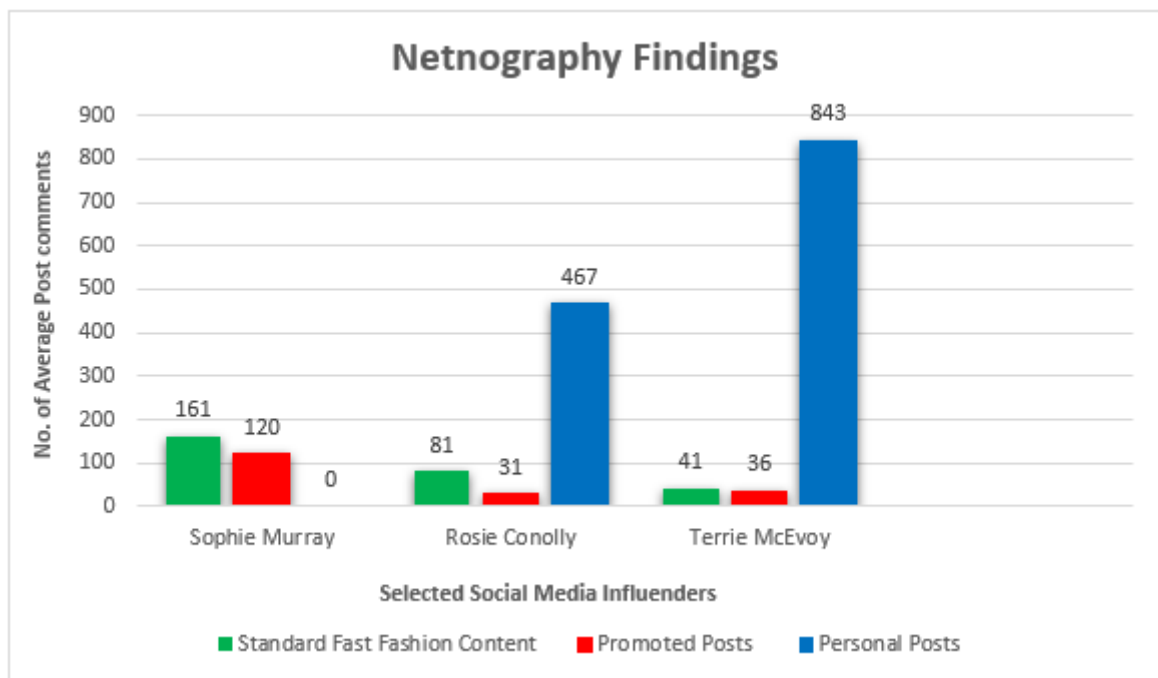
To monitor the engagement levels, the researcher observed the number of comments under randomly selected posts. Due to the researcher's restraints and limitations with time and resources, one post was selected each month for the duration of this study. The comments were the chosen form of engagement over the 'likes', as Instagram have disabled the visibility of the 'like' feature. As seen in *Table 5*, the number of comments under the randomly selected post within each variant was categorised by month and the average was calculated for each one.

Table 5 – Breakdown of Netnography Findings

SMI	No. comments on post	March	April	May	June	July	Average
Sophie Murray	Standard fast fashion content	181	216	184	109	115	161
	Promoted post (#AD/#SP/Gifted)	164	196	135	11	97	120
	Personal post – not promoting brands/fashion	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rosie Connolly	Standard fast fashion content	81	130	84	79	31	81
	Promoted post (#AD/#SP/Gifted)	21	64	11	47	13	31
	Personal post – not promoting brands/fashion	208	210	1499	106	313	467
Terrie McEvoy	Standard fast fashion content	49	52	43	41	21	41
	Promoted post (#AD/#SP/Gifted)	31	16	24	38	72	36
	Personal post – not promoting brands/fashion	295	44	3673	132	73	843

Across the sample group of three SMI's, the findings demonstrate the '*standard fast fashion content*' were the second favourable posts with the SMI's audiences, as two SMI's received the second highest average likes within this category. This content post achieved the highest levels of engagement for Sophie as she only provided content to fulfil the two variants '*standard fast fashion content*' and '*promoted posts*'. The '*promoted post*' was shown to be the least popular with each SMI's followers with the lowest average levels of engagement within the comment sections. Finally, the '*personal posts*' which did not promote or tag any fashion or brands ranked the highest in terms of engagement with Rosie and Terrie. As Sophie did not provide any content to fulfil the variant of '*personal posts*', her result for this finding was zero.

Table 6 – Netnography Findings



Chapter 6 – Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings outlined within *Chapter 5*, while incorporating a comparison with reference to the literature review from *Chapter 2*. To conduct a logical discussion, the chapter will be centred around the key salient themes derived from the research objectives outlined in *Chapter 3*.

6.2 Research Objective 1

To establish whether influencer marketing promoting fast fashion has a positive or negative impact on female millennials purchase intentions.

6.2.1 Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness was another key factor which was uncovered throughout each interview. Participants stated that they must trust an SMI if purchasing a promoted item, with respondents disclosing their trust is strong in SMIs who are considered an expert in their field. This trait was also highlighted within Chopra *et al.* (2020) findings and has strong correlations with an SMIs credibility. Comparably, Chetioui *et al.* (2020) found fashion influencers positively impact consumers purchase intentions, however trust, control, expertise, and credibility were key factors that contributed to the positive impact. This mirrors the researchers' findings as every participant stated their purchase intentions were wholly influenced by the trustworthiness and credibility of the SMI which are dependent on factors, namely, the number of advertisements posted and the SMIs relationships with brands. The higher the levels of advertisements published by SMIs, the less trust the participant had in that SMI. Participant #4 verified this statement, declaring, "*I've found with a lot of them it is #AD, #AD, #AD ... like every post is sponsored. So, it wouldn't be as authentic*". Taylor (2020) referenced a 'Stackla' study stating consumers felt family and friends have more of an impact on their consumer behaviour than celebrities and influencers, however, the research's findings negate this statement, albeit from an IFM perspective.

6.2.2 Sense of Self and Social Desirability

Within the literature Kim and Sullivan (2019) discusses the positive correlation between consumers gaining a sense of self and the increase in sales for brands. The researchers' findings complement Kim and Sullivan (2019)'s statement as every participant expressed their feeling of sense of self when viewing SMIs promoting fast fashion or when purchasing garments themselves. Every participant stated that their purpose for following SMIs promoting fast fashion was for inspiration and to learn how to style outfits. SMIs creative content sparked interest amongst the participants, encouraging them to keep on top of their trends and opinions, leading to engagement and potential purchases of the viewed items.

Posts containing SMIs wearing and tagging a fast fashion brand, albeit not paid for, was ranked the second most popular form of content in terms of audience engagement. This further complements the interview findings where participants expressed their likening for viewing SMIs fashion content on Instagram as it sparked inspiration and a sense of self. It has become apparent that these factors may be the underlying rationale within the subconscious of the consumer which influence their decision to purchase the clothing displayed.

While some participants did discuss their concerns regarding young consumers losing their sense of self due to social desirability and striving for acceptance within societal norms, this still demonstrates a positive correlation with purchase intentions as these consumers are purchasing garments that they see on SMIs pages to '*fit in*'. Chopra *et al.* (2020) mentioned similar findings within their own study, however, this particular research uncovered both gaining and losing a sense of self in relation to SMIs, in spite of both avenues leading to the same destination of brand's sales.

The young generations fashion sense was described as monotonous, which has been led by the over promotion of similar styles by SMI's. Participants expressed they are getting tiresome of seeing multiple SMIs promote and wear the same trends when new season ranges launch, with many referring to Penney's in this instance. It is argued that this cohort have an issue with this, however from the netnography observations, a large quantity of comments expressed consumers desire to purchase or stated they had purchased these monotonous styles. It is evident that there is a cyclical pattern here where this generation long to express themselves differently, but for reasons such as social desirability, they remain to follow the crowd.

6.3 Research Objective 2

To determine whether female millennials are concerned about environmental impacts such as sustainability when looking at SMIs promote fast fashion.

6.3.1 Correlation Between Impacts and Purchase Intentions

The researcher's findings determine there is no correlation between the negative impacts associated with fast fashion or SMIs promoting it and IFMs purchase intentions. It was revealed that this cohort are aware of the negative environmental impacts caused by fast fashion, inclusive of sustainability issues, corroborating with Sorensen and Jorgensen (2019). Critiquing Gazzola *et al.*, (2020) and Ha and Angus (2021) beliefs that Millennials are committed to the growth of sustainability, the research findings illustrate that this cohort understand and acknowledge the negative sustainable impacts yet continue to purchase fast fashion. This echoes Lee *et al.*, (2019) statement, referring to this cohort as fast fashion consumers, thus, contradicting Gazzola *et al.*, (2020) and Ha and Angus (2021) beliefs.

However, one participant highlighted their delight at learning of UK fast fashion brand 'In the Style' modifying their clothes tags within the Stacey Solomon range, which are essentially plant seeds, resulting in no waste. This demonstrates that some IFMs respect brands that make these sustainable changes, supporting Ha and Angus (2021) statement regarding this cohort appreciating sustainability from a minority perspective. However, the broader findings illustrate that their consumption of fast fashion contributes to the negative impacts.

The researcher noticed certain factors hinder this generation in becoming more sustainable with their fashion choices, and they are the price of clothing and their perception of sustainable fashion. As discussed in *Chapter 5*, one participant regarded their perception of sustainable ranges as not stylish, stating if the clothes were stylish, they would purchase them. While this, again, taps into the social desirability element of influences that determine what is fashionable and what isn't, this participant expressed their main reason which resonated with every participant, was price. It is apparent from the interview findings that some IFMs have low incomes, yet strive to remain on top of current trends, therefore, fast fashion is convenient and economical for them. This supports Bernardes *et al.* (2018) who state Millennials perceive sustainability as high cost, thus, it is not relatable for this cohort.

The findings contrast with Su *et al.* (2019) beliefs that Millennials are willing to pay a higher price for sustainable items. The issue of affordability was raised, which forced some individuals into purchasing fast fashion as they simply cannot afford higher end brands.

As mentioned in *section 6.2.2*, the netnography observations found many followers commented on posts regarding Primark and purchases made or intended. These uncovered themes appear to overshadow and outweigh IFMs sub-conscious knowledge about the negative impacts, thus, continuing the fast fashion cycle.

6.4 Research Objective 3

To evaluate the effectiveness of influencer marketing as an advertising tool for fast fashion retailers targeting female millennials.

6.4.1 Relatability

As this research study was based upon Chopra *et al.* (2020)'s qualitative in-depth interview approach, a cross-examination was carried out between the findings. Similar to the author's findings, this study uncovered that respondent's follow SMIs for new information, to keep up to date with current trends and consider SMIs who are experts in their field as credible. Unanimously, all the participants stated their reason for following SMIs was down to relatability and resonance, corresponding with Chopra *et al.* (2020). The majority of respondents mentioned their resonance lies with SMIs who have a similar feature's such as body shape, therefore sought them as a virtual model where they could establish which clothing or fashion trends would suit them before purchasing. Other resonating factors discussed were similar values and shopping experiences. Participant #6 stated, "*I like the clothes that come from those websites, and they are generally in trend and the range I can afford*", illustrating their resonance with SMIs they follow as they shop the same brands as they are within their price range, thus, finding them relatable.

Meanwhile, other participants noted that SMIs who wear high-end brands are less relatable due their promotion of products which they could not afford. This highlights the impact price has on this generation purchase intentions. This carried through to the netnography findings as it was noted that followers commented more frequently on posts regarding fast fashion brands such as Primark. The comments often relayed their desire to purchase or look for the

item worn in store, further verifying the appeal fast fashion brands have for IFMs. Although the netnographic research does not directly demonstrate the key themes, the findings provide enough information to interpretate the correlation between the themes discussed. For instance, the findings illustrating the most popular content posted is the SMIs personal life, which supports the interview findings and existing literature (Munsch, 2021; Ki *et al.*, 2020) stating Millennials follow SMIs that they can relate or resonate with on a personal level.

6.4.2 Advertisements

Comparably, Instagram was the favoured platform for the respondents to view SMIs for fashion from both the researchers' and Chopra *et al.* (2020)'s studies. The reasons from both studies correspond with one another as the pictorial, visual and realistic perceptions are the appealing factors mentioned for the platform, thus, demonstrating its promotional power.

Bognar *et al.* (2019) found influencer marketing captures consumers attention however, their research found consumers believe SMIs do not impact their purchase intentions. In saying this, their study went on to find that when the participants were deciphering between various products, 87% would purchase the item recommended by an SMI, therefore demonstrating a positive correlation with the researchers' findings. This complements Chopra *et al.* (2020)'s findings, to which the researcher's interview was based upon and also shared a similar outcome. The researcher found 90% of the interviewed participants disclosed that they had purchased an item of fashion from an SMIs recommendation, however, ensured that this was only the case with SMIs that they ought to be credible and trusted.

The interview participants were adamant that they disliked seeing paid promotions and would refrain from using affiliated links provided by SMIs. However, this was later contradicted as majority of participants ultimately admitted to purchasing an item promoted by an SMI, therefore, indicating that this advertisement tool is effective. The purchases made appeared to be based off the previous themes of relatability and resonance as participants would purchase an outfit if it looked good on an SMI who had a similar physique. Additionally, those who deemed SMIs credible saw higher levels of purchase intent as the participants were convinced the SMI wholly believed in the promoted product from long-term use prior to paid promotions for the brand.

The netnography observations demonstrated that promoted posts ranked the lowest in terms of engagement with SMIs audience's, coinciding with the interview findings. However, as

mentioned, the comments do contain consumers desire to purchase and seeking more information regarding the item shown. This may be associated to social desirability, but nevertheless verifies SMIs influence over this cohorts purchase intents, despite their dislike for the advertising method.

Overall, it is clear that SMIs who have built a credible, trustworthy relationship with their followers and practice transparency, are deemed as an effective advertising tool. This complements Haenlein *et al.* (2020) and highlights relatability as a key factor for influencing this cohort to purchase.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to understand how and why the promotion of fast fashion through influencer marketing on Instagram, impacts Millennial's purchase intentions, from an IFMs perspective. The triangulation approach comparing existing literature, in-depth interviews and netnography, aided in fulfilling the research objectives outlined within *Chapter 3* and has allowed this study to contribute to future theory. This qualitative research method allowed for a thematic analysis to be carried out, identifying salient themes that explain the rationale and interpretation of the Millennial cohort, differentiating from the narrative of pre-existing literature.

The overall findings suggested that the important factors contributing to their intent to purchase were, gaining a sense of self through relatability and resonating with SMI's who share the same values, style, opinions, and promote fashion within the consumers price range. However, these impacts outshine the root issues caused by the fast fashion industry. This study demonstrated despite being fast fashion customers, IFMs are aware of the negative environmental impacts. While none of the participants allow the knowledge of these effects to impact their purchase intention, it became clear that the more they hear of the issues, the more it consumes their mind and subconscious. The potential of these issues being discussed by the relatable SMIs, may provoke a shift in the mentality of the IFM consumers buying habits. However, the current impact of SMIs promoting fast fashion through Instagram on IFMs purchase intentions is a highly effective persuasive advertising tool.

The study confirmed that IFMs are a cynical generation that want to enjoy the social media content they benefit from and to not receive multiple push advertisements. A level of protection was expressed throughout the interview process by participants where they did not want their '*happy place*' or '*online outlet*' to be disrupted by promotional content or advertisements. Although, the netnography observations noted that if the paid advertisements published on SMIs pages were of brands which the cohort favour, such as Primark or Zara, despite their dislike for advertisements, they do interact and express an intent to purchase the items shown. This conformed with the salient theme of social desirability and relatability, coinciding with the interview findings.

While many studies have attempted to define the effectiveness and impacts of influencer marketing, it is evident that this topic is subject to generational opinions and findings will differ dependant on the origin of the research. Although themes such as credibility and relatability resonated with existing literature findings, the subjective nature of this study derived additional, unexplored themes such as social desirability and sense of self. Influencer marketing is a growing marketing communication tool, which will be used for future generations on social media such as Gen Z. Conducting research from an IFM context has enhanced the current theory surrounding influencer marketing, providing valuable information to aid future studies on how best to understand different generations and their purchase intentions.

7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

This research study highlighted that the impacts influencer marketing on Instagram has on IFMs purchase intentions from a fast fashion content, are subjective and complex as they delve deep into the feelings and perspectives of this cohort. Although these contributing themes were touched on throughout this study, it would be recommended that future research focuses predominantly on key chosen themes and adapt a mixed method approach. This approach would uncover the true connection's female Millennial's have with SMIs from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, establishing the supply and demand aspects of influencer marketing. This would provide a deeper understanding into the consumer thought-process and highlight indicators which resonate with the cohort from a marketer's perspective.

It would also be recommended to adapt this study with the Gen Z cohort. This generation are the up-and-coming consumer and have stronger beliefs in contributing to a better future and environment than that of Millennial's (Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020; Meade, 2020). As this research found IFMs are aware of the negative environmental impacts caused by fast fashion, yet continue to consume it, the researcher would recommend the adoption for Gen Z consumers to establish any similarities or disparities. Contributing to the studies of generational marketing would be valuable for marketers and advertisers to understand each generation and their preferences.

As mentioned throughout the research findings, the element of price was an influencing factor which persuaded Millennial's to purchase fast fashion. Although two participants stated their low-income status, the researcher could not determine whether there was a correlation between social classes, income levels and fast fashion. This could pose as a recommended topic to cover in future research, to provide a deeper insight into the fast fashion customer demographics and contributing factors toward sales.

Finally, the researcher would recommend conducting this research on the Irish male Millennial consumer. When exploring the current literature, it was noticed that the majority of studies regarding influencer marketing, focus on a female perspective. As mentioned, studies have focused heavily on cosmetics and beauty which has a predominant female audience, however, with the growth of inclusivity among demographics, more individuals are learning to express themselves through makeup and fashion. Conducting a research study into the Irish male Millennial's perspective surrounding influencer marketing and its effectiveness on this cohort, not exclusive to the fashion and beauty industries, would significantly contribute to existing theory and education for marketers going forward.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Sample Interview Guide

Speak about purpose of interview with interviewee, reiterate confidentiality and anonymity

Introduction

- o Confirm consent form and interview information sheet have been read, signed, and understood.

Social Media

- o Do you use social media? How often would you say you use it?
- o What do you use social media for?
- o Which platform would you say you spend most of your time? Why?
- o What features do you use the most on your preferred platform and why?
- o Do you follow social media influencers on this platform?
- o Would seeing #Ad have any effect over your reading or interpretation of a SMI's post?
- o Do you find SMI's to be credible or an expert in their field? Why and how?
- o Do you find SMI's to be authentic trustworthy? Why and how?

Influencing Purchase Intentions

- o Do you follow many SMI's who promote fashion? If yes who do you follow and why?
- o Do any of these SMI's promote fast fashion? If yes how many would you say? Who & why?
- o What do you get from their pages / do you enjoy their content? It can be anything from similar values to expertise.
- o Do you trust the opinions and recommendations of SMI's you follow who promote fast fashion? If so, why? If not, why not?
- o When it comes to shopping for fashion, what factors persuade you to buy new items?
- o Tell me about a time you purchased something off a peer's recommendation? Were you happy with your purchase?
- o Would you say you trust peers' recommendations for fashion before purchasing more than the SMI's you follow who promote fashion? Why?
- o Do any of your friends follow SMI's who promote fast fashion? And if so, who are they?
- o Have you ever purchased clothing from an SMI you follow? What persuaded you to make the purchase? Tell me about this experience.

Impacts of Fast Fashion SMI's

- o What are your thoughts on SMI's promoting fashion?
- o What about fast fashion? Do you feel any differently about SMI's promoting fast fashion?
- o What makes the SMI's you follow who promote fast fashion relatable? Why do you find them influential or appealing?
- o Do you find micro and macro SMI's effect your perceptions differently or do you perceive them as the same? i.e., influencers who have 10,000 followers or less vs those who have 100,000 followers or more.
- o Do you find SMI's who promote fast fashion to be credible? How or why?
- o Are you a customer of fast fashion? How regularly would you purchase? If not – why?
- o Why do you think people purchase fast fashion + why do you think some people don't?

Trustworthy & Authentic

- o Do you think SMI's are authentic etc or show their belief in the promoted product?
- o Do you feel the market of SMI's promoting fast fashion is over saturated? If so, why? If not, why not?
- o When you see #AD or #SP on SMI's posts, do you feel the SMI is more/less influential/credible? Why?
- o Are you aware of the ASA guidelines SMI's need to follow when promoting brands?

Fast Fashion Impacts

- o How does seeing new fashion trends online and in-store regularly make you feel?
- o How does fast fashion impact your day-to-day life?
- o Did you find you purchased more or less clothes during Covid 19? Tell me about the clothes you purchased during this time and why.
- o How do you purchase items of fast fashion? What device would you use if any?
- o How do you feel about fast fashion? Are you aware of any negatives associated with it? If so, tell me about them.
- o How do you think fast fashion impacts the environment?
- o Do these impacts influence your decision to purchase fast fashion items? If so, how? If not, why not?

Appendix 2 – Sample Interview Consent Form

“How does the promotion of fast fashion through influencer marketing on Instagram impact Millennial’s purchase intentions, from an Irish female Millennial perspective?”

Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves meeting with the researcher online for an informal interview to provide information and personal beliefs which will then be included within the researcher’s study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher’s study which will be published on the National College of Ireland’s library database and may potentially be published in the future.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on the researchers own computer and USB only. I understand the files will be stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations, can only be accessed by the researcher and will be destroyed on completion of the study. I understand the data will be stored within an encrypted zip lock password protected file and remain in this location until the exams board confirms the results of the researcher’s dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam boards confirmation of results.
- I understand that under the freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek

Researcher: Ellen Duggan

Degree: MSc in Marketing

College: National College of Ireland

Supervisor: Michael Bane

Researcher Contact Details: ellend18@outlook.com

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Signature of researcher

Date