An exploration of how Instagram Influencers build a reputable self-brand both with their followers and company brands.

By Caitlin Kavanagh

MA in Human Resource Management

National College of Ireland

Submitted to the National College of Ireland, August 2020

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland
Research Students Declaration Form
(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

Name: Caitlin Kavanagh

Student Number: 19156561

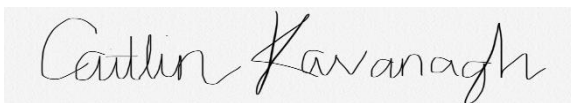**Degree for which thesis is submitted: Master's in Human Resource Management**

Title of Thesis: An exploration of how Instagram Influencers build a reputable self-brand both with their followers and company brands.

Date: 19/08/2020

Material submitted for award

A. I declare that this work submitted has been composed by myself. ☐

B. I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.
☐

C. I agree to my thesis being deposited in the NCI Library online open access repository NORMA. ☐

D. *Either* *I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
Or *I declare that the following material contained in the thesis formed part of a submission for the award of
_____
(State the award and the awarding body and list the material below) ☐

Signature of research student:

Date: 19/08/2020

Table of Contents

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the creation of a reputable self-brand for social media influencers on Instagram. The literature focuses on what social media influencers are, their role on the social media platform of Instagram, the different levels of social media influencers and the service they provide for brands, social media users and consumers. After the review of literature, it identifies what factors could contribute to the establishment and growth of social media influencers including the Instagram tools of hashtag and tagging, the concept of gifting products, the Instagram Influencer community, and existing brand loyalty.

The research adopted a qualitative research approach and conducted five semi-structured interviews with beauty and fashion influencers to gain a deep insight into this area of research. The findings and analysis showed that there were some correlations between what the literature provides on how social media influencers work on Instagram and the findings of this study. It further highlighted the main elements that contributed to the participants creating a self-brand were inspiration from other Influencers and a background in makeup. While in relation to growth, all participants acknowledged that tagging brands, using specific hashtags and support of other influencers contributed to their growth.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Louise Maguire for her guidance, support, and advice which was greatly appreciated throughout this entire process.

I would also like to thank all the participants who took the time out to partake in the research interviews.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for being there during stressful times and encouraging me to continue to achieve this completed dissertation.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Social media has made it easier than ever to quickly create and share content with online communities on social networking sites. It has also paved the way for the arrival of a type of opinion leader or a new type of independent third-party endorser, the social media influencer (Freberg *et al.*, 2010). Social media influencers also referred to as influencers, make optimum use out of this instant social media platform by establishing a self-brand for themselves. The concept of a self-brand refers to how someone showcases their expertise, experiences, and personality in a unique and relatable way. This involves them sharing their interests, their thoughts and their opinions through their personal and everyday lives. In doing this, influencers have generated high levels of engagement from online audiences who share the same interests as them and have also attracted brands and companies to the marketing opportunities that influencers could provide for them.

The current literature focuses a lot on how influencers are perceived by social media users, consumers and brands. Influencers have gained acknowledgement and popularity as being a dependable source when it comes to informing, advising and reassuring social media users and consumers on their purchase intentions (Martikainen & Pitkänen, 2019). Companies and brands have been quick to recognise influencers authenticity as the perfect marketing strategy to promote their products and services. So much so that it was reported that two-thirds of marketers use influencers for content promotion while 59% use influencer marketing for product launches and content creation (Kirkpatrick, 2016). Furthermore, brands in order to maximise positive word-of-mouth they look to influencers to generate positive customer experiences that can be spread across social media platforms to the brands existing and potential consumers (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Through this, influencers have built a business for themselves as brands and companies offer payments for influencers to create content on the brand's products.

However, it appears that there is a gap in the literature when it comes to how influencers got to where they are today in terms of how they came to using Instagram as a business for themselves and creating a reputable self-brand. This study intends to investigate the elements that go into influencers creating their self-brand and what they have become known for by other social media users and brands. It also further looks to how they extend their self-brand building up their follower count and reaching further audiences that would value the content they produce.

In the next chapter, it will provide an overview of the main concepts and theories from the current literature that is relevant to this study on social media influencers. Deriving from what was found and assessing the gaps that appeared in the literature review it leads on to establish what the aims and objectives are for the research. In chapter 4, the methodology, it will look at how this research will be carried out and how the aims will be achieved. Following on from this is the findings and analysis of the data collected and then a discussion section that evaluates what the findings mean for influencers and brands. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the overall study and findings as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature review aims to establish a greater understanding of the existing knowledge and research concerning the key area of how Instagram influencers build a reputable self-brand both with their followers and company brands.

In this chapter, the author will firstly look at what it means to be a social media influencer. This is then followed by looking at the social media platform of Instagram, focusing on the terminology used, such as Paid Ads, Sponsorships and Collaborations. As well as looking to explain what hashtags and tagging are on Instagram. Further related areas that are reviewed in this chapter include brand loyalty, influencer marketing, pressures of influencers and the different tiers of influencers.

In examining previous literature on these areas, it aims provides for an overview of the current knowledge, highlights common themes, and identify any gaps in the research.

2.2 Social Media Influencers

Social media has created key marketing communication channels between consumers and brands and has established new styles of marketing characterised by conversation and community (Gillin, 2008). Along with the rise in social media, there has been an emergence of a dynamic third-party endorser known as social media influencers (SMIs) or also simply known as influencers. These influencers are individuals who use social media as a platform to "*shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets and use of other social media channels*" (Freberg *et al*., 2010, p.90). Some consider influencers to be a form of microcelebrities, who accumulate their following on social media by displaying textual and visual narration of their personal and everyday lives (Abidin, 2016). In engaging and connecting with their followers on a personal level, they tend to be seen as relatable to their followers or average consumers, who tune in to their social media pages such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Gluckmans, 2017). Even influencers themselves would refer to those who follow them on social media as 'followers' rather than 'fans', to eliminate this idea of higher status or a social distance between the influencers and their followers (Abidin, 2016). For both the influencers and their followers there is some form of bond or relationship created contributing to influencers becoming regarded as being credible, trustworthy and knowledgeable sources, especially for the younger generations (Lim *et al*., 2017). Additionally, there comes along

this idea of a persuasive power associated with influencers as now more than ever, consumers are looking to fellow consumers, to inform and enlighten them on their purchasing decisions (Glucksman, 2017). While social media users can look to their favourite influencers to guide them on the likes of fashion, beauty and lifestyle choices there comes a point that one may question how authentic influencers are. This is especially pertinent when it comes into play that influencers are possibly being paid to promote or advertise for particular brands and products on their social media pages.

Glucksman (2017), found that an influencer's follower count is not the sole reason for their success. It is also their ability to influence followers through being genuine, confident and interactive to create a connection between their followers and the brand. Therefore, brands nowadays involve themselves with influencers to strengthen their brand's message through these individuals who hold influence over potential buyers of the brand or product (Evans *et al.*, 2017). Brands see social media sites as an additional way to engage and interact with their target audiences through using brand pages, paid ads or sponsored posts and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM). E-WOM is defined as "*any positive or negative statement made about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet*" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). Influencers are the ones who generally start the chain of E-WOM by using their social media platform to share brand-related information with others on their social media pages. The information they share not only reaches their followers but disperses out among multitudes of people within and between social networks (Evans *et al.*, 2017). Typically, in this process of E-WOM, these influencers are not being paid to be brand advocates and genuinely have a desire to share their positive experience with particular brands. However, it can become a case where brands really want to utilize E-WOM and would go to the extent of paying these influencers to ensure that their brand's message will be positively reflected on influencers' social media pages with the intent of reaching a large segment of consumers (Scott, 2015). This can enhance the brand's image by involving social media influencers to help build direct relationships with its key consumers and encourage brand loyalty (Gluckmans, 2017). For the influencers they serve as the ultimate connection between a brand and a consumer, building up high social credibility and trust not only with consumers and their followers but with brands who look to them to be a voice for their brand.

2.3 The Social Media Platform of Instagram

One of the most popular social media platforms currently for influencers is Instagram, a photo and video sharing social media mobile app with 1 billion Instagram monthly active users as of June 2018 (Iqbal, 2020). Instagram is an especially popular and successful platform for fashion enthusiasts as it allows them to use the visual aesthetics Instagram has to offer to showcase their personality through their love of fashion. For these fashion influencers along with providing their top fashion tips, they also introduce their favourite brands and products through their social media accounts which in turn sparks the interest of fashion brands (Paton & Kuchler, 2014). This is very much relating to this idea of E-WOM, in that the brands see an opportunity to harness their way into influencer content by reaching out to influencers and offering rewards to them for incorporating the brand's message within their posts. There are, however, maximum and minimum levels of how much a brand intervenes in what the influencer says or posts about the brand. The maximum level of encroachment would offer payment in return for posts in which the content is fully determined by the brand and they may state particular requirements such as a minimum number of posts mentioning the products, a specific number of brand citations and pictures of the influencer with the brand and redirection from the influencers social media page to the brand's online store (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2018). On the other hand, minimum levels of intervention would refer to brands sending free products to the influencer with a hope that they will communicate some information about the products sampled in the likes of an Instagram post. In following this, there are particular measures put in place for followers and consumers to know when influencers are being paid or sponsored by a brand and when they are simply just sharing their opinions about certain brands and their products. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has enforced these stricter guidelines, as there was widespread criticism about the possibility of paid brand endorsements masquerading as organic and unpaid posts (Evans et al., 2017). To this day, it is made clear to influencers that they must disclose information about whether their post is, for example, a "Paid Ad", a "Collaboration or Collab", or is "Sponsored".

In looking more at explaining these terms used, a Paid Ad or #AD is when the brand has a right to control what is contained in the influencers post about the brand. This may mean that the brand can request to see the post prior to it being published and have an opportunity to alter it, maybe to include specific wording that they prefer to use before it is posted on the influencers page (Duran, 2018). A collaboration would refer to an influencer working with

the brand to create something which then the influencer can market (the "collab", a more common phrase used by influencer) on their social media page and possibly on the brand's social media page (Ayaz, 2019). It is beneficial to both the brand and the influencer in that they can gain additional recognition from appearing on each other's social media pages. Sponsored or SP, on the other hand, is where the influencer has been paid to create content with the brand however, it is very much in the hands of the influencer to create the concept and execute it in a way that best fits them (Duran, 2018). It allows the influencer to have the freedom to talk openly and honestly about the products which are what made them so popular among social media users in the first place. An additional term that pops up quite frequently is "Gifted", which means that an influencer is under no contractual obligation to share the products unless they desire to. These products are free and generally new products a brand sends to influencers so that they can try them out for themselves to see if they like them. It is then up to the influencer whether they want to share what they thought of the product, but again it must be stated in their post (Duran, 2018). To maintain a level of trust with their followers it has become important for influencers to disclose information about their relationship with particular brands especially when it comes to Paid Ads or Sponsored posts.

A further symbol that is of importance, especially on the social media platform of Instagram, is tagging. The use of account tags, hashtags, product tags and location tag, opens up the opportunity to extend your social media presence to a greater following with hashtags generating over 12% more engagement than posts that exclude them (Moore, 2018). When it comes to choosing hashtags for social media posts they must be suitable as the hashtags allows for the content to be visible to users who are interested in a particular topic. It also makes the influencers or social media users' profile visible, opening up the possibility of gaining more followers (Ibba *et al*., 2015). It is a way for influencers to further connect with their following as the function of hashtags is to act as a descriptor for the post, to explain the content better and can allow for communities to emerge from the use of different hashtags. One popular hashtag is #OOTD (Outfits Of The Day) which is encouraged by influencers and brands to use as a way to generate large volumes of advertising content (Abidin, 2016). For this hashtag, social media users can access all the similar content that is under this hashtag, in this case, predominately fashion posts. This concept of a flow experience comes into play, as the consumers or followers get involved in this act of network navigation, whereby they become focused on the interactions online (Syrdal & Biggs, 2018). Similarly, influencers can further include the '@' symbol in their post to create an actual link to the brand's social

media page where all products can be viewed and access to the company website or how to purchase the products is provided (Ibba, *et al*., 2015). For both the brands and influencers, it is an additional demonstration of the dynamics of the content produced and consumed (Ferrara, Interdonato & Tagarelli, 2014). It would be mandatory for an influencer who is being paid or sponsored to either tag or link the brand's social media account and the products in their post, but the influencer can also tag the brand or product to purely share their interest and their inspirations with their following. This also gives them an opportunity to show that they are genuine and create this honest connection.

2.4 Brand Loyalty

One thing that has become increasingly important in the digital world is brand loyalty, as there is almost an overload of options for consumers now when it comes to them purchasing goods or products and services. Brand loyalty is an emotional or psychological attachment to a brand with those who are loyal to the brand often exhibiting a positive and deeply committed attitude towards it (Lobschat *et al*., 2013). Traditionally, brands often operated loyalty schemes, such as reward cards and discounted offers, for their customers in order for them to continue using their brand. Today, for brands it is understanding where their customers are and how they communicate with them, especially if the brand is aimed at the younger generations, not only is their social media presence essential but also engaging with influencers, who are a trusted voice in this social media space, can be beneficial to the brand in gaining brand loyalty (Brooks, 2018).

On social media, influencers or just social media users, in general, tend to have a desire to share information about a brand with other users if they themselves have become emotionally and psychologically attached to it (Choi, Thoeni & Kroff, 2018). This loyalty towards the brand intensifies the more they engage with the brand and in turn will impact how they comment on their experience with the brand's products on their social media pages. For the influencer when they express their love and loyalty for a brand they do it in a particular way that resonates with their audience through their expertise in creating relatable and trustworthy content for their followers (Brooks, 2018). However, influencers are tasked with accumulating a following and creating their own brand for themselves, that is distinct from any sponsoring entity, so they often work with many brands simultaneously as they are not owned by any specific brands (Wise Marketer Staff, 2019). While an influencer can be

supportive of one brand they can easily be equally as supportive of another brand, that may even be a competitor of the first brand. In a way, they are still being loyal to each brand and it's not that they favour one over the other they simply like using both brands and in combining a variety of brands it contributes or forms their own self-image, their own brand. It does then raise the question as to where the customer's loyalty lies whether it is to a brand or if it is with an influencer, do the customers get to like and know the brand for themselves or are they being influenced by the influencer to buy into a brand that the influencer likes?

It is apparent that, especially in relation to fashion and beauty choices, consumers decisions are influenced by the information that is made available to them from a multitude of sources such as magazines, advertisements, celebrities, and influencers. Particularly, fashion, it is seen as a powerful social symbol used to create and communicate both personal and group identities (Wolny &Mueller, 2013). Consumers value the personal opinions and communication which is how many influencer have become so successful as they influence a trend or a "must-have" product which makes the consumer want to copy them and be like them so, therefore, are they being loyal to the influencer in relation to this? (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). In some ways, trends are co-created by consumers who not only perpetuate but also adapt them along the way. For influencers adopting a trend successfully impacts the perceived value of the product to their followers or another consumer, in both positive and negative ways (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Therefore, it could be a case that influencers try to keep on-trend as a way to stay relevant rather than being loyal to particular brands. Influencers share how they style products and how they interpret trends in their own way with the intention of gaining feedback on their stylistic choices (Lin, Lu & Wu, 2012). It allows for one's fashion preferences to be amplified and a chance for their self-selected styles to emerge through engaging with different brands and other fashion enthusiasts. Fashion is constantly changing and there are endless ways in which fashion or styling choices can be interpreted by fashion designers, brands and individuals, bringing about this element of surprise when the different fashion movements begin to surface. Just like fashion new beauty trends, products and brands are constantly emerging and shifting. Therefore, when it comes to beauty, consumers value the honest opinions of influencers as they are seen as a credible source that provides information on different makeup and cosmetic brands, products and the latest makeup trends (Paco & Oliverira, 2017). It is said that this surprise and newness is an essential characteristic in maintaining the social audience's interest (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Influencers have to be able to respond to this whether they choose to stay relevant by

keeping to the trends of their favoured brands or whether they decide to branch out and diversify by engaging with a variety of brands that contribute to their fashion and beauty choices.

2.5 Influencer Marketing

One of the main factors that help influencers stay relevant is the fact that currently, many brands and companies have specifically set aside budgets for influencer campaigns. A research study by Kirkpatrick (2016) found that influencer marketing is likely to generate eleven times more return on investment than any other form of traditional advertising annually. Additionally, more companies consider brand-influencer collaborations to be a more effective way of grasping the customer's attention. Furthermore, in a survey by ZD Net, it found that 'peer' endorsement such as family, friends and influencers are preferred by 70% of millennials over traditional celebrity recommendations (Brown, 2016). This suggests that there are plenty of opportunities for influencers to get involved with different brands as it appears that there is a growing desire for companies and brands to budget for influencer campaigns (Woods, 2016). As more brands continue to understand and learn about the impacts of influencer campaigns it opens up the possibilities for influencers to work with different brands, brands that they may have pre-existing loyalty with, new up and coming brands and even brands they may not have heard much about.

2.6 Pressures faced by Social Media Influencers

On the other hand, in trying to stay relevant, influencers are under pressure to ensure that they maintain the interests of their followers while also attracting other social media users to their social media pages. Firstly, influencers can be faced with this pressure from brands that they have been associated with or are part of an influencer campaign that they have paid ads or sponsorships with. While influencers need to be involved with these brands to contribute to their self-brand and as a source of income, if they are paid for posting about products, there comes a concern around authenticity. The pressure for the influencer, in this case, could be that a brand that they work with has brought out a new product that isn't as popular as their previous products, however, the brand could have an expectation to be able to rely on the influencer to positively promote the new product on their social media page. It is difficult for the influencer as they are faced with this external pressure from the brand as they may receive

a reward for actively engaging, wearing or using a new product, even though they may not entirely like the product, but could have a fear that they will be punished if they speak negatively about the brand's product (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2018). On the other hand, influencers want to be open and honest with their followers as consumers desire this authenticity, this idea of what is true, genuine and real particularly when it comes to beauty, lifestyle and fashion. As part of a personal branding strategy, influencers craft an authentic self-presentation, whether they are being intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (Marwick, 2013). Intrinsic motivations can be valued by influencers as it involves behaviours that stem from a person's internal desires and passions, which links into one of the influencers primary activity of self-expression. They often value their work due to the enjoyment it offers in creating and sharing content that is based on what they love and what their interests are (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2018). Extrinsic motivators are driven by external pressures such as reward or punishment with no consideration of internal desires (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, it would appear that in the case of influencers intrinsic motivators overshadow extrinsic motivators. This is to say that staying connected with people, using social media pages as creative outlets and journaling day-to-day life are highly motivating factors for influencers to create and share content. While money, on the other hand, is a motivating factor only once the influencers have been satisfied with their internal desires their intrinsic motivation (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2018).

Influencers can document their lives as they predominately work from their own homes if they can set themselves up to do so. It is easy for them to work from home with access to social media from devices such as laptops and phones where they can have a constant connection with anyone, from friends, family and online followers to brands and companies. In doing so they create this digital engagement which is defined as any type of activity or human reaction, such as liking, commenting, sharing or saving, an online post (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018). Influencers can go online to their social media pages at any time to share their personal lives with their followers but when they are online sharing it gives them a chance to make comments about the outfit they are wearing that day, where they might be going for lunch and what their plan is for the day. In having this openness of sharing their own interest and hobbies as a way to generate likes and followers, it creates or boosts self-confidence, which encourages influencers to continue to post on their social media pages. However, when influencers post something and it doesn't receive many likes or the reaction that they expect, it naturally would spark concern with the influencer and often results in them looking to other

influencers content to see what they are doing differently. Furthermore, they look to their followers and in doing so they find content and topics that online audiences want to see, which can impact the creative direction of an influencer (Bolat & Gilani, 2018). This idea of authenticity emerges again as influencers move away from their original content of what they want to share and what their own ideas and interests are, to what their increasing follower count wants to see in a bid to become more popular or stay relevant.

An article by Grazia highlighted how an online personality's or a social media influencer's life may appear to full of tropical travel adventures, designer clothes and a cast of glamorous friends. In reality, influencers have spoken out about how everyday demands of life, a need to stay relevant and a fear of letting down followers and sponsors have contributed or triggered their anxiety (Alimohamadi, 2015). In working in their home environment, it can be more natural for influencers to speak out on their social media pages about how their day might be going, discussing struggles that they may be experiencing that other social media users could relate to. In doing so it only further, supports this idea that influencers are seen to be real and relatable people setting themselves apart from traditional celebrities by allowing social media users to be a part of their personal lives.

2.7 The 3 R's: Reach, Resonance and Relevance

The creation of the correct visual content by the correct person is what appeals most to consumers as it is what gets them engaged and most importantly what gets their response (Martkainen & Pitänen, 2019). The 3 R's selection process of Reach, Relevance and Resonance is often taken into consideration for brands to identify, measure and evaluate the best-suited influencer for their brand and products. Reach refers to the influencer's follower count on their social media sites, the larger the follower count the larger the reach is for the brand (Newberry, 2019). However, this doesn't necessarily mean that it will be a guaranteed success. It is important to take into account the brand's target market and work with influencers who have access to these audiences. Therefore, relevance is important as it is the level of alignment and similarity between both the brand's image and the values of the influencer. This can be dependent on what type of content the influencer creates or the audience they reach. If brands can identify the influencers that hold the same values, culture and demographics as the brand's target audience then those influencers are likely to be selected (Ebrahimi, 2015). The brand, in this instance, feels that these influencers have the

ability to engage with its target market in a particular way that ensures their message is presented to their audience in the best possible and most authentic way. Lastly, resonance is the degree of engagement influencers can create with the relevant audience based on the content they share (Ebrahimi, 2015). Ultimately, once the content reaches an audience they can engage with it at different levels whether that is they actively share the message on their own social media pages, or they ignore the message or simply use the content for their own purpose. There must also be a recognition on the tiers of influencers referring to the size of influencers following or potential reach.

2.8 Micro, Macro and Mega Influencers

Influencers have been categorised into three tiers, the micro and nano influencers ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 followers, macro-influencers ranging from 10,000 to 999,000 followers and mega influencers with over 1,000,000 followers (Ojuri, 2018). Micro and nano influencers are typically 'normal' people who have generated a few hundred followers for themselves and would have the lowest follower count. However, they often have a strong, loyal, and trusting following and make up for their small reach through higher relevance and resonance (Gretzel, 2018). Macro and mega influencers clearly have larger reaches and would receive the most interest from brands and companies (Boerman, 2020). Macro influencers would have a devoted following on a national scale and in comparison to micro influencers, would produce higher quality content. While mega influencers move more to this idea of celebrity as it's associated with the likes of Kylie Jenner or the Kardashian/Jenner clan in general, who have an international scale following having the most reach but doesn't necessarily mean the most engagement or response levels from their following Additionally, for the brands looking to having a mega influencer endorser like Kylie Jenner they are looking at a cost of between $1 to $3 million per sponsored social media post. It is to say that brands can and will go to extreme lengths, financially, in order to secure influencer marketing. In comparison to this, a micro influencer would receive on average less than $250 per social media post and macro influencers would earn around $5,000 per post (Gretzel, 2018). They do this as not only is influencer marketing an endorsement or message that is shared by influencers but it's this idea of ongoing brand ambassadorships, product reviews, brand mentions, event coverage, sponsored content and affiliated links that are further associated with influencer marketing tactics (Krasniak, 2016). However, as previously mentioned, brands can reach out to influencers in a different way that doesn't come at a cost,

whereby they send out their products to influencers that they think are suited to their brand in anticipation that the influencer will mention the gifted products on their social media pages.

The idea of gifting has become a popular option for brands to use as a way to connect with influencers and celebrities. While the 3R selection process of influencers is often an effective method for brands, gifting is an opportunity for both brands and influencers to remind their followers and consumers that their opinions can be trusted as it demonstrates the way brands and influencers can collaborate in a way that creates a great response at little expense. Take the example of Lalalab, a photo printing app, through one year of giving products to influencers they generated 4,500 social media posts and reached 70 million people (Stancliffe, 2020). However, there is still an element of knowing the interests and lifestyle of influencers, referring to whether the influencer has children or pets or likes to travel, is into health, fitness or beauty products, so brands can tailor their gifted products to what they feel is suitable for particular influencers. In creating something personal to the influencer it is likely for the influencer to speak highly of the gifted product as well as having the freedom to create personalised posts and reviews about it (Duncan, 2018). My 1st Steps is a company that specialises in gift hampers for babies took the time to send out hampers of personalised goodies to several celebrities and mega influencers such as Dannii Minogue, Binky Felstead, Elton John and even Beyonce and Jay Z, after the births of their children. In sending these gifts, it opened up opportunities for the owners, Daniel Price and Jonny Sitton, such that they were invited to talk about their products on The Alan Titchmarsh Show, giving them further recognition for their brand (Stancliffe, 2020). Not only is it beneficial for the brand or company, but for influencers receiving gifts, they come to learn about products that they wouldn't have necessarily come across before. An additional thing to point out is that it is often suggested for brands to gift products to micro influencers as they tend to offer more content in relation to the gifted product and that they are considered to have a higher percentage of engaged and loyal follower in comparison to celebrities (Duncan, 2018). Gifting is a way to help support and establish the beginnings of a relationship with up and coming influencers, that can offer the most engagement with their audiences. On another level, macro and mega influencers can spread the brand name and message to their millions of followers. It then becomes a question as to whether gifting plays a role in obtaining brand loyalty with influencers and whether it opens up opportunities for the influencer to either work with that same brand in the future or raise interest with other brands.

2.9 Conclusion

It is understood that the online social media platform has enabled ordinary users to assert strong identities and goes back to this idea of self-branding which has been noted as being an essential attention-getting device (Shepherd, 2005). While anyone can essentially be an influencer if they put their minds to it, in order to make a living earning money for social media content and treating your social media account as your business you need to have recognition from brands, companies and even among social media users and other influencers. As previously identified, influencers create the content based on their own interests and hobbies, which brands take into consideration when it comes to selecting the most suitable influencer. Influencers start from being micro influencers, having a relatively small following, but what is it that makes them grow? Many different aspects could play a vital role in the success of influencers in relation to brands seeking them out and them growing their own self-brand and business. To consider elements such as the hashtags used in a post, it spreads influencers content to a more extensive audience where they can become noticed and stimulate their follower count. Another one could be related to the influencer already using the brand's products, are familiar with the brand name and have a pre-existing loyalty to the brand. In having this loyalty for a brand and pairing it with influencers' tags that mentions the brand's name in posts, could it spark interest from the brand to reach out, taking their selection steps and involve this influencer in their brand, whether it be a paid ad or a sponsorship deal? On the other hand, with the gifting of products, it was acknowledged that micro influencers are effectively the most significant players when it comes to a brand sending out gifted products. The brand could be well known and through this method could be extended the influencer's reach if the influencer decides to share the brand's gift with their online users. Furthermore, to consider whether forming relationships within the influencer community provides greater recognition for an influencer. Also, whether the support from other influencers helps in obtaining new audiences and increase follower count. Ultimately, the question lies with what factors are the most significant contributors to the growth and the success of influencers.

Chapter 3: Research Question and Objectives

3.1 Research Question

An exploration of how Instagram influencers build a reputable self-brand both with their followers and company brands.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

To investigate the factors that contribute to the growth of Instagram influencers' self-brand and the establishment of their own business.

- This is concerned with identifying how influencers develop their self-brand and the different factors on the social media platform of Instagram that could play a role in building up their self -brand.
- It looks to consider whether elements such as location tagging, brand tagging and hashtags that gain a further audience reach, contributes to recognition from brands and other social media users.
- Whether the concept of gifting i.e.- when brands send out gifted products to influencers and influencers share the products on their Instagram page, opens up an opportunity for influencers to work with that brand in the future.
- Furthermore, whether the gifted products or the brand who sent the products helps contribute to the foundation or shape the self-brand of the influencer.

To investigate the importance of online connections and relationships when it comes to Instagram influencers creating their self-brand and expanding their audiences.

- This focuses on the online Instagram influencer community as well as online relationships with brands.
- Whether forming a relationship with well-established influencers helps to advise them on creating content and inspiration for their self-brand.
- Also, whether the relationship can contribute further audience reach for influencers (e.g. they comment or tag one another in their Instagram posts).

To investigate the role of brand loyalty concerning the self-branding of influencers.

- This focuses on influencers displaying a pre-existing brand loyalty whether that is through posting or tagging the brand (no payments attached), they build up an association with that brand and it becomes part of their self-brand.
- Whether this brand loyalty sparks an interest from the brand, that they have a known loyalty with, to work with the influencer through Paid ads, Sponsored posts or collaborations.

In the next section, the methodology, it will outline how the aims and objectives will be achieved. The methodology needs to align with the aims and objectives in order for the results and findings to provide answers to the research question.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this research study is to fill the gaps in the current literature and to provide additional insight into the topic of social media influencers and the formation of their self-brand. The purpose of the methodology is to direct the research onto the right path, informing the philosophical underpinnings, research strategy and the methods used in collecting and analysing the data of this research study. Through exploring Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2009) Research Onion, as seen below in Figure 1, it outlines the significance of identifying the appropriate research process. As each layer has a purpose and describes a more detailed stage of the research process, it will look at particular elements, such as research philosophy and research approach, to offer guidance in this methodology. It will further discuss the reasons as to why interviews were chosen for this research and will establish the data collecting methods, sampling and analysis techniques that can be applied to the research.

Figure 1: The Research Onion
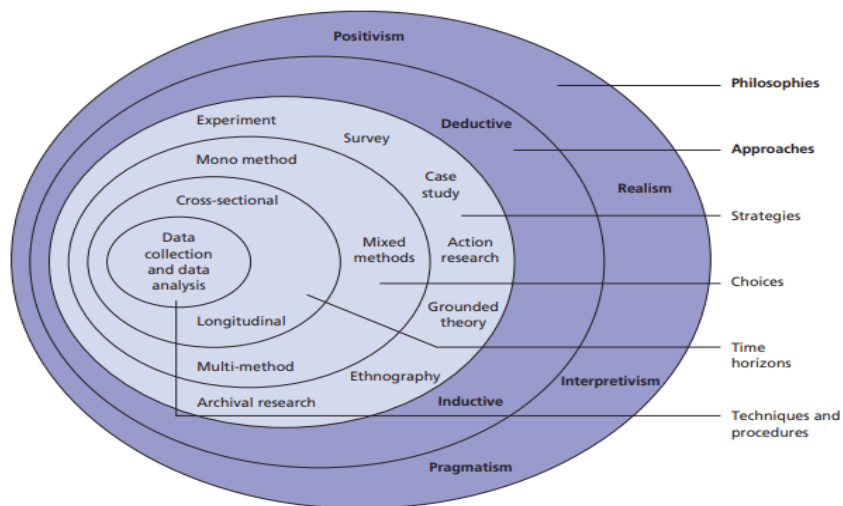
(Source: Saunders *et al*., 2009)

4.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy is concerned with the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge. Upon examining the research onion, it is clear that the outer layer is a crucial aspect of the research as it signifies the four main theoretical philosophies of positivism, realism, interpretivism and pragmatism (Saunders *et al*, 2009). The objective of this study is to further understand the features of the creation and building of individual influencers' self-brand, therefore, the most appropriate approach is interpretivism. Interpretivism recognises that humans create meaning and considers the meaning and reasoning behind people's actions, how people participate, behave, or interact with others in society and culture (Chowdhury, 2014). Furthermore, the interpretive approach holds a subjective understanding of people, whose individual social worlds, feelings, opinions, and viewpoints carry value and meaning (Saunders *et al*., 2019). It is to say people will have their own thoughts, emotions and experiences as *"one individual's perception of meaning in a given setting is likely to differ from others and representing both is needed for an understanding of the whole"* (Greene & McClintock, 1991, p.14). This study looks to explore the different experiences that influencers have with their establishment of their self-brand through the content on their social media pages, their following on social media and their work with different brands, confirming interpretivism is the most suitable choice.

4.3 Research Approach

The next layer of the research onion reveals the two approaches, deduction and induction, to theory development. To distinguish between induction and deduction, Locke (2007) explains that a deduction method involves moving from the general to the particular, starting from theory, to which hypotheses are made and tested to revise the theory. On the other hand, induction entails moving from the particular to the general, starting with observations of some specific instances to form concepts, generalisations and theories about the phenomenon (Locke, 2007). The deductive approach looks to pre-existing theories, analysing and testing against them, to discover a relationship between the research and the existing theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The inductive approach is usually associated with qualitative methods of research and its objective is to formulate meaning from the collected data set as a way to identify patterns and relationships to form a theory while being able to use existing theory to generate the intended research question (Saunders *et al*., 2012). Therefore, the approach of

the induction method for this study would appear to be more appropriate, as it intends to form a new theory based on the conclusions from the research on social media influencers self-branding formulation.

4.4 Qualitative vs Quantitative

In peeling these first few layers of the research onion it has been identified that this study blends an interpretive perspective along with an inductive approach, therefore, suggesting that the research would fall under the category of qualitative research. As defined by Bryman, (2012, p. 380), "*Qualitative research is a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. As a research strategy it is inductivist, constructionist and interpretivist*". In comparison to this, quantitative research is concerned with data that is numerical or that can be converted into numbers through using mathematically based methods, in particular statistics (Sheard, 2018). In considering this, it is clear that for this study, the approach taken by the researcher is a qualitative research. The purpose of this study is to get a deeper understanding of how influencers have constructed their own self-brand and the factors that play a role in attracting and attaining the right attention from brands and followers. Qualitative research enables the participant, in this case, the influencer, to have a voice, allowing stories of direct experiences to be heard, in order for the researcher to gain a greater insight at an individual level.

Furthermore, the information gathered can be analysed and the research findings presented in a way that uses the influencer's own words that conveys their feelings and experiences towards the subject of the research (Saunders *et al.* 2012). In saying this, there are some drawbacks of a qualitative research approach, like with any research approach, that must be taken into consideration by the researcher. Thompson (2011), identifies that in having a smaller sample size in a qualitative research method, it draws upon an issue of generalisation being applied to the entire population of the research, in this case, other social media influencers. It has also been thought that with a qualitative research approach, it can be difficult to develop the undeveloped question into a researchable form and that there may be continuous refining of the research question throughout the study (Darlington & Scott, 2003). However, this study focuses on formulating an understanding of social media influencers, in exploring and retrieving rich data on their opinions and experiences of self-branding through

using social media platforms. A qualitative approach provides the depth of understanding needed for this study.

4.5 Research Strategy

The research strategy is concerned with how the researcher intends to carry out the research. The intended qualitative method for this study is interviews. The reason as to why interviews are best suited for this study is down to the fact that they can provide a way for participants to provide more depth and insight into their experiences on a given topic (Rabionet, 2011). It became apparent in the literature review that there is a need to explore the theme of influencer self-branding, how they establish themselves as essentially being a brand. Therefore, the interviews are semi-structured in nature, whereby the participant has to answer predetermined open-ended questions allowing for the possibility of broad and varying responses from the participants taking part in the study. In this study, semi-structured interviews will be conducted online, with the table below, Figure 2, identifying the four types of synchronous communication that can be used for online interviews, (Salmons, 2010).

Figure 2: Four Types of Synchronous Communication for Online Interviews.

Text Based	**Videoconference or Video Call**
• Communicate through typed words, limited use of images through emoticons or exchange of pictures. • Connect on phone, mobile device, or computer.	• Communicate through audio and video. • Connect in videoconference facility, computer, or mobile device.
Synchronous Communication Types for Online Interviews	
Multichannel Meeting	**Immersive 3-D Environment**
• Communicate through audio, video, text, and/or shared applications. • Connect by computer or mobile device.	• Communicate through audio or text, and visual exchange. • Connect by computer or mobile device.

(Source: Salmons, 2010)

The two types of communication that are taken into consideration for this study are online videoconference or video calls and text-based interviews via email. Both methods are a

popular way for researchers to communicate and make a direct connection with individuals and/or groups through Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs) (Nehls, Smith & Schneider, 2015). In the case of an online video interview, it resembles more of a traditional face-to-face interview technique as it allows for a natural conversation to flow with the addition of verbal and nonverbal signals to be used (Salmons, 2012). Text-based interviews remove these nonverbal gestures, but, on the other hand, it opens up more flexibility for the participant as it allows them to interact at a time and a place that suits them. It may be argued that text-based interviews are not as rich in detail as a video call or face-to-face interview, however, the alignment of research design with participants usage preference, access and availability is thought to be more important than richness by itself (Salmons, 2012). Furthermore, James and Busher (2006), noted that this form of text-based online interviews for research purposes enables the participants "*to explore and revisit insights…moving back and forth through their narratives, thinking about their responses, drafting and redrafting what they want to write*" (p.406), creating in effect, a form of an enriched interview. However, it was decided that online video interviews would be most suitable for the purpose of this research as the participant is more likely to say what initially comes to mind, giving their honest and direct opinions. It also allows for the interviewer to become more involved in recognising facial expressions, asking follow- up questions and getting that greater insight into the participant's experiences.

It is acknowledged that the correct wording of questions is crucial in extracting the most insightful answers (Rowley, 2012). The questions developed for the interview must fit the topic that is being researched. As this study is inductive research, existing studies, and previous questions used are important factors to consider when it comes to developing the research questions (Bolderston, 2012; Rowley, 2012). The questions are open-ended questions allowing the participant to respond with answers that give more depth than just 'yes' and 'no' answers. The order of questions is also something to take into account as they may establish the context for later questions (Rowley, 2012). The interviews are semi-structured, with between six to 12 well selected and well-phrased questions used in a particular order, as well as additional sub-questions to ensure that the main question is explored to the full extent (Rowley, 2012).

The important aspect of the time scale was additionally considered, a semi-structured interview via video call meeting would typically last between 30 minutes to more than an hour (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As the interviews take place online via video the

time scale has to take into account that there may be difficulties in relation to setting up the interview. For example, ensuring both the interviewee and the interviewers' microphones and cameras are set up and working prior and during the interview. Also, to check there is a relatively strong internet or Wifi connection on both ends of the video call. Furthermore, in relation to the interview being recorded, the device upon which it is recorded on needs to be tried and tested to make sure it picks ups the audio from the video call.

4.6 Time Horizons

In referring back to the research onion, there are two types of time horizons, cross-sectional and longitudinal. For this study, the best suited time horizon is a cross-sectional study, as it a 'snapshot' taken at one point in time rather than a longitudinal 'diary' perspective that takes a series of snapshots over a given time period (Saunders *et al*., 2009). Longitudinal studies can be quite a time consuming as data for a study is collected over a longer period of time. As there are slight time constraints with this study, cross-sectional is the more appropriate approach as it aims to collect data in a short period and doesn't involve regular interviews or snapshots.

4.7 Research Sample

In selecting a research sample, it is important to identify the basic profile of the participants such as their qualifications, job role, experience and other criteria that may be of significance to the study (Rowley, 2012). This study adopts a non-probability method of sampling as it involves selecting samples based on your objective judgement (Saunders et al., 2009). The non-probability sampling technique of 'purposive sampling' was chosen for this study as it takes into consideration who is in a position to answer the research questions, who is able to offer the insights into the research topic and who is most appropriate for this research study (Silverman, 2010). In the literature review, it identified that there are several different elements such as brand and location tagging, and hashtags, on Instagram. This study is concerned with the significance of these elements when it comes to influencers establishing a self-brand, an online presence and recognition from brands and other social media users. Therefore, the chosen sample concentrates on female Instagram influencers, as Guttmann (2020), found that in 2019 there were over three million Instagram #ad posts made and 84% of influencers creating sponsored posts were women.

Furthermore, the sample particularly focuses on female beauty and fashion influencers, with #fashion and #OOTD (Outfit Of The Day) being two of the most used hashtags on Instagram and it being reported by Forbes that the beauty giant, Estée Lauder invests 75% of its marketing budget on influencers (Gerdeman, 2019). To narrow down the selected sample, this study will look specifically to five female Irish influencers, as the researcher lives in Ireland and they are the most applicable when it comes to this study. In terms of the tier of influencers, which refers to the number of followers an influencer has, the sample will fall between micro and macro influencers. However, it is important to note that this study the selected sample ranges from between 7,000 to 35,000 (see Table 1 below). The chosen range of influencers anticipates that there will be a variance in the responses given to the interview questions as the selected influencers are at different levels in terms of how much of online recognition and following they have. Additionally, the selected sample are at different points in the development of their self-brand. The research questions and objectives are relevant to social media influencers on the social media platform of Instagram, and so the selected sample is female beauty and fashion Instagram influencers in Ireland (Saunders *et al*., 2009).

Table 1: Participants and follower count

Participants	Number of Followers
Participant A	33.4 k
Participant B	20.5 k
Participant C	32.2 k
Participant D	8.9 k
Participant E	8 k

4.8 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The final layer of the research onion is concerned with how the data will be collected and analysed. As previously identified, video interviews are used to gather data for this qualitative research. In most face-to-face interviews or video interviews, handwritten notes or video/audio recording devices are usually used to record what has been said (Sutton & Austin, 2015). For the purpose of this study, both recording methods are used in the interviews. Handwritten notes are used to put down the key or interesting points that could be revisited or a follow-up question asked on a specific point mentioned. The interviews are also

audio recorded on an iPhone which would be later uploaded onto a laptop in a secure file. The audio recording picks up everything that is said in the interview from which a transcript is written up and sent back to the interviewee. The purpose of this is that once the data is collected, as part of ensuring the trustworthiness of the research exploration, respondent validation is used. This gives an opportunity for the researcher to check the quality of the data and ensures that the interviewee understands the questions asked and that the interviewer understands the responses given (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019). Transcripts allow for the interviewee to them to read back over what they have said and ensure that everything is recorded correctly. Additionally, it opens up an opportunity to whether they would like to include any additional information or something that they forgot to mention that may be of significance to the research study.

In relation to analysing the data, a thematic approach is used for this study. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research which involves identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is argued by Braun and Clarke (2006), that thematic analysis is a suitable approach when the research concentrates on examining the different perspectives of the research participants, highlighting their similarities and differences, to generate unexpected insights. This study aims to investigate how individual Instagram influencers establish their own self-brand. Therefore, the most appropriate approach is thematic analysis, as it can be used to summarise the main features of a data set, pushes a researcher into taking a well-structured approach to the collection and handling of their research data and allows for a clear, rich and organised report to be produced (King, 2004).

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the outcomes and analyse the findings of the research that has been conducted. In the interviews, the selected influencers gave an insight into their own thoughts, opinions and experiences and while each influencer's story varied from one to the next it became apparent that there were similarities in some the responses given.

The investigation was able to identify the shared views, feelings and backgrounds of the majority of the participants and gave rise to common themes. The aim in mind for this section is addressing the objectives of this study presenting each theme and including a number of direct quotes from the participants.

5.2 Research Objective 1

To investigate the factors that contribute to the growth of Instagram influencers' self-brand and the establishment of their own business.

Themes :

1. Makeup Background
2. Tagging Brands
3. Gifting
4. Hashtags

5.2.1 Makeup Background

This study included five participants with the data collection process opening with each participant discussing the beginning of their journey to becoming an influencer. As the participants were selected based on their social media content being related to beauty and fashion the main starting point for many of them was through working with makeup.

Participant A *"I was in Charlotte Tilbury…then left to freelance"*

Participant B *"I used to work for Inglot…I went for the Pro team in Inglot"*

Participant C *"I was working in MAC…"*

Participant E *"I am actually a makeup artist"(…) "I worked in MAC"*

In particular, looking to one of the participants it was actually a requirement for their job as makeup artist to take pictures of their makeup and upload them onto their Instagram page. Which was something that played a role in them getting more involved on Instagram.

Participant B *"we were constantly on social media…you needed to post on Instagram three times a day… that was in our contracts…to be fair it was a really good way of gaining your following…"*

The responses given by the participants demonstrate how already having a background in makeup can act as a gateway into the world of social media influencers. It gives rise to the fact that social media influencers are changing the face of beauty and establishing cult-like followings on social media, particularly on Instagram (Gerdeman, 2019). Today, people look to influencers to gather information and opinions from 'real' people about products and trends in the field of beauty as well as fashion (Paco & Oliveira, 2017). Influencers can share their creations, the makeup products they use, their reviews of different brands and their makeup tutorials allowing people and consumers to interact and engage with their content.

5.2.2 Tagging brands

The conversation moved from participants discussing the foundations upon which they began their online media presence to how they began piecing together their self-brand and gaining recognition from brands and online users. One particular aspect that was explored when it came to influencers making a well-branded name for themselves was the ability to tag brands in their posts.

Participant A *"tagging a brand is good…they'll see it …comment on it…share it…then that gives you good exposure"*

Participant B *"if you are trying to grow your brand…the best thing you can do is tag the companies all the time in your posts…though you're not working for them…get recognised by companies"*

Participant C *"…using a full face of Charlotte Tilbury Makeup and you tag Charlotte Tilbury account maybe she might not see it but maybe her PR agency would, or someone would comment"*

These comments suggest that the concept of tagging on Instagram allows for influencers to tag any brand with an online social media presence in their posts. While influencers can consider brand tagging as a way to get recognised by the brand it is also acknowledged that it can be a way of reaching further audiences.

Participant A *"…I tagged Sla the Label and then they reposted my photo…"*

Participant D *"…I Saw it First reposted my photo on their feed and they have a couple of million followers…was so good for my page…nice to be recognised…"*

These participants' responses indicate that not only does tagging brands gain recognition from that brand but also by the brand reposting your photo it can gain recognition from their audience. It makes a point that in tagging brands in posts on Instagram it can build stronger connections with others in that in return you might feature on their accounts (Moore, 2018). While tagging brands may help build up your online recognition there is an element for the influencer to ensure that they are involving themselves with brands for the right reasons and with brands, they themselves use and have trust in.

Participant A *"Pretty Little Thing and Boohoo like you hear all the stuff about how they treat their worker and things like that…I just couldn't work with the brand"*

The response came from a question asked about the criteria upon which you select a brand to work with. In an article by The Wise Marketer, it stated that 54% of influencers confessed to not trusting brands to work with them fairly. It raises a concern for influencers about tagging brands that they may not know much about just to gain that recognition. They are in a way becoming associated with that brand and it can become part of their self-brand especially if they repetitively tag them in different posts. Overall, the response to tagging brands proved to be worthwhile for influencers as it's a way for them to put themselves out there and get their name and their self-brand recognised but they should also be aware of who and what they are tagging.

5.2.3 Gifting

In regard to the gifting of products, the participants were questioned as to what their opinions were on brands and companies gifting products. Two of the participants expressed that gifts should only be accepted or posted about if it's something that is of relevance to their page and their self-brand or is something that they would genuinely use themselves.

Participant A *"…if I'm gifted something I do not feel like I have to show it"(…) "…if it's not something I'd spend money on I'm not doing it."*

Participant B *"…gifted a pair of football boots…I don't play football"(…) "…would never accept anything that I don't think it properly works."*

For these participants, it is apparent that they are not letting free products jeopardise their authenticity and the trust they have from their following. On the other hand, one participant viewed gifting as an opportunity to give honest reviews about the products sent to them.

Participant C *"I used to put up everything that I received" (…) "If I didn't like them I'd say I didn't like it, but I'd still give it a mention" (…) "…followers will appreciate…oh, she wasn't paid for it but she's still putting it up because she really likes it."*

This participant suggested that gifting allows for influencers to give a more truthful opinion of brands' products as there are no strings attached, no contracts or no payments involved. Which again for the influencer in doing this creates trust and authenticity with their following as they are sharing genuine organic reviews (Duran, 2018). While gifting can be part of an influencer building their self-brand in establishing an honest and open relationship with their following it was a common belief among the participants that it was the brands who benefitted the most when it came to gifting.

Participant A *"Of course it's good for their brand…"(…) "I get why brands do it, they want their brand awareness…"*

Participant D *"really good…exposure for them as well and their products"*

Participant E *"It's a good way to kind of get their products out there"*

The responses have highlighted how critical it is for brands to gift influencers when promoting themselves on social media (Duncan, 2018). However, one participant notably pointed out that brands should not have high expectations when it comes to the amount of exposure they will receive on a gifted product to an influencer.

Participant C *"…you need to consider as well like I am not going to be able to give you this same level of service for something that's free as opposed to someone who has a budget and a brief and a plan put together."*

Furthermore, another participant commented on the number of gifts brands sends out to influencers.

Participant A *"I think people roll their eyes to it as well…are a bit sick of seeing it"(…)* *"They all get the same package and they then all put up the same story."*

Gifting has been considered one of the most successful marketing strategies in terms of generating more exposure and sales. However, as previously identified brands select influencers for paid partnerships/ads/sponsorships based on the three R criteria which should additionally apply or at least be considered when brands are selecting who they gift products to (Duncan, 2018). A study by Stancliffe (2020), supports the responses of the participants in this study by making a valid point that when brands gift products to influencers or celebrities there needs to be an alignment with the brand and the influencer such that the brand must get to know who they are sending gifted products to.

5.2.4 Hashtags

Lastly, the function and use of hashtags were discussed with each participant. There were a number of different views on hashtags and how they would be typically used. Firstly, the majority of the participants found that hashtags are a good way of reaching new audiences but also pointed out that the hashtags must be of relevance to the post.

Participant A *"…definitely see people absolutely spamming…hashtags and they are hashtags that have no relevance to their post."(…)* *"So I will have #OutfitoftheDay or #Fashioninspo, what I want people to follow me for."*

Participant B *"I'd hashtag in my makeup page…" (…) "…I know if someone is looking for a makeup artist that would be the way." (…) "So many people #love in their photos that's it's not beneficial to your page whatsoever."*

Participant D *"There is like the #Irishbloggers…" (…) "…so good for finding people and people finding you as well."*

Participant E *"…I #Irishmakeupartist, #Irishstylist and #Irishfashionblogger and then if anyone was looking for an Irish fashion blogger they can type that in."*

These responses support previous studies that acknowledge that hashtags can bring your posts further than your following if the hashtag is appropriate for the post (Abidin, 2016, Ibba *et al.*, 2015, Moore, 2018). However, it was further found in this study that hashtags can be put to good use when it comes to bringing events, campaigns or logos together for brands.

Participant B *"Say for example BiaBella they have their BiaBella Babes…" (…) "You would #BiaBelleBabes if you were ever just wearing their stuff…"*

Participant C *"…hashtags are a really good way of making like an event come together or a brand campaign" (…) "…I did this one for Bumble it was like #datefromhome instead of work from home and that was kind of the campaign message and stuff."*

To hashtag a brand's specific logo or campaign it allows for an online community to be created where the brand, influencers and other social media users can post using the specific hashtag and all their content is located under that hashtag. Although additionally it was discovered that if you constantly hashtag the same hashtag or you like or comment on too many posts it is classed as spamming and Instagram put what is called a shadow ban on your account.

Participant A *"…to be shadow banned means that your pictures don't go further than your following, so all my number went down…" (…) "If you hashtag too much if you comment too much if you like too much you can get shadow banned." (…) "…they do it for two weeks and then bang on two weeks later your reach goes back up and your likes…"*

Participant B *"…if you constantly do the same hashtags in every single thing you actually get shadow banned…"*

Participant C *"…there's a thing called shadow banning where if you use the same tags over and over again it thinks you're like a robot or something."*

Shadow banning was something that the participants brought up themselves and that they had only become aware of it when it happened to them. The idea of shadow banning prevents Instagram users to continuously use the same hashtag, so influencers and other users alike must vary or alter their hashtags from time to time. However, overall, the participants believed that hashtags have a useful purpose when you are trying to get a particular message out there or the hashtag is something specific that you want people to follow you for.

5.3 Research Objective 2

To investigate the importance of online connections and relationships when it comes to Instagram influencers creating their self-brand and expanding their audiences.

Themes:

1. Inspiration from other Influencers
2. Support of other Influencers

5.3.1 Inspiration from other Influencers

The online social media community was discussed with each participant during the interview. When it came to who or what inspired them to get into being an influencer, for the most part, it was other Influencers that played a leading role. Especially those who had strong work ethics and had success in starting from the bottom and building their way up.

Participant A *"So Sue Me (Suzanne Jackson) would be huge for me. I think she is just so inspiring the business she made for herself."*

Participant C *"Suzanne Jackson is just a powerhouse"(…) "She like paved the way nearly for everyone" (…) "work ethic is a huge thing."*

Participant D *"…I was following Niamh Cullen, Rozanna Purcell like all them…being really successful" (…) "I realised if they can do it like I can do it as well."*

Participant E *"…definitely Keilidh"(…) "…you could see all the hard work she put in and I would be like I'd love to do something like that myself someday."*

While the majority of the participants looked to the likes of Suzanne Jackson, Niamh Cullen, Rozanna Purcell and Keilidh Cashell, all well-established Irish Influencers, for inspiration one participant considered themselves to be the one that really inspired them.

Participant B *"I would probably kind of say myself influenced myself." (…) "…I like to think outside the box…not doing everything that everyone else is doing."*

This participant took Instagram and the idea of being an influencer as an opportunity to share who they were, what they liked and took pride in the fact that they were trying to do something different and be unique. Furthermore, in the case of the majority of the other participants, it is apparent that they acknowledge other Influencers for their achievements and

get inspired by the potential that they themselves could achieve if they put the time and effort in.

5.3.2 Support of other Influencers

Moving on from inspiration but staying on the topic of other Influencers it was further discussed by the participants the supportive influencer community in relation to other influencers reaching out to them, sharing/reposting their social media pages and forming relationships and connections with them.

Participant A *"Rosie Connolly she shared me, and Louise Cooney shared me as well" (...) "...the Irish community is so nice and supportive like the Irish blogger community"*

Participant B *"Sian Walton" (...) "she reposted my page on, or no sorry, my photo on her story and I went up a thousand and a half followers in 24 hours"*

The concept of sharing or reposting is similar to this concept of tagging brands or individuals accounts in that when a person shares your page on their Instagram stories whoever views that post can be redirected to your account. It works as a way of networking as one participant points out.

Participant D *"...other people they can repost you and other people can find you through that..." (...) "People that would have never maybe stumbled upon your page before can find you through that and like I can find other people as well"*

It is evident from these responses that the support of the influencer community is a way for them to reach different audiences that they wouldn't have necessarily been able to reach on their own. This aligns with an article by Moore (2018), revealing the importance of the online Instagram community for exposure for the influencer and for connection building. However, one of the participants made an interesting comment in that she experienced that,

Participant B *"... it is the smaller influencers that are actually nicer…" (...) "...even though I've got more followers than them…they probably have followers that don't follow me." (...) "Sometimes it's the smaller influencers that are actually more beneficial than the bigger ones."*

Although the other participants had named Rosie Connolly, Sian Walton and Louise Cooney, again all well-established Influencers with over 200,000 followers, to be most supportive of

them in a way it makes sense that the smaller micro influencers can be more valued when it does come to the influencer community supporting one another and helping each other grow. Micro influencers are considered to have the most loyal and trusting following so if they were to repost another influencers' pages it may gain a larger response from their following than it would from larger macro influencers following (Gretzel, 2018).

5.4 Research Objective 3

To investigate the role of brand loyalty in relation to the self-branding of influencers.

Themes :

1. Existing Brand Loyalty
2. Competitor Rivalry

5.4.1 Existing Brand Loyalty

The last topic that was focused on during the interviews was in relation to influencers' brand loyalty. The main aim was to explore whether influencers had an existing loyalty to a brand before they started working with that brand. It was found that three out of the five participants had a loyalty to a brand prior to working with them.

Participant A *"I have worked with Bondi Sands which I have always worn their tan so that's kind of like a brand loyalty thing…" (…) "…Beverly Hills Formula, another one I have always loved so I was happy to work with them."*

Participant D *"I am actually a brand ambassador for bBold…big thing for me because they were Irish." (…) "…for so long I was using their tan and all I wanted was to work with them and now I am"*

Participant E *"I think anyone that's gotten in contact with me it's because I've been using it." (…) "Bella Mianta I have been using their tan for so so long… they got in contact with me" (…) "I am a brand ambassador for them now."*

All of the participants considered brand loyalty to be a large factor when it came to working for a brand. However, from these responses, it indicates that in making brands aware that you are using their products through notifying or tagging the brand in posts it can open up an opportunity for you to be selected to work with them. In a way from the brand's perspective,

it can be a means of maintaining an existing customer with the potential of gaining new customers. Furthermore, as mentioned in an article about influencers being the missing link to brand loyalty, the level of engagement is an important additional way of measuring brand loyalty aside from the number of purchases (Brookes, 2018). This links into another angle that was explored when it came to brand loyalty which was concerned with the amount of time an influencer would work with a brand. The purpose of this was to find out how much exposure a brand wants to get out of an influencer and in turn looks to how influencers prefer to work with brands.

Participant A *"Bondi Sands the first one…a once-off…the brand, which I totally agree with …have to gauge how well it will do for them." (…) "…they will ask you for longer… I am about to do a three-month contract with Bondi Sands."*

This participant acknowledged that it depends on the response and the level of engagement that they receive from their post with a brand as to how long they continue to work with that brand. It refers back to the three R's selection criteria as to whether the influencer is suitable for the brand in terms of the audience they are reaching, the influencer's and brand's alignment with each other's image and the way in which the brand is portrayed by the influencer (Ebrahimi, 2015). Therefore, it is important that there is an appropriate matchup between influencers and brands as this is key to gaining consumer response and purchase intention. Another participant additionally pointed out that recurring work with a brand can strengthen the audience's view of the brand.

Participant C *"…prefer long term…your audience is nearly waiting for it every month…ready to hear any updates and stuff and they just become more familiar with it." (…) "its beneficial to the brand because the audience becomes more loyal."*

Participant E "…long-term I think you come across as more real if you actually just stay with one brand…" (…) "…just stick with that brand if you really like them instead of just doing it for the sake of being like oh I worked with this company…"

This element of what your audience wants to see plays a role in what content you put up, who you decide to work with and why you have decided to work with them. The participants response relates to a prior study by Lim *et al.* (2017) which revealed that an influencer's credibility can be hindered if there is a lack of knowledge about a product or brand they work with or a misrepresentation of a brand's product. It also found that it impacts negatively on consumers' purchase intention. On the other hand, the alignment with the brand and their

product with the influencer was found to be significant when it came to purchasing intention (Lim *et al*, 2017). In these two participants opting to take longer contracts shows that they believe in and are aware of what the brand's products are. They also want to keep their followers updated on that brand's products how to use them or how to wear them or where to buy them especially when it comes to new products.

An additional point to make is that one influencer expressed how important it is to include in posts whether it is a Paid Ad/Partnership, Collaboration (Collab), Sponsorship, Brand Ambassador or whether it is just their own review.

Participant C *"...tan is one now that people kind of stick to one...I haven't found just one that I absolutely love yet to do a brand ambassadorship for." (...) "...I love trying too many and I love being honest about different types of tan." (...) "Sometimes people then again don't realise...think 'Oh you're working with four different tan products' and I don't even work with one."*

This response brings it all back down to self-branding as the participant is working her way through different tanning products sharing her own views and experience using them. It demonstrates that they are not fully committed to investing their time into one tanning brand as they have not found the one that's right for them. In a way, the products and brands are trialled and tested before this participant can devote a loyalty towards a brand and become associated with that brand.

5.4.2 Competitor rivalry

A further comment that was made by one of the participants was about how one brand's interest in them sparked interest with another brand.

Participant E *"... you want it to be long term, you want to actually just stay loyal because now that I work with Bella Mianta, bBold actually sent me a DM and asked would I take a tanning package and I was like I actually work with a brand like a tanning company already"*

One of the aims of this research objective was to discover whether an existing brand loyalty is what sparked interest from the brand to work with an influencer. However, it was not considered that it could possibly be a brands competitor that sparks interest in a brand reaching out to work with that influencer. In this case, the influencer remained loyal to a brand that they have always loved and used rather than accepting another offer from a

competing brand. Yet in looking at another piece of information given by a participant it looked to the brand's loyalty to an influencer.

Participant B *"BPerfect I used to get sent all their new stuff coming in..." (…) "...then they started getting so big that they just go with bigger influencers now".*

Does it pose the question as to whether brands are just interested in the amount of advertising space, the content creation that an influencer can provide and the volume of people that it will reach? Furthermore, it goes back to the point of influencers not trusting brands when it comes to working with them fairly. So much so that as of recently unions have formed in the United Kingdom and the United States to protect the rights of Instagram influencers. The Creator Union is the first UK based collective body to represent, support and advice digital content creators and influencers (Ashley, 2020). However, while there is no union yet in place for Irish influencers it may be something that will have to be set up within the next few years as the influencer marketing industry continues to grow at a rapid pace.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on discussing the findings of this study and their implications through revisiting the key themes that appeared in the previous chapter. This will be achieved by combining the current research from the academic literature review with the participant's responses from the semi-structured interviews of this study.

6.2 Tagging brands

When it came to the concept of tagging whether it was locations, brands, or other influencers it was mutually agreed by the participants that brand tagging can be an effective way to get recognised by brands and even the brand's audience. This study complements Moore's (2018) acknowledgement that the community is so important when it comes to Instagram and confirms that tagging brands open opportunities to establish a strong network of online connections. In addressing the idea of self-branding, influencers have to put themselves out there in terms of what they want to be known for, what they want to share with their audience and who they want to be associated with. For influencers in order to build up their self-brand they have to create their own content that showcases what they like, what brands they like, what products they like and what way they like to use or wear them which is achieved by tagging brands. Not only can it gain a brands attention, but it also allows for the influencers following to become more engaged with their content as they get to know the influencer through what they share in their posts. It echoes what has been expressed by Abidin (2016), that social media influencers have built themselves up to be seen as credible and trustworthy sources through self-curation, follower engagement and authenticity. Furthermore, for brands, it appears that having an online social media presence provides an opportunity to interact with alternative content creations and the possibility of reaching different audiences. It refers back to what was stated by Glucksman (2017), that influencers involvement with a brand can strengthen the brand's relationships with their potential and existing consumers. It enables this idea of E-WOM explored Evans *et al*. (2017) and Scott (2015), that influencers share information about a brand or product with their followers and consumers who then absorb this information and act accordingly to the information given. Therefore, influencers tagging brands essentially create this network of communication between the influencers, social media users, brands and consumers.

6.3 Gifting

With the concept of gifting, there was little indication given as to whether it helped in growing an influencer's brand but there were insights into how it could impact on their self-brand. Furthermore, it was a common response that it was something that was most beneficial to the brand as it gives them good exposure if they are featured on an influencers page. This study aligns with an article by Duran (2018) expressing that it is down to the influencer to decide on whether they want to share or not share the gifted product especially if it is something that they wouldn't usually purchase themselves. Therefore, it was made clear in a study by Duncan (2018) that brands should ensure that gifted products should be personal to the influencer. Additionally, in a study by Stancliffe (2020), it comments on how the brand must identify who are the influencers that are the best fit for their gifted products. Yet it would appear in this study that brands would send out the same gifted products to multiple different influencers just to get their products out there and not really taking into consideration whether they are gifting their products to the right influencers. Furthermore, it was believed by Duncan (2018) that brands could often rely on influencers with less than 100,000 followers to provide the most content on gifted products. However, this study opposes with this statement as it was revealed that influencers at any level do not have to accept any gifted products from brands if they feel it is not worth their while accepting them. It is at this point that influencers must consider whether the gifted products are of relevance to their social media page and their self-brand.

What brands need to understand from this is that they should not expect influencers to promote their products just because they have sent them for free. Particularly when they are products that influencer wouldn't use them themselves or have a whole lot of interest in. It is to say that if brands actually gift products to influencers that they have done their research on and they know that the influencer will use or benefit from their products the influencer would be more likely to provide content and feedback on them. On the other hand, for influencers, they must be focused on their self-brand and what they want to be included and a part of their self-brand. Otherwise, in continuously accepting and sharing various gifted products, it could lead to influencers losing sight in what is important to them, what their passions are and what they wanted to share, all the reasons behind why they became an influencer in the first place.

6.4 Inspiration from other Influencers

This study found that the majority of participants were inspired by other Influencers when it came to using Instagram and creating a self-brand as a business for themselves. It was raised as a concern in a study by Bolat & Gilani (2018) that influencers often compare themselves to other influencers when they see them achieving their goals and obtaining high levels engagement from their Instagram posts. They begin to question themselves as to how and why they don't have the same levels of response on their posts. However, in this study, it found that influencers don't necessarily compare themselves to other Influencers but rather that they look up to them to remind themselves what they can achieve. Additionally, not only was it other Influencers that were looked up to but that it was, in fact, other Irish Influencers that had a part in motivating them to put the work in and actually start to build their Instagram and self-brand. It puts it into perspective that what this means for influencers is that in order to achieve their goals and fulfil their own desires they must be willing to put that same energy and passion, those other Influencers have shown, into their self-brand. It refers back to a study by Ryan and Deci (2000) that states that influencers own desires and passions are the driving force behind what motivates influencers rather than extrinsic factors of rewards. For influencers, they must be careful as to remain focused on what they want to achieve for themselves rather than looking to other Influencers and questioning why they are not achieving what the other Influencers are achieving. Furthermore, in establishing their own self-brand it demonstrates an innovative ability to create something new and unique to them which is something that would make them stand out against other influencers and eye-catching to brands recruiting influencers.

6.5 Existing brand loyalty

Loyalty, in general, was a key theme throughout this research as it is something that brands are continuously concerned with when it comes to consumers, that influencers are concerned with when it comes to their following and that brands and influencers are concerned with when it comes to each other. In an article by The Wise Marketer (2019), it stated that influencers tend to work with a number of different brands at one time as they are not owned by one brand. While this might be the case, this study found that existing loyalty is an important element when it comes to influencers working with brands. This study suggests that influencers who already use, share, post about and genuinely like a brands product before

working with that brand could possibly put them at an advantage when a brand decides to invest in an influencer. However, it was outlined by Ebrahimi (2015) and Newberry (2019), that brands have a selection criterion of reach, relevance, and resonance when it comes to deciding what influencers to work with. It was never specifically mentioned in these selection criteria if existing brand loyalty was an aspect brand look towards when deciding influencers to represent their brand. Although, it could prove to be a worthwhile investment to reach out to influencers that already have loyalty with their brand as it was revealed by Glucksman (2017), that influencers can encourage brand loyalty if they themselves are seen to be loyal to the brand. Furthermore, it was acknowledged by Glucksman (2017), influencers have this persuasive power over consumers as consumers nowadays trust the opinions of fellow consumers on their purchase intentions. Then for influencers, it goes back to this idea of tagging brands as in influencers documenting their loyalty to a brand through tagging them in their Instagram posts. They should actively tag brands that they are using as it can attract the attention of brands and could open up an opportunity for the brand to get in contact about working with them.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this research was to conduct an exploration into the area of social media influencers and the establishment and growth of their self-brand on the social media platform of Instagram. From previous literature, it is evident that social media influencers have created new alternative way of advertising and marketing for brands, companies, and products. They have presented themselves as being open, honest, and real people who are more than willing to share their opinions, experiences, and views on different aspects of their lives. Although, it has been questioned at times as to whether influencers are being as genuine as they are perceived to be. Especially when there is this added aspect of them being paid for particular content that they post on their social media accounts. This research uncovered elements that showed influencers work hard to achieve this status of being a trustworthy and credible source for consumers, other social media users and even brands.

The research findings highlighted that main contributors in the formation and the exposure of an influencers self-brand was the ability to tag brands in posts and brands being able to tag/repost them, other Influencers inspiring them and sharing their posts and the use of relevant hashtags in posts. Other areas that were addressed in this research included the concept of gifting and brand loyalty. It appeared in this study that the participants knew what they wanted to be known for and used the different tools of hashtags and tagging on Instagram to assist them in spreading their self-brand among the multiple networking channels of Instagram. It was acknowledged that although influencers use Instagram as a business for themselves it is not all down to the amount of offers they receive and accept to work with brands. Such that they will not work with a brand that they feel doesn't fit in with what they have built their content and Instagram page up to be.

Influencers look to other Influencers for support and inspiration when it comes to starting their own self-brand. In witnessing the work of someone who is already in the line of work that influencers are entering is appears to be a good way to learn that they must commit to the work that they produce on social media as well as the work that goes in behind the scenes. Furthermore, having connections with other Influencers has helped influencers to grow and become well-known among the Influencer community as well as with other social media users.

In relation to brand loyalty it is something that influencers recognises as being an important aspect when it comes to working with brands. Showing off loyalty towards a brand can be a factor upon which a brand reaches out to an influencer to work with them. It is also a way for influencers to build up their own self-brand as their loyalty for particular brands can result in other social media users to associate them with those particular brands.

This study was conducted with participants who were Irish female Beauty and Fashion Instagram Influencers. For future research it may be recommended to research a selection of influencers across the different domains of Influencers on Instagram such as Lifestyle and Fitness Influencers, Health and Well-being Influencers and Travel Influencers. They may offer different perspectives and insights into how they establish their self-brand. Additionally, comparing the different levels of influencers in relation to their self-brand and growth may provide a larger variety of answers surrounding the area of self-branding. Lastly, the element of local and global could further be explored. How do influencers grow their self-brand to be recognised outside of their country, whether their content would be relevant in another country and whether they want to reach this further audience.

Chapter 8: CIPD Requirements

8.1 Recommendations

This study has shown that for Instagram influencers it is up to them as to what they want their self-brand to be. It is recommended that if influencers want to grow their self-brand they must put themselves out there by tagging brands, building up associations with brands and tailoring hashtags to suit the content that they post. These are an effective way of getting recognised and reaching audiences that influencers would not have reached otherwise. Furthermore, influencers should be consistent in posting and sharing to keep followers updated and become more known on the online community. It is also recommended that influencers should focus on what they love and what their favourite brands and products are as demonstrating this passion and loyalty could present them with opportunities to work with brands that they like and would want to work with.

For brands and companies, they must have a clear direction as to where they want their brand to go and how they want their brand to be perceived by others. It is recommended that brands should determine if investing in influencer marketing will contribute to their brand and be successful in achieve what they intend to achieve from this marketing approach. This may be achieved by doing a pilot test so once off paid posts with influencers that they have selected from their set criteria. Alternatively, to test out what they could get from introducing influencers as part of their marketing strategy they can gift products to influencers. However, gifting products brands should not expect that the influencer will provide the level of content that the brand wanted. Also, it is recommended from the findings of this study that in selecting influencers brand should take into consideration influencers who already express a loyalty towards the brand.

8.2 Implications of Findings

As laid out in the recommendations it suggests the approaches brands should take in when incorporating social media influencers and influencer marketing into their marketing strategy. Investing in influencer marketing, can involve low costs as well as high costs depending on what brands want to achieve through influencer marketing. An inexpensive route to go down is gifting products to influencers although not guaranteed brand exposure. Alternatively, a more expensive route of fully investing in influencers through paid ads/partnerships, sponsorships and collaborations is another way for a brand to ensure they receive their

desired coverage and access their target market through the selection of correct influencers. However, failure to recognise the best potential influencers to represent the brand in an effort to gain alternative creative content and a larger audience could negatively affected the brand's image.

8.3 Personal Statement

I started of this master's in human resource management with a background and degree in Geography and Human Development. My previous course had presented a wide variety of modules and different approaches to subject such as Psychology: Learning and Motivation and Geographies of Economies which I found both very interesting. Psychology had provided me with an understanding of how we as humans learn and develop as well as how we become motivated in achieving our individual needs and desires. While Geographies of Economies examined the important role geography has in relation to the economy as well as assessing social aspects of economic life, gendered economic geographies and ethnic economies. I believed that my previous area of study could in some ways link into certain aspects of what the course in HRM had to offer. So, decided to continue my education and apply for the master's in human resource management.

The Masters course, in general, was definitely an interesting learning experience for me that was both rewarding yet challenging at times. It was rewarding in the sense that most of the things that I was learning were very new to me which allowed me to be more invested in expanding my knowledge in this area of HRM. At the same time, it was often challenging to get to grips with what complex concepts that were introduced within the different modules. However, without the support from my lecturers and classmates that helped me to gain a better understanding of what I struggled to work out for myself I think I would have found the experience a whole lot harder.

As for my dissertation it presented an opportunity for me to research into an area that I had a lot of interest in. It gave me a purpose to go investigating all there is to know about social media influencers. I was then able to research my own my thoughts and ideas that I had about influencers in regard to the formation of their self-brand which appeared to be something that was not fully looked at in previous studies. Taking on a research project was initially a very daunting thought but once it was broken down and taken step by step this feeling of stress and pressure turned into a feeling of achievement and satisfaction.

Reference List

Abidin, C. (2016) 'Visibility Labour: Engaging with Influencers' Fashion Brands and #OOTD Advertorial Campaigns on Instagram', *Media International Australia*, 161 (1), pp. 86-100. DOI: 10.1177/1329878X16665177.

Alimohamadi, N. (2015) 'The Link Between Social Media Stars, Anxiety and Depression', *Grazia,* 6 November. Available at: https://graziadaily.co.uk/fashion/news/social-media-stars-anxiety-depression/. Accessed 15/05/2020.

Ashley, B. (2020) 'Why Instagram influencers are unionising', Vogue Business, 13 July. Available at: https://www.voguebusiness.com/companies/why-instagram-influencers-are-unionising. Accessed 05/08/2020.

Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G. & Moulard, J. G. (2018) 'Authenticity Under Threat: When Social Media Influencers Need to go Beyond Self-presentation', *Journal of Business Research*, DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008.

Ayaz, R. (2019) *What Happens When You Try to Collab On Instagram: The Startup*, 8 April. Available at: https://medium.com/swlh/what-happens-when-you-try-to-collab-on-instagram-a1be25b9d0a7. Accessed 09/04/2020.

Boerman, S.C. (2020) 'The effects of the standardized Instagram disclosure of micro- and meso-influencers', *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 133(1), pp. 199-207. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015. Accessed 26/05/2020.

Bolat, E. & Gilani, P. (2018) 'Instagram influencers: when a special relationship with fans turns dark', *The Conversation*, 7 August. Available at: https://theconversation.com/instagram-influencers-when-a-special-relationship-with-fans-turns-dark-100543. Accessed 28/05/2020.

Bolderston, A. (2012) 'Conducting a Research Interview', *Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences*, 43 (1), pp.66-76. DOI: 10.1016/j.jmir.2011.12.002.

Brooks, A. (2018) *Why Influencers are the Missing Link in Brand Loyalty,* 7 August. Available at: https://performancein.com/news/2018/08/07/why-influencers-are-missing-link-brand-loyalty/. Accessed 09/04/2020.

Brown, E. (2016) 'Study shows non-celebrity influencers are 10 times more likely to drive in-store purchases', *ND Net*, 27 April. Available at: https://www.zdnet.com/article/study-shows-

non-celebrity-influencers-are-10-times-more-likely-to-drive-in-store-purchases/. Accessed 20/05/2020.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2) , pp. 77–101. DOI:10.1191/ 1478088706qp063oa.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

Choi, Y., Thoeni, A. & Kroff, M. W. (2018) 'Brand Actions on Social Media: Direct Effects on Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and Moderating Effects of Brand Loyalty and Social Media Usage Intensity', *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 17 (1), pp. 52-70. DOI: 10.1080/15332667.2018.1440140.

Chowdhury, M. F. (2014) 'Interpretivism in Aiding Our Understanding of the Contemporary Social World', *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 04 (03), pp.432-438. DOI: 10.4236/ojpp.2014.43047.

Duncan, D. (2018) 'Why "Gifting" Influencers Is Critical When Promoting Your Brand on Social Media', *Medium,* 18 October. Available at: https://medium.com/brandsnob-app/why-gifting-influencers-is-critical-when-promoting-your-brand-on-social-media-a9aac5d668fc. Accessed 01/06/2020.

Darlington, Y., & Scott, D. (2003) 'Qualitative research in practice: Stories from the field', *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 22 (1), pp. 115-118.

Duran, K. (2018) *Ad? Sponsored? Gifted? Review? What does it all mean?!*, 13 July. Available at: https://www.swoonworthy.co.uk/2018/07/ad-sponsored-gifted-review.html/. Accessed 09/04/2020.

Ebrahimi, Y. (2015) 'The three R's of influence marketing', *Sidebuy,* 22 June. Available at: https://sidebuyblog.com/2015/06/22/the-three-rs-of-influence-marketing/. Accessed 20/05/2020.

Evans, N. J., Phua, J., Lim, J. & Jun, H. (2017) 'Disclosing Instagram Influencer Advertising: The Effects of Disclosure Language on Advertising Recognition, Attitudes and Behavioural Intent', *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 17(2), pp.138-149, DOI: 10.1080/15252019.2017.1366885.

Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K.P., Walsh, G. & Gremler, D.D. (2004) 'Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet?', Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18(1), pp. 38-52. DOI: 10.1002/dir.10073.

Ferrara, E., Interdonato, R. & Tagarelli, A. (2014) 'Online Popularity and Topical Interests Through the Lens of Instagram', *ACM Digital Library*, September (1-4), pp.24-34. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1145/2631775.2631808. Accessed 20/05/2020.

Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K & Freberg, L.A. (2010) 'Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality', *Public Relations Review*, 37 (1), pp.90-92, DOI:10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001.

Gerdeman, D. (2019) 'How Influencers Are Making Over Beauty Marketing', *Forbes*, 13 December. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2019/12/13/how-influencers-are-making-over-beauty-marketing/#609a96321203. Accessed 18/06/2020.

Greene, J.C & McClintock, C. (1991) 'The evolution of evaluation methodology', *Theory into Practice*, 30 (1), pp.13-21. DOI: 10.1080/00405849109543471.

Gillin, P. (2010) 'New Media, New Influencers and Implications for Public Relations', *Society for New Communications Research*, 2 (2), 1-10.

Guttmann, A. (2020) *Share of influencers posting sponsored content on Instagram 2019, by gender*. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/893749/share-influencers-creating-sponsored-posts-by-gender/. Accessed 18/06/2020.

Glucksman, M. (2017). 'The Rise of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Lifestyle Branding: A Case Study of Lucie Fink', *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 8 (2), pp. 77-87.

Gretzel, U. (2018) 'Influencer marketing in travel and tourism', in Sigala, M. & Gretzel, U. (Eds.), *Advances in Social Media for Travel, Tourism and Hospitality: New Perspectives, Practice and Cases*, New York: Routledge, pp. 147-156.

Ibba, S., Orrù, M., Pani, F.E. & Porru, S. (2015) 'Hashtag of Instagram: From Folksonomy to Complex Network', *Proceedings of the 7th International Joint Conference on Knowledge Discovery, Knowledge Engineering and Knowledge Management (IC3K 2015) - Volume 2: KEOD*, pp. 279-284. DOI: 10.5220/0005613502790284.

Iqbal, M. (2020) 'Instagram Revenue and Usage Statistics (2020)', *Business of Apps*. Available at: https://www.businessofapps.com/data/instagram-statistics/. Accessed 02/04/2020.

James, N. & Busher, H. (2006) 'Credibility, authenticity and voice: dilemmas in online interviewing, *Qualitative Research*, 6 (3), pp. 403-420. DOI: 10.1177/1468794106065010.

Kirkpatrick, D. (2016) 'Influencer Marketing Spurs 11 times the ROI over Traditional Tactics: Study', *Marketing Dive*, 6 April. Available at: https://www.marketingdive.com/news/influencer-marketing-spurs-11-times-the-roi-over-traditional-tactics-study/416911/. Accessed 20/05/2020.

King, N. (2004) 'Using templates in the thematic analysis of text', in Cassell C. & Symon G. (eds.), *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research*. London, UK: Sage, pp. 257–270

Krasniak, M. (2016), 'Social Influencer Marketing on the Rise: New Research', *Social Media Examiner*, 24 November. Available at: https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/social-influencer-marketing-on-the-rise-new-research/. Accessed 27/05/2020.

Lim, X. J., Radzol, A. R., Cheah, J. & Wong, M. W. (2017). 'The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Purchase Intention and the Mediation Effect of Customer Attitude', *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 7 (2), pp. 19-36, DOI: 10.14707/ajbr.170035.

Lin, T.M.Y., Lu, K. & Wu, J. (2012) 'The effects of visual information in EWOM communications', *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 6 (1), pp. 7-26. DOI: 10.1108/ 17505931211241341

Lobschat, L., Zinnbauer, M. A., Pallas, F. & Joachimsthaler, E. (2013) 'Why social currency becomes a key driver of a firm's brand equity: Insights from the automotive industry', *Long Range Planning*, 46 (1–2), pp. 125-148. DOI:10.1016/j.lrp.2012.11.004.

Locke, E. A. (2007) 'The Case for Inductive Theory Building', *Journal of Management*, 33 (6), pp.867-890. DOI: 10.1177/0149206307307636.

Lup, K., Trub, L. & Rosenthal, L. (2015) 'Instagram #Instasad?: Exploring Associations Among Instagram Use, Depressive Symptoms, Negative Social Comparison, and Strangers Followed', *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*, 18 (5), pp.247-252. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0560. Accessed 15/05/2020.

Martikainen, I. & Pitkänen, A. (2019) *The Significance of Consumers' Perceived Authenticity to Engagement – Explorative Research of Influencer Marketing in Instagram.* MSc Business Administration Thesis, Linköping University. Available at: http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1322621/FULLTEXT01.pdf. Accessed 23/05/2020.

Marwick, A.E. (2013) 'They're really profound women, they're entrepreneurs: Conceptions of authenticity in fashion blogging', *Paper presented at the International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media.* Cambridge. MA.

McGrath, C., Palmgren, P.J. & Liljedahl, M. (2019) 'Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews', *Medical Teacher,* 41 (9), pp. 1002-1006. DOI: 10.1080/0142159X.2018.1497149.

Moore, K. (2018) 'The Complete Guide to Instagram Tagging', *Sked Social Blog*, 16 May. Available at: https://skedsocial.com/blog/instagram-tagging/. Accessed 23/05/2020.

Nehls, K., Smith, B.D. & Schneider, H.A. (2015) 'Video-Conferencing Interviews in Qualitative Research', in Hai-Jew, S. (ed), *Enhancing Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research with Technology,* Hershey: Information Science Reference, pp. 140-156.

Newberry, C. (2019) 'Influencer Marketing Guide: How to Work with Social Media Influencers', *Hootsuite*, 2 May. Available at: https://blog.hootsuite.com/influencer-marketing/. Accessed 20/05/2020.

Ojuri, S.O. (2018) *The Social Media Influencer Reigns Supreme*, MSc Master Thesis, Copenhagen Business School, Available at: https://research-api.cbs.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/59759587/596652_Thesis_Sept_13.pdf. Accessed 26/05/2020.

Paton, E. & Kuchler, H. (2014) 'Fashion world sashays to Instagram for brand-building', *The Financial Times*, Available at: www.ft.com/content/d20c1bbc-d156-11e3-81e0-00144feabdc0?mhq5j=e5. Accessed 03/04/2020.

Paco, A. & Oliveira, S. (2017) 'Influence Marketing in the Fashion and Beauty Industry', *Communication Studies,* 25 (1), pp. 119-136. DOI: 10.20287/ec.n25.v1.a07

Rabionet, S.E. (2011) 'How I Learned to Design and Conduct Semi-structured Interviews: An Ongoing and Continuous Journey', The Qualitative Report, 16 (4), pp.563-566. Available at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol16/iss2/13. Accessed 22/06/2020.

Rialti, R., Zollo, L., Pellegrini, M. M. & Ciappei, C. (2017) 'Exploring the antecedents of brand loyalty and electronic word of mouth in social-media-based brand communities: do gender differences matter?', *Journal of Global Marketing*, 30 (3), pp. 147-160, DOI:10.1080/08911762.2017.1306899.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research* (2nd edn.), Oxford: Blackwell.

Rowley, J. (2012) 'Conducting research interviews', *Management Research Review,* 35 (3/4), pp. 260-271. DOI 10.1108/01409171211210154.

Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2000) 'Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being', *American Psychology*, 55 (1), pp. 68-78. DOI: 10.1037110003-066X.55.1.68.

Salmons, J. E. (2010) *Online interviews in real time,* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Salmons, J. E. (2012) *Cases in Online Interview Research,* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2009) *Research methods for business students,* 5th edn., Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2012) *Research methods for business students*, 6th edn., Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2019) *Research methods for business students*, 8th edn., Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Scott, D. M. (2015) *The New Rules of Marketing and PR* . 5th edn. New York, NY: Wiley.

Sheard, J. (2018) Quantitative data analysis, in Williamson, K. & Johanson, G. (eds), *Research Methods: Information, Systems, and Contexts, Second Edition,* 2nd edn, Cambridge: Elsevier, pp. 429-452. DOI: 10.1016/B978-0-08-102220-7.00018-2.

Shepherd, I.D.H., (2005) 'From cattle and coke to Charlie: meeting the challenge of self-marketing and personal branding', *Journal of Marketing Management*, 21 (5–6), pp. 589–606. DOI: 10.1362/0267257054307381.

Sky News, (2020) '

Sutton, J. & Austin, Z. (2015) 'Qualitative Research: Data Collection, Analysis, and Management', *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, 68 (3), pp. 226-231. DOI: 10.4212/cjhp.v68i3.1456.

Silverman, D. (2010) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, 3rd edn., Sage, London.

Stancliffe, E. (2020) ' Influencer Gifting – Here's 20 Reasons You Need to be Doing it in 2020', *The Handbook,* 2 January. Available at: https://www.thehandbook.com/blog/2020/01/how-to-gift-to-celebrities-and-influencers/. Accessed 01/06/2020.

Sudha, M. & Sheena, K. (2017) 'Impact of Influencers in Consumer Decision Process: The Fashion Industry'*, SCMS Journal of Indian Management*, 14 (3), pp.14-30.

Syrdal, H. A. & Briggs E (2018) 'Engagement with Social Media Content: A Qualitative Exploration'*, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 26 (1–2), pp. 4–22. DOI: : 10.1080/10696679.2017.1389243.

Thomson, S.B. (2011) 'Qualitative Research: Validity', *Journal of Administration and Governance*, 6 (1), pp. 77-82.

Voorveld, H. A. M., Van Noort, G., Muntinga, D. G. & Bronner F. (2018) 'Engagement with Social Media and Social Media Advertising: The Differentiating Role of Platform Type'*, Journal of Advertising*, 47 (1), pp. 38-54. DOI: : 10.1080/00913367.2017.1405754.

Wise Marketer Staff (2019) *Can Influencer Marketing Advance Loyalty? : The Global Voice of Customer Loyalty.* Available at: https://thewisemarketer.com/brand-loyalty/can-influencer-marketing-advance-loyalty/. Accessed 11/04/2020.

Wolny, J. & Mueller, C. (2013) 'Analysis of Fashion Consumers' Motives to Engage in Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication Through Social Media Platforms'*, Journal of Marketing Management*. 29 (5-6), pp.562-583. DOI: 10.1080/0267257x.2013.778324.

Woods, S. (2016) '#Sponsored: The Emergence of Influencer Marketing', University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Available at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/1976. Accessed 16/05/2020.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about how and when did you first get started as being an influencer?

2. Would you be able to give me a few details on who or what inspired you to do what you are doing today?

3. Could we discuss who are the people or brands that have had the most influence on your growth and why?

4. Could you describe how you normally would be approached by brands who want to work with you through Paid partnerships/ads, sponsorships or collaborations?

5. How do you feel about brands/companies gifting products to influencers?

6. What are the criteria upon which you select brands to work with? For example, is it the products themselves, the brands message and values, an existing loyalty to that brand?

7. Would you go into brand partnerships or form relationships with brands for a long-term period or is it more short-term?

8. What is the significance for you/influencers being able to tag locations, brands and other people in Instagram posts?

9. What, in your opinion, is the reasoning behind using hashtags in a post and how would you typically use them?