



# **Does influencer eWOM marketing impact purchase intention within the beauty industry?**

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Submitted to the National College of Ireland, August 2022

# Author's Declaration

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# Acknowledgments

This study could not have been completed without a number of people, and to those I must acknowledge. This has been a wonderful journey, a whirlwind of emotions- yet a great experience that I am lucky to have at a young age. Without you all- this seemingly impossible challenge could not be completed.

First, I'd like to thank my partner, Daniel, who took on my stress, challenged me to do better, and held my hand throughout this year.

To Joseph, someone I cannot thank enough, for his constant support over these last few years. Your kindness does not go unnoticed.

To my entire family, for your work ethic, loyalty and love. You motivate me, distil confidence in me and are always there when I need you, even if you don't know it.

To my supervisor, Micheal Bane, for his support, encouragement and patience. I cannot thank you enough.

And finally, this thesis would not have been made possible without my parents, Lisa and Helal Ali, who not only supported my education up until this point- but also gave me the confidence and belief that I can achieve anything I put my mind to. Maybe not the "*Tour de France*"- but this challenge, I believe, may have been harder.

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# 1 - Introduction

In today's multi-media age, connecting with consumers and potential customers has become more accessible through websites, social media and innovative advertising strategies. *"From the consumer's perspective much of these changes have been a consequence of the ubiquity of smartphones and other mobile devices where the internet can be accessed on demand and where information flows more freely between consumers and intermediaries"* (Lowe, Dwivedi and D'Alessandro, 2019). However, the market is now saturated with new products and ideas and it is becoming increasingly harder for companies to capture attention and gain real estate space in the consumer's mind (Keller, 1987). *"Consumer patience for heavy advertising volume is wearing thin, with many people feeling bombarded by brand messages"* (Evans, 2019). Advertising has changed from traditional methods such as newspapers and TV and has now successfully manifested into the online space where a new generation of buyers now shop- with a 50% increase in online shopping over the last 10 years (Rangaswamy, Nawaz and Changzhuang, 2022). Social media as a platform is a perfect means for companies to connect with consumers and to draw traffic or to disclose their websites (Uzodinma, 2021). Before, companies used high-profile celebrities within their advertisements to attract flagging consumer attention, however this is not as effective as it once was according to Knoll and Matthews (2017). Knoll and Matthews (2017) also suggest that a new phenomenon has come with the growth of social media in

which ordinary people can achieve celebrity status online, whilst still being somewhat more relatable to the average consumer as opposed to a celebrity. This relatability is due to the perceived like-mindedness of influencers and consumers with shared interests, goals and hobbies (Bruns, 2018). However, over recent years, the authenticity and credibility of influencers has been put into question (Zhang and Choi, 2022)- with consumers questioning the true nature of Influencer's relationship with them. Even with the pros and cons of social media marketing, traditional marketing no longer holds the same impact with millennials (Newman, 2015) and thus companies now turn to new endorsers on social media, the *"Influencers"*

## 2- Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to gather information and build an understanding of current ideas, traits and trends within the aspects of the research question, *“The Impact of Influencer’s EWOM marketing on Consumers Purchase Intention within the Beauty Industry”*.

The review will start by laying a foundation on the history of marketing communications and how it evolved into what consumers know today. It will then focus on the evolution of traditional “word of mouth” marketing and how it transpired onto social media and became a source of marketing persuasion. Following this will be a review of related areas in the marketing field such as social media itself, micro and macro influencers, credibility, purchase intention and lastly a breakdown of the beauty industry in relation to consumers.

A recent addition to the armoury of marketing communications is the commercial appropriation of *“Social Media Influencers”*s - a phenomenon that originally and organically began with people sharing posts with families and friends on social media, gained followers and trust, and then turned into intermediaries between advertisers and consumers as companies recognised the potential of their influence to their followers (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). Wielki (2020) corroborates this by stating that *“Organisations use them to support traditional marketing activities, and to generate a*



*multiplier effect based on electronic word of mouth, playing an important role in building a 'digital relationship' with their clients."* .

To build a foundation of the history of influential sources, celebrity endorsement literature will be examined to seek out consumer trust when it comes to attractiveness, credibility and overall brand to consumer relations when being compared to current influencers on social media. By examining the propensity of SMI's to impact Millennial females' perceptions/intentions,, it aims to build an understanding of current knowledge and highlight trends within this area whilst also identifying gaps that are yet to be explored. This provides a practical perspective when answering the research question in relation to the impact of influencers EWOM marketing on consumers.

## **2.1 Evolution of marketing communications.**

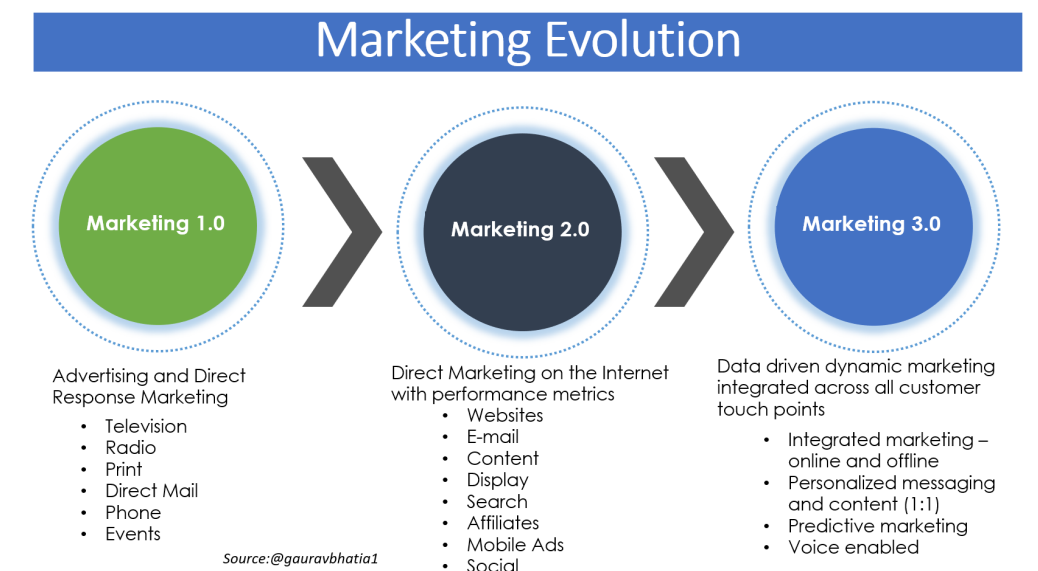
The development/transition of the internet over the last two decades must be considered when discussing the evolution of marketing communications as there are currently 5 billion internet users, with 4.65 of this population actively using social media (Statista, 2022). In 2020, 97% of Europe's population had an at home internet connection (Statista, 2020). Although Nielsen's study on advertising (2012) found that 42% of respondents trust radio

advertisements, Core's Outlook Study (2018) found radio advertising had dropped by 5%. However The Irish Times (2022) reported that radio was "On the rise" with high revenues of 145 million euro revenue stream from advertisements, sponsorships and partners. Profit Ability: the business case for advertising' (2017), by Ebiquity and Gain Theory suggests that TV advertising is still a competitor, with *"71% of total advertising-generated profit at an average profit ROI over 3 years of £4.20 per £ spent, the highest ROI of any media"*. However, digital advertising has been steadily growing with 26 billion being spent globally in 2010 (IAB, 2010), to 521 billion USD in 2021- and expecting to grow to 876 billion by 2026 (Statista, 2022). Therefore it is suggested that digital media advertising is the chosen method of advertising by companies, and traditional advertising is on the decline (Makrides, Vrontis and Christofi, 2019, Faruk, Rahman and Hasan, 2021, Homburg and Wielgos, 2022) Gilpin, (2021) stresses that *"Nearly all business executives anticipate that their company's social media marketing budget will increase over the next three years, with more than half expecting their budgets to grow by at least 50%."*

Bhatia's (2019) Marketing Evolution model (Image 1) conveys the marketing evolution from traditional marketing, depicted in the model as "Marketing 1.0", to a new marketing paradigm "Marketing 3.0". The model shows how marketing has evolved from a low-engaging environment with high competition among suppliers that excelled in television, radio and print advertising (Durmaz and Efendioglu, 2016) to a hyper-connected, technological and

co-creative platform as depicted Marketing 2.0 (Bhatia,2019) and finally bringing us to the latest form of marketing communications, Marketing 3.0, which consists of the “Data driven” dynamics that are personalised to each individual user that intertwines technology within society (Warrink, 2018). As a result of these marketing techniques, relationships are formed between brands and consumers through jointly created networks and dialogues (Gómez-Suárez, Martínez-Ruiz and Martínez-Caraballo, 2017).

***Image 1 - Marketing Communications Evolution (Bhatia, 2019)***



As depicted in Image 1, two-way dialogues have emerged throughout marketing 2.0 and marketing 3.0 as a demand from consumers, specifically new consumers such as “Gen Z ”, for co-creation has resulted in new marketing communication variants. This two way dialogue is a necessity for businesses because consumers have become increasingly technology-dependent (Zhitomirsky-Geffet & Blau, 2016). Traditional mass media is simply not enough for Gen Z consumers as they expect high-engaging environments as they are

*“self-reliant digital natives; they socialise, learn and have fun living in a fluid digital world—one in which the boundaries between their online and offline lives blur to the point they are nearly indistinguishable.”* (IMB, 2017). The relationships formed in this high-engaging environment with dual dialogue between brand and consumer is also suggested to form brand loyalty, resulting in higher chance of purchase intention among Gen Z consumers (Dobre et al., 2021, Balakrishnan, Dahnil and Yi, 2014).

As previously shown in the IBM’s 2012 Paper “Winning over the empowered consumer”, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of their purchasing power and distrusting of corporations and advertisements. In 2020 and 2021 the global outbreak of COVID 19 affected consumers purchasing behaviour online and consumers actions comprised the actions of seeking, purchasing, using, assessing and disposing of products and services in order to satisfy their own needs (Vázquez-Martínez, Morales-Mediano and Leal-Rodríguez, 2021). This corroborates Schiffman’s 1993 study that concluded that consumer behaviour is a complex pattern of buying that entails three dominant external influences: cultural, economic and sociological aspects. This is further reflected by them turning to both their peers, and social media influencers as sociological influences as *“They give their followers an insight into the brands they love and use in their daily life and even give direct advice on the products their followers should use or not use”* (De Jans et al, 2019). With the evolved or *“empowered”* Gen Z consumer, they have higher expectations of marketing communications than

generations before and are pessimistic about brands just trying to “sell them something” (Sejud, 2018). From this, companies and brands can no longer settle for push-advertising, but now need to create a two-way communication and collaborative effort with their new potential consumers, “Gen Z”.

## **2.2 Gen Z Consumers**

Generation Z or “Gen Z” can be defined as “Generations born in the 1990’s and raised in the 2000s during the most profound changes in the century who exist in a world with web, internet, smart phones, laptops, freely available networks and digital media” (Dangmei and Singh, 2016). They can also be defined as “Digital Natives” as they have never lived without technology (Alruthaya,Nguyen and Lokuge, 2021) Gen Z grew up immersed within a truly international community facilitated by social media sites such as Myspace (2003) and were the first generation to grow up communicating preferably via social media, when compared to their Millennials predecessors (Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2017). Ryan Jenkins (2014) cooberates this and states that the everyday life of Gen Z cannot be separated from Social Media, as they depend on the platforms to strengthen bonds with family and friends, and develop new friendships. Prakash, Yadav and Rai (2017) suggest that the main rationale behind the use of social media by Gen Z is the need to be hyper connected and constantly

seeking and sharing with other people. This can be considered “Engagement”.

According to this study there are two factors that change Gen Z relationship with Social Media: Environmental and Personal. Environmental factors externally affect Gen Z and include PETCL (Political, Environmental, Technological, Cultural and Legal) variables . These variables act as a direct or indirect influence on this particular Generation and can be easily accessed by Gen Z through Social Media which opens them up to others opinions and beliefs worldwide. Personal factors internally affect Gen Z and include social class, personal morals/beliefs, age/maturity and culture/subculture. The use of Gen Z’s social networks, personal objectives to them, feelings, and personality can influence or be influenced by their online behaviour that they choose to display (Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2017). This was further corroborated by Mohr and Mohr (2017) that stated that Gen Z’s online behaviour can be considered “All-day” online behaviour, as *“The influence of internet culture on Generation Z has increased, and the internet has become an indispensable necessity in their daily lives”*. This online behaviour creates expectations that Gen Z have for retailers and companies that want to connect with them.

Expectations of a consumer can be defined as the desires or wants of consumers, and emphasises that expectations have to do with what organisations “should offer” and less with what they “would offer” (Parasuraman and Berry, 1998). As consumers, Gen Z have experienced a lot during their lifetimes including the 2008 financial

crash, Covid 19 and climate changes along with other political, social, technological and economical changes as previously stated (Ernst and Young, 2015). These experiences impact their expectations of businesses, as set out in Vivaldi's (2019) study of Gen Z consumers. In this study they lay out five expectations that Gen Z expect companies to meet; 1. Hyper- personalisation, 2. Ethics, 3. Access over ownership, 4. Seamless experiences and 5. Capturing attention. Hyper personalisation refers to a company personalising a service or product to suit the consumers preferences: ex. Spotify creating a personalised playlist based on the listeners music taste. Ethics refers to a companies ethics in regards to sourcing materials, labour practices and overall production/disposal of goods ex. Lush cosmetics supporting charities and keeping production in-house. Access over ownership refers to Gen Z's expectation of a company to provide a service without them having to make a large purchase ex. GoCar providing rental use of cars that is affordable and efficient. Gen Z also expects seamless experiences, such as the company Revolut- making banking efficient with no closing hours, paperless banking and seamless transactions with currency exchange. And finally, Gen Z expect businesses to capture their attention. Businesses such as "OREO" creating interactive advertising with "Oreo people: Show your creative side" marketing campaign (Vivaldi 2019). Gen Z also expects engagement from a brand. According to Gambetti et al., (2012) engagement consists of the formation of a bond that is continuous between a brand and its customers. This bond is based on a continuous effort from the brand to maintain the interest of its consumers. This can be done through interaction, experiential content and even rewards (Lou and Yuan, 2019) as suggested previously.

However, above all else, studies have shown that Gen Z expect authenticity from credible brands and ambassadors (Doorenbos and Erasmus, 2020, Bruns, 2018, O'Carroll and Rooney, 2020). However as the generation are tech savvy and knowledgeable (Linnes and Metcalf, 2017), they are not easily swayed by clever marketing- thus brands and ambassadors must be completely authentic with how they run their operations before thinking of how they are perceived on social media (IBM, 2017) This sense of authenticity and credibility from brands encourages Gen Z consumers to interact with brands and ambassadors via social media as they believe they are like minded and have similar social wants and desires (Wood, 2022).

Based on this information, the use of social media in a marketing strategy targeting Gen Z is crucial for a successful marketing campaign, as social media is an inseparable part of their lives (Nugroho, Rahayu and Hapsari, 2022) As Gen Z consumers share, like, tag and comment about a product/service on social media- it appears on their timeline or feed which gives access to their followers in what they are interested in, or recommending (EWOM). The reviews of peers will also have an impact on purchase intention from other potential consumers (Liu, Lei, Guo and Zhou, 2020). Due to the growth on social media and e-commerce platforms, Gen Z consumers have become accustomed to evaluating the quality of products and services- which further produce collaboration/co-creation on these platforms. In conclusion to this section, Gen Z consumers crave two way dialogue between peers and businesses on social media as this is what they have become accustomed to as they grew up with



technology becoming more and more embedded into their everyday lives. In the next section we will look at Gen Z's use of social media as a platform for interacting with influencers and making purchases.

## **2.3 - Social Media**

Aichner et al (2021) defines Social Media as “*an umbrella term that describes a variety of online platforms, including blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks (SN), forums, microblogs, photo sharing, products review, social bookmarking, social gaming, social networking, video sharing, and virtual worlds*”. The term “Social Media” was coined back in 1994 by Tokyo media company “Maise” (Bercovici J, 2010). Social media has been studied since the 1990's, and over the last two decades has been a particular interest for scholars due to it quickly evolving regularly. The number of social media's users is now around 4.65 billion, which is 58.7% of the world's population (Keponis, 2022). Of this percentage, Gen Z are actively present on Social media, with 50% of those surveyed saying they use social media at least once a day (Statista, 2022). Being that emerging adults average 6 hours per day on social media (Hruska and Maresova, 2020), we can make the assumption from Statista's 2022 findings that Gen Z are accessing social media multiple times a day over a six hour period. Magna Group, a world-renowned ad agency, forecasted the estimated net worth of the global digital ad

marketplace at over 700 billion USD (Forbes, 2022), compared to 100 billion USD in 2012 (Forbes, 2013) which also supports the suggestion that social media is a major player in marketing communications today.

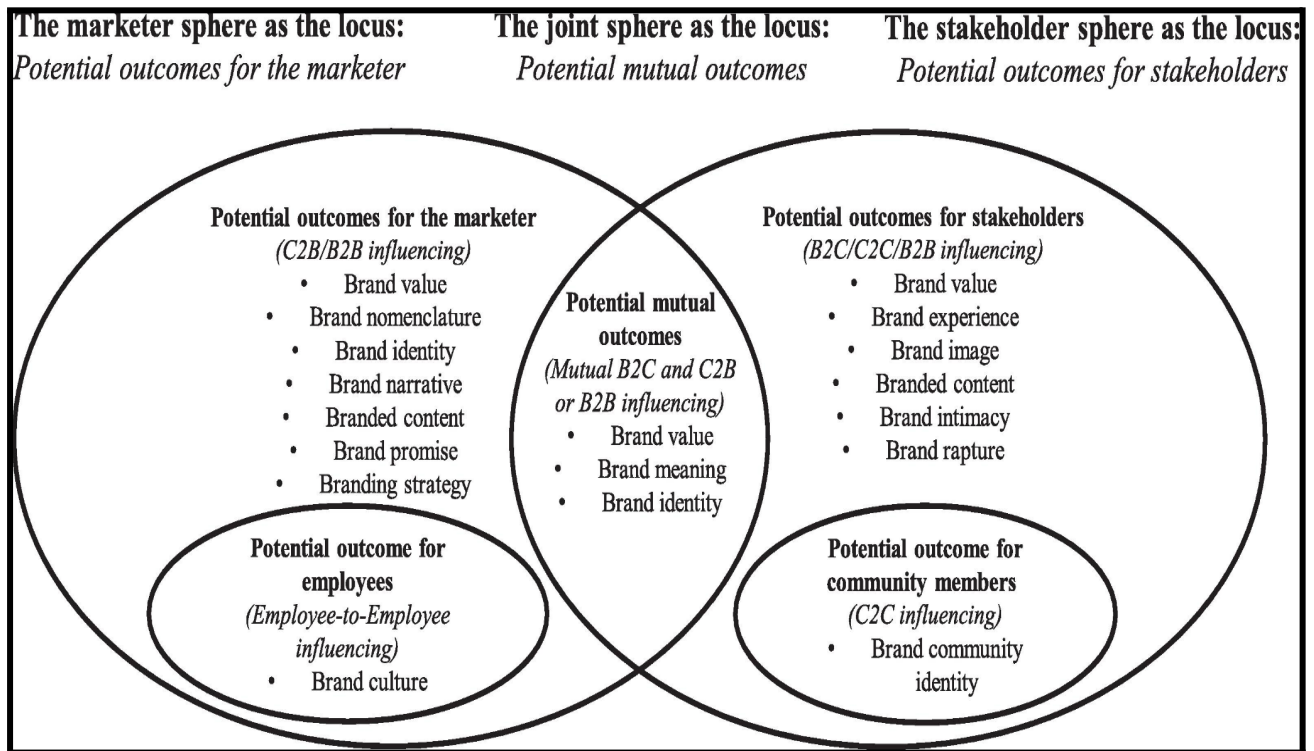
As previously discussed in the last section, Gen Z craves two way dialogue from like-minded individuals, and Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) suggest that social media has transformed traditional one-way communication into multi-dimensional, two-way, peer to peer communication. This two-way communication allows for brands to become transparent and open for conversation and feedback on their products/services. It personifies them by allowing consumers to contact them for support easily, make changes and improve their services which results in a growth of sales (Sarasvuo, Rindell and Kovalchuk, 2022). Brands are making an effort to replicate this peer-to-peer communication with posts that seamlessly blend in with a consumer's social media (Oglivy, 2019) feed in order to appear relatable, informative and interesting- rather than just another advertisement posted for profits. (Klassen et al., 2018)

From this, a question can be asked as to why Gen Z craves two way dialogue from brands on Social media?

Gen Z are the latest generation to have purchasing power (Fromm, 2022), and therefore, as previously discussed in the last section, hold high expectations for brands and companies to adapt to. Social media can be used as a tool by Gen Z consumers to interact and express their

opinions, feelings and thoughts towards a brand- whilst also seeking help or advice in a quick, casual manner using two-way dialogue that social media offers (Kujur and Singh, 2017). By using two-way dialogue, Gen Z consumers have the perception of higher brand values, brand image, brand experience and brand intimacy (Sarasvuo, Rindell and Kovalchuk, 2022), whilst also having the opportunity to co-create with brands. Co-creation can be understood as “creating together” (Sarasvuo, Rindell and Kovalchuk, 2022) and is said to form brand loyalty, resulting in higher purchase intentions from consumers (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). An example of co-creation can be seen with LEGO Ideas, which gave consumers the chance to create their own Lego sets by hosting a competition to design a product idea in which Lego would sell, and the winner receives 1% of net profit sales (Gililand, 2018). This allows for consumers to become active content creators in their relationships with firms, which results in stronger brand loyalty and brand satisfaction. (Tajvidi, Richard, Wang and Hajli, 2020). Agreeing with this, Sahin, Zehir and Kitapçı, 2011 also states that brand experiences and satisfaction positively affects brand loyalty. Hameed and Kanwal 2018 then concludes that brand loyalty positively affects the purchase intention of a consumer showing the overall importance and attributes that two-way communication has on a consumer’s purchase intention within this study that aims to investigate how communication affects purchase intention.

**Image 2 - Outcomes of Two way communication (Sarasvuo, Rindell and Kovalchuk, 2022)**



However, Azizea et al. (2012) findings show that both one-way and two-way brand communications have positive effects on brand satisfaction based relationship platform between brand and consumer (Azizea, Cemel and Hakan, 2012)- which suggests that a dual dialogue is not a necessity in order to fulfil brand satisfaction. For many years before social media, traditional marketing offered one-way communication for brands and they were still successful. A study conducted in 2012 by AT Kearney Social Media Study found that 94 percent of companies land visitors on a one-way communication page, and 38 of the 48 companies with a Facebook page have either filtered their wall to display company-only posts, or have restricted their walls solely to company posts (Holmes report, 2012). However Maecker et al. (2016) suggests that this form of communication can also lead consumers to believe that the brand is controlling their brand image,

by not allowing opinions or reviews to be shared in order to maintain brand integrity. Companies developing brand awareness through digital and social media need to be aware of the criticality in promptly engaging directly with consumers in response to negative postings , thereby, preserving trust and reputation of the organisation (Y.K. Dwivedi et al. 2020)

Msimangira (2012) also found that companies have a *“lack of understanding on how social media can be applied, how social media contributes to organisational effectiveness and the investment social media requires such as dedicating money, time and effort to ensure the social media is managed efficiently”*. Even if a company does have a website and social media, it is important that there is enough staff to facilitate the platform and ensure responses are answered in a timely manner with solutions in order for the two-way brand communication to work and brand satisfaction to be acquired.

Following this logic, companies internationally have embraced new technologies, the internet and social media as a whole and are adapting their platforms so their brands can contribute content to followers online in hopes of creating an “online community” by providing two-way communication (Kilian, Hennigs and Langner, 2012). Online communities are a powerful digital source for businesses to analyse online users’ behavioural data, which allows for feedback and innovation to occur within the business (Akar and Mardikyan, 2018). Online communities can be found on social media platforms such as Instagram, Youtube and Facebook (Dwivedi et al., 2021) and are usually identified by a joint interest such as a hobby,

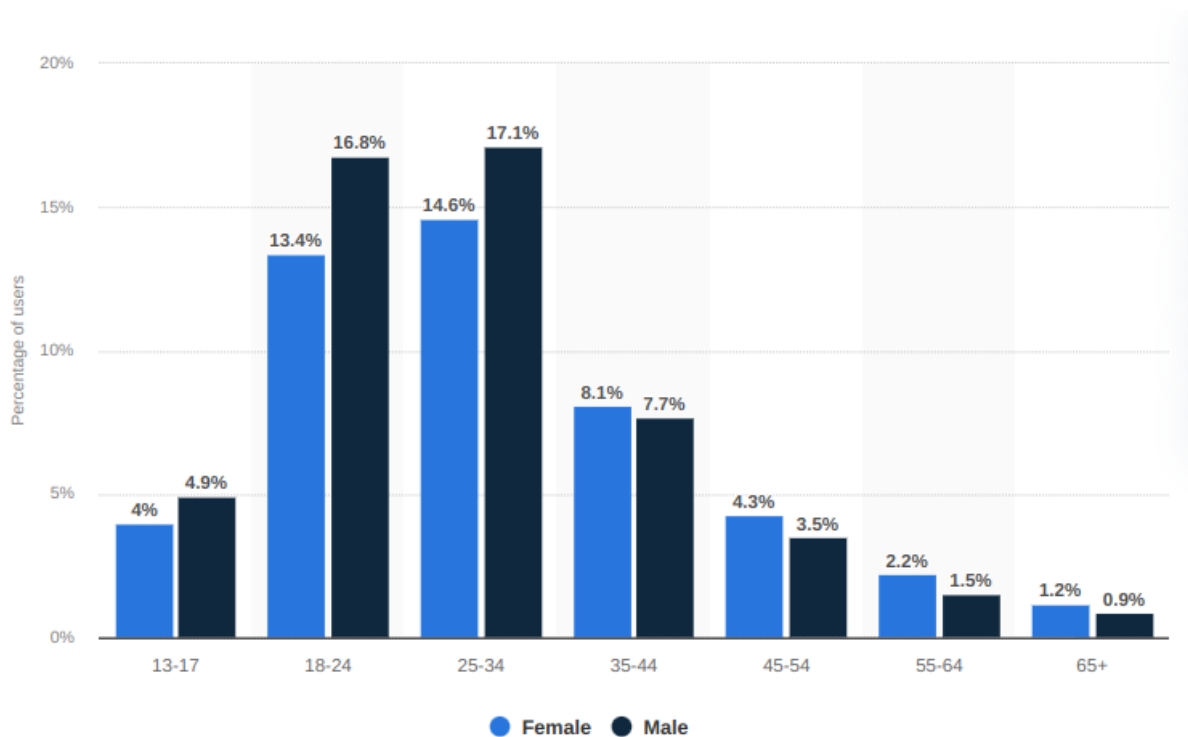
common project/goal, similar lifestyle, profession or geographical location (Wu, 2011). Facebook was a popular social networking site in 2011, with the social network reaching 8 million users, and surviving the launch of Google Plus and creating “facebook timeline”, which allowed for users to share and display their day to day lives, photos, and recommendations- as well as “pin” their locations which allowed their peers to see where they where, and what they were doing (Clix, 2011). Facebook also allowed for online communities to boom, by creating “Facebook groups' ', which allowed for people to engage with each other and businesses. However, Business Insider found that Facebook usage among 12-34 year olds (Gen Z and Millenials) fell from 48% in 2017, to 29% in 2019, as new social medias such as Instagram and TikTok appealed more to younger users, as they preferenced visual over written content (Vuleta, 2022). This is supported by Dahlhoff (2016) who states that online platforms, such as Instagram, enable compelling visual stories to be built and facilitate engagement through visual features that complement the standard aesthetics of many brands.

The preference for Instagram, by consumers, as their favourite social media platform has been noted by brands, who can clearly see the engagement difference between different social media platforms. A study by Eriksson, Sjöberg, Rosenbröijer & Fagerström (2019) found that Instagram had more engagement than Facebook as a platform- noting that “*Instagram scores a higher follower engagement rate at 2.72% than Facebook at 1.01%*”. However, also suggested in this study- Instagram has a younger user base (Pew Research Centre, 2018), which tends to be more active on social

media in general (Moyer, 2022) in comparison to Facebook's older population (Barnhart, 2022). Eriksson, Sjöberg, Rosenbröijer & Fagerstrøm (2019) study concludes that Instagram is the preferred choice for both the consumer and the brand, "*Instagram inspirational content created the highest brand engagement.*" across any other social media.

Due to the restraints of this study, our primary focus will be on the photo sharing social media platform, Instagram. Shahbaznezhad, Dolan and Rashidirad (2021) conclude that Instagram and Facebook are the two most popular social media platforms for both engagement and B2C communication. Instagram hosts 1.21 billion users globally (Statista, 2022) with over 200 million business accounts currently active on the platform (Sproutsocial, 2022). The global influencer marketing platform was valued at 10.39 billion USD in 2021 and is expected to grow at a rate of 33.4% from 2022-2030 (Grandviewresearch, 2022). Instagram is mainly popular among the younger age group of 18-34 year olds (Pasztor and Bak, 2021). As shown in Image 3, 8.9% of 13-17 year olds and 30.2% of 18-24 year olds use the platform which makes 39.1% of the users of the platform Gen Z (Statista, 2022). Of this 39.1%, 17.4% are females whilst 21.7% are men (Statista, 2022). Although the platform consists predominantly of men, studies have shown that females on the platform engage with female influencers more than males with male influencers due to women relating to influencers, leading to stronger feelings of parasocial interaction and thus resulting in brand

attitude and post engagement (Hudders and De Jans, 2021).



**Image 3 -Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of April 2022, by age and gender Statista (2022)**

67% of companies use Instagram to engage with this influencer marketing platform, and consumers seem to be particularly responsive to buying products sponsored by micro or macro influencers (Santora, 2021). For the purpose of this study, we will be focusing on the impact of the beauty industry market on the Instagram platform. Estee Lauder, owner of brands such as MAC, Clinique and Smashbox, announced in 2019 that they will be spending 75% of their marketing budget on influencers (Gerdeman, 2019). Aleissa Vettse, a Harvard Business School graduate, surveyed 520 beauty enthusiasts on Facebook, and found that over 62% followed beauty influencers, with 67% of the subjects looking to



influencers for reviews before purchasing a product. Company advertisements were trusted or sought after by only 44% and celebrities only 34%. 82% of the respondents also used Instagram as their top social media channel to reach influencers (Geredman, 2019) with Conick (2018) concluding that influencers win consumer trust when compared to other online sources, and allow for consumers to engage with both the influencer and the brand- which results in a higher chance of purchase intention and brand loyalty.

Engagement between brands and consumers is thought to be critical in order to form brand relationships, which may result in brand loyalty. Engagement has been a key talking point in the literature over the last decade (Brodie, R. J., Hollebeek, L. D., Juric B. & Ilic, A, 2011, Tsai and Men, 2014, Painsil and Kim, 2021). Customer Engagement can be defined as “*emotional attachment that a customer experiences during the repeated and ongoing interactions.*” (Bansal and Chaudhary, 2022). Behaviour that reflects engagement with social media includes customers’ creation of, contribution to, or consumption of brand-related content within a social network (Hallock et al., 2019) Engagement is a result of satisfaction, loyalty and excitement about your brand (Enginkaya, E., & Esen, E, 2014). Engagement with brands on social media can be simple such as “liking” a post on Instagram, to “sharing” posts on their timeline or feed that they are interested in. Co-creation engagement can also occur by posting reviews on social media (Muntinga, 2011). Jaitly and Gautam (2021) concluded in their study that Influencers are the bridge to connect consumers with brands that promote

engagement. According to De Veirman M, Cauberghe V, and Hudders L (2017), Influencers are approached in terms of their ability to attract followers and impact purchasing decisions- all as a result of their own engagement with consumers. Enginkaya & Esen (2014) suggest that engagement could be clarified “*with trust, commitment and in a reputed dimensional way*”, and therefore “trust” can be considered a crucial factor in which consumers consider when interacting with social media influencers, Which leads us to our next section: Consumers Trust.

## 2.4 Consumers Trust

“Trust” is often an attribute described in a relationship, which consumers often depict between themselves and influencers (Gerdeman, 2019)- however this relationship can be considered a “parasocial relationship” (Daniels, 2021). A “Parasocial Relationship”, the term first coined in 1950, described the first relationship between spectator and performer that is an illusion of friendship, or somewhat of a peer (Giles, 2002). Although when this term was first used it was a one-way form of communication, the term has evolved as with the introduction of social media- it has opened up a two-way dialogue and “performers” can now interact and allude to being a peer. Gong, W. and Li, X. (2017) found that Parasocial relationships through social media influence the attitudes of consumers towards particular products and endorsements. However, it is suggested that the transparency of influencer’s intentions when advertising to consumers can be put into question. As with any new phenomenon, regulations can take a number of years to implement, if at all. Only in 2020 did social media platform “Facebook”, parent company of Instagram, set in motion new guidelines and algorithms to weed out non-disclosed advertisements, only after an investigation by the UK’s Competition and Markets authority (PR, 2021). This form of advertising, with companies taking advantage of this “Parasocial relationship” can be considered “Stealth marketing”. Stealth marketing is a form of

marketing that commercialises social interaction by “*using surreptitious practices that fail to disclose or reveal the true relationship with the company producing or sponsoring the marketing message*” (Martin and Smith, 2008). This type of marketing exploits consumers who may not be familiar with sponsored content when not explicitly identified as such- or who may not be able to decipher between organic non-sponsored content on Instagram, and paid content that influencers post (Barker, 2018). This is due to the lack of transparency found in sponsored posts, and as previously stated, has identified issues from authorities and consumers globally (Warc, 2019). Lou, Ma and Feng (2020) found advertisements by brands that were disguised as “non-sponsored/affiliated” left the consumer with a “*distrustful attitude*” and had “*subsequent lower eWOM intentions*” as well as “*lowered purchase intentions*”.

Ireland's response to stealth marketing was set out in 2017, where the ASAI (Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland) declared that influencers and bloggers must demarcate their marketing communications online (ASAI, 2022). A visible hashtag of, #AD or #SP should be visible to the consumer and easily identifiable- whilst the company is also responsible and held liable for these guidelines to be adhered to. The ASAI also accepts complaints from any person or body who considers a post to be in breach of the code of conduct (ASAI, 2022) in an attempt to bring transparency to consumers when using social media platforms, and also in an attempt to control stealth marketing.

However, Irish consumers' response to stealth marketing, in relation to bloggers and influencers, created and followed an Instagram social media account. "Bloggersunveiled" was created in 2018, in an attempt to highlight what the owner of the account believed to be "false or misleading" postings from recognisable social media influencers and bloggers- specifically beauty industry influencers (Daly, 2018). In an attempt to "expose" influencers authenticity and credibility, Bloggers unveiled their cult-following examples of misleading advertisements from influencers such as "Makeupfairypro"- who was reselling clothing with misleading information, as depicted in Image (Jones, 2018). "Makeupfairypro" was also accused by the account of photoshopping body images and altering her appearance. Whilst Bloggers unveiled was seen as a "whistle-blower" in many Irish consumers' eyes, others felt as though the account became evil- and even accused the account as "bullying" (Zaw, 2018, Daly, 2018). In the account's attempt at exposing the "fakeness" in the world of beauty blogging- the account fell into its own downward spiral when its audience began questioning the accounts ethics and authenticity. Whilst the author was anonymous, followers soon wanted to expose the account itself, and targeted the wrong owner, a beautician in Tullamore, Ramona Treacy, sending death threats which eventually spiralled into a Gardai investigation (Daly, 2018). The account closed soon after.

However as a result of the allegations, Beauty blogger "Makeupfairypro" took a new brand approach in a direct contrast to her previous photoshopping pictures and began posting

“Body-positive” and “realistic” images to her Instagram, resulting in her followers “loving her new approach to her snaps, with the former makeup artist showing off her real self.” (Carty, 2019). However, although she recovered from the allegations, Makeupfairipro lost 20,000 followers in the process, which may have been down to the lack of trust her followers had when she openly admitted that she did edit her photos- and only now is she posting authentically (Barrington, 2021).

The quick change of branding worked for Makeupfairipro who still regularly posts to her 130,000 Instagram followers, but the authenticity and credibility of influencers is still questioned by consumers. Before exploring this topic, we will first discuss Influencers and their role on social media.



The image is a screenshot of an Instagram post. On the left, there is a profile for 'makeupfairipro' from Dublin, Ireland, with a 'Sold' badge. The post features a photo of a floral jumpsuit and a caption describing it as a 'Brand new River Island jumpsuit worn once in perfect condition. Bought in Size 12 to fit tall and curvy shape. Current retail price €80'. The price is listed as €65, posted 2 weeks ago. On the right, a comment from 'bloggersunveiled' is visible, warning potential buyers that the jumpsuit was sold as size 12 but is actually size 16, and that the seller has provided a full refund.

**makeupfairipro**  
Dublin, Ireland

**Sold**

**kirstyforde** and **7 others** like this  
Brand new River Island jumpsuit worn once in perfect condition. Bought in Size 12 to fit tall and curvy shape. Current retail price €80

Brand **River Island**  
Price **€65**  
2 WEEKS AGO

**bloggersunveiled** • Following

**bloggersunveiled** → Potential buyers beware. We have been informed that the jumpsuit Joanne was selling as a "curvy sized 12" was actually a size 16 with the size ripped off. (The care label still had the correct size) It is not our intention to shame anyone for being any size- that is irrelevant, but we thought you should know in case you intend on browsing her Depop that she seems to be deceiving people in this way. All references to the jumpsuit have now been removed from her Depop and the girl who bought it has received a full refund after complaining. Images have been cropped to protect the buyers identity. 🙊

Load more comments

**norannelynch** @klynchy1994  
**jenihughes\_x** @hmck105 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄  
**orlaheffeman** @iaderochech wow

3,538 likes  
23 HOURS AGO

Add a comment...

## 2.5.1 Influencers

The term influencer can be defined as “*a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors*” (Duffy, 2020). Influencers can be found in a number of different industries such as makeup, fitness, food, travel and business. As discussed previously, Influencers create relationships with their followers which develops trust as followers believe they are relatable (Lee et al., 2021). It is argued that the influencer economy draws on the conventions of a traditional celebrity (Hearn, Schoenhoff, 2016), however other scholars believe that contemporary influencer strategies can be understood through the framework of a microcelebrity (Abidin, 2016). A microcelebrity can be defined as “*a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status*” (Dunn and Fakfolk, 2021). This, along with aspects of traditional celebrity attributes such as fame, familiarity and opportunities make up the core of what an influencer is (Zhang, 2021). Careful personal branding such as aesthetics, ethics, relatability and content can contribute to their success in gaining followers (Gorbatov, Khapova and Lysova, 2018). This careful personal branding can lead to a micro-influencer to create revenue from brands looking for advertisement/endorsement deals. In fact, Influencers are often thought of as a new method of marketing

persuasion, used to influence consumers' attitudes towards brands and purchase intentions (Schieber, 2020). However influencers may not always influence their consumers towards purchase intention. Consumers' purchase decisions can be affected by (an influencer's) personality, their creativity and the ability to convey brand messages is also another vital determinant (Peetz, Marks and Spencer, 2004). It can be proposed that due to the relatability that influencers give consumers with their everyday lives, brands are coming away from celebrity endorsements and instead turning to influencers (Kim and Kim, 2022). Hollensen and Schimmelpfennig (2013) proved this theory as they found that consumers cannot relate to celebrities' livelihoods and no longer feel as though products/services can help them relate or replicate celebrity lifestyles.

When researching how influencers are a direct source of advertising, the concept of “influence” is recurring. Before social media, influences around consumers such as peers, friends, family and society had an influence on consumers' purchases. These influences or pressures are known as “Normative influences”. Normative influences (also known as subjective norm or social influence) are related to the perceived social pressure to follow or not to follow the anticipations of others' behaviour (Ajzen, 2002). Ajzen's 2002 study also found that friends and families opinions were considered “trustworthy”, and therefore the perceived “risk” was taken out of the purchase decision. This same theory can be applied to consumers who trust influencers. Duffy (2020) found that consumers who consider an influencer “reliable”, also considers them a credible source who they can trust when making a purchase decision. The similarity found is the perceived risk



reduction that is taken away from a purchase decision, when following a recommendation from either a Normative influencer- or a Social media Influencer.

Whilst endorsement reviews are typically positive, Influencers may also give a negative review of a product or service. Wood & Hayes (2012) found that consumers respond accordingly towards a review by an influencer, or comments from other consumers about a product in order to conform or feel socially accepted by their online peers. Consumers respond positively to individuals that they like, over who they do not. Any similarity between the individual and an influencer will increase this (Rothschild, 2014). Therefore if a consumer does commit to following an influencer, they are likely to be inclined to be susceptible to their opinions subject to their perceived credibility and authenticity, which leads us to the next part of the literature review.

## **2.5.2 Authenticity and Credibility**

A survey completed by CNBC in 2018 showed that 67% of Gen Z agreed to the statement that *“being true to their values and beliefs makes a person cool”* (Handley 2018). This statement also corroborates the conclusion by Williams (2020) that Gen Z consumers want influencers who would *“Fit into their social bubble”*- and found that 85% of respondents to this study followed an influencer whom they perceived could potentially be their friend (Williams, 2020). Gen Z also concludes in this study that they don't just take a “mass following” into account for credibility, as they *“crave a personal,*

*authentic connection*” with those they intend to follow for influence (Handley, 2018). This authentic connection is also supported by Williams 2020 in his findings that 86% of Gen Z consumers want to feel that the influencer "isn't just trying to sell them something"- and instead are looking for people “*who they can trust to provide good advice amid a social media environment that's flooded with misleading information, fake news and inflammatory content*”. (Williams, 2020). This is contrasted however McCormick (2016) who states that their predecessors, the “Millennials”- often looked at celebrities as influencers and are more likely to pay attention to products endorsed by them, as they tend to replicate looks of celebrities they admire for their own identity development. Rather than looking for relatability, McCormick (2016) suggests that consumers look for familiarity, and celebrities endorsing products can be easily recognisable by consumers, who then relates the product to the celebrity that they may admire- regardless of their authenticity or credibility.

Matt Voda, CEO of Optimine stated that Gen Z represents a quarter of the US population and is the most culturally and ethnically diverse generation that marketers have had to market towards, and they expect brands to adapt quickly to their wants and needs (Talbot, 2021) thus businesses must be authentic in how they meet these wants and needs. An example of Gen Z consumers expecting brands to adapt to their wants and needs was with the release of the “Bounce liquid whip” foundation, released originally with 32 shades of skin tone (primarily light tones), and re released with 40- catering to a larger range of skin tones (Diaz, 2018). The re-release occurred due to backlash on social

media by consumers demanding that the brand be “inclusive”- however, the authenticity of the brand was questioned by consumers who believed that the brand was exclusive Kraus, 2018). Due to the demand of adaptation by Gen Z, *“Businesses must rethink how they deliver value to the consumer, rebalance scale and mass production against personalization, and—more than ever— practise what they preach when they address marketing issues and work ethics”* (Francis and Hoefel, 2018, Fromm, 2022

Gen Z wants a brand that not only looks to make a profit, but helps improve the world in some way that is transparent (IBM, 2017).. A consequence, per say, of Gen Z being so tech savvy is that they can *“easily source and check information they need ”* (Dolot, 2018) , so if companies and brands are not transparent, these consumers have the means to investigate at their disposal.

Not only do Gen Z want companies to be authentic with their corporate social responsibility and supply chain, Gen Z wants brands to be authentic with their advertising. In a yearly global survey hosted by WP Engine, they found that 82% of Gen Z consumers were more likely to trust a brand if they depicted more images of real customers in their advertising (Williams & Kelly, 2020). However, if a brand is advertising in order to keep up with latest marketing trends, and not because they believe in the message they are sending, Gen Z will be sceptical, and if found out to be inauthentic, will lose the trust in your brand- resulting in a loss of potential sales and also the risk of consumers sharing their negative views online (IBM, 2022). Victoria’s Secret, one of America’s largest lingerie retailer launched a campaign

in 2021, “Victoria’s collective”, which featured seven diverse women from different backgrounds including a transgender female, a plus-size woman, a successful entrepreneur and a female footballer (Maheshwari and Friedman, 2021), perhaps to fit Gen Z’s wants of real customers in their advertisements. However, Gen Z consumers online were under the impression that Victoria’s Secret was only adapting to exploit this tendency and not because they believed in what they were promoting (Nessel, 2021). In fact, the Harris Poll in 2021 found that *“Only 36% of women aware of the rebrand said it would make them more likely to shop with the storied lingerie retailer.”*(Raswano, 2021). This proves the theory that brands must be 100% authentic, and truly believe in what they are advertising, or Gen Z may be sceptical of the brand and choose to shop elsewhere.

Whilst authenticity is important in the world of social media and advertising, credibility is important in the world of influencing. Source credibility is a *“concept that expresses all of the positive features affecting the acceptance of a message by the recipient and the features used to affect the individual”* (Yilmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş, 2021). Source credibility can capture how much a consumer believes the influencers recommendations or advice. Trustworthiness plays a factor in the level of source credibility that a consumer perceives from an influencer. It is the evaluation of how worthy an influencer is of a follower’s trust (Wang and Scheinbaum 2018). Expertise is also a factor in source credibility, as consumers follow influencers for advice within their chosen niche (McGinnies and Ward, 1980).

For this study, we will be looking at the beauty industry- thus it is presumed that these targeted consumers would follow “Beauty influencers” who may have a qualification in makeup training, or work as a makeup artist. This would give them credibility, and consumers may feel more trusting of their advice as it is presumed they know what they are talking about (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020) The extent of trust and loyalty between the consumers and their influencers has been seen to positively affect the sustainability of the relationships between the followers and the influencers, the sales, and the brand (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Because of these findings, a question can be asked: Do Irish Gen Z consumers find beauty influencers on social media credible? And if so, what makes them credible?

Dublin based digital agency- “ZOO” conducted two surveys in 2017 and 2018 to investigate the growing influencer presence online and their credibility towards the Irish consumer market. Surveying 500 individuals, their goal was to see whether they would be influenced by product recommendations given by influencers. A key finding in this research was that 57% of Irish consumers would not trust a paid product recommendation in 2017- and this had grown 14% in 2018, with 71% of those surveyed stating that they would not trust a paid recommendation by an influencer (Heatherington, 2018). This was a key finding for ZOO as it showed the distrust between Influencers and the Irish consumer market was growing, as they became more familiar with paid promotions and endorsements. From the same study, we see that the Irish consumer market is also becoming educated with how to spot sponsorships and paid advertisements on social media. In 2017, 78% of those surveyed said they were able to recognise a paid

product recommendation and this figure rose to 82% in 2018. (Heatherington, 2018). This shows us that whilst influencers are hired to make advertisements look organic and seamless among other posts on a social media users news feed, Irish consumers are now easily recognising them, and as the study shows, trusting them less, as their credibility is being put into question when the Influencer is being paid.

Tran, Nguyen and Luong (2022) shows in their study that buyers seek out the reliability and credibility of an online review, before trusting what the review itself says. This theory has also been held with online social media influencers (Kwiatek, Baltezarević and Papakonstantinidis, 2021, Belanche, Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021). Personal experiences by an Influencer, in Gen Z's eyes, can often make them more "relatable", which also impacts their overall credibility, and consumers are more likely to trust the review (Zanib, Zahra and Shilan, 2022). Shen et al. (2015) found that 85% of those surveyed indicated that reviews written online by peers can influence their purchase behaviours. Shein et al (2015) also found that the online reviews of social media influencers also have this impact, yet the use of social media influencers may not always be credible or authentic (AlFarraj et al., 2021). According to Verger (2020), there are two types of Influencers: Macro and Micro, which will be further discussed in the next section.

### **2.5.3 Micro vs. Macro Influencers**

According to Louisa Allen (2022), in 2020 micro influencers (1000-100,000 followers) had the highest engagement rate on Instagram with 3.86%- whilst the average engagement rate for macro influencers (100,000- 1,000,000 followers) had 1.22% engagement. Consumers perceive macro influencers who were once micro-influencers as “out-of-touch” as they rise with the fame that comes along with endorsements and attention, but associate micro-influencers as “down-to-earth” and “relatable” as they consider themselves to be similar with real-life jobs and responsibilities (Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020). However, Uzunoglu and Kip (2014), concluded that having a large number of followers resulted in consumers having a more positive attitude towards the endorser, and can be perceived as credible and have better expertise when compared to influencers with less number of followers.

A case study can be made from the findings of beauty macro-influencer “Zoella” (Zoe Sugg), who currently boasts 12 million subscribers on Youtube and 9.4 million followers on Instagram as of 2022. In 2009 Zoe began her Youtube career with videos such as “Boots (pharmacy) bargains”, “Room tour” and “Dealing with panic attacks and anxiety” from her then, rented, flat in London. She was also working in New look at the time and did daily vlogs which consisted of everyday life and fans related to her “normal” lifestyle (Baxter, 2017). However as Zoe Sugg’s social media platforms grew, so did her lifestyle. According to Baxter 2017, Sugg earns over £500,000 a month and boasts a net worth of 3m. Sugg also lives in a £1.7m

mansion in Brighton, and owns three cars with fellow influencer Alfie Dayes, including a Range rover and Audi R8 (Baxter, 2017). To a Gen-Z consumer (aged 10-25), this lifestyle can be considered “unrelatable” and influencers of this nature can become overly commercialised- losing the engagement that they once had (Killgallon, 2020). Compared to micro-influencer “Olivia Neill”, a 19 year old Northern Irish youtuber with 785,000 subscribers who features videos such as “a chaotic week in my life” and “say it or shot it with mum and dad”. Olivia continues to live at home with her parents, and makes most vlogs in her hometown where her audience can relate to an ordinary lifestyle. Olivia averages 600 thousand views per video whilst macro-influencer Zoella averages 750k views- suggesting that Gen Z appreciate the authenticity of micro-influencers, and find that they are more credible in their recommendations than macro-influencers- making them more likeable. If consumers perceive the influencer as someone likeable, this means that the advertising effectiveness will perform better (Chapple and Cownie, 2017), which may be in effect within these two case studies.

Companies and brands are also gathering data and research in an attempt to understand the purchase intention of consumers in relation to macro and micro beauty influencers. Beauty brands created by “influencers” themselves have had no problem excelling in the beauty industry within social media. In a study conveyed by BrandTotal in 2019, “KYLIE cosmetics”, a cosmetic company launched by reality star Kylie Jenner (with 362 million personal followers on Instagram), generated the most social media engagement per post, without spending a dime on paid



advertisements, when compared to other beauty brands at the time of launch (Williams, 2019). This engagement, whilst generating profit for a short term period, may not last as the authenticity of the influencer may be questioned. Rakuten Intelligence's data show that Kylie Cosmetics sales peaked in November 2016 before plunging 62% over the following two years (Fickenshcher, 2019) as customers typically purchased once, and did not return. As social media provides facilities for consumers to interact with each other, accessing information, comments, reviews, and rates that can help them for purchasing decisions in different ways (Agarwal, 2020), it can also contribute to negative reviews about a brand, and lead to a loss of sales. This dialogue can be considered "*Electronic word of mouth*" which leads us to the next section.

## **2.6 EWOM marketing and online reviews.**

For years, scholars concluded that "Word of mouth marketing" was the most trusted source of marketing by consumers which resulted in purchase (File, Cermac and Prince 1994, Sirma, 2009, Gildea, 2003, Ngoma and Ntale, 2019). Arndt (1967) defines word of mouth marketing (WOM) as '*face-to-face communication about a brand, product or service between people who are perceived as not having connections to a commercial entity*'. Whilst WOM marketing is still prevalent in today's society, the growth of social media, and with it, online communities have created a new form of communication, Electronic Word of Mouth Marketing (EWOM). By contrast, electronic word of mouth consists in the transmission of personal opinions and experiences through the written word online (Meiners, Schwarting

and Seeberger, 2010). Electronic Word of mouth marketing plays a major role in contributing to the success of Influencers, as Influencers are essentially relaying a message from a brand to their viewers/followers. It is that “*consumers prioritise opinions of friends and family, followed by anonymous sources such as influencers and lastly marketing advertisements when it comes to making purchase decisions*” (Hu, 2015), thus proving that traditional WOM marketing is still a major player in consumers purchasing decisions. Although WOM marketing is still prioritised, it can also be considered limited to friends, family and acquaintances. EWOM marketing however, can be accessed from anywhere, anytime from any number of people from all over the world through the internet, and social media. “*Social media influencers are one of the key EWOM sources*” (Baker, 2018).

Whilst many scholars agree that WOM or EWOM marketing is the most trusted and dependable source of marketing, Voltolini (2019) suggests that relying on reviews made by others or e-WOM can be dangerous, as there is a strong chance to be manipulated. This was previously explored in the authenticity and credibility section where we discussed “Stealth marketing” and the deceit that may prevail with influencers EWOM strategies with companies. Henning-Thura et al. (2004) also stated that EWOM/WOM marketing is opinion based, and that every consumer has a different experience with a product/service. Therefore it is left to the consumer to decide whether they trust positive/negative reviews, or if they wish to make their purchase decision based on their own experience of the brand. However previous studies (Chen et al, 2004, Foyd, Freling, Alhoqail,

Chloe, 2014) have concluded that ratings and reviews do in fact impact consumers' purchasing behaviour and intentions, as well as their attitudes towards certain retailers and types of products.

The success of apps such as Yelp, TripAdvisor and Trustpilot shows how consumers today are interested in previous reviews, and how reviews play a role in purchase intention. The effect of consumer reviews on online decisions is widely recognized. Consumers feel as though online reviews are reliable and more trustworthy than other marketing communications as they are a direct experience of a consumer (Purnawirawan, Dens and De Pelsmacker, 2012). The decision to purchase or the “purchase intention” is made based on the knowledge the consumer has about the product or service. In a study conducted by Poturak et al. (2018), 200 students both male and female aged 18-24, were surveyed and proved that more than half of the participants made up their mind based on the comments of their friends, family and other acquaintances. Additionally they found that consumers who are actively involved on social media, recommended products and services also. Findings from Lobaugh, Simpson and Ohri (2015) found that half of the teenage sample reported that they used social media as their decision making source when considering purchasing a product or service. In conclusion, whilst influencers messages are appealing to Gen Z consumers (Chopra et al., 2020), centennials/gen Z consumers may be hesitant to form purchase intentions unless friends and peers have bought the product (Barker,2018) or thoroughly trust the influencer at hand (Hu, 2015).

In our next section we will take a closer look at how the audience of influencers and consumers of EWOM/WOM marketing engage with the messages that are portrayed on social media

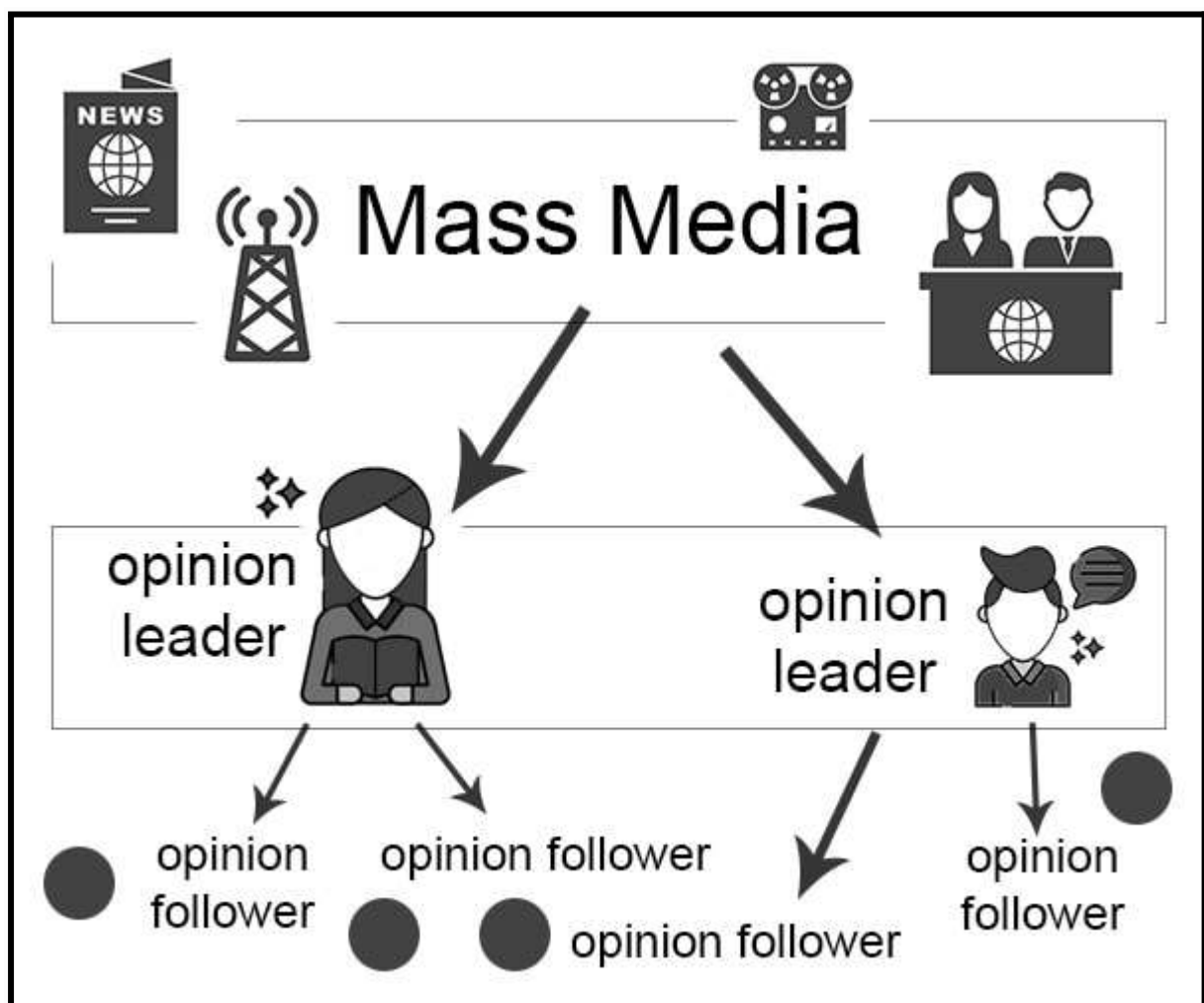
## **2.7 Audience Reception Theory**

The final section of the literature review will analyse both the Hypodermic needle theory of mass communications (1930's) and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973). In doing so, we can analyse the interpretation of mass media messages among audiences, and understand the behaviour that follows by consumers.

Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) state that the "Hypodermic Needle" much like the title of the concept, depicts that just like a needle, the media infuses messages into the minds of the audience. This theory is also known as "The Magic Bullet theory". This theory suggests that audiences are passive in their consumption of media, and "that an intended message is directly received and wholly accepted by the receiver" (Nwabueze and Okonkwo, 2018). During the early stages of the 20th century it was widely agreed by society that the media was extremely powerful, and had persuasive influence on the population (Binem, 1988). It was also initially suggested that the media perceived its audience as susceptible to manipulation, and trusting of the media as a source of information (Smith, 2019). An example of the use of the hypodermic needle in practice was the 1938 radio broadcast "War of the Worlds" which was a story, based on fiction, about aliens coming from Mars, and killing large masses of people. Some listeners that tuned in after the introduction believed the radio broadcast and fled for the

countryside- without any evidence of the attack besides the radio report (Thompson, 2019). This style of mass communication worked in the 1930's as newspaper, radio and television were audiences limited sources of information (Neuman and Guggenheim, 2011). However by the 1950's and 1960's audiences and consumers grew weary of broadcasters, as TV and radio shows became sponsored, produced and scheduled and the proliferation of independent stations challenged national networks (Chapman, 2012). The theory of the hypodermic needle is suggested to be linear, and the message flows from creator to receiver with no interference or judgement, however has been disputed Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) who contended that "the people control the media" as opposed to the stance that the hypodermic needle theory proposes. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues researched the decision making process of voters during the 1940 presidential election in America. Through this analysis, it was suggested that both newspaper and radio broadcast campaigns did not have a profound impact on each individual voter, and argued that instead, mass media influence opinion leaders with political knowledge, who then influenced, or persuaded, less-knowledgeable voters (Katz, 1957). This led to a new theory, the "two-step" communication model. The two-step flow of communication or multi step flow model states that most people form their opinions under the influence of opinion leaders, who are perceived as experts or more knowledgeable (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1970)- which is similar to McGinnies and Ward's (1980) findings as previously discussed in the context of social media influencers, that *"Expertise is also a factor in source credibility, as consumers follow influencers for advice within their chosen niche"*. Following Katz and Lazarfields work, Bittner (2005) also critiqued the Hypodermic needle

by suggesting that audiences can determine their preference of what medium they expose themselves to to satisfy their own desires and cognition such as information, education, ego-boosting and relaxation. This is a direct contrast to the Magic Bullet/Hypodermic needle theory as it suggests that audience members choose what they expose themselves to, and are considered “active” rather than passive.



**Image 5 - Two-step communication model (Katz, 1957)**

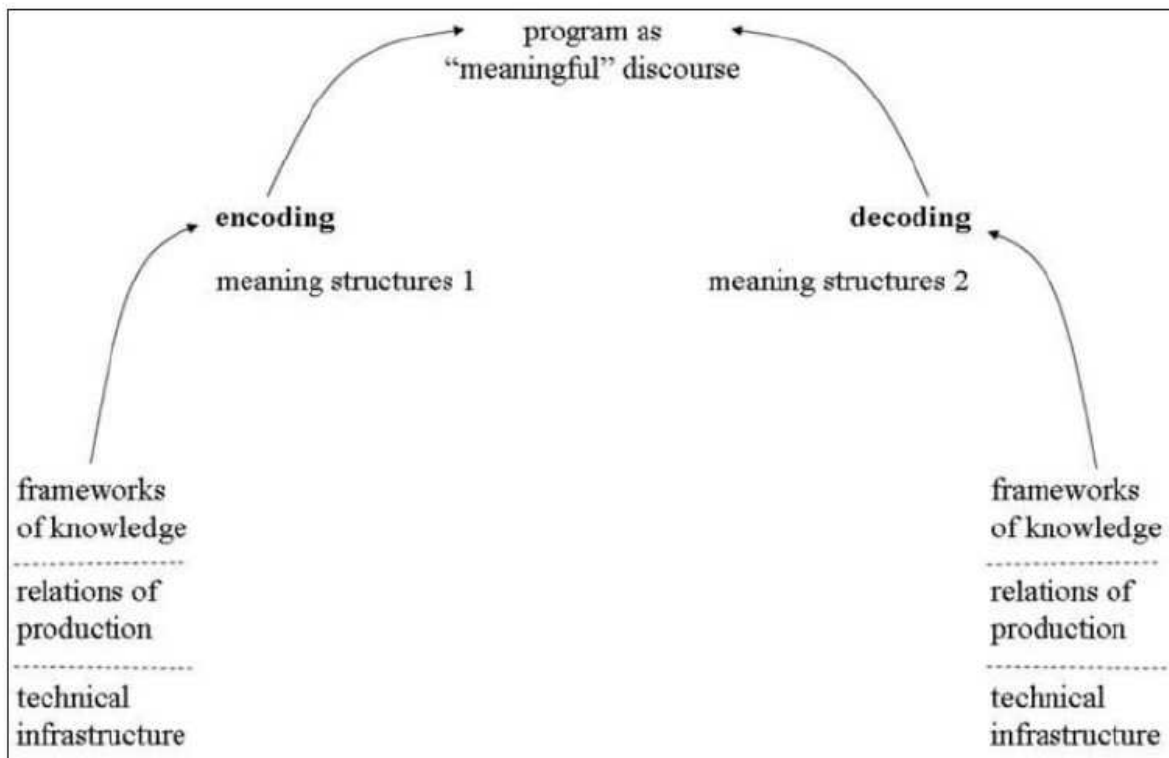
Unlike the Hypodermic needle, where traditionally the media message was viewed as static and unchanging throughout the communication process, Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding theory argues that the

message sent is seldomly the one received, and that the communication is distorted between (Mambrol, 2020).

Hall's theory of encoding/decoding depicts the audience as not only active in their selection of what they are exposed to- but also have the ability to give meaning to the messages they are being given, that may differ from what the sender is intending. Hall's study argues with traditional mass communications theory by stating that (i) meaning is not simply fixed or determined by the sender; (ii) the message is never transparent; and (iii) the audience is not a passive recipient of meaning (Mambrol, 2020). Hall argues that "researchers should direct their attention toward analysis of the social and political context in which content is produced (Encoding) and the consumption of media content (Decoding)" (Hall, 1980).

As depicted in Image 6 below, the message is sent by the "Encoder" i.e in the context of this study, the media, or company. The encoder has their own frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure about the message they are sending. The message is then shared to the mass audience where "meaningful discourse" occurs (Lu, 2021). Meaningful discourse, according to Hall (1980), allows for the message to be understood and decoded by the receiver. It is this set of decoded meanings for the receiver which have an overall effect, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade with complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences (Hall, 1980). Once the receiver decodes the message, their own interpreted message is then received and via the messages "decoding"- issues into the structure of social practices, via the

receivers own frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure (Hall, 1980).



**Image 6 - Hall's Encoding/Decoding theory (Hall, 2003)**

From Hall's study of the Encoding/Decoding theory- he concluded that there are three different decoding positions in which an audience member, or consumer, can receive the message (Lu, 2021).

Under the "dominant-hegemonic code", the audience completely accepts the intended meaning of the producer directly- and in fact decodes it exactly the way it was encoded or produced. The position of the encoder or creator of the message and the audience remain the same, with the audience holding no independent position (Hall, 1980). This can be seen with traditional marketing- which was considered one-way communication.



In the “negotiated code”, the audience receives the message and does not agree nor deny the intended encoding. They accept the seen authority of the dominant ideology in social culture, but are aware of its own interests, thus refuse to accept the intention of the encoder completely (Hall, 1980). An example of this can be seen when a consumer dislikes an influencer, however still follows and watches their content regularly.

In the last decoding position, the “oppositional code” states that the audience understands the intent of the encoder/producer, and what they intend to transmit but chooses themselves to decode it from an oppositional standpoint and therefore assume an oppositional understanding of the message (Hall, 1980). This can be seen in political examples such as Donald Trump’s election campaign with the message “Make America Great Again”. Trump has stated that the message was in reference to the economy, as he wanted to bring the economy back to greatness. However, many Americans decoded the message as “racist” and believed there were underlying meanings to the now famed slogan, putting them in an oppositional stance towards the message (Melton, 2017)

Hall’s theory has been supported throughout the decades by contemporary cultural researchers such as John Fiske (1986) who suggested that in all media *“there are gaps and spaces in the text for the producerly reader to fill in from his or her social experience and construct links between the text and their experience”*. Fiske’s Cultural theory supported and developed the three decoding positions,

and added to them, stating that *'Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry'* (Mambrol, 2020) suggesting that industries cannot create trends, ideas and influence without the participation of the people, or in this case the consumers. This links back to the importance of dual-way communication as discussed previously, and in conclusion shows that people, i.e influencers, appeal and communicate better with people, i.e consumers.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

As shown throughout this literature review, Social media has grown and evolved massively in recent years- and with this became a new evolution of marketing communications. Gen Z consumers are now demanding two-way, co-created communication with brands as advertisements are now taking form on their personal social media news feeds. Although traditional marketing that featured celebrity endorsements were previously popular amongst marketers, the introduction of the digital landscape is now real estate for advertisements.

As mentioned before, Influencing has had a massive impact on the purchase intention of consumers. This is due to the large amount of time that Gen Z consumers spend on social media platforms where they are susceptible to marketing and advertisements that seamlessly blend into their everyday life online. As marketing communications evolved, it is suggested that consumers expect more from brands and influencers. It was found that Gen Z consumers expect brands to

attract them, in forms of dual-communication, co-creation and personalisation. Through the investigation and exploration of the literature in this field, knowledge gaps emerged which then gave four overall objectives of this study, which will be now used to conclude this section.

The first gap to emerge was “engagement” which was found to be important between social media influencers and Gen Z consumers (Prakash, Yadav and Rai, 2017). The importance of engagement is defined within the literature by scholars such as Gambetti et al., (2012), Lou and Yuan (2019) and De Veirman M, Cauberghe V, and Hudders L (2017) - however it is not clear whether engagement expectations differ amongst Gen Z consumers. It is then necessary to explore whether or not engagement is important to all Gen Z consumers, and whether it plays a part in their overall purchase decisions, as suggested by Enginkaya & Esen (2014). This was the basis of objective one of this study: *Assessing the importance of engagement between social media influencers and female Gen Z consumers.*

The second area of interest for consumers to consider before making a purchase was the authenticity and credibility of an influencer. Williams (2020) findings showed that authenticity is shown to positively impact a consumer's perception of an influencer and creates a stronger, more trustworthy relationship that promotes a higher chance of purchase intention. The perception of trust and credibility has also been noted to positively affect the sustainability of the relationship between followers, the influencers, the sales and the

brand (AlFarraj et al., 2021), and therefore an important aspect of this study that we must explore. This was the basis of the second objective of this study: *To examine the impact of influencers authenticity and credibility on female Gen Z consumers in Ireland.*

The third gap that was identified was that of the EWOM marketing having an impact on purchase decisions. With the word of mouth marketing being the most trusted form of marketing communications for decades (File, Cermac and Prince 1994, Sirma, 2009, Gilden, 2003, Ngoma and Ntale, 2019), the development of electronic word of mouth marketing greatly contributed to the success of Influencers, as Influencers are essentially relaying a message from a brand to their viewers/followers (Hu,2015). However, the trustworthiness of EWOM used by influencers can be questioned as it can be manipulated by brands and influencers as a financial gain (Voltolini, 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand how EWOM relates to purchase making by consumers prompting the third objective of this study: *Assessing how impactful influencers EWOM marketing is on Gen Z consumers' purchase intention.*

Finally, the last gap that was identified was the reliability of an influencer's recommendation. As shown throughout this literature review, previous studies (Chen et al, 2004, Foyd, Freling, Alhoqail, Chloe, 2014) have concluded that ratings and reviews do in fact impact consumers' purchasing behaviour and intentions, as well as their attitudes towards certain retailers and types of products in terms of reliability. Purnawirawan, Dens and De Pelsmacker (2012) found

that consumers feel as though online reviews are reliable and more trustworthy than other marketing communications as they are a direct experience of a consumer, however Barker (2018) suggests that Gen Z consumers may be hesitant to form purchase intentions unless friends and peers have bought the product first. Therefore to get a better understanding of what makes a beauty influencers recommendation reliable, our last objective of this study is : *Exploring the reliability of Beauty Influencers recommendations from a female gen z consumers perspective.*

### **3. Research Objectives and Methodology**

### **3.0 Research Objectives**

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of beauty cosmetics Social Media Influencers on Irish Centennial females' purchase intention on the Instagram social media platform. The literature review shown in the previous chapter provides us with a foundation to the overall objectives of this study - a snapshot review would be helpful here (just a sentence or so).

The four objectives listed below were created in line with gaps found in research and areas of interest within the literature.

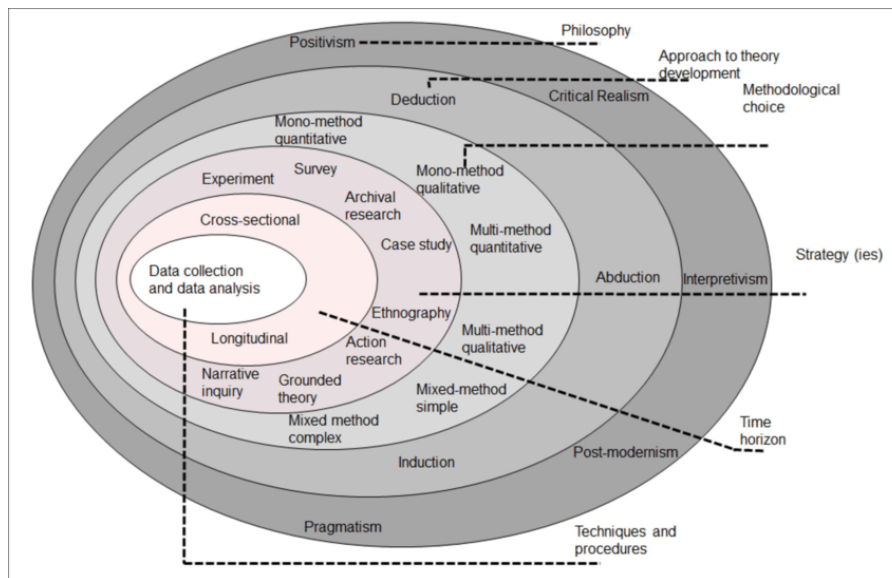
1. Assessing the importance of engagement between social media influencers and female Gen Z consumers.
2. To examine the impact of influencers authenticity and credibility on female Gen Z consumers in Ireland.
3. Assessing how impactful influencers EWOM marketing is on Gen Z consumers purchase intention.
4. Exploring the reliability of Beauty Influencers recommendations from a female gen z consumers perspective.

### **3.1 Methodology introduction**

The methodology chapter will describe the methods that will be used in gathering and analysing the data for this study. A justification of the method and design will also be provided. Topics of discussion will include the limitations and ethical consideration of this study. The primary objective of this study is to consider and address the impact of influencers EWOM marketing on Gen Z consumers

### 3.2 Layer One: Research Perspective

**Image 4 - Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill “Research Onion” (2019)**



For this study, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill’s (2019) Research Onion (Image 4) will be utilised to underline academic rigour and best practice. The Research Onion outlines the importance of identifying the correct and valid research perspective. This strengthens the prospect of this dissertation and its contribution to the business and marketing practice theory (Opoku, Ahmed and Akotia, 2016).

A research perspective or research “paradigm” can be defined as *“school of thought, or set of shared beliefs, that informs the meaning or interpretation of research data ”* (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Saunders et al (2012) defines research as a process by which individuals attempt to learn things in a systematic way in order to increase their knowledge and understand or answer hypotheses within an area of study. Johnson and Clark (2003) state that business and management researchers need to be aware of the philosophical commitments we make through our choices of research strategy as this will have a significant impact on what we do and how we understand what it is we are investigating. Saunders et al (2019) also discusses that there is no ideal philosophical perspective for a business research strategy - however there may be suitable philosophical approaches in a particular area of study.

To begin, the perspective of the research or the research paradigm should be decided upon *“as this results in the overall view, the methodology used and eventually, the outcomes of a particular study”* (Saunders et al, 2019) . Lincoln and Guba (1985) conclude that a paradigm comprises four elements: epistemology, ontology, methodology and axiology. Having a firm understanding of these four key elements is of importance as they comprise assumptions, beliefs, norms and values that each paradigm holds- however Saunders et al. (2019) puts an emphasis on epistemology and ontology for the field of business and management. Scotland (2019) defines ontology as *“ a branch of philosophy concerned with the assumptions we make in order to believe that something makes sense or is real, or the very nature or essence of the social phenomenon we are investigating”*. It



is the philosophical study of the nature of reality or existence, of being or becoming, as well as the basic categories of things that exist and their relations (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Epistemology however refers to the study of the nature of knowledge and justification and how we can relay that knowledge to others (Schwandt, 1997, Burrell and Morgan 2016). This study's research will take the "Epistemology" perspective as the researcher answers the question of whether or not influencer EWOM marketing has an impact on purchase decisions. Interviews will be conducted in order to gather information and "acceptable knowledge" through qualitative in-depth interviews (McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl, 2018).

Epistemology has two main approaches: "Positivist" and "Interpretivist". The positivist approach is the focus on the importance of what is given in general, with a stern focus to consider pure data as well as facts without being influenced by interpretation and bias from humans (Saunders et al, 2019). On the other hand, "Interpretivist" or Interpretivism is more concerned with in depth variables and factors related a context, it considers humans as different from physical phenomena as they create further depth in meanings with the assumption that human beings cannot be explored (Alharahsheh et al. (2019). The interpretive paradigm is used when recognizing and narrating the meaning of human experiences and actions (Fossey et al., 2002) and researchers using this method usually carry out one to one interviews or focus groups as a way of gathering knowledge which can later help with the study. This way of gathering data fits best for the study of how Influencers eWOM marketing impacts consumers purchase intention within the beauty industry, as it allows the

interviewee to give opinions and expand on their own personal experiences (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017), which allows for a well-rounded study of the current lifestyle, beliefs and opinion of Gen Z consumers on social media.

As seen in Image 4 above, the “Research Onion” created by Saunders et al (2019) depicts the first layer as “Research philosophy” which has five variations of philosophy: Positivism, Critical Realism, Postmodernism, Pragmatism and Interpretism. As a researcher it is critical to choose a philosophy as it can outline the focus and objectives for the study and then the creation of knowledge. Walshaw (2012) highlights that it is important to develop frameworks, models and concepts to assist the understanding of the world, or at least the individuals’ view of it. Whilst Saunders et al. (2019) focuses on four philosophies, other scholars such as Melnikovas, (2018) and Quinlan, (2011) have expanded on Saunders’s research onion, with Quinlan, (2011) adding nine additional philosophies: Construtivism, Feminism, Post-modernism, Hermeneutics, Functionalism, Critical theory, Post-structuralism, Symbolic interactionism and Structuralism.

The objective of this study is to gain a better understanding of the mind of Centennial Irish females seeking cosmetic/beauty recommendations and the effects that social media influencers have on their resultant purchase intention. Studies such as Barker (2018), Tumsah (2021) and Voltolini (2019) have all shown that consumers have many subjective opinions about the beauty industry and power of influencers on the female irish consumer. The most suited philosophy to adapt is the Interpretive as it allows for the researcher to design set

questions for the participants on the interview, but allow for them to discuss their own experiences from their own cultural and societal backgrounds (Saunders et al. 2019). However, Jacobson, Guartz and Haydon, (2016) shows in their study of Interpretive research that it does have drawbacks as the researcher can be seen as the “research instrument”, as they create the questions and interpret the answers- at times unknowingly becoming biased due to personal experiences or opinions. However, scholars such as Galadas (2017) and Morse et al (2002) *“generally agree that considering concepts such as rigour and trustworthiness are more pertinent to the reflexive, subjective nature of qualitative research.”*. Thus, it is important that throughout this research it is important to note that the work is conducted in a non-biased manner. In order to be unbiased, the researcher will conduct a “Prebrief ” (Collins et al., 2006) where participants are given an introduction to the study, the goals of the interview and an explanation of the process. The researcher will also carry out a “de-brief” where participants are walked back through the interview in order to ensure all data collected reflects their personal opinions, feelings and experiences in accordance with Leech et al., (2008). Although the work will be subjective, as all participants will have their own experiences and opinions on the impact of social media on their purchase intentions, this study will capture more than just data, but will interpret the current view of Gen Z’s engagement with influencers online. The next section below will outline how the researcher hopes to conduct this research and strategies that will be used.

### **3.3 Layer Two : Research Approaches**

In research there are two approaches that can be taken: *Deductive* and *Inductive* reasoning. Deductive reasoning can be described as "*a basic form of valid reasoning. Deductive reasoning, or deduction, starts with a general statement or hypothesis, and examines the possibilities to reach a specific, logical conclusion*"(Bradford, 2017). Deductive reasoning is often used in scientific research, and the theoretical position of the researcher is clear, where a hypothesis is set after a gap in the literature is identified and is then tested. The deductive method usually has large samples and uses the quantitative method of research (Saunders et al, 2019). The opposite is Inductive reasoning, which uses smaller samples and uses the qualitative method (Saunders et al, 2019). Using inductive reasoning, the theory within that field of research is considered; however , it seeks to build a new found theory with the gathering and interpretation of data without the theoretical approach defined. Within the research theory field, there are contrasting opinions on which technique produces the richer data however Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) suggest that both qualitative research and quantitative research address the same elements in the research process. The differences arise due to the way that the researchers implement each step (Soiferman, 2010). The research being conducted can be considered inductive and the goal is to build new theory around the area of the impact of EWOM marketing on Gen Z consumers, using interviews as a form of qualitative data collection and approaching it with an interpretive goal (Saunders et al, 2019).

### **3.4 Layer Three: Research Strategies**

### **3.4.1 Qualitative Research Approach**

The type of research approach chosen for a study dictates the strategy and instruments an interviewer may use for the study (Saunders et al. 2019). Qualitative research has been defined as “*the study of the nature of phenomena and is especially appropriate for answering questions of why something is (not) observed, assessing complex multi-component interventions, and focussing on intervention improvement*” (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020). In correlation with this, Aspers and Corte (2019) define it as an “*iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied*” (Aspers and Corte, 2019). Recent studies in the areas of Social media (Yousif, Khan, Al Jaradi and Alshibli, 2021), EWOM marketing (Verma and Yadav, 2021) and purchase intention (Majeed, Owusu-Ansah and Ashmond, 2021) have used the Quantitative method of research which includes data collection from surveys and observation. Whilst quantitative data collection represents a large sample with data and figures, qualitative data collection - it can be limiting as questions are generally yes/no, whilst qualitative data “*can be approached by assessing complex multi-component interventions or systems (of change), addressing questions beyond “what works”, towards “what works for whom when, how and why”*” (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020). Few Irish studies have been completed on Gen Z consumers and their thoughts on social media influencers having an impact on their purchase intentions which leaves the field understudied, However Barker (2018) and Voltolini (2019) investigated the impact of

influencers on millennials within the beauty industry. Due to this, completing quantitative research would limit what the researcher can ask, and the complexity of social media and the psychology of the Gen Z consumers may only be represented in numbers and statistics. *“Researchers who do not know how specific words and actions are understood in sociocultural contexts of their research domain may ask the wrong questions or misinterpret the respondents answers in questionnaires”* (Kelle, 2006). This study will use the qualitative research method to collect data in order to gain a broader understanding of the sample (Gen Z's) approach to beauty recommendations, their views on authenticity of influencers and any other thoughts and feelings they have that would impact their purchase intention on beauty products. From this study, a quantitative study may be conducted in the future.

Qualitative data is a popular choice among researchers when studying the consumer as it allows us to gain a better understanding of the consumer's mind processes, thoughts, opinions and beliefs- direct from source (Aspers and Corte, 2019). An example of this is Hjetland et al. (2021) study of Social media in regards to mental health, in which eleven participants took part in focus groups. This qualitative approach is considered “natural” when compared to the quantitative approach which is considered “scientific” (Daniel, 2016). The information gathered during the interviews or focus groups when using qualitative research can be gathered and analysed, with the findings then being presented that provide insight into the sample's feeling towards a subject, as said in their own words (Saunders et al, 2019) This extends the insight beyond restrictive parameters that may

be set by heavily structured and prefabricated surveys or questionnaires.

With any research method, considering drawbacks is essential to consider so that measures can be taken to prevent the study from being affected. As stated above, qualitative data collection is from a small sample - thus leaving it difficult to represent a generalisation of a population (Rahman, 2016). Although this drawback allows for only a small sample size, the studies of current Gen Z consumers in Ireland is limited - and therefore this study will be an exploratory introduction allowing for consumers to express with their words how they feel about the topic using qualitative research method which will provide a deep understanding of a Gen Z consumer and their opinions on social media influencers. Scholars such as Hall & Harvey (2018) and Anderson (2010) agree that qualitative research allows for better insights and experiences from the participant. The research given from this study will allow for future quantitative studies on the topic.

### **3.4.2 Research Strategy**

An interpretivist perspective along with an inductive approach using qualitative methods and small sample sizes provides richer research data than quantitative methods with larger samples according to Saunders et al (2019) and Vasileiou et al. (2018). Therefore, a qualitative method using small samples and in-depth interviews was chosen by the researcher for this study. Other methods of qualitative research were considered for this study, such as focus groups and case studies however the researcher decided on in-depth interviews as it allows the participants “a more relaxed atmosphere in which to collect information” which “provides much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys.” (Boyce and Neale, 2006). However other scholars such as Leung and Savithiri (2009) suggest that using focus groups can initiate group discussion around a topic which allows for interaction among participants and hear other opinions and thoughts that allows for participants to come to their own conclusions on the particular topic. However the researcher must understand the group power which may lead to group thought that makes participants agree with the group rather than standing with their genuine opinion and thoughts (Ayrton, 2019, Farnsworth and Boon, 2010). Although it has been suggested that influence and power by the researcher can take place within in-depth interviews (Anyan, 2015), it is easier to resolve this issue on a one-to-one basis, rather than during a group process (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). Whilst face-to face interviews have its advantages in terms of data quality, it also carries the risk that the interviewer will influence the respondent’s behaviour (Kreuter, 2008) therefore disrupting and altering the data. however the steps to prevent that bias have already been disclosed previously. The nature



of this research is to find Gen Z's honest opinions, thoughts and reflections on their use of social media, and therefore the researcher chose in-depth, face-to-face interviews as their chosen methodology as it was considered the best suited option for the research to be carried out.

Saunders et al (2019) states that Inductive research is used to discover evident themes and patterns associated with a certain phenomenon. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to collect information, analyse interview data collected, and then formulate conceptual framework (Saunders et al. 2019). Using unstructured or semi-structured, in-depth interviews have five stages according to Ritchie and Lewis (2003). First, the arrival of the participant- where relationships are established. Second, an introduction to the research where consent is given and the study is explained. Third, the interview begins and contextual information is discussed such as the participants age, gender, field of study/job etc. Fourth stage is the interview itself, where the researcher guides the participant through questions, allowing the participant to go in-depth and follow up questions. The fifth step for the participant is being asked for any further comments or feelings about what was discussed during the interview. And lastly, the sixth step for the researcher is to thank the participant and let them know how their help has impacted the research and ensure they are "well" before goodbyes (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Qualitative open-ended interviews that are unstructured in nature are methodologically well-established tools of social scientific data collection (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). However it is vital for the researcher to interpret the data correctly and organise to bring meaning to the data collected "This

*interpretation procedure not only examines how interactions and framings in interview situations constitute meanings but also reconstructs regularities by identifying recurring discursive practices within interviews" (Philipps and Mrowczynski, 2019).* Using the method of in-depth interviews does have advantages and disadvantages, and will be explored within the next two sections.

### **3.4.3 Advantages of in-depth interviews**

Two major advantages of in-depth interviews are time and dual exploration, as concluded by Brenner, Brown and Canter (1985) and supported by Diccio-Bloom and Crabree (2006).

#### **Time**

According to Diccico-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), semi-structured interviews can last anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours to complete- however in-depth one to one interviews that are conducted generally take less time as the topic can be explored in a short-space of time in comparison to focus groups, as the participant only speaks on behalf of themselves (Brenner et al, 1985).

#### **Dual exploration**

In a case where individual in-depth interviews are chosen as the method of data collection, the researcher guides the interview along; however, the participant can also open new pathways of discussion through their own experiences (Diccio-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). This “Dual exploration” can be probed by the interviewer by asking more in depth questions about a topic that has been brought up that the researcher believes is relevant and noteworthy. The one-to-one communication that individual in-depth interviews brings to a study provides clarity to the subject, and detailed information can be gathered for the study- allowing for misinterpreted mistakes can be identified and corrected immediately- unlike with the case of focus groups that can lead participants into a new narrative, which may be difficult for the researcher to control the conversation (Brenner et al, 1985). However, according to Oppdenacker (2006) the researcher must ensure *"that you must be both listening to the informant's responses to understand what he or she is trying to get at and, at the same time, you must be bearing in mind your needs to ensure that all your questions are liable to get answered within the fixed time at the level of depth and detail that you need"*. Therefore, dual-communication must be monitored in order to ensure that data is collected in due time.

### **3.4.4 Disadvantages of in-depth interviews.**

As with any research strategy conducted, there are disadvantages to using in-depth interviews as a method of collecting data. Boyce and Neale (2006) highlight two disadvantages in their study of in depth interviews: “*Prone to Bias*” and “*Not Generalizable*”.

#### **Prone to Bias**

In some cases of research, a researcher may have an objective set in their head as to what hypothesis they want to prove and may be subject to bias during an interview in order to sway the data collected toward their own end goal- rather than allow for the participant to openly discuss their own experiences. Saunders et al (2019) also discusses researcher bias and states that “*a researcher may allow her or his own subjective view or disposition to get in the way of fairly and accurately recording and interpreting participants’ responses*”. In order to prevent this, the interviewer or researcher must ensure that “*every effort is made to design a data collection effort, create instruments, and conduct interviews to allow for minimal bias*” (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Efforts during this study to conduct interviews in a fair and unbiased manner included note-taking during the interview, to ensure all information that was interpreted was thoughts and reflections during the interview itself, and also a consensual recording to reflect the participants exact words that could be later transcribed. The interview itself was also guided by a thematic question guide to allow for structure and guidance- and prevented influence from the researcher. It is also important to note that as a researcher, you must understand the role during the process- but also when interpreting the data collected as “*Without such*

*awareness, it is easy to slip into interpreting other people's narratives from your own viewpoint, rather than that of the participants.*" (Sutton and Austin, 2015). Keeping this in mind, the researcher ensured that the process of interpreting the data was true to reflecting the data collected during the interviews.

### **Not Generalizable**

During their research, Boyce and Neale (2006) found that generalisations about the results of in-depth interviews are inconclusive due to the utilisation of small samples and non random sampling methods. It should be noted however that they also found that the general rule of sample size for interviews is that when the same stories, themes, issues and topics are emerging from participants then a sufficient sample size has been reached. In order to reach a general consensus, the researcher aimed to have a range of different backgrounds, ethnicities and level of social media usages, as well as age range of Gen Z consumers (18-25) that was still in line with NCI's ethical form of data collection, in order to reach a broad range of subjects whilst still collecting data-rich information from in-depth interviews. The researcher would also like to point out that there is no attempt by the researcher within this study to generalise the findings of this study. *"Qualitative research is used to gain insights into people's feelings and thoughts, which may provide the basis for a future stand-alone qualitative study or may help researchers to map out survey instruments for use in a quantitative study."* (Sutton and Austin, 2015)

### **3.4.5 Interview structure**

Semi structured interviews, unlike that of structured interviews, allow both the researcher and participant to dually explore the topic at hand (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However it is possible to “*depart from the planned itinerary during the interview because digressions can be very productive as they follow the interviewee’s interest and knowledge*” (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The relaxed atmosphere allows the researcher to delve deeper into the understanding of the participants viewpoint, opinions and feelings as they become recognisable during the interview (Saunders et al. 2019). There are some critiques on semi-structured interviews from scholars such as Brekawell, Hammond and Fife-Shaw (1995) which conclude that weaknesses for semi-structured interviews lie in their inflexibility which leaves little room for “unanticipated discoveries”. They also require large amounts of planning of questions- and the quality of these questions will ultimately reflect on the quality of data.

Based on the themes of influencers EWOM marketing strategies on consumers purchase intention throughout the interview, semi-structured interviews were chosen to explore this theme as it is a case of individuals' opinions and thought process. The freedom of allowing for topics to emerge from the participants thoughts allow the researcher to take on the perspective of the participant and then build an understanding from the information processed (Saunders et al, 2019.)

### **3.4.6 Interview Techniques**

During the interview, the researcher used visual methodology in order to gain the best insight into the world of social media from the consumers point of view. Visual methodologies are used to understand and interpret images (Barbour, 2014), and with the photo-sharing platform "Instagram" being chosen for this study- visual aid is an effective and acceptable method for qualitative research and is becoming more widely used in multiple disciplines (Pain, 2012). The participant was given 5 A4 size sheets of paper, each with a screenshot of an Influencers Instagram post. The participant was then asked to identify what they believed was an advertisement, endorsement or sponsored post, and what was a non-paid/regular post. The interviewer was then asked how their purchase intention would be affected if the post was endorsed by a company. Glaw et al, (2017) notes that this approach allowed for participants to be "experts' ' in their own lives, encouraged empowerment and allowed for dual-communication and collaboration between both the researcher and participant. By using visual methodology, it facilitates and enriches the communication and furthermore enhances the data-creating a different kind of data when compared to verbal methods alone (Pain, 2012).

### **3.4.7 Sample**

Correct sampling is of the utmost importance whilst conducting qualitative research (Saunders et al, 2019) in order to have a broader scope of research. A study that has cogent representation of target groups within its sample, gives the study's credibility and validity (Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott and Davidson, 2002). In order to gather data that represents the generation discussed in the Lit. review, the

chosen participants for the interview must rigorously resemble and represent them appropriately, and time was given in order to choose the right sample for this study.

Gen Z consumers aged between 18-25 (Dobrowolski, Drozdowski and Panait, 2022) were the selected target group for this study. Gen Z's age range as of 2022 is 10-25, however the researcher has decided that due to the age of consent for those under 18 to require parental consent and guidance in Ireland when participating in research (Child participation in research, 2022), it is of ethical belief that the sample Gen Z consumers aged 18-25 will be more suited to the study.

As previously discussed in the Literature review, Gen Z responded positively with influencers on social media, with 97.1% of those surveyed saying they follow at least one influencer, in comparison to 52% of millennials (The Financial Express, 2022). According to a study done by Statista in 2019, 84% of sponsored content created using the Instagram platform was done by Female influencers (Statista, 2022) thus the researcher for this study chose female gen z consumers, as this was the market identified as the most applicable to the study. The choice of focusing on the beauty industry on Instagram was chosen as the beauty industry is one of the fastest growing industries on social media , with the #Beauty dominates the platform, having over 490 million entries (Schwarz, 2022). It is also important to note that international, well established beauty brands are also using social media as a tool for advertising- with brands such as Estee Lauder spending 75% of its marketing budget on collaborations with social media influencers (Schwarz, 2022).



Within sampling there are Probability Sampling and Non-Probability sampling. In probability sampling each sample has an equal probability of being chosen. Therefore, a probability sample is one in which each element of the population has a known non-zero probability of selection (Showcat and Parveen, 2017). However in non-probability sampling, participants are not chosen randomly and therefore it is suggested that the sample cannot be generalised to a whole population. Although the researcher cannot generalise, they can ensure that participants meet a desired criteria for the study. Non-probability sampling was chosen for this study as Sanders et al. (2019) suggests that it is best for qualitative studies. The chosen form of non-probability sampling was purposive sampling which can be described as a technique that identifies and selects information-rich participants for the most effective uses of limited resources (Patton, 2002). Although scholars such as Bryman and Bell (2011) suggest that “quota sampling” is held in high regard amongst researchers using non-probability sampling- the researcher of this study came to the conclusion that “Snowball Sampling” was a suitable choice for this piece of work.

Saunders et al. (2019) defines snowball sampling as “a procedure in which subsequent respondents are obtained from information provided by initial respondents”. This sampling technique was used to meet particular criteria that this study had, and allowed the researcher to distinguish and identify female gen z consumers who actively use social media for purchases. The researcher announced the study on her own Instagram social media, seeking out female Gen Z consumers

interested in taking part in this study. From this, the researcher was contacted by 24 people through email and Instagram direct messages, of which participants for this study were then chosen based on the following criteria:

- **Age:** The participants for this study must come under the “Gen Z” generation, of those born between 1997-2012 (aged 9-24). Due to ethical guidelines, the researcher excluded respondents under the age of 18 and therefore participants aged 18-24 were contacted. The researcher ensured that there were a mix of ages selected for the study within these limitations.
- **Gender:** The researcher ensured that all participants identified as female in order to correctly represent the gender choice for this study.
- **Nationality:** Participants must be Irish in order to represent an Irish consumer.
- **Interests:** The participants must have an interest in the beauty industry and use social media in order to reflect the target group of Gen Z who have an interest and are knowledgeable around this topic.

### **3.4.8 Theoretical saturation**

When conducting an in-depth interview it is important for the researcher to consider the studies objectives, chosen research instrument when selecting the size of the sample and the limitations (Riley et al., 2000). Whilst conducting the interview, the researcher of this paper continued to interview until the discussed information being produced was an adequate level, and theoretical saturation occurred (Saunders et al., 2019). Theoretical saturation can be described as “*the point at which ‘additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes’* (Given, 2006) The researcher took an inductive thematic saturation approach, where she interviewed respondents until no new information or themes emerged in relation to social media influencers and gen z’s purchase intention considerations. However Saunders (2019) opposes the use of theoretical saturation as he believes that it does not give a definitive number for a suggested sample size. Saunders recommends between five to ten subjects for a semi-structured/in-depth interview, and therefore after theoretical saturation was accomplished, seven participants were chosen for this study. The table of candidates can be found in Appendix 2.

### 3.5 Layer Four: Research Method

The fourth layer of the Research Onion by Saunders (2019) describes the research method. Identified are three types of methods: the Mono-method, Mixed-method and the Multi-method. Quinlan (2011) critiques the mixed method, as each method is “*philosophically different*” and therefore the differences are missed when mixed together. However Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017) advises that when using the method correctly, quantitative and qualitative data answer different questions, gathering more data. They conclude that qualitative collection allows for the exploration and discussion of the topic through the participants' own words, whilst quantitative collection can add to, and generalise, through the testing of hypotheses. Saunders et al., (2019) suggests that by using both- the researcher may avoid weaknesses that come with each method. It is also important to note the findings of Lavelle, Buk and Barber (2013) who state that the use of the mixed methods approach does not make a study robust.

With limited resources and a strict time frame available for the researcher, the preferred choice of mixed methods for this study was unattainable. Therefore a mono-method was better suited due to these restrictions. Azorin and Cameron (2010) define the mono-method as a “*study uses only one type of method, one quantitative or one*

*qualitative.*”. Therefore the researcher chose Qualitative data as her chosen method, and in-depth interviews as her data collection technique. In-depth interviews have been used in previous studies around this topic such as Barker (2018) and Voltoloni (2019) to help understand the thoughts and feelings of respondents. Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020) suggests that using one method of research may limit researchers findings, therefore the researcher of this study believes that perhaps a Phd study could bring further information to the topic using a mix-method approach.

### **3.6 Layer Five: Time Horizons**

This layer of the research online deals with time horizons. According to Saunders (2019), time horizons are cross-sectional or longitudinal. When exploring a phenomenon a cross-sectional study looks at a phenomenon at one particular time and collects the data only once. A longitudinal study collects the data over an extended period of time, and more than once (Institute for Work and health, 2019). Due to the constraints of this study, a cross-sectional study was best suited for this paper. The researcher collected the data over a time of two weeks during July 2022, with the data collection only being made with each interview on one occasion.

### **3.7 Layer Six: Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The final layer of the research onions looks at data collection and data analysis of the study being conducted. Referring back to our layer

three section, the researcher has undertaken a qualitative approach to this study, and therefore the collection and analysis of this data that had been discovered through the in-depth interview process was important to the study.

### **3.7.1 Data Collection**

According to Palmer (2019), interviews can be held and hosted in any suitable location, including a suitable online network. The researcher used both a private office space, and the use of Apple's Facetime in order to conduct the interviews. The private office space in an accessible Dublin location suited local participants who lived or worked nearby and provided a quiet, comfortable environment-ensuring comfort for all face-to-face participants. The use of Apple's Facetime application was used for participants who could not attend face-to-face interviews, and Microsoft's dictation was used to take notes. All interviews conducted were arranged at a suitable time for the participants. The interviews were held over a two week period in mid-July 2022 and lasted between 45 minutes to an hour.

In order to avoid any bias, the questions were created to be succinct and unambiguous, with an open-ended nature to allow participants to explore topics of interest. The questions proposed in the in-depth interviews were derived and written to further the studies of previous scholars such as Barker (2018) and Volotinin (2019) to ensure the reliability and validity of the questions.

In order to feed participants into a suitable level of discussion, a thematic question was created which took the themes of previous literature explored within the literature review, and questions that

could further the study within the field. The topics covered within the interview were Advertising on social media, EWOM marketing, Influencers, Authenticity and credibility, Engagement, Purchase intention and reliability of influencers. An example of this thematic guide used within this study can be found in Appendix One.

Descriptive validity is crucial for qualitative studies (Leung, 2015), and therefore the researcher took notes during all interviews to ensure any expression, reaction and thought could be noted for. Descriptive validity can be defined as what the researcher reports having seen or heard (or touched, smelled, and so on.) (Maxwell, 1992). To ensure descriptive validity had been reached, all participants consented to being audio recorded for use in this research, using Microsoft teams as a tool to store the data. The researcher ensured that all recordings and data that was to be collected would be destroyed after the study was completed and findings had been reached. All online recordings would be deleted, and any paper manuscripts or transcripts would be paper shredded.

### **3.7.2 Data analysis**

A grounded approach was taken to analyse the data. This approach is considered appropriate when there is little known about a phenomenon. The aim is to produce or construct an explanatory theory that uncovers a process inherent to the substantive area of inquiry (Glaser, 1976). This applies to this study which is inductive in nature. Therefore the data analysis of this particular research aims to develop theory within the information that is collected.

A thematic approach is one type of grounded theory, and was applied to this study, Analysis can be conducted under any philosophical approach (inductive or deductive) as Saunders et al. (2019) suggests that it is a stand-alone analytical technique. Thematic analysis is chosen where there is disorganised qualitative data, and researchers seek to find relationships within the words of the subjects (Saunders et al., 2019). Using this approach, all interviews are transcribed, studied, key phrases are highlighted and ideas or concepts become apparent. According to Saunders et al., (2019), codes can become “apparent” or “recognised” in three ways: participants own words, collection of data that the researcher identifies and labels, or terms found in related theory and literature.

Scholars such as Braun and Clarke (2006) use both data-driven and theory-driven data, however this study was inductive in nature and therefore the researcher decided to focus on developing theory. The researcher allowed themes to evolve from the data collection process rather than from just the literature. Known as “Open coding” by Quinlan (2011)- the data collection allowed for initial codes to be identified and put into categories. The researcher used the theoretical saturation process as she added to themes during the interview/data collection process until either category was developed or “saturated” (Given, 2006). After this, “Axial Coding” was then used to find a relationship between the codes. Once relationships were identified, “Selective coding” was then used to where codes were integrated based on the similarities or relationships formed which then produced the overall themes of this study (Saunders et al., 2019). Once the process



was ended, the research had clarified themes from the qualitative narrative of the interviews conducted to then build theory around the purchase intention of consumers and their relationship with social media influencers. Lastly, the themes were then put into comparison with the literature to add interpretation and produce a valuable discussion that is relevant around the topic.

### **3.7.3 Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the research process the researcher ensured that National College of Ireland's "Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research Involving Human Participants" were adhered to. An ethical review application was submitted for the proposal submission for this study, and was accepted following these guidelines.

### **3.7.4 Voluntary Participation and Confidentiality**

The purpose of the interview and study was explained to each participant before the interview was conducted to ensure that they understood the purpose of the study. Each participant chosen for the study also read and filled out a consent form to ensure they understood the purpose of the interview, and that they give consent to their information being used for the study, and the recordings to take place (Byrne, 2001). All candidates were also informed that the content of the interview was used for the purpose of the research MSC's dissertation, however anonymity was also an option for participants (Wiles, 2013). All participants gave permission for their identities to be disclosed, however for clarity to the reader of this paper, we will identify the subjects as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2 etc.

### **3.7.5 Limitations**

Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) state that “Study limitations represent weaknesses within a research design that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the research.”. As with many research studies, two main limitations were identified:

- Firstly, the researcher suggests that in-depth interviews allowed for the topic at hand to be discussed on a personal level, however data collected cannot be generalised due to the limitations of using qualitative research. However, if another form of qualitative data collecting had been used, such as focus groups, the data collected would complement the findings and provide richer data for the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). However as previously stated, time constraints allowed for only one option. A group interview conducted as a focus group would have allowed interaction among subjects that would allow them to listen to other opinions, and then consider and evaluate their own thoughts which may have produced finer data.
- Secondly, whilst the topics of Social media influencers and their EWOM marketing strategies have been studied by other scholars within this field such as Barker (2018) and Voltolini (2019)- a longitudinal study may have given a greater insight into Gen Z’s experiences with new marketing communications having an impact on their purchases and their relationship evolution with influencers. However, time constraints made this impossible and therefore it

would be more suited to a larger study such as a PhD to build a greater understanding of the development and evolution of these relationships over a period of time.

## **4. Findings, Analysis and Discussion**

The purpose of this chapter is to show an analysis and discuss the main findings which were identified during the in-depth interviews conducted as a part of the study. By investigating and exploring the opinions, feelings and thoughts of Gen Z Irish females, themes emerged that were common amongst participants. This section will show each theme and any significant direct quotations from the interviews, with the aim of addressing the study's goals, exploring whether or not Influencer eWOM marketing impacts consumers' purchase intention within the beauty industry.

### **4.0 Research Objective 1**

#### **Research objective 2:**

Assessing the importance of engagement between social media influencers and female Gen Z consumers.

#### **Interview themes:**

- Life online
- Educational purposes
- Engagement

### 4.0.1 Life Online

The interviews were conducted with seven participants for the data collection process. Seven out of the Seven participants interviewed for this study agreed that they use social media everyday, multiple times a day. Their usage habits can be seen within the comments below.

**Interviewee A:** “It's probably for quite some time during the day, as I dip in and out, so probably for a couple of hours”

**Interviewee B:** “Over the course of the day, I would say a few hours”

**Interviewee G:** “Between 3-4 hours on and off I would say”

These findings corroborate Mohr and Mohr (2017) findings that Gen Z online consumer behaviour can be considered “All-day”- as all participants interviewed agree that they use it every day. It also supports Statista 2022’s findings that 50% of Gen Z population use social media at least once a day. Participants were then asked what platforms they use daily- and why they use them specific platforms. All participants stated that they use Instagram and TikTok the most out of all other social media platforms, as they believed the content was better on the apps and they were easily accessible.

**Interviewee F :** “I enjoy the layout of Instagram, how easy it is to use and I like the content that is on it”

**Interviewee D:** “I use instagram to see my friends, follow influencers- and then I'd use Tiktok as a platform for entertainment and to get ideas, tutorials. I strayed away from Twitter as I felt that there was little visual content on there, compared to other social media sites.”

**Interviewee A:** “I like the constant, but short, reels on instagram that are quick and informative whilst still keeping me entertained (...) I don't have to wait for ages to get to the point. I would prefer reels over an ordinary post.”

Vuleta (2022) found that Instagram and TikTok were on the rise for younger users as they preferences visual content over written content, which was validated during these interviews. Dahlhoff (2016) also states that online platforms, such as Instagram, enable compelling visual stories to be built and facilitate engagement through visual features- which was apparent during these interviews also, and is suggested in this study to be what entices the users to the platform. However, contrasting Dolan and Rashidirad (2021) statement that “Facebook and Instagram are the two most popular social media platforms- not one participant mentioned facebook as a platform that they use daily.

#### **4.0.2 Educational purposes**

Leading from the discussion of their life online, social media usage and platform choices, participants were then asked about social media influences (SMI's). All participants followed influencers with a beauty niche: such as beauty gurus, makeup artists, hairstylists and nail

technicians. Participants were then asked why they follow social media influencers, and made comments as follows:

**Interviewee A:** “I follow them for their makeup tutorials...I feel like if I look at them and see what they're doing, that, It can become what i’m doing”

**Interviewee E:** “I see my peers following them and so I gravitate towards them, and then I get onto their pages and I like their content and I’ll listen to what they kind of, have to offer”

**Interviewee F :** “For their tips and advice”

**Interviewee C :** “Their expertise and their recommendations... I like seeing them do their makeup and hair so I can learn.”

These comments suggested that Gen Z consumers had an interest in social media influencers within the beauty industry, as they were using them for educational purposes. This supports De Jans et al., (2019) conclusion that influencers can be considered “sociological influences” as they give direct advice to their followers on what products they should or should not use. By following advice, tips and tutorials by beauty influencers, Gen Z consumers are more likely to engage by liking, sharing or saving the content (Vivaldo, 2019).

### **4.0.3 Engagement**

In order to delve further into the importance of engagement between social media influencers and Gen Z consumers, participants were asked open-ended questions about their use of social media and how they interact with influencers online. 5 out of 7 participants said that they actively follow, share, comment and like social media content produced by influencers and this would have an impact on who they would trust to purchase from. However 2 out of the 7 participants said they don't really interact with influencers and they see them as advertisements, who they can choose to pay attention to-or not.

**Interviewee F:** “I see influencers as advertisements on my newsfeed. If something catches my eye- i’ll view the product- not necessarily the post itself (...) I wouldn’t say I’d interact with the post or influencer if i’m honest”

**Interviewee E:** “I don’t view influencers in the same category as my friends or family, which is one of the main reasons I use social media... to interact with them. So no- I wouldn’t say I actively interact with them- or expect them to interact with me”

Linnes and Metcalf (2017) pointed out in their study that Gen Z consumers are tech savvy and knowledgeable, and are not easily swayed by clever marketing techniques. Participants F and E did follow influencers actively, but more so for their content, rather than to follow them as a person. However other participants in this study found that engaging with influencers prompted them to form relationships with them, which may have impacted their purchase intentions.

**Interviewee C:** “I interact with influencers more on the Instagram platform (...) it just seems more personal. It’s easy to like and save posts. Where as TikTok is kind of “all over the place” and you’re introduced to new people every time you log onto the “For You” page”

**Interviewee A:** “I feel as though the more an influencer interacts with me, the more interest I have in what they’re doing, what they’re saying and what they’re promoting- and therefore I also engage and respond to them”

**Interviewee G:** “I ended up buying Ellie Kelly’s lip glosses, and a concealer she recommended as I trusted her opinion from watching and interacting with her for so many years”

From these comments, we see that the participants feel as though engagement can be considered a personal attribute between followers and influencers. It also shows that more engagement between influencers and their audience, leads to a higher chance of interaction including liking/saving/commenting, and purchasing. These findings are in support of Balakrishnan, Dahnil and Yi’s 2014 findings that dual-way dialogue between influencers and their followers results in relationships being formed , resulting in higher chance of purchase intention from the consumer. These participants indicated this as their bond and interest with an influencer did impact their future purchases- similar to that of the findings of Hameed and Kanwal (2018) study. However, Azizea et al. (2012) findings show that both one-way (Interviewee F and E) and two-way brand communications (Interviewee C, A and G) have positive effects on brand satisfaction based relationship platform between brand and consumer - which suggests that a dual dialogue is



not a necessity in order to fulfil brand satisfaction, resulting in purchase intention. Following these themes and opinions of the participants it is important to note that it is a necessity for brands to acknowledge engagement levels, however they must consider users/followers that exist on social media purely for educational purposes of the Gen Z population, who don't feel the need to engage.

#### **4.1 Research Objective 2**

**Research Objective 2:**

To examine the impact of influencers authenticity and credibility on female Gen Z consumers in Ireland.

### **Interview themes:**

- Relatability
- Expertise
- Disconnection

#### **4.1.1 Relatability**

In order to look at the impact of influencers authenticity and credibility on Gen Z consumers in Ireland, the researcher first looked at what factors made an influencer authentic and credible in the participants' minds. All participants agreed that *relatability* was a factor in how authentic and credible the participant perceived an influencer to be. Their thoughts can be explained by comments related to their thoughts on influencers relatability as outlined below:

**Interviewee A** : “Some live in a different world, when you look at their lifestyle... it's different from mine. You don't see them going to work... so i think they are different- away from us. You don't see an authentic real life struggle anywhere... so I can't relate.”

**Interviewee C**: “I think they start off as normal people... but once they get bigger with more followers and collabs and stuff like that- they're less relatable”

Thus participants swayed more towards influencers who they consider relatable, in order to see the influencer as authentic and credible

**Interviewee D:** “Irish influencers I can relate to, as they live in similar houses to me, and drive cars that you could afford... they also have similar budgets unlike influencers such as the Kardashians who I cannot relate to...”

**Interviewee E:** “Not all influencers are relatable (...) People I can relate to I follow, such as Cheryl Lloyns, who is a dublin-based makeup artist”

These findings corroborate Wood (2022) that Gen Z consumers interact with brands and ambassadors who they perceive as like minded and have similar social wants and desires . It also agrees with Williams (2020) findings that that Gen Z consumers want influencers who would “*Fit into their social bubble*”- as noted by Interviewee E and D. These finding suggest that personal experiences by an Influencer, in Gen Z’s eyes, can often make them more “relatable”, which also impacts their overall credibility, and consumers are more likely to trust the review (Zanib, Zahra and Shilan, 2022). Credibility stemming from relatability was identified in Yilmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş (2021) study which showed that in order for an influencer's review to be deemed credible in the eyes of the consumer, the overall experience must be relatable. Therefore the respondents who viewed their own choice of influencers as relatable, would be more likely to view their content and recommendations as credible as they could relate to their influencers personal and everyday life (Williams 2020). And respondents who found influencers as “unrelatable” were more likely to view them as a credible source (Williams 2020). Delving into the credibility aspect of influencers, the participants were then leading into a discussion of expertise- which leads us to the next theme of this section.

### 4.1.2 Expertise

Following the participants discussion on relatability, the participants then discussed *expertise* as another factor that impacted their thoughts on an influencer's authenticity and credibility. Five out of the seven participants agreed that an influencer expertise in their field makes them more authentic and credible.

**Interviewee C :** “Recently I purchased a dyson hairdryer (...) before I bought it I did not necessarily go to my favourite influencer for advice or tutorials, I went to an hairdressing expert on youtube so I can see if it's worth the money or not as I trust their opinion more so than that of an influencer”

**Interviewee E:** “I follow Cheryl Lloyns... She owns a makeup academy so I would consider her an expert in makeup and her advice is credible”

**Interviewee D:** “Ellie Kelly is a makeup artist, so I trust her opinion on what products I should try”

These findings corroborate that of Wiedmanna and von Mettenheim (2020) who suggest that consumers may feel more trusting of an influencer's advice if it is presumed they are experts and know what they are talking about. From our Literature review we can see that *expertise* is also a factor in source credibility, as consumers follow influencers for advice within their chosen niche (McGinnies and

Ward, 1980), Suggesting that these participants follow these influencers as they are not only experts, but also credible in what they are saying

However other findings on expertise being suggested as a factor contrasted McGinnes and Ward (1980) as they expressed that their level of “expertise” had little impact on how they viewed the influencers authenticity or credibility.

**Interviewee F:** “They don’t have to be, like, experts in what they do, Just good at advice and easily follow along”

**Interviewee A :** “I follow them (influencers) more so for the way they look, and I like what they’re doing”.

These findings support that of McCormick (2016), who suggest that consumers are likely to pay attention to products endorsed by influencers or celebrities as they tend to replicate looks and admire them for their own identity development. William’s (2020) findings also corroborate McCormick (2016) by stating Gen Z consumers follow those who they can trust to provide good advice amongst a social media environment that is flooded with misleading information. Participants suggested that credibility played a factor on who they trust to follow on social media, however seven out of seven participants felt as though Influencers growth on social media made them lack “*authenticity*” which then impacted the credibility that they may have previously felt when following their favourite online influencers. This disconnection between influencers and participants

was noted on all interviews, and will be discussed in-depth in the next theme.

### **4.1.3 Disconnection**

Derived from all interviews with participants, the researcher noted a new, but common theme of “disconnection” that occurred between an influencer and participant at one stage of time. Participants stated that they felt as though the lifestyle of influencers get to a point where they consider them “unrecognisable” and hard to relate to as they grow and gain a larger following. At this stage, some participants stated that they questioned the “*authenticity*” of the influencer. The following comments were made by participants about this:

**Interviewee A :** “I feel as though they are like television characters at this stage (...) Playing a role when they are online. When they go into the collaboration stage they’re not as genuine..”

**Interviewee D:** “I put them in a separate category to myself once they get big, I think they live a different lifestyle to me”

**Interviewee G:** “I think once they reach a big following the money aspect becomes desirable for them, at it does make me question their authenticity”

**Interviewee C:** “Micro influencers , I would say, are more like me, but the second they start getting bigger with big collabs they become unrelatable because they have a different lifestyle than to what we would have.”

These findings align with that of Williams and Kelly (2020) who found that Gen Z consumers identify more with “real people” and advertisements that depict their ordinary lives. It makes the suggestion that as the influencer grows, they become more unrelatable, less credible and thus participants felt as though they lost trust in the process.

**Interviewee B:** “I think social media becomes to them, like a fake life, everything seems perfect and it seems unrealistic (...) they use filters, and talk professionally and almost seem commercial at times which makes me trust them less.”

AlFarraj et al., (2021) suggests that the extent of trust and loyalty between the consumers and their influencers has been seen to positively affect the sustainability of the relationships between the followers and the influencers, the sales, and the brand (AlFarraj et al., 2021). However, as suggested from our findings, if that trust cannot be consistent throughout an influencer's relationship with a Gen Z consumer, then it may have negative effects on the relationship, potential sales and the brand the influencer is collaborating with.

ZOO's (2017) survey found that if influencers are deemed credible, trustworthy and authentic then they are more persuasive with brand messaging. This study therefore suggests that social media influencers should be encouraged to be authentic with all reviews (those that are paid, and those that are not), stay true to their core values and talents

when choosing collaborations (with Interviewee E stating that Image 2 depicts Kylie Jenner promoting “FitTea”- which is not her niche online, making the promotion untrustworthy) and use the product on their platform, outside of the promotion. By doing so they will be viewed as “authentic” leading consumers to believe they are both trustworthy and credible. This will help influencers and brands avoid perceptions that have been communicated in this study, and aid in higher purchase intentions.

**Interviewee A :** “If they (influencer) use the product consistently alone from other brands, and I can see them using it and enjoying the product and see the results- I think I would be more inclined to make the purchase”

## 4.2 Research Objective 3

### **Research objective 3:**

Assessing how impactful influencers EWOM marketing is on Gen Z consumers purchase intention.

### **Interview Themes:**

- Trustworthiness
- Relationship with influencer
- Similar budgets

### 4.2.1 Trustworthiness



When asked about EWOM marketing, the themes of Trustworthiness, Reliability, Relationships and Similar budgets were all discussed and identified throughout all interviews conducted. Trust was considered a factor as to how impactful influencers EWOM marketing is on Gen Z's consumer purchase intention as discussed below by participants. A question was posed to participants- *“What are your personal thoughts on social media influencers working and collaborating with brands?”*

**Interviewee D:** “I trust that influencers do collaborations with brands that they believe in, that who they are collaborating with has approval by them and it's something they want to advertise to their audience”

**Interviewee B:** “You can see with some influencers that I would trust, it is something that they would use- and it would make me consider making a purchase- for sure.”

This element of trust playing a part in the role of purchase intention can be considered a crucial factor when influencers are playing a part in EWOM marketing strategies for brands. Rothschild's (2014) study concluded that consumers respond positively towards individuals they do like, and therefore trust, increasing the consumers overall purchase intention. This is also corroborated by Schieber (2020) who believes that influencers can be considered a new form of marketing communications, as it is easier to build a relationship with consumers now as there is dual communication present, which allows for trustworthy relationships to be formed. It is also suggested by Gong, W. and Li, X. (2017) that “Parasocial” relationships can be formed

between influencers and their followers whereby there is “an illusion of friendship, or somewhat of a peer” between the two. This in turn can influence the attitudes of consumers towards particular products and endorsements (Gong, W. and Li, X, 2017).

**Interviewee A:** “I’d trust my family more so than an influencer’s recommendation, as there is a financial incentive for influencers to push a product. However if I saw them (the influencer) using the product with no filter, and consistently, I think I would trust the review just as much as a family member or friend”.

**Interviewee C:** “I’d probably go with family or friends before i’d turn to influencers because you can see the product on them, or they may even give you some of the product to try”

However, it is suggested by Ajzeen (2002) that the strongest form of EWOM marketing comes from family members and peers of the consumer. These influences are known as “Normative influences” and are related to the perceived social pressure to follow or not to follow the anticipations of others’ behaviour (Azjeen, 2002). From the findings of this study we find that although the participants do trust influencers, their first person to turn to for trustworthy reviews and recommendations is their family members and peers. These trustworthy reviews and recommendations is what pushes the participants towards purchase intention, as although they may trust influencers- they still look for reviews elsewhere. Seven out of the seven participants noted that they would be more likely to purchase a

product recommended by an influencer, if it had been first purchased and trialled by a friend or family member. All participants did mention that their trust depends on the relationship with the influencer, which brings us to our next theme of these findings: Relationships with Influencers.

### **4.2.2 Relationships with Influencers**

The impact of EWOM marketing by influencers on consumers' purchase intention was greatly affected by the perceived relationship between the influencer and consumer. In order to delve deeper into this relationship, a timeline of the consumer's journey to making a purchase recommended by an influencer was identified. Five out of the seven participants suggested that they would only buy a product recommended by an influencer if they felt the influencer was credible and trustworthy. Below are some comments made by participants about their relationship with influencers impacting their purchase decision.

**Interviewee C:** “I would buy a product if I trust the person recommending it, and I’ve been following them for a while (...) I’ve maybe bought products in the past that they have also recommended”

**Interviewee G:** “I suppose i’ve built up relationships with the influencers that I follow, any product that I've purchased that they have recommended, I really like, so I wouldn't consider it risky making a purchase”

These findings support Jaitly and Gautam (2021) study whereby influencers are suggested as a bridge, to connect consumers to a brand by building and maintaining relationships which then lead to higher chances of purchase intention. Williams (2020) findings also corroborate these statements as he suggests that a potential friendship-based relationship leads to higher engagement. However, as suggested by other participants in this study, the lack of transparency by influencers can impact the relationship that has been formed, or the potential for relationships to be formed. Martin and Smith (2008) suggest that “Stealth marketing” commercialises the relationship between influencer and consumer and capitalises off the trust that the consumer has with an influencer. Consumers are becoming more aware of this style of marketing, with ZOO’s 2017 study concluding that consumers are more familiar with paid promotions and endorsements and even educated with how to spot sponsorships and paid advertisements on social media. The more an influencer posts paid promotions, or seen to be endorsing products that they may not use, the more the relationship between influencer and consumer is fractured. All participants studied were able to identify correctly that Image 3 was the paid promotion, whilst also commenting that all three images were endorsed, although not disclosed.

Commenting on this, One participant felt as though they would question the influencers intentions if a product was endorsed, and not clearly labelled as an advertisement.

**Interviewee E:** “I feel as though they would lose my trust if I felt that they thought they could trick me into purchasing a product that benefited them, and didn’t benefit me (.....) It would make me question following them and interacting with them again.”

Due to these findings, the researcher suggests that Influencers must develop and maintain relationships, with honesty and integrity in what they are promoting in order for their EWOM to successfully translate to purchase intention. This supports Hall’s (2003) encoding/decoding model shown in the literature review whereby the message sent by the receiver may be distorted into what the consumer may perceive it to be. Suggestions from the participants in order to regain that trust and maintain those relationships are as follows:

**Interviewee F:** “I just want real opinions on products that they use..  
No sugar coating needed.

**Interviewee E :** “If I'm paying my hard-earned cash and I'm not getting the product that I believed was correctly advertised... I’m going to gravitate towards other influencers for their recommendations instead.”

### **4.2.3 Similar budgets**

Another theme that appeared during these interviews whilst discussing relationships between influencers and consumers was the aspect of money, and what the consumer could afford to purchase. Six out of seven participants agreed that this was in fact, a big factor, in what they considered purchasing when looking at what influencers were recommending. This study was conducted using Gen Z consumers, specifically those aged 18-25- and therefore participants suggested that their budgets were limited on what they spend on beauty products.

**Interviewee E:** “I want to be able to afford what they may be recommending so I can make the decision on what to purchase- and feel included in who they are trying to sell to”

**Interviewee A:** “I sometimes find it unfair when an influencer receives large PR packages for free, and I have to go and purchase the product myself...”

Williams and Kelly’s (2020) findings show that consumers want to relate to the influencer, and the depiction of real life consumers using a product makes them more likely to purchase. This can be seen here, and is a key finding that ties back in with the relatability aspect of this study. Personal experiences by an Influencer, in Gen Z’s eyes, can often make them more “relatable”, which also impacts their overall credibility, and consumers are more likely to trust the review (Zanib, Zahra and Shilan, 2022). However when the products being endorsed are out of touch with the influencers audience in terms of budget, the relatability factor falls short- and consumers may become

uninterested in the product, brand, and even the influencer. Participants did note that “accessibility” was the key to them being able to make a purchase through social media, and noted that discount codes often led them to make a purchase- combined with a “swipe up link”.

**Interviewee A:** “If I liked the product, and there's a discount code.. I'd be running to purchase”

### 4.3 Research Objective 4

**Research Objective 4:**

Exploring the reliability of Beauty Influencers recommendations from a female gen z consumers perspective.

**Interview Themes:**

- Supporting reviews

Moving on from EWOM marketing and purchase intentions by consumers, we then discussed the reliability of an influencer's recommendations by discussing previous purchases, and what would probe the participants to purchase again.

### 4.3.1 Supporting Reviews

All participants agreed that supporting reviews of products that influencers use is a probe for them to make a purchase. Interviewee G and D agreed that they are more likely to purchase a product if they have seen people within their friend group using the product first, and then look to influencers as to how they should use it.

**Interviewee G:** “I am more likely to purchase a product from an influencer, if I have seen my friends using it online also”

This ties in with Ajzen (2002)’s conclusion that friends and families opinions were considered “trustworthy”, and therefore the perceived “risk” was taken out of the purchase decision. The reliability factor of an influencer's recommendation is often considered after the purchase is made, however participants stated that they do not base reliability on their own personal feelings, and often read other reviews to see if others had the same experience or if the influencers were reliable.

**Interviewee B:** “If i don't like the product, I don't immediately say that the influencer was lying. For example I bought a tan recommended to me by Bla Murphy, and it didn't suit me. However my friend loved it”.

This supported Wood and Hayes (2012) study that found that consumers respond accordingly towards a review by an influencer, or comments from other consumers about a product in order to conform or feel socially accepted by their online peers. Interviewee B, C, A and



F also concluded their interviews stating that an influencer who gave negative and positive reviews on their platform were more likely to be trustworthy, credible and reliable as they felt as though they were honest and authentic.

## **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to ask the question, “Does influencer eWOM marketing impact purchase intention within the beauty industry?” to gain a better understanding of the relationship between SMI’s and the people who follow them. This study has advanced eWOM marketing academia by offering an insight of the social media landscape in order to propose recommendations and potential avenues for new studies to be conducted.

### **5.0 Insight to influencer/follower relationships.**

**5.0.1 Findings for Objective 1:** Assessing the importance of engagement between social media influencers and female Gen Z consumers.

- a) In relation to engagement, this study found that Gen Z consumers are divided in how and why they engage with influencers. From our findings it indicates that a strong relationship between a beauty influencer and a consumer who is highly-connected, is usually down to their engagement with educational content such as tutorials and aesthetic content that followers can aspire to achieve. Participants in this study also noted that they engage with influencers who give step-by-step tutorials, where followers “gain something” from following them.
- b) Another aspect found under this theme is that participants swayed towards following influencers who engaged with them, as participants feel as though engagement can be considered a personal attribute between followers and influencers. However, other participants also noted that they don't “expect” influencers to engage with them, as they themselves will reach out and follow somebody if they like their content.

**5.0.2 Findings for objectives 2: To examine the impact of influencers authenticity and credibility on female Gen Z consumers in Ireland.**

- a) Relatability was found to be an important aspect of social media influencers for all Gen Z participants as they view the influencer to be more credible as they can relate to the source. Wood (2022) that Gen Z consumers interact with brands and ambassadors who they perceive as like minded and have similar social wants and desires . Thus influencers must be perceived to achieve two of the following objectives:

- Firstly, influencers must be perceived to live a life that is considered “achievable” to their following in order to be perceived as relatable and something their following can aspire to be in their own everyday lives. This achieves source credibility.
- Influencers must also be perceived to be authentic, in order for consumers to trust them. This can be achieved by being true to themselves, making their morals and ethics known, and living by them throughout their influencing career.

b) Credibility, as outlined in 4.1.2 can be broken into two fragments, expertise and trust. Trustworthiness was noted within the interviews as a huge factor in what makes a participant follow an influencer. To achieve this, participants agree that beauty influencers should:

- Avoid switching and promoting brands that have similar products and services as this causes confusion among Gen Z consumers and puts their authenticity and credibility into question.
- Stay related to their niche in the products that they are promoting as they are seen to be skilled or educated in this area, and is why their following follow them.
- Share honest opinions, that of a negative or positive aspect, with their followers as this shows the genuinity of an influencer that

they are being paid to “try and test” the product or service, rather than being paid to sell it.

- c) The findings also show that “expertise” is a factor in why most participants follow beauty influencers as they watch them for their educational purposes. This ties in with the participants wanting influencers to “stick to their niche”, as this is the reason they are engaging with the influencer. However, some participants did note that expertise is not needed in order for them to follow and engage with their influencers of choice.
- d) Disconnection from an influencer was also noted, as participants believed influencers become disconnected from their audience as they grow a larger audience. Influencers are proposed to ensure they stay relatable to their fanbase in order to keep relationships with their followers.

**5.0.3 Findings for : Research Objective 3:** Assessing how impactful influencers EWOM marketing is on Gen Z consumers purchase intention.

- a) Findings from objective three were that trustworthiness plays a massive role in an influencer's impact on a Gen Z's purchase intention, as previously noted. Influencers are suggested to only promote products that they would use themselves, and that they recommend highly, whilst

negative reviews on products are also shared to give advice on what not to buy.

- b) It was also found that participants trust their peers and family more than SMI's, and therefore it is important that influencers come across as a "friend" to followers in order to gain their trust and be a credible source.
- c) The level of their relationship with an influencer also has an impact on their purchase intention. The stronger the perceived relationship with the SMI, the stronger their purchase intention will be when looking for a product to buy.
- d) Similar budgets also attracted followers and impacted their purchase intention. When an influencer recommends a product, all participants stated that in order to consider purchasing- the product must be in their personal price range. Therefore it is proposed that influencers should recognise their audience and promote accordingly.

**5.0.4 Findings from Research objective 4** : Exploring the reliability of Beauty Influencers recommendations from a female gen z consumers perspective.

The reliability of an influencer was also found to impact a consumer's purchase intention when considering a purchase recommended from a beauty influencer.

a) The final recommendation to influencers is to ensure that they do not contradict their recommendations, as this will disrupt the trust in the relationship between themselves and the follower. Contradicting recommendations and their own opinions will put their authenticity, credibility and reliability into question which will overall impact a consumer's purchase intention from that influencer. Ensure that all product recommendations are honest opinions with clear results that followers who do purchase the product will be able to see themselves.

## **6.0 Recommendations for future Academia**

- This study was conducted using participants based in Dublin, Ireland. To further the research, scholars could explore different countries and cultures such as that of Americans or UK citizens where social media is widely used, yet the audience may have different experiences with SMI's.
- Using a different research method such as a quantitative survey may help further this research and give a scientific approach to the field when it comes to exploring different aspects as to why consumers purchase intention is impacted by influencers.
- Lastly, a study conducted from a male gen z consumer may broaden the research and give a different perspective to the topic at hand.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

# Thematic Question Guide:

## **Social media:**

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1. Do you use social media daily? If so, for how long?
2. What social media sites do you use daily?

## **Influencers:**

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3. Do you follow social media influencers? Specifically those in the beauty industry such as makeup gurus, hairstylists and beauty enthusiasts?
4. What is the main reason you follow these influencers? Is it for their advice, expertise, recommendations or aesthetic?

## **Authenticity and Credability:**

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5. Do you feel as though SMI's are similar to you in terms of lifestyle, interests and hobbies?
6. What are your personal thoughts on SMI working and collaborating with brands on their social media newsfeed?
7. Would you describe a SMI as a normal everyday person, similar to yourself or your peers?
8. Do you view them as trustworthy? If not, what would make you gain their trust in order to make a purchase recommended by them?

### **EWOM Marketing:**

9. Who would you turn to for credible and trustworthy reviews of beauty products that you have never tried before? (Ex. friends, family, influencers, celebs etc.)
10. Would you trust a SMI's cosmetic/beauty review just as you would a friend or families review?
11. Would you be more inclined to trust a review from an influencer if a friend or family member bought on their recommendation?
12. Would you view a SMI's review as credible, if you believe the product was endorsed? Would you still purchase?

### **Purchase Intention:**

13. Have you ever considered making a purchase recommended to you from a beauty/cosmetic influencer?
14. Have you ever purchased an item recommended to you by a social media influencer post?
15. What encouraged you to make the purchase? Or what put you off going ahead with the purchase?

### **Advertisement Knowledge:**

16. Have you noticed the hashtags #SP or #AD on posts made by influencers?
17. Has it effected your thoughts on Influencers?
18. Has it effected your purchases from influencers?
19. Are you aware of the new ASAI rules in relation to the #AD or #SP for SMI and brands?

# APPENDIX 2

## IMAGES FOR INTERVIEWS

### IMAGE 1




### IMAGE 2



# IMAGE 3




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25w



 tharii\_kay Stunning!! And the Outfit is 🔥🔥🔥



1,717 likes

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## APPENDIX 3

**Table of Participants**

Age	Gender	Nationality	Interest in Social Media Influencers	Interest in Beauty
25	Female	Irish	Beauty and Fashion	Makeup, Lashes Nails and Hair
19	Female	Irish	Fitness, Fashion and Beauty	Makeup, Tanning and Nails
22	Female	Irish	Fitness, healthy eating, clothing and beauty,	Makeup, Tanning, hair and Nails
22	Female	Irish	Fashion and beauty bloggers	Tanning, Lashes, Eyebrows and Nails
18	Female	Irish	Fashion, Beauty Entertainment	Lashes, Eyebrows and Nails
22	Female	Irish		
18	Female	Irish	Fitness, beauty and overall health	Makeup and tanning