How Influential Are They? An explorative study into the relationship between consumer-based brand equity and influencer endorsements.

Authors:

Syeda Saana Hashmi (19971008)

Fatima Khan (010509)

Supervisor: Viktor Magnusson
Examiner: Åsa Devine
Group: A1
Terms: VT22
Subject: Branding
Course Code: 2FE21

Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to explore the relationship between an influencer's endorsement of a brand and the subsequent brand's equity within a consumer's mind.

Research Question: How will an influencer endorsement influence a consumer's brand equity?

Design, Methodology, and Approach: The authors of this paper used a qualitative approach, inductive structure. Due to the explorative nature of this paper, the authors have conducted 10 semi-structured interviews. This method generated a depth of information which was then coded for the analysis process.

Findings: The findings of the research suggest a strong relation between frequent engagement from the influencer and brand awareness through endorsement. There is also a positive association between the relationship with an influencer. Furthermore, trust in influencers is built through two components, knowledge/expertise and authenticity, however, trust does not influence brand loyalty.

Limitations: The interviews were conducted in English although English was not the first language for any of the participants, this caused some confusion when the interviewees had to explain the more technical terms in simplified language. Furthermore, this may have hindered their ability to express themselves 100% accurately, however, the researchers made sure to get a detailed answer for every question to ensure nothing was lost in translation.

Keywords: *Influencer, influencer endorsement, brand equity, brand loyalty, brand image, brand awareness, trust, knowledge, expertise, authenticity.*

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Influencer marketing is a rapidly growing field, and currently, it is almost impossible to go on to any social media platform and not see a variety of influencer endorsements. Influencers have become highly valuable marketing tools for businesses. In 2021, marketing through paid content generated by influencers was one of the most widely used branding strategies by companies worldwide (Ponzoa and Erdmann, 2021). More and more brands are beginning to realize that traditional methods of advertisements are quickly becoming obsolete and irritating to customers (Campbell and Farell, 2020), and especially with the rapid increase in the use of technology more customers are spending most of their time online, increasing their chances and frequency of seeing sponsored influencer content. Marketing through influencers can be described as the way brands utilize individuals that hold influence over others in online spheres and engage them to, promote their brand through sponsored content (Sammis, Lincoln, and Pomponi, 2016). A good definition of what it means to be a social media influencer is provided by Abidin (2015) who states that social media influencers are ordinary internet users, who have been able to build up a large and or dedicated following of other users, with whom they engage with and typically create content for. Another characteristic stated by Abdin (2015) is that influencers monetize their following through advertisements, and this illustrates how they are utilized by brands.

What sets influencers apart from traditional celebrities and makes them more valuable to brands and is a central aspect of their success is their close personal relationship with their followers and their level of engagement with them (Abidin and Ots, 2016). This engagement is built through practices such as sharing content, establishing commonality with viewers (despite often living a lavish lifestyle), meeting in life-real with followers, and more (Abidin and Ots, 2016). Previous research has demonstrated that the parasocial relationships between influencers and consumer can increase their effectiveness. Another aspect that is distinctly important for influencers that both ensure their success and signify their potential as a successful economic collaboration for brands is their credibility, their relatability to their audience, and their authenticity (Abidin and Ots, (2016), De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017). Furthermore, the kind of content

created is also a factor in influencer effectiveness, for example, influencer effectiveness may be positively influenced by content that signifies their expertise (Kim and Kim, 2019) as well as by content that can be easily applicable to the consumer's own lives such as style or organization tips (Scholz, 2021)

To infer, influencers can be a very valuable asset to a business, not just to generate sales but for non-sales related objectives, such as conveying social responsibility (Yang et. al, 2021) as well as marketing and branding. One important branding goal for most businesses is an increase in brand equity. Brand equity is aptly explained by Keller (2003) as the marketing efforts that are unique to a brand, and the resulting marketing outcomes would not be the same if the attached brand would be different.

Brand equity can be discussed from several perspectives, such as finance-oriented, cost-oriented, or customer-oriented. For this paper, a customer-based perspective will be utilized. A customer-based perspective is highly relevant to this study as its main premise is that the power of a brand is decided by the customers and depends on what they have "learned, felt, seen and heard about the brand over time" (Kim and Kim, 2004) and the authors' aim with this study is to explore how seeing and hearing an influencer's endorsement of a brand will affect the brand's equity in a consumer's mind. For this reason, it makes sense to employ a customer-based perspective.

An important and widely used definition of customer brand equity is set forth by Aaker, (1996) and it conceptualizes several key components of brand equity, including but not limited to the loyalty inspired by the brand, its ability to satisfy consumers by fulfilling it's intended purpose, brand awareness (how customers can recall and recognize the brand) as well as how the brand is perceived (Aaker, 1996). This definition can be encapsulated by the key terms of brand loyalty, brand image, and brand awareness, and these components work together to inspire brand equity.

1.2 Problem discussion

The past decade has seen a high level of academic engagement within the field of social media influencers. Social media as a technology is constantly under advancement and new features and platforms are being added to the massive repertoire every day, so consequently the field of influencers on social media is developing every day as well. The focus of this field in research today is everything from the value of influencers, how they are utilized, their efficacy and contribution to the business, and more (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman, 2021).

Within the growing research, the definition of what it means to be an influencer has constantly evolved to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances and trends, but there seem to be common elements to what makes an influencer, these have been identified by Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, (2020) in their literature review of the strategic use of social media influencers within the business. The two vital characteristics to be considered an influencer are reach and impact. Reach refers simply to the magnitude of consumers the influencers reach but "impact" is more complex to define, and this is the area the authors aim to explore with this research. The impact of social media influencers refers not only to how they can influence the purchasing decision-making to drive sales but as discussed in the introduction, also to how well influencers can achieve branding goals such as influencing the consumer's brand equity. Thus, to understand how this impact is exerted, and how to optimize the influencers to ensure maximum impact, it is important to explore the relationship between influencer endorsement and brand equity.

Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman (2021) further mention that from their review of 154 articles written on the subject, they can infer that a significant amount of research has been devoted to understanding the efficiency of influencer marketing and understanding the mechanisms behind its persuasiveness, particularly how influencer endorsements impact brand evaluations. This highlights the quantity of literature on the subject; however, certain areas may be lacking where more research is needed. Rosengren and Campbell (2021) highlighted the key insights made regarding influencers recently, such as influencer's effectiveness when promoting social causes (Yang et al, 2021) or the difference in impact when promoting a different kinds of products, however, they also highlighted areas that remained to be discovered. They write *"What aspects are influencers most suited to achieve, i.e., awareness, purchase? And what mechanisms*

influence this?" (Rosengren and Campbell, 2021, page 3) A similar concern is also raised by Hudder et al (2012), who point out that future research goals must aim to understand issues of what factors constitute expertise and authenticity, for example. Both literature reviews thus highlight the need to explore more in-depth the mechanisms behind influencer efficacy, as well as the extent and intricacies of their effect. For this reason, the authors aim to explore this area within the framework of brand equity.

In the current day, social media is an extremely powerful tool for businesses and through engagement, can significantly contribute to a brand's equity (Bruhn et al, 2012). The interactive nature of social media allows a deeper, more immersive connection, which brands utilize to relay not just information about themselves but also build lasting connections with the consumers. In this way, social media has a direct link to how consumers are made aware of the brand and their perception of it, which in turn can contribute to their loyalty towards the brand (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015). These dimensions are what constitute an important branding concept, that of brand equity. For this paper, the focus is on conceptualizing brand equity through three important determinants of it: brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. Some notable examples of literature that contributed to the same niche are Jun and Yi (2020), who explored the role of an influencer's authenticity in inspiring long-term attachment to a brand, and Manavat et al (2020) that investigated the links between influencer marketing and brand loyalty within Gen Z. This conceptualizing of brand equity to include the mentioned three elements have been substantiated within previous research, such as Yoo and Donthu (2001), Juntunen, Juntunen and Juga (2010), that have conceptualized brand equity to contain brand awareness, loyalty, and image.

Another insight from the literature review by Hudders et al (2021) was that much of the research tended to be largely quantitative. While quantitative research may be valuable when aiming to gather large-scale data when it comes to gaining an in-depth, nuanced understanding and understanding the unique case-by-case characteristics of a particular phenomenon, qualitative research is more suitable (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley, 2019), and therefore the authors decided to employ a qualitative research methodology as the goal was to explore the phenomenon and reveal intimate insights. Currently, comprehensive qualitative exploration of the relationship between brand equity and influencer endorsements is scarce and this paper aims to contribute to this gap within the literature. The authors will be looking at the topic more holistically, and

aiming to understand how exactly influence is exerted over different aspects of brand equity, and this is best explored with a qualitative approach.

From a practitioner's point of view, it is useful to understand influencer endorsements as brands need to know how consumers perceived influencers and how influencers can shape their opinion and impact their decision-making, this will greatly assist them in developing more sophisticated marketing and communication plans and integrating influencer marketing as a valuable strategy in their arsenal (Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2020). This research can help brands better understand if influencer marketing is the right strategy for them, as well as select the kind of influencers best suited to them, identify the segments of their audience most receptive to influencer endorsements, and provide an understanding of the kind of content that is most effective.

1.3 Purpose

This paper aims to explore the relationship between an influencer's endorsement of a brand and the subsequent brand's equity within a consumer's mind.

1.4 Research question

How can an influencer's endorsement impact a brand's equity?

2. Literature Review

This chapter consists of two main categories influencer marketing and brand equity.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

Lee and Eastin (2020), Leung, Gu, and Palmatier (2022), and Martínez-López et al. (2020) have stated that Influencer marketing is an online marketing strategy of individuals or groups of individuals that have developed a network of followers on social media such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram or YouTube. These influencers are seen as opinion leaders that influence the sales of a specific brand. However, the sales are effect based on the number of followers the influencers have. The content is shared through vlogging, blogging, or generating short-form

content on social media. The content tends to display either their reviews or opinions on a brand or product. The content can also be a vlog (short video) about their everyday lives and experiences. To maintain or increase the following the influencers will need to interact and engage with the followers. Lastly, influencers must be mindful of the content they are posting as that factor will create a personal brand for the influencer. And if the consumer resonates with the influencers' content, they will earn a follower.

Moreover, Leung, Gu, and Palmatier (2022) state that brands tend to select and incentivize influencers to market their product or service to their following on social media. This is an attempt to attract followers to become future customers for the brand. This is why Zhong (2022), argues that brands need to be particular with which influencer they pick to endorse their products. The brand should ensure that the influencer and followers have high engagement. As this will help the followers to be more connected with the influencer which can entail building a connection with the brand that is being advertised. Additionally, that brand ought to ensure that the product that is endorsed matches the personal brand of the influencer. In support of the previous study Fitriati and Madu Siwi (2022), Argyris et al (2020) and (Genoveva, 2022)., stated high engagement between a famous influencer and followers can improve the brand value of the endorsed product. As the followers have a sense of connection due to the high engagement, and familiarity due to the content. Which can all lead to building trust and credibility for the influencer.

According to Lou and Yuan (2019), high engagement and familiarity all play an important role in generating trust. However, the strategy of using an influencer for endorsement will only be a success if there is complete transparency and the content is informative. This entails that followers that are viewing the content will only trust what is endorsed to them based on how aware the influencer is and if the product matches the influencer's brand. Additionally, Shamim and Islam (2022) and Martínez-López et al. (2020) stated the message the influencers are adverting to the followers needs to be credible and that will develop in generating trust in the content and brand that is being endorsed. In support of the previous study Stubb, Nyström, and Colliander (2019) have also, stated that the influencer should always be clear if the content is sponsored as the follower will appreciate the transparency and develop trust not only in the influencer but also the brand.

As seen above the concepts of engagement and trust are factors that are relevant in order to have successful influencer marketing. Influencer engagement and Trust will be discussed further.

2.1.1 Influencer engagement

Sugiarto, Simanjuntak, and Hasanah (2022) and Chen, Lin, and Shan (2021) and Argyris et al. (2020), stated that if the engagement is high between influencer and their followers not only does it build a strong and deeper bond that entails in a strong relationship like a friendship. But it also, affects the purchase decisions. The study stated that followers tend to find the influencer reliable due to the constant interaction and communication on social media. This is why the followers are easily convinced to purchase the product that is being endorsed to them. The followers also, find it convenient to rely on the message as it has been altered to the followers' needs and wants. Hence, the follower will become a customer of the brand being endorsed.

Additionally, Argyris et al. (2020) argued that purchase decision increases through engagement because there is a sense of familiarity and reliability with the influencer that gets transferred to the brand that is being endorsed. In support of the previous studies, Jang et al. (2020) stated the reason the followers can rely on the product being endorsed is mainly because of the attraction the followers feel to the influencers that the attraction they feel with the brand/ product being endorsed.

2.1.2 Trust

Saima and Khan (2020) have stated that engagement is a great source of finding the needs and wants of the follower which then the influencer can incorporate in the marketing campaign accordingly to the follower's expectations. However, it is the factor of trust that drives the consumer to want to purchase the endorsed product which is drive through engagement. The trust factor will only be solidified if the followers can detect the influencer is well knowledgeable about this specific product. Only then the followers will find the influencer credible. In support of the previous study Kim and Kim (2021) and, Lou and Yuan (2019) result mediate that trust is formed if the follower knows that an influencer has expertise and knowledge about the product that is being marketed. Also, the influencer is authentic with the way they market the product which builds a strong homophily and trustworthy relationship. This means

the individuals that are following the influencer are based on the unique content they are posting, and the content is based on the interest of the follower which can be bonded upon. This leads to followers trusting the influencer and the brand that is being endorsed.

Additionally, Liu et al. (2015) have stated that trust is a factor that can vary from time to time. To keep the trust strong and "alive" Ye et al. (2021) have stated that the endorsement should always be done ethically. This means the influencer ought to disclose to the followers that if the content is sponsored or not through clear communication with the followers. In support of this study, Shamim and Islam (2022) stated that by disclosing the content as a sponsorship the follower will feel that the influencer and brand are very transparent. This will allow the followers to find the influencer and brand credible which will automatically enhance the trusting factor further.

2.2 Brand Equity

Brand equity is defined as a set of assets and liabilities that are linked to the brands' name and symbol, which adds or subtracts the value through products or services. In other words, brand equity is the value that the consumer associates the brand with which means the more the consumer is familiar with the brand the stronger the brand equity is going to be. Furthermore, there are two aspects to brand equity financial brand equity and consumer base brand equity (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018). This research paper will be focusing only on consumer-based brand equity.

Alhaddad (2014) stated in their result that in consumer-based brand equity, brand loyalty and brand image are crucial factors as they positively affect brand equity. According to the study, brand image has a more vital role since through this factor companies can increase brand equity. The brand image includes elements such as brand association, and perceived value These elements will enhance the brand image leading to strong brand equity. However, focusing on brand loyalty can also, strengthen brand equity as this will lead to a long-term relationship with the customers. In slight contrast, Tong and Hawley (2009), stated in their study that brand loyalty and brand associations are the main factors for brand equity. Brand awareness and perceived quality are factors that are relevant but are weak supporters of brand equity.

Contrary to the previous study Kim et al., (2008) have stated that brand awareness is a key factor for brand equity specifically when it comes to the geographical location of the brand. Whereas brand loyalty can vary due to a lack of convincing for the customer. The brand image also positively affects brand equity as it allows the consumer to trust the brand more. Additionally, Yoo and Donthu (2001) and Juntunen, Juntunen, and Juga (2010) have argued that brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty all are dimensions of brand equity that help to strengthen it and lead to potential sales and growth.

Therefore, the concepts of brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty will be discussed in the further subchapters.

2.2.1 Brand awareness

Brand awareness is how well the consumers are familiar with the brand's quality, image, and what they have to offer. Having a strong brand awareness leads to having a highly competitive advantage. This can be achieved by making the consumer more familiar with the brand. Familiarity dictates the primitive sense of knowing about the brand without any specific details needed (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018).

According to Koecha, Buyleb, and Macario (2023), the findings indicated that by having a strong brand awareness there will be an increase in familiarity. Hence, consumers will automatically be more inclined to pick that specific brand as their first or only choice. When brands focus on engaging with brand awareness marketing it positively influences the attitudinal perceptions towards a brand which will manifest in repurchase intention. Firstly, brand attitude is defined as the way individuals think about a brand such as the value of the brand or the perceived quality. This is associated with the memory linked to the brand. This means how well the quality is perceived by the brand through packaging or marketing of the product. All these factors tend to shape the attitude the consumer will have toward the brand (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018). Therefore, Koecha, Buyleb, and Macario (2023) stated in their result that by having high brand awareness the consumers will be more familiar with the brand. This will lead to creating a positive attitude for the brand as there will be a positive association linked with the brand. Thus, there will be a high likelihood of that brand being selected in the future. Homburg,

Klarmann, and Schmitt (2010) also argue in their research that a company's market value or performance can be detected by how well-aware consumers are of the brand.

Furthermore, Dabbous and Barakat (2020) have stated that it is agreed that brand awareness leads to be positive brand attitude and repeated purchase intention (incline to purchase from the brand). However, to achieve strong brand awareness companies need to have a high engagement with the consumers and need to represent themselves positively and attractively. Sasmita and Mohd Suki (2015), argue in their research that brand awareness is the top element to having strong brand equity. As the results stated that marketers and practitioners should put more emphasis on brand awareness. This can be done through communicating with the consumer, especially the younger generation through social media. To have better brand awareness the companies will need to be creative and present information in an attractive manner for the consumers. Hence stimulating the purchase intention.

Moreover, Koecha, Buyleb, and Macario (2023) further stated in the results that creating brand awareness is done through creating curiosity which will make the consumers want to try the brand out. Agreeing with the previous studies Chandran, Rangarai, and Parayitam (2020), also stated that by having brand awareness the consumers will automatically have a change in attitude towards the brand. This will result in the consumers purchasing from the brand and using the product. The study also, states that product purchase and usage is an inclination of a satisfied customer. Which emphasizes repeated purchase intention.

2.2.2 Brand Image

The brand image focuses on how the consumers perceive the brand through experiences, quality, and marketing (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018). According to Sasmita and Mohd Suki (2015), brand awareness is the main element in brand equity, but the next crucial element is the brand image. By being familiar with the brand the consumers will perceive the brand a certain way. If the consumers have a positive perception the brand image will be strong. Leading the consumer to want to purchase from that specific brand rather than the competitors.

Additionally, Lee, Lee, and Wu (2011) stated that by having a superior brand image the consumers will have a positive brand association. Brand association is known as being mentally linked with the customers these links can be based on emotions, experiences, or interaction (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018). The results show that acquiring a brand with an excellent image creates the perception of better quality among consumers rather than acquiring a brand with an inferior image. Moreover, Lee, Lee, and Wu (2011) results also, dictate that by having a strong brand image the companies will value and view the brand highly which will automatically make the consumers more inclined to the brand. This means that by having a strong brand image the consumers will have a strong positive emotional bond with the company. Which will essentially make the consumers want to stay committed to the specific band more.

Supporting the previous study Afsar (2014) has stated that a positive brand image has a positive and significant impact on consumer trust. This entails that if consumers have high trust in the brand the perceived value and quality are high in the brand. Perceived quality is the first impression the consumers received from the brand. As perceived quality is the first impression Ranjbarian et al. (2012) argue that this element is what influences the brand image. In other words, if the quality, presentation, and appearance of the brand are poor based on these judgments the customer will not be appealed to want to purchase from the brand. As the brand image is not seen as a valuable brand. However, if the perceived quality is high the customer will view the brand as a trustworthy, value brand. This will enhance customer satisfaction which will provoke a repurchase intention.

In addition to the previous studies, brand image leads to trust, satisfaction and re-purchase intention. However, according to Pan and Chen (2019) knowing how to elevate the brand image through strategies such as storytelling or as Chang et al. (2019) have stated having the right narrative can elevate the brand image. Pan and Chen (2019) stated that through a brand telling story, the consumers will be able to be informed well about the mission and vision statement. This will allow the consumers to be able to trust and understand the brand deeply. Leading to a higher perceive the quality of the brand by the consumer, elevating brand image, and influencing re-purchase behavior. In support of the previous study, Chang et al. (2019) have stated that

narrating any advertisement, or story warmly and invitingly makes the consumer feel belong and are accepted by society. This helps the consumers to have a deeper trust and connection with the brand. Thus, enhancing the brand image

2.2.3 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is an act of being committed and devoted to one specific brand regardless of what the competitors have to offer concerning services and price (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018). According to Emari, Jafari, and Mogaddam (2012), brand loyalty is the element that has the greatest contribution to developing strong brand equity. This can be achieved by building long-term relationships with customers by keeping in contact to see if their needs and wants are being met. The brand should maintain high-quality products and provide elite services. Because a satisfied happy customer is a loyal customer.

According to Šerić and Gil-Saura (2019), Customer brand loyalty can be measured in two aspects, attitudinal loyalty (customer choose to stay loyal through positive experience) and behavioral loyalty (customer buys from the same brand repeatedly). For consumers to have a high attitudinal loyalty experience – base connections between the brand and customers will be beneficial. In addition to high-quality services and relationship building, Matthews (2014) and Taylor, Celuch, and Goodwin (2004) argues that brands need to create an emotional value to achieve that brand satisfaction to a deeper level. Through high-quality services, the consumers will be intrigued to want to come back, and relationship building will help the consumers to be able to communicate any of their needs and value. Lastly, the emotional value will increase the positive experience, trust, and overall satisfaction level. This leads to a highly positive attitudinal loyalty being met.

According to Hariharan et al. (2018), behavior loyalty on the other hand will only be achieved once attitudinal loyalty is achieved. This means by achieving high attitudinal loyalty the consumer has had a positive experience, they find the brand trustworthy, and the quality and services are meeting the expectations. Only then the consumers will be willing to repurchase from the specific brand again. Supporting the previous study Chahal and Bala (2010) and

Bandyopadhyay and Martell (2007) have stated that through passing attitudinal loyalty which includes being satisfied with the skill of the staff, updated products to match the needs and wants, functional and high quality easy to use product. All these key elements will lead to developing a positive attitude. This essentially means the consumers will want to return and repurchase the same product/ service they were offered. Hence leading to high behavior loyalty.

 2.3 Conceptual Map

The main focus of this study is to explore the relationship between Influencer marketing and consumer-based brand equity. The theory demonstrates that using the influencer marketing strategy, high engagement, and trust are the two main factors. According to Fitriati and Madu Siwi (2022), Argyris et al (2020), and Genoveva (2022) through high engagement the influencer can detect the needs and wants of the followers and implement that in the marketing campaign they endorse to the followers. This will not only strengthen the bond but attract the follower to the brand to want to purchase from the said brand. The factor of trust plays a huge role in influencer marketing Shamim and Islam (2022), Martínez-López et al. (2020) and Stubb, Nyström, and Colliander (2019) have stated in their results that trust will only be solidified if the followers are aware that the influencer is knowledge and an expert of the product, they are advertising. Additionally, the influencer should always be transparent with the followers if the content is sponsored or not as this will build credibility for the influencer and brand.

About brand equity, according to Kim et al., (2008) Yoo and Donthu (2001), and Juntunen, Juntunen, and Juga (2010) to achieve the ideal consumer base brand equity factors such as Brand awareness, Brand image, and Brand loyalty needs to focus on. According to Koecha, Buyleb, and Macario (2023), studies Chandran, Rangarai, and Parayitam (2020) Sasmita and Mohd Suki (2015), having high brand awareness means consumers are familiar with the brand which means there will be a sense of curiosity to want to try out the product or service that is being offered. Through high brand awareness positive brand attitude will be formed. Moving on to Brand Image Lee, Lee, and Wu (2011), Afsar (2014), and Ranjbarian et al. (2012) have stated that having a positive brand image the perceived quality is positive as well due to having a positive experience with the staff or product. Hence, the association that the customers have with the brand will also, be positive and strengthened the overall brand value.

Lastly, Brand loyalty is the last step to achieving consumer-based brand equity. According to Emari, Jafari, and Mogaddam (2012), According to Šerić and Gil-Saura (2019), and Hariharan et al. (2018) to achieved a strong brand loyalty the the brand will make sure to pas attitudinal loaytly where consumers will actively stay choose to stay loyal with the brand through positive experiences. This will lead to a satisfied customer who will have high behavior loyalty where the consumers will be willing to repurchase from the specific brand again.

Furthermore, the model illustrates the relationship between influencer marketing and consumer-based brand equity. Firstly, the concepts engagement and trust make up influencer marketing. As illustrated engagement leads to trust the arrow dictates that trust is a concept that cannot live without engagement. However, Saima and Khan (2020) have stated that engagement is a concept that can live without trust. Secondly, the concepts brand awareness brand image and brand loyalty make up consumer-based brand equity. The arrows dictate that engagement can influence brand awareness and brand image. Lastly, the arrow between trust and brand loyalty dictates that trust can lead to brand loyalty.

Conceptual Model

Influencer market

Consumer based brand equity
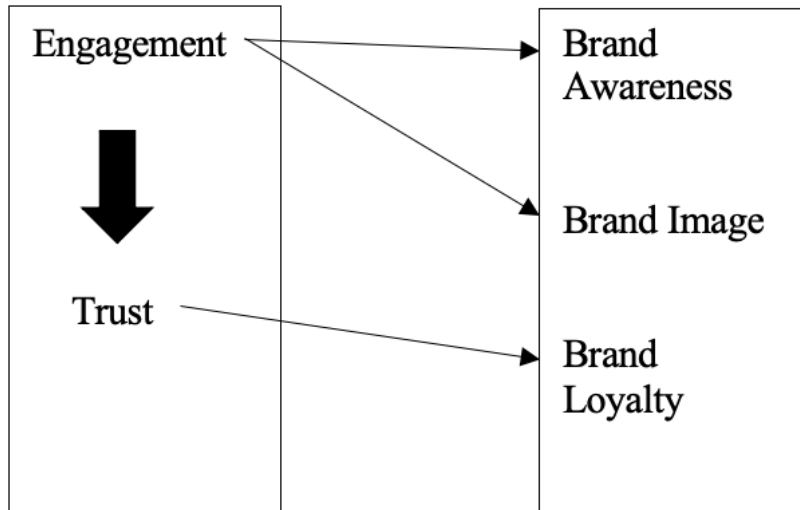
3. Methodology

The method chapter contains a detailed description of the design and structure of the research, how the empirical material was gathered as well as how the data was analyzed. For this paper, the authors have conducted semi-structured interviews based on a set of questions gathered through the operationalization of the theory. A pre-interview was conducted to ensure the validity of the questions. For a complete list of questions see the Appendix.

3.1 Research Approach

Before beginning the research process it is important to consider the overall approach taken to the research to ensure consistency and cohesiveness within the assumptions made within the research. Researchers must determine how they will approach the theory in their paper, and there are two ways to go about doing this, the inductive approach and the deductive approach. The deductive approach consists of analyzing the existing research on a field and producing a hypothesis that can be empirically examined, and the inductive approach aims to produce new additions to the theory through research, done by drawing insights from research that can then be generalized to a larger group (Bell, Bryman and Hartley, 2019). The inductive will be the approach adopted by the authors for this paper. The primary focus of the inductive process is to allow the emergence of new research findings from the significant themes within their data, without the rigid hypothesis structures of a deductive approach that often overlooks underlying themes that are not part of the hypothesis (Thomas, 2006). This will enable the author's aim to gain a rich insight into the consumer's mind regarding their attitudes and behaviors regarding influencer-generated brand content. The method of the inductive approach suggests that the raw data should be analyzed to reveal categories and themes which are then developed into a model or framework (Thomas, 2006), and this will be the course of action adopted by the authors. More detail regarding the collection and analysis of the data will follow in upcoming chapters.

3.2 Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, the concern is not regarding the frequency of the occurrence of a phenomenon, and the collection and analysis of the data are more focused on the words rather than the numbers within the phenomenon. The goal is to understand in greater detail the intricacies of human behavior. Denzin and Lincoln write that qualitative research aims to answer how, where, what, when, and why a person would act in a certain way toward a specific matter" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Questions of experience, meaning, and perspective from the point of view of the participant are answered within qualitative research, and like quantitative research, qualitative research can also be judged on similar standards of trustworthiness, credibility, applicability, and consistency (Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey, 2016) In fact, the crux of

qualitative research can be said to lie in interpretivism, in that it aims to understand how a certain issue is experienced and interpreted by a group of people. Another differentiating characteristic from quantitative research is the emphasis on context, as qualitative research is richer in detail regarding the background setting of the research and the often seemingly trivial details that are revealed to be of key importance.

This is because the researcher needs to get a full picture of the context within which the research is done to more clearly understand how to judge and evaluate the behavior of their subjects concerning their study. Ozanne, Strauss, and Corbin discuss that the selection of a qualitative research method may be done in situations in which in-depth information regarding a phenomenon needs to be gathered that may be difficult to express quantitatively or where the researcher has judged that interpretation and description through numbers would not adequately do the subject justice (Ozanne, Strauss and Corbin, 1992). The main focus of this paper is to explore if there is a relationship between influencer marketing and consumer-based brand equity. In order words how a certain market develops their perceptions of brands after seeing it promoted through influencer marketing. The researchers wanted to go beyond the quantitative discussion regarding the frequency or extent of this phenomenon, rather they aimed to get an insight into the inner workings of a customer's mind when faced with influencer-branded content. For this reason, a qualitative approach to the research was selected.

Whilst there may be many advantages and pearls of wisdom in selecting the qualitative research methods it is not without its fair share of criticisms. One common critique is that it is difficult to both replicate and generalize, and regarding the latter the response is that often that it is not the purpose of qualitative research to produce insights that can be generalized to the larger masses, rather it is to gain deep insights into one particular sub-section. Regarding the issue of replicability, this is because each researcher brings their interpretation to the research, as well as the characteristics of the researcher (such as age, gender, and personality) may affect the participant response, therefore it is unrealistic to replicate a qualitative study exactly (Bell, Bryman and Hartley, 2019). However, there are solutions to this, including but not limited to creating stricter and more standardized procedures and reporting detailed step-by-step protocols for methodology and data collection that can be used in further research. (Anczyk et al, 2019)

3.3 Research Design and Purpose

The research design that is utilized in this study is the semi-structured interview. The reason being there will be greater and richer data that can be received from the interviewee's response. Within qualitative interviews data collection is an extremely important step, and one of the most widely used methods of qualitative data collection is conducting interviews, and the reason for its popularity is its many advantages. Interviews, as compared to questionnaires or surveys, are more powerful in eliciting narrative data that allows researchers to investigate people's views in greater depth (Kvale, 1996; 2003). Furthermore, it is also valuable because of the freedom and flexibility it provides participants to express themselves authentically, without the confines and limits of structured surveys. Within qualitative research they are especially helpful within instances where the phenomenon under question is not directly "observable" and the only method of inquiry is asking the participants about their experience of it (Alshenqeeti, 2014). As the purpose of this study is an explorative study the authors will be specifically conducting semi-structured interviews. The authors have a list of questions on fairly specific topics that are covered.

 However, the questions are not exactly following the outline of the guide. Furthermore, the questions that are not in the guide can also be asked; this will generate a better understanding of the topic of discussion (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley, 2019). This method will help the authors of this paper to explore and dig deeper to understand if influencer marketing factors of engagement and trust have a relation with brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty aspects from the consumer's perspective of brand equity. Furthermore, the researcher must be careful to let the participant have room to speak, as well as create an atmosphere of trust, and value, to ensure rich detailed data.

When preparing the interview guide, the researcher should critically evaluate the purpose and goal of their study and think about the gaps in their knowledge that would be supplemented by the participants' responses. The questions often arise out of the theoretical framework and can be

varying levels of probing, specifying (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley, 2019). However, like any research tool, interviews can also have certain disadvantages, for example, the response of the participants can be heavily shaped by the kind of questions asked, which encourages the researchers to be even more critically aware of their interview guides. Another disadvantage is the process of sampling, interviewing, transcribing and then coding the data for an interview is very time-consuming and leads to much smaller sample sizes. Regardless of the disadvantages, the authors of this paper have selected interviews as a data collection method as it would allow them to gain deep insights into the relationship between the influencer and consumer based brand equity.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Sampling Method

 The crux of sampling in qualitative research lies in purpose: the sampling needs to be done in a highly purposive manner as the goal is not to make infer large generalizations as in quantitative data, but to deeply understand the topic at hand; therefore, the sampling is done with a clear focus on the research question (Bell, Bryman and Hartley, 2019). One off-shoot of purposive sampling is generic purposive sampling, which is done slightly similarly to theoretical sampling, as the purpose is of generating theory through new observations, and it is a highly iterative approach. Researchers use it as a springboard off which new theories emerge. (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley, 2019) However, whereas theoretical sampling is sequential, a generic purpose sample can be fixed and a priori, meaning that the sampling is conducted once and the sampling characteristics are decided at the outset of the research, and the research question is kept in focus.

The authors of this paper used the convenience sampling method which is defined as a non-probability sampling where individuals are selected due to being accessible (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley, 2019). Moreover, the authors believe that this would allow the study to be more focused, and more insightful observations will be made from a sample that is

ethnically/culturally homogeneous. Due to this, the author's deeper look into the mind of the Swedish consumer. As the study is an explorative study base on relations between the Influencer market and Swedish consumer brand equity. The authors ensured the sample was relevant to the subject matter. The authors did this by making sure that the sample was active followers of influencers and was Swedish.

3.4.2 Sample Size

The sample sizes within qualitative research are typically not as large as those in quantitative research, regardless, maintenance lower limits exist to ensure that the amount of data collected is substantial enough for analysis and valuable inferrals. In qualitative research, it is not that important for a piece of data to be frequently recurring, rather even a single occurrence may hold importance within the larger framework, as the goal focuses on meaning and not generalizations. Another important aspect of sample size in saturation: is, the size of the sample is under that of the level needed to reach saturation, the situation where the addition of one more participant would not reveal any new insights or data (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley, 2019).

According to Patton (2015) and (Francis et al., 2010) a minimum sample can be selected before researching as it gives the researcher an understanding and guideline beforehand. The main focus ought to be to achieve data saturation clearly and transparently. Hence, the authors decided to go with a sample size of 10. However, Marshall et al (2015) have stated that a small sample size can be difficult to reach the ideal saturation. Although, so can larger groups as their data can be harder to analyze. If theoretical saturation is not researched the researchers are advised to broaden the sample size. The authors of this paper were content and did not need to broaden the sample size as the theoretical saturation was reached. This was detected by noticing a common partner in the answers of the interviewees.

3.4.3 Pre-Test

Conducting a pre-test of the data collection method for qualitative research is considered highly effective in increasing validity and ensuring better interpretation of the resulting data (Brown, Lindenberger, & Bryant, 2008), and testing the interview guide before hands works to make sure that the entire research instrument works well (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley). Therefore, it is key to go through reflection and self-correction after designing the questions for interviews and before implementing them, and this will not only assist in identifying any weakness in the questions that may hinder the data collection process by causing any confusion for the interviewee, detecting word ambiguity, and warning the researches of any questions that may be triggering or uncomfortable for the interviewee (Hurst et al., 2015). It is suggested that pre-testing should be conducted on individuals that may be similar to your target demographic in important ways but not those that would be included in your study (Bell, Bryman, and Hartley, 2019)

The authors also had an expert who was guiding them through this process in dept. and based on his recommendation and feedback the question was altered. Additionally, for this study, the authors conducted two interviews for pre-testing purposes. The two individuals were both young women who matched the sample group. They both were Swedish and followed influencers. The sampling of these two individuals was also based on convincing sampling. The criteria were also that the individuals were well knowledgeable about the Marketing field and theories that were being used in the paper. Two pre-tests were done as two authors of this paper were conducting five interviews each. Hence, it was crucial that both interviewers were to pretest to have an understanding and fix any of the feedback that was made. Some revisions suggested through the pre-tests were issues with wording, and some words were edited for clarity. Another revision suggested through the pre-test was to eliminate questions that prompted repetitive answers and one question was subsequently deleted.

To conclude, the pre-tests provided valuable feedback which was implemented before the authors were ready to carry out the final interviews.

3.5 Conducting Interviews

Once the sample selection is selected and finalized and through the pretest the question is altered and fixed. The next step is to conduct the actual interviews. The interviewees are sent a consent letter where they are asked to participate in the interview process. They are informed that the interview will be approximately 30-40 mins long. The interviewees are also informed that the interview will be recorded for analysis purposes. However, they are told that their answers are confidential and their names or identity will not be shared.

The interview was conducted on Zoom due to convincing the participants. The video was switched off for privacy reasons. Before 10 min the interview was to begin the Zoom link was sent to the participants. The interview begins with the interviewers introducing themselves and the purpose of the interview which is a bachelor thesis where we are to explore the relation between influencer marketing and Swedish consumer brand equity. The interviewee is reminded that the interview will be 30-40 min long and that everything will be recorded. But all will be anonymous. After the interview was done the participants were thanked for their time.
A copy of the consent letter and list of the questions will be mentioned in the future.

3.5.1 Consent Letter

This was the consent letter that was sent to all the interviewees a day before conducting the interview.

Dear [Interviewee],

I am writing to request your participation in an interview that will be conducted as part of our university thesis. Your contribution would be extremely valuable in helping us to understand more about consumers' feelings about influencers and branding!

The interview is expected to last around 30-40 minutes and will be recorded for future use. The purpose of the recording is to ensure that the information gathered is accurately represented and

analyzed. Please note that your personal information will be kept confidential and only used for this research.

It is important to note that your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any point if you feel uncomfortable or choose to do so. Additionally, if at any point you wish to withdraw your consent for your data to be used in the study, you may do so without penalty.

Please confirm your agreement to participate in this interview by signing and returning the attached consent form. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.
Sincerely,
[Your Name]

3.6 Operationalization Table

Items	Sub Concepts	Item	Definition	Reference
Influencer Marketing	Influencer Engagement	Bonds/ Relationship	The connection between the follower and influencer	Argyris et al. (2020)
		Purchase decision	The thought process that	Chen, Lin, and Shan (2021)

			influences the follower to want to purchase	
		Communication	Exchange of messages or information	Sugiarto, Simanjuntak, and Hasanah (2022)
	Trust	Knowledge	Being informed about a subject or product	Kim and Kim (2021)
		Credibility	Having the nature of being reliable	Saima and Khan (2020)
		Transparency	Not hiding valuable information	Shamim and Islam (2022)
Consumer Base Brand Equity	Brand Awareness	Familiarity	Having the knowledge about how the product works and looks like	Koecha, Buyleb, and Macario (2023)
		Brand Attitude	Personal evaluation that affects the emotions of liking or disliking a	Dabbous and Barakat (2020)

			brand/ product	
		Curiosity	Eager or showing interest in wanted to try out the product/ brand	Chandran, Rangarai, and Parayitam (2020),
	Brand Image	Perceived Quality	The first impression of how good or bad the product/ brand is received by the customer	Suki (2015)
		Brand Association	Mentally link the customer has with the brand through experiences, interactions	Lee, Lee, and Wu (2011)
		Value	The worth the brand has through the product endorsement	Lee, Lee, and Wu (2011)
	Brand Loyalty	Attitudinal Loyalty	customer chooses to stay loyal through	Šerić and Gil-Saura (2019),

			positive experience	
		Behavior Loyalty	customer buys from the same brand repeatedly	Hariharan et al. (2018),
		Satisfaction	Customer is content with the services, experience or product	Chahal and Bala (2010)

3.6.1 Interview Questions

Start of Interview

- Start with a brief introduction of yourself and the purpose of the interview.
- Explain the interview format and how long it will take.
- Obtain informed consent from the participant and let them know that they can withdraw from the interview at any time.
- Gather basic information about the participant such as their age, gender, education level, and occupation.
- Ask open-ended questions to understand their personal and professional background.

Main Interview:

Influencer Engagement

- Do you like to follow any influencers? If so, what kind of influencer do you follow? Why?
- What makes their content engaging?
- How do your favorite influencers can create a sense of community and engagement with their followers?

Bonds / Relationship:

- How would you describe your relationship with them (your fav influencer)?

Purchase decision:

- Have you ever made a purchase based on an influencer's recommendation? How did you feel about the purchase afterwards?

Communication:

- How do you prefer them to communicate with you? What is their tone?

Trust:

- (The Influencer you talk about) do you trust them? In what areas do you trust them? What makes them trustworthy?

Knowledge:

- Is your influencer knowledgeable about the products they promote? How can you tell?

Credibility:

- What makes your influencer's content reliable and convincing?

Transparency:

- Is your influencer's content honest? Are they transparent with their followers?

Engagement and Brand awareness

- Have you ever discovered a new brand or product through an influencer's content? Can you describe the experience? How did you act upon the brand because of the endorsement?

Familiarity:

- How did your influencers make you more familiar with the brand/Product? What kind of communication did they use (polls, story, Q&A)

Brand Attitude:

- How has your relationship with your influencer affected your attitude on the brand?

Curiosity

- Can you describe a time when an influencer's content raised your curiosity about a product and influenced your purchase decision? How did their content create that curiosity?

Engagement and Brand Image:

- Did an influencer's endorsement of a brand ever change the brand's image for you?

Perceived Quality:

- Does the influencer's communication always reflect your perception of the quality of the brand ? Or is there a gap sometimes?

Brand Association:

- How can the relationship with the influencer's affect the associations you have with the brand they're promoting?

Value:

- How has your favorite influencer created value for the product of endorsement and did that make you want to purchase from the brand?

Trust and Brand Loyalty

Attitudinal Loyalty:

- Can you describe a time when an influencer's expertise or knowledge affected your attitude on the brand? Did that make you want to actively try out the product and choose that brand?

Behavioral Loyalty

- Does the influencer's credibility play a role in whether you purchase repeatedly from the brand? Why or why not?

Satisfaction:
- If the influencer is transparent about the endorsement would you feel satisfied enough to want to purchase from the brand? If so Why?

3.7 Analysis Method

Once the interviews were conducted the last and final step was to analyze the material. The analysis method that was used was similar to the Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is used in qualitative research, the concepts and theories are arrived at through the inductive method. This means the theories are derived from the data that is collected (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). This was the analysis method that the authors followed where the theory was derived from the interviews. It was systematically gathered which means once the interviews were conducted the authors listened to the recordings together and wrote the transcript down. Based on the transcript open codes were made, which are words and phrases that the authors are taking from the transcript. The authors work with the transcript and ask themselves questions about what it means and start to compare it with previous data (Flick, 2018). The reason why the data is compared is to maintain the close connection between the data and the conceptualization, this

will ensure that the correspondence between the concept and categorized with the indications are not lost (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). Once all the open codes are written down based on all 10 interviews. Here the authors have changed the raw data to the conceptual level. The next step is to cluster the open codes (axel coding) based on similarity which will lie under one label. The codes should be indicated in the same subject manner (Flick, 2018). Similar to what the authors did once the open codes were written down the codes with similar characteristics were clustered together and given a label. The next step is to create core categories that will capture the relationship between the various concepts (Flick, 2018). This means the labels that were made are concepts that will follow under certain core categories that indicate similar characteristics (Flick, 2018). A similar step was followed by the authors once the label was made a relationship between the labels was detected that was added to certain categories. Lastly, the analysis where the interrelated core categories are to explain the phenomena. The last step is shown in depth in the analysis chapter.

3.7.1 Coding Schedule
See Appendix 1

3.9 Research Quality
According to (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019), there are three most crucial and prominent criteria to evaluate the quality and standard of the research being conducted. These criteria are reliability, replicability, and validity. This will ensure the quality of the qualitative research that has been done in this paper. Concerning how trustworthy, transparent, and clear the study is conducted.

Reliability is concerned if the results of the study can easily be repeated or not (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). Although reliability is a term that is more so connected to quantitative studies. There are a few aspects that can be valid in qualitative studies. Reliability in qualitative research is the stability of the responses of the different codes of data. This can be stable by having a transcript of the interview conducted (Kirk and Miller, 1986). According to Leung (2015), the essence of reliability in qualitative research is consistency. Consistency is achieved if the interviews are carried out in the right manner. Which means not having leading questions for the interviewee. Additionally, the other research should also go through the results to make sure

there is cohesiveness and consistency (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). This paper is reliable as experts did go through the interview question to make sure none of the questions are leading, all the questions are concerning the research question. Lastly, there is consistency and the question does not derail.

Replicability is concerning if the study can be repeated and done again. The methods and techniques that are used will also be the same in the replicable study to get the same result (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). According to Closa (2021), increasing transparency will generate better options for replicability, and this will increase the validity of qualitative research. However, it is to be noted as these were semi-structured interviews that were conducted if future research does decide to conduct this study they will not get the same results as this paper. As the answers can differ from person to person.

Validity in qualitative research is about trustworthiness. This was ensured by the careful recording of the interview and continual verification which means repeating the data that the interviewer is taking down during the interview process (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006) for the research to be valid the study needs to have deep saturation of the theory. If the interviewee's responses are similar unanimously that means the data is reliable. Lastly, the interviewer should try to find an alternative explanation for the results. Similar steps were taken not only were the interviews recorded but they were carefully transcript word for word. The questions are based on the theory which helped in having clear and understandable responses accordingly. Which was later easily coded as there was a clear pattern.

3.10 Ethical Consideration and Societal Issues

3.10.1 Ethical consideration

When conducting research there are four main aspects that researchers should take into consideration to have an ethical study. Firstly, never harm the participants' career, this means if the researcher is questioning employees in a small firm does not state anything about the interviewee's identity (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). For instance, if the firm has ten males and one female present, avoid using pronouns as that can 'out the identity.' Not to ask questions that could make the interviewee that could stress the interviewee. Secondly, lack of informed consent or in other words invasion of privacy (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). It is the

researcher's responsibility to ask for consent and inform the interviewees that the interviewee will be recorded and the information from the interview will be used in the research. Thirdly, not to ask questions that could be personal, the researcher should stick to the research question and not ask for personal information. Lastly, deception should not be involved when the researcher alters the data for their purpose (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). Not only will the research not be reliable, but it is not ethical.

These ethical considerations were followed while conducting and constricting the interviewee guide and questions. Firstly, the interviewees were kept completely anonymous even while conducting the interviews the video was off for protecting their identity. Furthermore, an extra step that was taken by the authors for this paper was to ensure that all participants were 18 and above. Secondly, the interviewees were sent a consent letter a day before conducting the interviewees, and before the interviewee could begin the interviews asked again for consent on if the interview can be recorded. Additionally, as an extra step that was taken, the interviewers made sure to explain the purpose of the study and informed the interviewee how long the interview was going to take.

Thirdly, do not ask any personal questions that could make the interviewee uncomfortable. The interviews asked questions such as age and occupation from the interviewee. However, before starting the interview the participants were told that they can draw from the interview at any moment they feel uncomfortable or stressed. Lastly, in connection with the third step not to be deceptive. The expert made sure the authors do not ask questions that are leading that could damage the reliability of the data.

3.10.2 Societal Issue

The purpose of this research paper is to mainly explore the relationship between an influencer's endorsement of a brand and the subsequent brand's equity within a consumer's mind. As it is an explorative study naturally conducted the consumers that are targeted are Swedish consumers.

When considering societal issues cultural norms are to be considered and how they can affect their community (Greely, 1998). To make sure the purpose of this paper has no negative effect on the Swedish consumer. The authors made sure to be as transparent and honest with the process of the research. To make sure every step of the research paper is correct the authors double-check with the experts in the field of marketing for a 'green light'. Furthermore, by understanding what aspects of influencer marketing the Swedish consumers prefer and are against when it comes to endorsements of products. This can not only benefit the Swedish community as they are receiving the content they want/ need. But this will improve a brand's equity as the companies will be using influencers according to what the consumers prefer.

3.11 Source Criticism

The authors of this paper followed the LNU source criticism criteria that were used to judge if the scientific articles are valid, credible, and trustworthy sources. The criteria included if the authors are valued contributors to the research area, whether the information is current and up-to-date, if the article presents valuable and novel findings to the research area, and if the findings are relevant and important to your research purpose (Linnaeus University, n.d.).

The authors evaluated all the articles used for the review against this criterion, and all but two made it passed the evaluation, Yoo and Donthu (2001) and Taylor, Celuch, and Goodwin,(2004).
 Yoo and Donthu (2001) the obvious concern is that the article is almost 22 years old, and thus the relevancy of the article can be questioned, however, the authors selected this article because it demonstrated that while brand equity may have developed throughout the years, the findings of Yoo and Donthu that brand equity is still relevant today. The finding states that brand awareness, brand loyalty and brand image fall under consumer brand equity. This was an important finding for the time that it was published, and it still is very important today. Therefore, this article was very relevant to the study and findings are helpful to the explorative study that is being done in this paper.

Taylor, Celuch, and Goodwin, (2004) the obvious concern is that the article is almost 19 years old, and thus the relevancy of the article can be questioned, however, the authors selected this article because it demonstrated that while brand equity may have developed throughout the years, the findings of Taylor, Celuch, and Goodwin, (2004) stated to have high attitudinal loyalty brands need to create an emotional value to achieve that brand satisfaction to a deeper level. This was an important finding for the time that it was published, and it still is very important today. Therefore, this article was very relevant to the study and findings are helpful to the explorative study that is being done in this paper.

4. Empirical

This chapter presents the material gathered from the ten interviews. The material has been divided into categories developed through the coding process.

4.1 The Influencer- Consumer's Relationship

4.1.1 Influencer Personality

The first question was not planned but emerged while interviewing. *"The question was what is the kind of influencer personality that their favorite influencer is projecting"*. Interviewee 9 stated the personality and image the influencer had created was *"harsh and outspoken communication"* when it came to endorsement. This personality of the influencer was much appreciated by interviewee 9 which made her like influencers strongly. Interviewee 6 stated she found the influencer very *"energetic, happy, and positive"* which also made her like influencers overall. A very interesting description that was denoted by interviewee 8 was that the influencer's personality was very *"humble, and genuine"* which was communicated with the way the influencer interacted.

However, interviewees 3 and 10 stated that the personality that the influencer is showcasing is not real. As if the influencer is real could *"reflect poorly on their brand"*. Similar notes were detected in the discussion with interviewee 5 where she would get *"tired of the influencer easily"* and would just *"unfollow them"*. While Interviewees 2 and 4 do not keep up with the

influencer as their *"real personality"* does not shine through. Interviewee 2 also stated how the influencers tend to be *"very shallow"*. While Interviewee 3 also stated a similar remark that the influencers are not *"transparent"* as that could ruin their image. Hence, all these interviewees have an overall dislike of the influencer.

4.1.2 Reason for Following

Naturally, the next question was *"Why to follow them"*. An array of answers stated some mentioned they followed the influencer as they saw them as *"makeup experts"* or *"fashion experts"*. Interviewees 4 and 9 stated they are interested in the influencer *"as people like what they are doing in their lives"*. Interviewee 8 stated that he followed the influence because he educated him about fashion and how to style clothing items. In a similar answer, interviewee 7 stated how the influencer she follows gives tips on *"how to style dresses"* and *"how to cinch a particle part of the dress to give more definition"*. Interviewee 10 stated *"I was very insecure growing up"* The influencer she followed *"helped me in doing my makeup"* which helped Interviewee 10 to gain more confidence.

A unanimous response by all the interviewees was also that they followed their preferred influencer due to similar interests. Interviewee 3 pointed out how the representation factor of the similar religion and ethnicity made her follow the influencer. Lastly, 5 also, stated how she looked up to the entrepreneurial aspects of the influencer and wanted to learn from that and reflect that in her own life, which is why she continued to follow the influencer for several years.

4.1.3 Relationship Building Leading to Communities

By understanding the reason for following, the interviewee wanted to understand the relationship between the influencer and followers. The question stated was *"What kind of relationship do you have with the influencer"*. Interviewee 2 had a very strong and stern answer and stated that she has no relationship with the influencer, and it feels like *"stalking"* to have one. Interviewee 6 was a little confused as to how one can have any sort of relationship or bond with an influencer. She continues to state that she *"does not have a relationship"* with the influencer.

In contrast, interviewees 3 and 8 stated that after following the influencers for several years they start to develop a connection and bond with them. Interviewee 3 stated that she felt like the influencer she was watching for years is like an *"older brother" t*o her. Neutral responses were stated by interviewees 5, 7,1, and 4 stated that they have a very surface-level relationship, nothing too deep. Moreover, interviewees 9 and 10 stated the bond they have with the influencer was very inspirational. As the influencers have inspired them to improve themselves either in a confident manner or mentally health-wise.

Further on, the interviewees expressed unanimously by having similar interests, bonds, and representation automatically created a community. Interviewee 3 stated that ethnicity or religion helps in building a community with the influencer as she felt represented and seen. Interviewees 8 and 9 felt the influencers build community based on their expertise in makeup and fashion. However, interviewees 2 and 6 did not feel the same as the rest of the interviewees. The argument was that they tend to follow influencers based on what they are interested in viewing. That day the interviewees did not so much feel a connection enough to feel a part of the community. Interviewee 6 clearly stated, *"Honestly, I don't have a connection with her to say I am personally a part of the community."*

4.1.4 Engagement

The follow-up question was *"How do the influencers engage with the followers?"* The interviewees mainly stated through Instagram stories. The interviewees had to be probed to understand the deeper meaning of *"Instagram stories"*. The question was asked *"What do they post on their Instagram stories?"* Then the interviewee started to explain that influencers tend to engage with their followers by showing their personal life that influencers their families and friends. Furthermore, interviewees 6, 8, and 10 stated if influencers were to endorse or had endorsed in the past they would do *"Q&As"* to ask the followers for feedback or just help the followers to understand how to use the product better. Interviewee 9 stated that Instagram stories helped us followers to see the *"real, genuine and honest personalities"* of the influencers. The

engagement through Instagram stories further shows Interviewee 5 how open-minded and energetic the influencer she follows is.

Furthermore, an interesting discussion was noted by the authors in that interviewee 1 stated that smaller influencers tend to reach out more and engage more with their followers. However, interviewee 2 argued and stated the opposite: that bigger influencer engages more. The question *"Why do you think that?"* was stated. interviewee 2 continued to express and stated that smaller influencers are not

genuine as they are trying to build an audience and will say anything to gain followers. So even if they might *"engage more"* it's not genuine. As bigger influencers have *"made it"* hence, they can be more candidates with the way they engage with their followers. Lastly, interviewee 4, stated that the influencers try to engage by adding links to the endorsed products. To the interviewee 4 perspective this is how the influencer *"Kill two birds with one stone"*. They do their duty of engaging and endorsing the product to the followers *"which is why I NEVER buy from the links"*.

4.2 The Building Blocks of Trust

4.2.1 Trust

In the series of trust questions, the interviewee began with a simple yes/ no question. *"Do you trust your influencer?"* The responses were very diverse. Interviewee 9 stated that she trusted her influencer to the point that she would boycott any brand or product the influencer says to. While Influencer 10 stated that she does not know the influencer which is why she does not trust anything they recommend. The interviewer dug deeper to understand why the interviewees found the influencer trustworthy and did not find them trustworthy.

Firstly, the interviewee that found the influencers trustworthy was based on their judgments. The interviewees explained the influencers have always recommended that they have matched their needs. Also, the influencers tend to be very transparent with everything about the product that is

being endorsed. The influencers that interviewee 1 trust is due to her passion and knowledge of products that the influencer is recommending or even endorsing. Interviewees 8 and 9 express similar points as influencers will not recommend products if they are not familiar with them themselves. As their reputation will be on the line if they take the risk of recommending or endorsing products that they have not used themselves this is why they trust the influencers.

Additionally, the interviewee 8 influencer is very transparent and shows the profits being made after followers purchase the endorsed recommendation. Lastly, interviewees 6 and 7 stated that trust factors are generated as they show content creation behind the scenes and the content is very raw and unedited. According to the interviewee, this helps the interviewee to judge the influencer and allows them to trust the influencers. Although, interviewee 9 trusts her influencer by only being in the makeup department.

Furthermore, the understanding of the non-trusting interviewees was next. Interviewee 10 stated that the main reason for the lack of trust is the lack of transparency. The interviewee felt that the influencer's brand did not match the endorsed products *"The influencer I follow is very into neutral tones and the endorsed product had a very vibrant color"*. The interviewee felt it was only for the money which is why the interviewee does not trust the influencer. A similar answer was stated by interviewee 2 where it's *"all about the money"* for the influencers. Additionally, interviewee 3 stated that the lack of trust she has in the influencer is due to sponsored content and explained that *"it is their job to sell things to us"*. She continues to state that influencers will never be transparent and honest as too much is at stake for them.

Lastly, the interviewers wanted to additionally understand how "trust can *be gained"*. Interviewee 5 stated to trust influencers the followers need to feel safe to try out the brand that is being endorsed to them. The influencer can gain the safety factor by communicating how the product is used. Interviewee 5 continued being as detail-oriented as possible will help the followers to visualize the endorsed product and only then will be able to trust the influencers' endorsements. Interviewee 3 stated that if the influencer blogger's life is a *"side hustle"* then she will be more likely to trust the influencers. Interviewee 3 expresses that the influencer should not need the money only then *"I will find the influencer reliable and credible"*. Interviewees 2 and

10 stated they would find the influencer trustworthy if the content was not sponsored and it was a genuine recommendation. The interviewer stated, *"How will the influencer earn then?"* The response from interviewees 2 and 10 stated that if the content must be sponsored *"I would only trust if the influencer had been using products from that brand before"* or if the influencers were to say, *"I have used this product before"*. Then only the trust will be able to be generated from Interviewees 2 and 10 sides.

4.2.2 Knowledge to Trust

The discussion mainly stated that *"Is your influencer knowledgeable about the products they promote?"* Interviewee 1, 2, and 3 unanimously stated that the influencer they find knowledgeable is the influencers that are educated or have a degree. Interviewee 3 stated that *"If a dermatologist or specialist recommends or endorses a product to me, I will trust their judgments"*. While interviewee 2 stated that if the influencer has the same issues as me *"acne-prone skin"* and endorses the product the interviewee felt that the influencer is very knowledgeable and experienced with the product. Interviewee 1 stated that *"licensed dermatologists"* are more knowledgeable and will be convincing and trustworthy. Additionally, interviewee 4 finds influencers knowledgeable if they state they have *"tried the product before."*

Interviewee 8 stated that the influencer he follows is very knowledgeable as the influencer has been doing fashion for several years which is why the influencer's judgment and endorsements can be trusted. Similarly, interviewees 10, 5, and 7 stated that they find the influencer knowledgeable as the influencer has her makeup brand. This means the influencer has knowledge of what the make products must contain in order to be good. Which is why trust is generated. Interviewee 5 points out that *"right terminology"* is also a huge indication of how knowledgeable the influencer is.

Lastly, interviewees 2 and 3 also stated that criticizing the endorsed products slightly shows that the influencer is not only knowledgeable but also the influencer has used them. The criticism can be done when describing the product in depth. How it has a fault with the packaging or formula of the makeup product.

4.2.3 Influencer product match

The discussion here was about understating through the endorsement the influencer matching the product quality. Interviewee 10 stated that the product quality did not match the actual product by the influencer. Interviewee 10 felt that the influencer *"overdid it"* and the influencer's image does not match the product that was being endorsed. This is why Interviewee 10 felt the product match with the influencer was not a success. Interviewees 2 and 3 expressed that product quality matches when the influencer adds more life to it and makes it more real *"communicate like a friend"*. The interviewees felt the influencer endorse too much like a *"salesperson"* which makes the quality of the product lower than it could be which is why the product quality does not match the endorsement.

Interviewee 1 expresses that influencers do not capture the quality of the endorsed product well in the sponsored content. The influencers tend to either over or underdo it.
 Interviewee1 and 2 continue to say that if the product of endorsement does not match the image of the influencer automatically the product quality will be lower. As the influencer does not know the product intensely *"I would be very skeptical of the brand."*

In contrast, interviewee 7,8, and 9 expresses the product quality and brand always matches the influencer image and endorsement. The interviewee stated that because the influencer only endorses products that they have used several times. This makes the interviewees state that the product quality matches the description and influencer image.

4.4.4 Familiarity

The question that was discussed here concerning *"How did the influencer communicate and make the followers familiar with the endorsed brand?"* When this question was stated to the interviewees the discussion took an interesting and different turn. Interviewee 1 stated that when the influencer endorses a *"new brand"* she would not pay attention only to *"brands I am familiar with"* the attention would be grabbed. A similar statement was said by interviewees 2 and 3 that their attention is grabbed by the brand that they have personally tried and know it's

good for the money. The interviewees continued to explain that they are not invested in discovering new brands as they always will be hesitant to try them out. The question *"why"* was asked. Interviewee 4 stated a reasonable answer: the lack of credibility in the influencer makes them hesitant to try out a new brand that they have never heard of. Which is familiarity if not generated for these interviewees.

However, interviewee 9 argues that familiarity is created by influencers as they communicate the endorsed product constantly on their social media platforms especially, Instagram stories. This was a unanimous answer by interviewees 10, 8, 7, and 5. But interviewee 6's statement went deeper and states that for her the influencer created familiarity by being detail-oriented and showing the product up close and describing how the *"dress feels"* the material. The key term that the interviewees had stated was *"consistent"*. The influencer was consistent with showing the endorsed products on major social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. According to the interviewees the constant reminder and showing of how the products look and describing the overall attributes of the endorsed products helped in creating familiarity of the brand and their products.

4.5 The Brands

4.5.1 Brand Attitude

The following question was *"By having a relationship with the influencer how does that affect the brand attitudes?"* The responses were divided mainly based on how the interviewee felt about the influencers. According to an interviewee, 3 endorsements are something that is of interest to her. Although she does clarify she does have a bond with the influencer but that does not affect her attitude to the brand. Similarly, interviewee 6 stated that she has no relationship hence the endorsement does not affect the brand attitude. Interviewees 2, 1, and 10 also, stated the same answer that the endorsement that is being made does not affect the brand attitude.

In contrast, interviewees 9 and 8 stated how they have a strong inspirational connection with the influencer, and if they market a product a lot of work and thought has gone to the endorsement. Which is why they always have a positive attitude. Additionally, interviewees 5 and 7 expressed

how their relationship with the influencer is very surface leveled. Regardless, of the lack of intense bond the interviewee expresses they have a positive brand attitude toward the endorsed product.

4.5.2 Brand Image

The question that was stated here was how did influencer endorsement change the brand image? Interviewee 1, 2,3, and 4 was upfront and stated that influencers do not have the influence enough to change the brand image or as interviewee 1 stated *"they do not have that much power to do so."* An interesting discussion was raised by interviewee 5 and she stated that the only way the influencer can enhance or change a brand image is if the products matched their brand image. Interviewee 5 continues to state that the influencer will be the only way to create a strong brand association. Interviewee 10 stated I would have a better brand association with a brand if they did not pick a particular influencer as not all influencers match every brand. Additionally, Interviewee 5 also states that it is important to know the needs of the follower as a customer only then value will be created. Interviewee 5 felt that the influencer does not always do this which is why the brand image is non-existing. Interviewee 4 stated that her opinion on the image or association with the brand is by her interactions with the brand. It has nothing to do with the influencer.

However, interviewees 6 and 9 argue that the brand image is elevated only because of the influencers as they capture the image and content of the product in an aesthetically pleasing way. This helps the endorsement to look good which automatically makes the brand look good. Similar feelings were shared by interviewee 8 that influencers create value by showing the product in detail and as interviewee 7 stated *"describe it in a manner that we feel like we already have the product."* Interviewees 9 and 8 continue to state as they share a good bond with the influencer, they have a good association with the brand.

4.5.3 Attitudinal Loyalty

The question concerning attitudinal loyalty was *"How does the expertise that the influencer holds affects the attitudinal loyalty?"* Interviewees 2 and 3 had the same observation that the

influencer that seems very educated *"having a Dr degree"* as interviewee 3 stated. This made the interviewees try out the product from the specific brand. The reasoning behind this thought process according to the interviewee is that they are aware that the influencer does not need the money from the endorsement, and they are just doing it because they are *"knowledgeable and experts"* in the field. This is why both interviewees actively try out the brand that the influencer recommends. Additionally, interviewee 5 mentioned throughout her interview *"feeling safe as a consumer"* is important as that will encourage the followers to become a consumer and try out the brand. Interviewee 5 feels safe as she is aware that the influencer she views is an expert and very knowledgeable in the makeup department which makes her want to actively try out the brands that are being endorsed to her by the influencer. Interviewee 9 stated that due to the expertise, the influencer has encouraged her to actively try out the brand. The same was said by interviewee 8.

The same feeling and viewpoints were not shared by interviewees 1,6 and 10 they stated that the influencer's *"knowledge or expertise"* has no effect on attitudinal loyalty. Which means they would not actively try out the brand. According to the interviewees, the only reason they will try out the brand is if it attracts them. This attraction has nothing to do with the influencers. Interviewee 1 stated she has a negative reputation in her mind when it comes to endorsement and will only be interested to want to try out the brand if she has had contact with the brand.

4.5.5 Reason for Purchase

The question that was asked the interviewees was *"Did the influencer recommendation influence the purchase decision"*. There were mixed responses to this question as some of the interviewees felt

that the influencer's recommendation did help them find and purchase the best

product in the market. Interviewee 9 stated that *"It changed my life"* after she purchased the recommended product from the influencer. Interviewee 7 stated that *"I feel like I treat myself if I purchase the influencer recommendation"*. The probing question was asked, *"How"*. To which she responded the influencer she was following focused more so on *"high quality"* or *"high end products"*. So, purchasing based on that influencer recommendation felt like a

"treat". Additionally, interviewees 2 and 4 stated similar responses that subconsciously that influencer marketing or recommendation does

influence you into purchasing the item. An interesting point that was raised by interviewee 1 was that if she is considering purchasing but is unsure and sees her favorite influencer recommend that exact product. She will surely purchase the product then. Lastly, interview 8 strongly stated that he did purchase products based on the influencers' recommendation and was very pleased and *"fulfilled"* with them.

In contrast, the rest of the interviewees 3 stated that any purchases that are made are not because of influencers. The question that was asked was *"Then what are they based on?"*. To which she responded they are mainly done based on trends that she sees on TikTok. The purchases are also based on family and friends' recommendations. The same answer was expressed by interviewees 5 and

6. The common theme that was detected in the answers for 3, 5, and 6 interviewees was they prefer doing their research by reading reviews and asking friends and family about the product they are interested in. Lastly, interview 10 stated an interesting discussion where she stated that *"although I did purchase based on the influencer's recommendation, I was not satisfied with it"*. She later expressed that she will not be purchasing items based on the influencer's recommendation. As the product quality doesn't necessarily match the description.

4.5.6 Behavior Loyalty

The following questions were *"Did the endorsement of the product by the influencer lead to repeated purchase behavior"*. Interviewee 5 expresses that repeated purchase behavior is in connection with credibility and satisfaction. Several of the interviewees stated that the due to the transparency the influencer had with the followers. That encouraged them to try out the product and because they were satisfied, they continued to repurchase from the same brand. Interviewee 9 stated clearly *"I bought the same product four times already because of the influencer I trust her judgments"*. When the interviewer asked the prodding question as to why? Interviewee 9

stated that *"seeing long-term collaboration from the same brand creates a sense of loyalty for that endorsed brand".*

However, not all interviewees had the same experience. For instance, Interviewee 10 stated that *"if the influencer would be better at doing their homework on sponsored content, I would feel satisfied to purchase the product".* When the probing question was asked, *"Can you elaborate".* Interviewee 10 stated that *"If the influencer wants me to make repeated purchases. I would want her to use that product repeatedly first ".* Additionally, interviewees 1 and 3 had unanimous response that transparency is key for an influencer. Now, all influencers tend to display that, which is why they do not feel satisfied to make any purchases from the endorsed brand. Interviewees 1, 2, and 3 clearly stated that *"loyalty lies with the brand and not due to the influencer by any means".* Interviewee 7 and 8 stated that repeated purchase is impossible due to the price point. Although they stated that they are loyal followers of the influencer and really like the brand, they cannot purchase repeatedly from that brand as it is expensive. Lastly, interviewee 6 stated that *"Even though I like the brand I just cannot continuously repurchase from the brand".*

5. Analysis

The analysis chapter will dive deeper into the interviews to understand the ways influencer endorsements impact a consumer's brand equity. The analysis chapter will be structured as per the three aspects of consumer based brand equity and will explore the relationships put forth in the conceptual map.

5.1 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is considered the most crucial element to foster good brand equity (Sasmita and Mohd Suki, 2015) and focuses on how familiar and known a consumer is with the brand, its values, products, it's qualities and what it is offering (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018). It is highly important to create a strong awareness of the brand to ensure that when making a purchase, said brand remains at the forefront of the consumer's mind, and a positive

connection between strong brand awareness and market performance has been established in research (Homburg, Klarmann, and Schmitt, 2010). Brand awareness is fostered through curiosity, and increasing consumer's curiosity of a brand can lead to a positive shift in their brand attitude (Koecha, Buyleb, and Macario, 2023)

To investigate this phenomenon, the interviewees were probed regarding their previous encounters of a brand endorsement by an influencer. Participants were asked how the influencers generally engaged with their audience, and what methods they employed to build a familiarity with themselves, and the endorsed brand. Sugiarto, Simanjuntak, and Hasanah (2022), Chen, Lin, and Shan (2021) and Argyris et al. (2020) have discussed how influencers built a connection with their followers through frequent and honest engagement, and through engagement influencers are able to relay the information about the endorsed brand.

Regarding this the interviewees offered several interesting insights, on not just what the engagement could look like but what it implied. The phenomenon of Instagram stories was frequently brought up and the consensus was that influencers largely engaged with their audience using Instagram stories, on which they shared clips of their daily life, their family, and friends, and more.

Different aspects of the endorsement were brought up, starting off with the concept of *"familiarity"* with the brand, the interviewees discussed the ways in which they were familiarized with the endorsed brand through specific Instagram features, such as the *"story"* or the *"Q and A"*, where viewers could ask questions about the product which the influencer would then answer. Another interesting insight was different interviewees suggesting that a simple one-time post or story was rarely done, rather the influencers would show the product or brand here and there and display how it had assimilated into their daily lives. This was according to our participants a way to show how they produce, such as a dress, for example, could be used in multiple ways, or multiple occasions.

Here it is apparent that that engagement, especially natural and frequent engagement influences the consumer's awareness of the brand. However, a surprising insight was made with this line of questioning. A dominant theme was interviewees discussing the endorsement of brands they were previously familiar with, and this prompted the authors to dig deeper and inquire about

previously unheard-of brands. Interviewee one stated that she "*did not notice*" when influencers endorsed brands she had never heard of before, and Interviewee 2 stated how she did not pay attention to a brand that she had never encountered before as it was probably not relevant to her. Furthermore, other participants also touched on this, and discussed how seeing an influencer endorse a never-before heard of brand raised their suspicions: they were skeptical about trying it and did not have much faith in it. One participant discussed how she was initially not trusting of a new brand through an endorsement, she saw more than one influencer endorsement for that brand, which raised her trust levels slightly, but did not fully convince her. However, if an influencer they followed promoted an already *"established"* brand, they would have more faith in the endorsement overall. The underlying issue seemed to be that interviewees did not have that level of trust within influencers to act on a brand they had not received information about from any other source.

Brand awareness also touches on the attitude of the brand in the consumer's mind (Koecha, Buyleb, and Macario (2023), Dabbous and Barakat, (2020)). This led to quite a few interesting conversations with the participants about their attitude of a brand being impacted by an influencer, and the overwhelming consensus seemed to be that if the consumer already had an attitude towards the brand, and influencer was unlikely to change that, however, there was an exception to this, and that was the case of negative feedback. The interviewees seemed to be generally in agreement that positive feedback of a brand would do little to change the attitude already held by a consumer, negative feedback and criticism certainly made them doubt. One participant talked about how she sometimes listened to the positive endorsement, but she always paid attention to the negative feedback by an influencer, because that was likely to be more honest, and thus her opinion of the brand was influenced. This suggests that while an influencer endorsement may be beneficial, an influencer's negative experience could be critically damaging to a brand's attitude.

From this discussion we can conclude that influencer endorsements can be highly effective in terms of generating awareness of the brand, apart from very new brands, in which case the influencer endorsements are quite useless. Furthermore, it can be concluded that negative awareness may be much more easily spread by influencers as opposed to positive awareness.

5.2 Brand Image

The second dimension of brand equity is brand image, which is a contributing factor in trust, satisfaction, and repurchase intention of a customer. Brand Image is concerned with the brand's perceived quality and associations with the brand and is based on the experiences and interactions with the brand (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Prevan, 2018). It can also be inferred from the theory that the same associations felt for an influencer may be applied to the brand being endorsed. To explore the relationship between influencer endorsements and brand image, it was vital to first explore how our interviewees, the consumers, viewed influencers, and understand their relationship.

Through engagement, influencer's build strong and deep bonds with their followers (Sugiarto, Simanjuntak, and Hasanah (2022) and Chen, Lin, and Shan (2021) and Argyris et al. (2020), and this was echoed by statements from certain interviewees, that stated that for them, the influencers were like *"an older brother"* or *"an older sister I seek advice from"*. This sentiment was, however, not shared by other participants, quite a few of the interviewees were hesitant to agree that a relationship of any kind existed between them and the influencer. One interesting example in an interviewer who had mentioned only following large influencers, who she explained had a much less interactive approach with her followers. She stated how she felt herself to be a *"stalker"* or a *"watcher"* of this influencer, and indeed this sentiment was echoed by other interviewees, some of which described the relationship as *"very one sided"* or *"shallow"*. This was interesting to explore because these interviewees had revealed that they acted on advice through influencers by purchasing, despite demonstrating no attachment to them. This can imply that a deep connection or bond with the influencer might not be the key factor of affecting the image of the brand, and contradicts the findings of Zhong (2022), which state that having a deeper connection with the influencer entails building a connection with the brand that is being advertised. This was an interesting insight as it revealed that despite their efforts to engage the audience, interacting with the influencers are not very successful at building genuine relationships with followers.

Lee and Eastin (2020), Leung, Gare (20229, and Martínez-López et al. (2020) further discuss how influencers are considered to be opinion leaders, and this was a sentiment that was

unanimously agreed upon; when prompted on their reason for following influencers, the influencers all gave answers that related to inspiration and advice in fields of style, makeup, skincare, entrepreneurial pursuits, and more. This illustrates that consumers do in fact expect the influencers to convince them of a brand and influence the image in their minds.

When discussing the personality of the influencers, some interviews talked about specific character traits such as outgoing, bubbly, or humble. In addition, participants discussed representation, or feeling a common element with the influencer, such as a shared interest or ethnic background, which is highlighted in above theory as consumers follow influencers whose content resonates with them. However, a recurring theme amongst the remaining participants was transparency: Interviewees 2 and 4 both said that for most influencers they followed their *"real personality"* was not on display, rather it was a persona, while interviewees 3 and 10 also discussed how not being 100% transparent with their followers was a strategic move, as this would ensure that their image remained clean and problem-free. This lack of trust in an influencer's personality seems contradictory when considering the reason, they follow influencers is to get inspiration and advice, and from these findings it can be inferred that purchases made through influencers, or any shift in perception a brand through an influencer, is not necessarily because the followers feel a bond or relationship, nor due to the apparent personality. This opposes the findings which state that for an influencer to influence brand image and purchase decision, a strong emotional bond is required.

This hesitancy and doubt are possibly translated to the brand image of the endorsement, and a shadow of mistrust is cast over the brand's image as the consumer does not fully feel a connection with, or trust the public persona of, the influencer. When it came to brand image, several interviewees expressed that they did not think an influencer had the power to change the perceived quality of the brand, however, when probed deeper, were able to provide several instances that proved otherwise. One participant mentioned a high-end luxury brand using a TikTok influencer to promote their products: to her, this *"cheapened"* the brand. She discussed how she concluded that if a brand was using someone that did not match their product and had a reputation for not being very *"classy"*, that made her wonder if the brand was what they made themselves out to be. In contrast, when other interviewees were probed on this phenomenon, one

discussed how she had seen similar instances, but in her mind that was a way for the brand to expand their audience, and target more segments of the population, which was a good thing.

Another important insight was the way the endorsement was done also affected the brand image: one participant discussed how an influencer could *"Overdo or underdo"* an endorsement, and by that she meant that one endorsement would be done with much more effort and time, versus another with comparatively less effort. Here "effort" was explained as a more detailed text, a longer video with more talking, trying the product in different ways. For this participant, this indicated about the quality of the brand, and she perceived the brand with a more detailed endorsement was of a *"higher quality"*.

An opposing point of view was put forth by Interviewees 7,8, and 9 who believed that an influencer's knowledge and expertise verified the brand's image: they provided examples of influencers with high expertise in certain fields promoting brands, to them, this completely established the brand as that of a higher quality, even if they previously had misgivings about it. One participant stated how she knew her influencer would not promote a brand that was low quality, because she was a popular influencer who had a reputation to maintain. Here, we observe that the brand image is closely tied to the kind of influencer chosen: the participants tended to associate the influencer's image with that of the brand they promoted, so an influencer with a reputation for not being luxurious could drag down the image and perceived quality of a luxury brand, whereas an influencer with a reputation of being a promoter of high quality brands could elevate a brand and change it's image in consumer's mind.

5.3 Brand Loyalty

Finally, the final aspect of brand equity to be discussed is brand loyalty, which is remaining committed to a particular brand despite the competition's products- brand equity is built through maintaining long term relationships with customers as well as ensuring the high quality of the products and services. The implication gathered through theory was that trust had a significant relationship with brand loyalty, and trusting an influencer could inspire brand loyalty in a consumer. Therefore, the author's explored the concept of trust within the interviewees.

Throughout the interviews and coding the authors repeatedly encountered an overall sense of scepticism from the interviewees: despite the unanimous commonality that all were frequently or in the past influenced by influencer recommendations, the interviewees displayed clear signs of doubt regarding their level of trust in the influencer. A dominating concern amongst them was if the influencers were paid to do an advertisement, how could they be sure that it was genuine advice, and not simply a way to earn money? It was clear there was a certain level of trust, despite the misgivings, as the interviewees did not deny that they had been "influenced". Thus, it became very interesting to explore the different factors that inspired this trust and that were able to mitigate the suspicion and hesitancy to trust influencers. The two factors that were seen to inspire trust were knowledge and transparency/honesty.

5.3.1 Knowledge

One factor weighed quite heavily when it came to increasing the consumer's trust in an influencer and affecting their opinion of brands and impacting their purchase habits. This was knowledge.

Saima and Khan (2020), Kim and Kim (2021) and Lou and Yuan (2019) all seem to agree that knowledge and particularly trust are crucial elements in building trust in influencers, and this was clearly demonstrated by the interviews. Interviewees 1, 8, 9 discussed that their trust in the influencer stemmed from their in-depth knowledge of the industry, an example being an influencer who was passionate about clothes, and thus more likely to have accurate information about it. Interviewees also mentioned that being knowledgeable was often more than seeming informed, rather having a license or proof of knowledge was incredibly important for building trust: some mentioned were dermatologists for skincare, business-owners for entrepreneurial advice, makeup artists for makeup recommendations, and nutritionists for food and cooking. Interviewer 3 mentioned how influencers having a *"main profession"* different from influencing highlight added to their validity and trust in them, as it demonstrated that the influencer was not simply endorsing a product for monetary again. This was further expanded on by Interviewee 2 and 10, who highlighted that there was always a real concern with influencers only doing endorsements as it was their source of income, which is why a profession in their feed was an assurance that their recommendations were legitimate. This demonstrates the high levels of

perceptions of consumers and demonstrates how when seeking advice, it is simply not enough to seem knowledgeable, rather the influence significantly increases when the influencer has some sort of stamp of knowledge that legitimizes their advice. This has valuable practical implications for businesses as it suggests that working with influencers that are professionals within their field is a highly efficient strategy.

Another indication of knowledge was if the product being endorsed matched the influencer's personal brand. Fitriati and Madu Siwi (2022), Argyris et al (2020) and (Genoveva, 2022) expand on the importance of a product and influencer match, and this was confirmed by the interviews. One interview discussed how some endorsements feel like they are coming from a *"salesperson"* because they are totally unrelated to the topics the influencer usually talks about. The interviewees described different instances in which they were shocked to see a particular influencer speak on a brand or product that was *"out of their niche"* and concluded that it made them sceptical and confused. One interviewee described following a health-influencer that normally promoted healthy eating habits, and one day seeing him promote diet pills. She stated that *"I already had no trust in those pills, but this made my trust in the influencer decrease as well, because it was so unusual for him"*. This not only influenced the general field the influencers worked in, but also extended to their individual aesthetic. One interviewee discussed how her favorited influencer typically wore beige and neutral clothes, and once saw her promote a clothing line of bright colours; she said that there was no way she would trust that recommendation because she could observe it was not a natural, genuine recommendation, rather a paid one. Thus, a harmony between the endorsed product/brand and the influencer's personal brand hinted at knowledge and contributed to trust. This also allowed the influencer to go into much greater detail about the product and give in-depth information about it. One interviewee described how by providing. extreme detail about a makeup product such as how it felt on the skin, how it looks in certain lights, etc., her favorited make-up influencer made her feel *"safe"* as a consumer to purchase from that brand. One important factor that was highlighted by select participants was that a single mention of a product, in a story or post, was not enough, rather, *"good"* influencers would provide knowledge of a product over several instances, by showing it in their daily life. Several of the other interviewees also reported similar instances in which the way their trust was gained was not by a direct endorsement, rather clear and accurate information was provided to them by the influencer, which provided a good confirmation for the findings of

Lou and Yuan (2019), which stated that influencer marketing strategies were only effective when the content shared was highly informative. Again, for businesses this is relevant because it illustrates the kind of endorsement that works and the kind that doesn't, and what actions to avoid in relation to selecting an influencer and creating the content.

5.3.2 Transparency and Honesty

In addition to knowledge, another factor that greatly contributed to trust in an influencer was their transparency and honesty. Lou and Yuan (2019) discuss that using influencers is only effective when there are high levels of transparency, and this is further echoed by Stubb, Nyström, and Colliander (2019) who have also stated that an influencer's honesty regarding the shared content being paid advertisement is always highly appreciated by viewers, and this was repeatedly brought up by various interviewees and highly corroborated. Here the influencers talked about transparency not in the context of an influencer's personality, but rather their openness to reveal that the endorsement was a paid promotion. This issue has been Further highlighted in the theory by Liu et al. (2015), Ye et al. (2021) and Shamim and Islam (2022), which state that to be transparent about endorsements is vital for the success of an influencer marketing strategy. The interviewees gave examples where they had observed transparency, from influencers sharing behind the scenes unedited footage of shooting the advertisement, to one influencer even sharing the sum of money that had gone into creating the ad. To them, this elevated their trust levels greatly. This suggests that viewers do not appreciate being *"tricked"* into an advertisement, rather, the consumer feels more satisfied and in control with the knowledge that he/she is looking at a paid promotion, and this alleviates any possible notions of deception. This could lead to an increase in trust in the endorsement and even influence purchase intention.

Another interesting aspect of honesty was criticism of the brand/product. The interview discussed how if an influencer simply praised the product, perhaps they could trust it, but the trust levels would increase significantly if they offered some criticism of the brand/product, or some way in which it could be improved. To the interviewees, this demonstrated that the influencers had not just been paid to endorse the product, rather they had used it for themselves and reached that conclusion. This highlights the value of authenticity for consumers: trusting

influencers is already a risky businesses, so an influencers criticism of a product doesn't just show to the consumer that they are knowledgeable and familiar with the product, it also demonstrates that the influencer is not a *"sell-out"*, or that they would not promote a bad or faulty product for the sake of money, which raises the validity of the endorsement in the consumer's eyes.

Here, it is observable that while consumers do have doubts about influencers, their trust can be gain be gained through several factors. However, does this trust inspire brand loyalty? Can consumers trust influencers enough to purchase their recommendations, and do so repeatedly`? According to our participants, not really.

One of the first things the authors did for this section of the interview was establish whether the participants had purchased something based on an influencer's recommendation. All had, but with some interesting details. Some pointed out that it was not a single influencer, but the combined effect of several influencers endorsing the same product that convinced them towards the purchase. Participants also pointed out it was not merely the influencer's recommendation: they had done other research by reading reviews, as well had acted after hearing a recommendation from a close family and friend member. From this it can be inferred that the influencer's endorsement acted as more of a guide towards a brand, and it was not enough with a single endorsement, rather when the brand became part of a *"trend"* with several influencers, or when a family/friend recommended in addition to the influencer, the consumer was likely to make a purchase based on the endorsement.

Most participants were adamantly in agreement that any loyalty towards a brand would be 100% due to their satisfaction and happiness with the quality of the product and the service provided, and not because of the influencer's endorsement. There was one interesting exception, however. One interviewee described a situation in which an influencer had led to her brand loyalty: she was a long-term follower of an influencer who had a long collaboration with a brand over several years and was the ambassador for them. She stated that the influencer was involved with a brand not just for a brief, single paid promotion, rather it was a long-term collaboration, and she would take an interest in the brand whenever the influencer promoted it through the years. This highlights the importance of a more equal and longstanding collaboration between the brand and

influencer when establishing trust. It also highlights that despite knowledge and transparency building trust in the influencer, only attitudinal loyalty can be influenced by influencer endorsements, whereas behavioral loyalty depends entirely on the product/service itself and not the influencer.

6. Conclusion
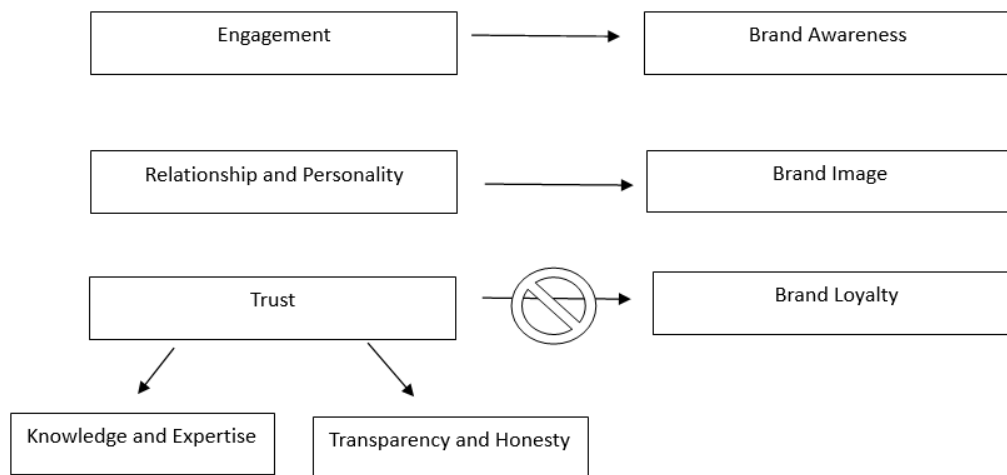
The research question of this paper was *"How can an influencer's endorsement impact a brand's equity?"*- the authors were eager to explore the mechanisms behind influencer's efficacy, as well as the detail of the impact of influencers? By conducting semi-structured interviews of a sample of 10 Swedish consumers and coding the results, the results can be concluded as follows: When it comes to the ways in which brand equity changes, several interesting insights were made. Firstly, in relation to brand awareness, it was shown that influencer endorsements were generally only efficient when the consumer had been previously aware of the brand, and in case of new brands the consumers would be highly wary of the brand or simply ignore the endorsement. Consumers' brand attitude was also far more likely to be affected when the influencer had negative feedback for the brand. The engagement between an influencer and a consumer had a strong link to brand awareness.

Secondly, when it came to brand image, the importance of selecting the right individual was realized, as the main insight from this section was that an influencer could seriously elevate or damage a brand's image. This was based on whether the influencer's reputation and personal brand matched that of the brand, and if the negative or positive effect resulted from a mismatch between the two. In addition, the relationship between an influencer and a consumer was of significance when it came to affecting brand image. Furthermore, if the endorsement was perceived to have been made with more effort from the influencer, the brand's image was perceived to be that of a higher quality.

Regarding the final aspect of brand equity, brand loyalty, the authors explored the relationship between trust and brand loyalty. The influencer's knowledge and expertise seemed to be the leading motivator of trust in an influencer, followed by the influencer's display of transparency and honesty. These two factors contribute to the understanding of how influencers can impact a brand's equity in a consumer's mind; however, trust impacts brand image, and awareness, and not brand loyalty. Brand loyalty remains dependent on the quality of the product and company. However, through legitimizing themselves through knowledge and transparency, influencers are able to build trust, which is the factor that allows them to be influential enough to impact brand equity to an extent. However, there was one small exception in the results which suggested that brand loyalty might be influenced by an influencer if the brand and influencer were involved in a long-term collaboration.

The conceptual map above illustrates the relationships uncovered through the research. It demonstrated how brand awareness links to loyalty, how relationships with influencers can impact brand image, as finally, the components of trust, as well as showing that there is not a significant relationship between trust and brand loyalty, as suggested by the initial conceptual framework.

6.1 Theoretical Implications and Contributions

The research contributes theoretically to the academic research within influencer marketing by avoiding greater insight into the relationship between influencer endorsement and brand equity.

Some important contributions are as follows: the role of the influencer's knowledge and expertise when it comes to creating trust, as opposed to the bonds and relationships with the influencers, which may not be as influential, challenging the findings of Zhong, L. (2022). Another important contribution is the non-efficacy of influencer endorsements on newer, less established brands. With the findings from this research the authors hope to contribute to a richer understanding of the mechanisms behind what makes influencer's effective, and what aspects of branding fall under an influencer's "influence".

6.2 Practical Implications

Through the findings of this paper, brands will have a deeper understanding of how to carry out influencer marketing. An important implication is for newer brands who are not very well established, it would be more advisable to stick to traditional marketing, as the findings suggested the consumer's do not respond well to new brands through influencer endorsement. Another important benefit of the findings is guiding the brand to select the correct influencer for the campaign: according to the findings it is important for the influencer to match the associations of the brand, as well as match the field and perceived quality. In addition, being knowledgeable is a vital aspect, with the most ideal choice being a professional in the field such as a makeup artist or dermatologist. Furthermore, maintaining a long term relationship with a select few influencers would be more effective and beneficial as opposed to having many short-term collaborations. Regarding the content, it would need to be as transparent as possible, and influencers must be encouraged to show the product integrated into their daily lives on several occasions, as opposed to a one-time endorsement, and provide detailed explanation of the product to ensure consumers feel safe to purchase.

7.Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, the authors recommend exploring the role of gender differences within influencer endorsements. In addition, it would be beneficial to move beyond Instagram, and explore emerging platforms such as Tiktok and Twitch. As suggested by Hudders et al (2021) , more research is required to understand what exactly constitutes expertise and authenticity within

influencers, some insight is gained in regards to expertise within this research but a more focused approach would be recommended. In addition, regarding brand loyalty it was demonstrated that influencers do not have a significant influence over with the exception of long term collaborations: this phenomenon of longer partnerships between brands and influencers should also be studied in greater detail to understand how to utilize influencers to affect loyalty as well as brand image and brand awareness.

8.Limitations

There were several limitations within the research paper that may have affected the results. Firstly, the sample size that was chosen for the explorative study was 10 individuals where the majority were females and only one was male. However, this study was based on Swedish consumers where gender was not the focal point. This is why it did not matter if the interviewee was a male or female if they fell in the criteria which was they had to be Swedish and consume influencer content. Secondly, as the sample was Swedish naturally their first language was not English. While interviewing the interviewee found it difficult to understand what the question meant. The interviewer had to explain what was being in other words to help the interviewee understand. The issue could be that the interviewer is over-explaining which can make the answer less raw. However, to overcome this obstacle the interviewer ensured to explain only the question and not give too many examples which could affect the interviewees' answers.

Lastly, feedback that was given by two of the interviewees was that the one question was too long. This made it hard for the interviewee to keep their focus. The authors overcame this by trying to simplify the questions as much as possible.

9. References

Afsar, B. (2014). Effect of perceived Price, Brand Image, perceived Quality and Trust on Consumer's buying Preferences. *Journal of Economics and Business Research,* 20(1), pp.7–20.

Alhaddad, A. (2014). The effect of brand image and brand loyalty on brand equity. *International Journal of Business and Management Invention*, [online] 3(5). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Abdullah-Alhaddad/publication/277299912_The_effect_of_brand_image_and_brand_loyalty_on_brand_equity/links/5565e88d08aec22682ff12a0/The-effect-of-brand-image-and-brand-loyalty-on-brand-equity.pdf [Accessed 16 Apr. 2023].

Ali, H. and Alquda, O.M.A. (2022). The effects of influencer marketing on overall brand equity through brand awareness and customer brand engagement. *International Journal of Data and Network Science*, 6(3), pp.651–658. doi:https://doi.org/10.5267/j.ijdns.2022.4.007.

Alok, K 2017, Building Brand Equity – In the Digital Era, International Journal of Management and Development Studies, vol.6, no.7, 7-15.

Alshenqeeti, Hamza. "Interviewing as a Data Collection Method: A Critical Review." *English Linguistics Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, 29 Mar. 2014, pp. 39–45, https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v3n1p39.

Anczyk, Adam, et al. "The Replication Crisis and Qualitative Research in the Psychology of Religion." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2 Oct. 2019, pp. 278–291,https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2019.1687197. Accessed 15 Feb. 2021.

Andreani, F., Gunawan, L. and Haryono, S. (2021). SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER, BRAND AWARENESS, AND PURCHASE DECISION AMONG GENERATION Z IN SURABAYA. *Jurnal Manajemen dan Kewirausahaan*, 23(1), pp.18–26. doi:https://doi.org/10.9744/jmk.23.1.18-26.

Argyris, Y.A., Wang, Z., Kim, Y. and Yin, Z. (2020). The effects of visual congruence on increasing consumers' brand engagement: An empirical investigation of influencer marketing on instagram using deep-learning algorithms for automatic image classification. *Computers in Human Behavior*, [online] 112(1), p.106443. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106443.

Arya, V., Paul, J. and Sethi, D. (2022). Like it or not! Brand communication on social networking sites triggers consumer‑based brand equity. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 46(4), pp.1055–1501. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12763.

Bandyopadhyay, S. and Martell, M. (2007). Does attitudinal loyalty influence behavioral loyalty? A theoretical and empirical study. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 14(1), pp.35–44. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2006.03.002.

Bell, E., Bryman, A., Harley, B. (2019). Business Research Methods. 5th ed. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Chahal, H. and Bala, M. (2010). Confirmatory Study on Brand Equity and Brand Loyalty: A Special Look at the Impact of Attitudinal and Behavioural Loyalty. *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective*, 14(1-2), pp.1–12. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/097226291001400101.

Chandran, S.R., Rangarai, H. and Parayitam, S. (2020). The Effect of Brand Awareness and Use, Product Awareness and Use on Brand and Product Satisfaction: A Study of Ayurveda Products from India. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Management Research and Innovation*, 16(2), pp.103–121. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/2319510x20925199.

Chang, Y., Li, Y., Yan, J. and Kumar, V. (2019). Getting more likes: the impact of narrative person and brand image on customer–brand interactions. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 47(6). doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00632-2.

Chen, K., Lin, J. (Elaine) and Shan, Y. (2021). Influencer marketing in China: The roles of parasocial identification, consumer engagement, and inferences of manipulative intent. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 20(6). doi:https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1945.

Chopra, A., Avhad, V. and Jaju, S. (2020). Influencer Marketing: An Exploratory Study to Identify Antecedents of Consumer Behavior of Millennial. *Business Perspectives and Research*, 9(1), pp.77–91. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/2278533720923486.

Closa, C. (2021). Planning, implementing and reporting: increasing transparency, replicability, and credibility in qualitative political science research. European Political Science, 20(1). doi https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-020-00299-2.

Dabbous, A. and Barakat, K.A. (2020). Bridging the online offline gap: Assessing the impact of brands' social network content quality on brand awareness and purchase intention. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53(1), p.101966. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.101966.

De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V. and Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing Through Instagram Influencers: The Impact of Number of Followers and Product Divergence on Brand Attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), pp.798–828.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Dhanesh, G.S. and Duthler, G. (2019). Relationship management through social media influencers: Effects of followers' awareness of paid endorsement. *Public Relations Review*, [online] 45(3). doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.03.002.

Dhun and Dangi, H.K. (2022). Influencer Marketing: Role of Influencer Credibility and Congruence on Brand Attitude and eWOM. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 22(1), pp.1–45. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2022.2125220.

Emari, H., Jafari, A. and Mogaddam, M. (2012). The mediatory impact of brand loyalty and brand image on brand equity. *AFRICAN JOURNAL OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT*, 6(17). doi:https://doi.org/10.5897/ajbm11.788.

Ferina, N., Sri, G. and Putu, L. (2021). Does Influencer Marketing Really Improve Sustainable Brand Awareness and Sales? *Inovbiz: Jurnal Inovasi Bisnis*, 9(1), p.167. doi:https://doi.org/10.35314/inovbiz.v9i1.1889.

Fitriati, R. and Madu Siwi, I.S. (2022). Mega-Influencers as Online Opinion Leaders: Establishing Cosmetic Brand Engagement on Social Media. *Journal of Promotion Management*, pp.1–24. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2022.2143992.

Flick, U. (2018). Doing grounded theory. Los Angeles: Sage.

Francis, J.J., Johnston, M., Robertson, C., Glidewell, L., Entwistle, V., Eccles, M.P., and Grimshaw, J.M. (2010). What Is an Adequate Sample Size? Operationalising Data Saturation for Theory-based Interview Studies. Psychology & Health, 25(10), pp.1229–1245. doi https://doi.org/10.1080/08870440903194015.

Genoveva, G. (2022). Tiktok Platform Opportunity: How Does it Influence SMES Brand Awareness among Generation Z? *SRIWIJAYA INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DYNAMIC ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS*, [online] 5(3), pp.273–282. doi:https://doi.org/10.29259/sijdeb.v5i3.273-282.

Hammarberg, K., et al. "Qualitative Research Methods: When to Use Them and How to Judge Them." *Human Reproduction*, vol. 31, no. 3, 11 Jan. 2016, pp. 498–501, https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334.

Hariharan, V.G., Desai, K.K., Talukdar, D. and Inman, J.J. (2018). Shopper marketing moderators of the brand equity – behavioral loyalty relationship. *Journal of Business Research*, 85(1), pp.91–104. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.12.002.

Homburg, C., Klarmann, M. and Schmitt, J. (2010). Brand awareness in business markets: When is it related to firm performance? *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 27(3), pp.201–212. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2010.03.004.

Jang, W. (Eric), Kim, J. (Jay), Kim, S. and Chun, J.W. (2020). The role of engagement in travel influencer marketing: the perspectives of dual process theory and the source credibility model. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(17), pp.1–5. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1845126.

Jun, S. and Yi, J. (2020). What makes followers loyal? The role of influencer interactivity in building influencer brand equity. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 29(6). doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-02-2019-2280.

Juntunen, M., Juntunen, J. and Juga, J. (2010). Corporate brand equity and loyalty in B2B markets: A study among logistics service purchasers. *Journal of Brand Management*, 18(4-5), pp.300–311. doi:https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2010.43.

Kevin Lane Keller (2002). *Branding and Brand Equity*.

Ki, C. 'Chloe' and Kim, Y. (2019). The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic. *Psychology & Marketing*, [online] 36(10), pp.905–922. doi:https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21244.

Kim , K.H., Kim , K.S., Kim, D.Y., Kim, J.H. and Kang , S.H. (2008). Brand equity in hospital marketing. *Journal of business research* , 61(1).

Kim, D.Y. and Kim, H.-Y. (2021). Trust me, Trust Me Not: A Nuanced View of Influencer Marketing on Social Media. *Journal of Business Research*, 134(1), pp.223–232. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024.

Kirk, J. and Miller, M.L. (1986). Reliability and validity in qualitative research. Newbury Park, Calif. Sage.

Koecha, A.K., Buyleb, S. and Macario R.́rio (2023). Airline brand awareness and perceived quality effect on the attitudes towards frequent-flyer programs and airline brand choice - Moderating effect of frequent-flyer programs. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 107(1).

Kvale, S. (1996). InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lee, H., Lee, C. and Wu, C. (2011). Brand image strategy affects brand equity after M&A. *European Journal of Marketing*, 45(7/8), pp.1091–1111. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561111137624.

Lee, J.A. and Eastin, M.S. (2020). I Like What She's #Endorsing: The Impact of Female Social Media Influencers' Perceived Sincerity, Consumer Envy, and Product Type. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 20(1).

Lee, S. and Kim, E. (2020). Influencer Marketing on Instagram: How Sponsorship disclosure, Influencer credibility, and Brand Credibility Impact the Effectiveness of Instagram Promotional Post. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 11(3), pp.232–249. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2020.1752766.

Leung, F.F., Gu, F.F. and Palmatier, R.W. (2022). Online influencer marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 50(1).

Leung, L. (2015). Validity, reliability, and Generalizability in Qualitative Research. Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care, [online] 4(3), pp.324–327. doi https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.161306.

Liu, S., Jiang, C., Lin, Z., Ding, Y., Duan, R. and Xu, Z. (2015). Identifying effective influencers based on trust for electronic word-of-mouth marketing: A domain-aware approach. *Information Sciences*, [online] 306(1), pp.34–52. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ins.2015.01.034.

Lou, C. and Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, [online] 19(1), pp.58–73. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501.

Marshall, B., Cardon, P., Poddar, A. and Fontenot, R. (2013). Does Sample Size Matter in Qualitative Research?: a Review of Qualitative Interviews in Is Research. Journal of Computer Information Systems, 54(1), pp.11–22. doi https://doi.org/10.1080/08874417.2013.11645667.

Martínez-López, F.J., Anaya-Sánchez, R., Fernández Giordano, M. and Lopez-Lopez, D. (2020). Behind influencer marketing: key marketing decisions and their effects on followers' responses. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(7-8), pp.579–607. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2020.1738525.

Matthews, D.R. (2014). An exploration of brand equity antecedents concerning brand loyalty: A cognitive, affective, and conative perspective. *Journal of Business and Retail Management Research*, 9(1).

Onwuegbuzie, A.J. and Leech, N.L. (2006). Validity and Qualitative Research: An Oxymoron? Quality & Quantity, [online] 41(2), pp.233–249. doi https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-006-9000-3.

Ozanne, J.L., Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1992). Basics of Qualitative Research. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 29(3), p.382. doi:https://doi.org/10.2307/3172751.

Ozuem, W., & Ranfagni, S. (2021).The art of digital marketing for fashion and luxurybrands marketspaces and marketplaces. Springer Nature Switzerland.https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-70324-0

Pan, L.-Y. and Chen, K. (2019). A Study on the Effect of Storytelling Marketing on Brand Image, Perceived Quality, and Purchase Intention in Ecotourism. *Ekoloji* , 28(107).

Parise, S., Guinan, P.J. and Kafka, R. (2016). Solving the crisis of immediacy: How digital technology can transform the customer experience. *Business Horizons*, 59(4), pp.411–420. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.03.004.

Patton, M.Q., 2015. Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and

Ponzoa, J.M. and Erdmann, A. (2021). E-Commerce Customer Attraction: Digital Marketing Techniques, Evolution and Dynamics across Firms. *Journal of Promotion Management*, [online] pp.1–19. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2021.1880521.

practice.

Ranjbarian, B., Sanayei, A., Kaboli, M.R. and Hadadian, A. (2012). An Analysis of Brand Image, Perceived Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Re-purchase Intention in Iranian Department Stores. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 7(6). doi:https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v7n6p40.

Ren, S., Karimi, S., Bravo Velázquez, A. and Cai, J. (2023). Endorsement effectiveness of different social media influencers: The moderating effect of brand competence and warmth. *Journal of Business Research*, 156, p.113476. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113476.

Rosenbaum-Elliott, R., Percy, L. and Pervan, S. (2018). *Strategic Brand Management*. 4th ed. S.L.: Oxford Univ Press.

Rosengren, S. and Campbell, C., 2021. Navigating the future of influencer advertising: Consolidating what is known and identifying new research directions. *Journal of Advertising*, *50*(5), pp.505-509.

Saima and Khan, M.A. (2020). Effect of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Consumers' Purchase Intention and the Mediating Role of Credibility. *Journal of Promotion Management*, [online] 27(4), pp.1–22. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2020.1851847.

Sasmita, J. and Mohd Suki, N. (2015). Young consumers' insights on brand equity. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 43(3), pp.276–292. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/ijrdm-02-2014-0024.

Scholz, J., 2021. How consumers consume social media influence. *Journal of Advertising*, *50*(5), pp.510-527.

Šerić, M. and Gil-Saura, I. (2019). Understanding brand equity in hotel firms. What is the role of brand loyalty and satisfaction? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(9), pp.3526–3546. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-06-2018-0516.

Shamim, K. and Islam, T. (2022). Digital influencer marketing: How message credibility and media credibility affect trust and impulsive buying. *Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science*, 32(4), pp.1–26. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/21639159.2022.2052342.

Stojanovic, I., Andreu, L. and Curras-Perez, R. (2018). Effects of the intensity of use of social media on brand equity. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, [online] 27(1), pp.83–100. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/ejmbe-11-2017-0049.

Stubb, C., Nyström, A.-G. and Colliander, J. (2019). Influencer marketing: The impact of disclosing sponsorship compensation justification on sponsored content effectiveness. *Journal of Communication Management*, [online] 23(2), pp.109–122. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/jcom-11-2018-0119.

Sugiarto, I., Simanjuntak, M. and Hasanah, N. (2022). THE ROLE OF E-MARKETING MIX, INFLUENCER, AND FOLLOWERS ENGAGEMENT TOWARD PRODUCT PURCHASING DECISIONS. *Jurnal Aplikasi Manajemen dan Bisnis* , 8(3).

Taylor, S.A., Celuch, K. and Goodwin, S. (2004). The importance of brand equity to customer loyalty. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 13(4), pp.217–227. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/10610420410546934.

Teresa Borges-Tiago, M., Santiago, J. and Tiago, F. (2023). Mega or macro social media influencers: Who endorses brands better? *Journal of Business Research*, 157, p.113606. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113606.

Thomas, D.R. (2006). A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), pp.237–246. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748.

Tjandrawibawa, P. (2020). The Effect of Using Instagram Influencers in Building Conseva's Brand Awareness. *The Winners*, 21(1), p.67. doi:https://doi.org/10.21512/tw.v21i1.6497.

Tong, X. and Hawley, J.M. (2009). Measuring customer‑based brand equity: empirical evidence from the sportswear market in China. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 18(4), pp.262–271. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/10610420910972783.

Trivedi, J. and Sama, R. (2019). The Effect of Influencer Marketing on Consumers' Brand Admiration and Online Purchase Intentions: an Emerging Market Perspective. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 19(1), pp.103–124. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2019.1700741.

Vania Putri, S. (2022). The Impact of Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) Using Influencers on Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention. *CoverAge: Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(1), pp.11–25. doi:https://doi.org/10.35814/coverage.v13i1.3913.

Vannucci, V. and Pantano, E. (2019). Digital or human touchpoints? Insights from consumer-facing in-store services. *Information Technology & People*, 33(1), pp.296–310. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/itp-02-2018-0113.

Yang, J., Chuenterawong, P. and Pugdeethosapol, K., 2021. Speaking up on black lives matter: A comparative study of consumer reactions toward brand and influencer-generated corporate social responsibility messages. *Journal of Advertising*, *50*(5), pp.565-583.

Ye, G., Hudders, L., De Jans, S. and De Veirman, M. (2021). The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business: A Bibliometric Analysis and Managerial Implications. *Journal of Advertising*, [online] 50(2), pp.1–19. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2020.1857888.

Yoo, B. and Donthu, N. (2001). Developing and validating a multidimensional consumer-based brand equity scale.*Journal of Business Research*, 52(1), pp.1–14.

Zhong, L. (2022). Analyses of the Relationship between Virtual Influencers' Endorsements and Customer Brand Engagement in Social Media. *International Conference on Creative Industry and Knowledge Economy*, 651(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.220404.007.

10. Appendix

Category	Concept	Codes
The influencer-Consumer Relationship	The Influencer Personality	Overall like
		Overall dislike
		Overall dislike
		can get really "tired" of influencers, but I like
		Does not keep up with influencer
		Overall like
		Overall like
		Overall dislike
		the tone of communication for influencers is happy energetic
		An influencer is harsh and outspoken when communicating about sponsor content
		if the influencer fails to do so that will reflect

		poorly on the influencer
		the tone of communication for influencers is happy energetic
		An influencer is harsh and outspoken when communicating about sponsor content
		if the influencer fails to do so that will reflect poorly on the influencer
	Reason of Following	Recipes, budgeting advice, Appearance
		clothing inspo
		I am interested in them as people
		their personal life
		seeing another Arab", representation and relatability, following since young, entertainments, community ethnicity, race
		Youtubers, entertainment, more into "personal life", like their personality, not beauty or appearance, more lifestyle/gaming, high-quality content
		Advice, inspiration, "fits my interests", inspirational

		to me female entrepreneurs and lifestyle content makes engaging Follows fashion influencers Follows influencer related to lifestyle and makeup content is engaging shows lates trend and shows how to style
	Relationship Building	unwilling to call it "relationship" no relationship feels like "stalking friendship kind a bond influencer become like big brothers following for so long connection is made relationship not deep and more one-sided not a deep a relationship hesitancy to call it relationship, there's a connection but no bond Follow influencer fits my interest

		inspirational connection kind a bond
		no special bond or relationship with influencer
		surface level bond
		surface level relationship
		bond created with time
		inspirations connection
		, there is a bond and connection with influencer because she talks about mental health
		inspirational connection with influencer
		influencers create community base on similarities
		similarities can be ethnicity or religion
		a little bit part of the community view same content
		influencer created a community around fashion,
		create a sense of community by sharing what's in her life
	Engagement	Smaller influencers engage more

		big ones not engaging, more one-sided
		influencers reach out on stories
		never used a discount code or directly pressed a link
		interaction using stories and lives, constant life updates,
		influencer engages by showing personal life
		communications should be outspoken and detail oriented
		influencer engaging with followers through content
		influencer content is engaging because every energetic open-minded and shows everything
		interact with followers through questionnaires
		engages with followers in a genuine humble and normal person
		content in engaging because its real and honest
		similar interest with influencer makes it engaging for me

		influencer engaging throughs Q&A with followers
Building Block of trust	Trust	"Know them to trust them"
		I trust their judgment
		no trust in paid collab
		lack of trust created hesitance in purchase
		more trust, knowledgeable when passionate
		hard to tell if influencers are honest
		"influencing is their "job" so no trust
		non-sponsor content I trust more
		influencers are driven because of money
		no collab more trust
		dont trust influencers
		don't know it influencers tell the truth
		"influencers "gain" from recommending, might just do it because of that.,
		if not sponsored then I trust them

		if the influencer lifestyle is a side hustle then I will trust them
		if they do not need the sponsored money then I will trust them
		honest influencer…more trust in collaborations, "bad reputations"
		content is reliable because she is raw and unfiltered
		influencer is transparent she shows everything
		wouldn't trust influencer sponsorships
		feeling "safe"!!!, is very important for making a purchase. If they communicate safety, they will get my trust
		content is reliable because it shows everything from behind the scenes
		if an influencer is "big" she's not just gonna jump if it is not a good product and more money, more positive mindset
		influencer is transparent showed all the profits that were made
		influencer is credible and reliable is very open

		Influencer can be trusted in relations to makeup influencer is not transparent, influencer shows products that do not match her person brand influencer over communicates the quality of the product
	Knowledge to trust	Knowledge "putting time into it" Criticism and improvements influencers are experts when they buy and try out the product if the influencer are actually educated or have a degree then I find the experts constructive criticism on the promoted product skincare from a dermatologist, makeup from a makeup artist, more trustworthy real doctor influencer tells me to buy then I buy licensed dermatologist", more convincing influencer is not always knowledgeable

		I would trust an influencer more if they say they have used the product before sponsorship
		trustworthy influencer in the fashion area
		influencers use right terminology that matches the quality of the product
		influencer will look into and research the product before endorsement, I feel safe and satisfied to purchase
		influencer is knowledgeable about the product because she described the material in depth
		influencer is knowledgeable as hes is doing fashion for several years
		influencer is knowledgeable about product as she tries ad researched herself
		influencer critici's sponsored content which makes her trustworthy
		influencer is reliable because influencer does her own homework and research about product
	Influencer product match	influencers elevate the quality of the brand

		influencers endorsement is not valuable if they communicate like a salesperson
		influencers endorsement is valuable if they communicate like a friend
		if I trust the influencer then I feel the perceived quality matches the actual quality
		influencer communicating through pictures and videos does match the quality of product
		quality of the product was communicated perfectly
		as the influencer has good status in fashion industries value is automatically created for endorse produ ct
		influencer endorsement has made a uncool think cool and trendy
		he knowledge I have of him as a follower reflects with the association with the endorse brand
		influencer communication matches the quality of endorse product
		brand association in positive because of strong connection with influencer

		influencer create value by describing the features of products

communication and quality do not match

Bough cookbooks from chefs, it is strange if the field is different, would think it's only paid

brands trying to reach a "different audience" use unsuspecting influencers, skeptical when recommending things not in their field

influence promoting "non-matching products" mean they do it for the money

 influencer over communicates the quality of the product

influencer communicating through pictures and videos does match the quality of product |
| | Familiarity | More attention to familiar brands

brands that I already have an interest in if they are endorsed then I listen

more investment if the brand is familiar

 If I already know the brand then I am interested, if it is a new brand I will be hesitant to try it out |

		influencer create familiarity by communication that they have used the products themselves
		influencer made me familiar with the endorsed product by constantly using it
		influencer created familiarity by showing the products repeatedly
		influencer created familiarity by constantly showing the product and how to use it
		influencer created familiarity by communicating on insta stories
		influencer has create familiarity of product through communicates on insta stories
		influencer would generate familiarity and curiosity through constantly showing product on Instagram stories
		More attention to familiar brands
		brands that I already have an interest in if they are endorsed then I listen
		more investment if the brand is familiar, If I already know the brand then I am interested, if

		it is a new brand I will be hesitant to try it out
		influencer create familiarity by communication that they have used the products themselves
		influencer made me familiar with the endorsed product by constantly using it
		influencer created familiarity by showing the products repeatedly
		influencer created familiarity by constantly showing the product and how to use it
		influencer created familiarity by communicating on insta stories
		influencer has create familiarity of product through communicates on insta stories
		influencer would generate familiarity and curiosity through constantly showing product on Instagram stories
		curiosity created when there is already purchase intention
		attention is grabbed when buzz is created
		"already thinking about buying" curiousity

		more curiosity if genuine content, "this is the only thing that worked for me
		something I've already had in mind
		influencers created curiosity
		curiosity is created by influencer by using the and describing the product
		Influencer has made be curious to point I tried buying the endorse product from secondhand market
		influencer has created curiosity
Brands	Brand Attitude	if I like the influencer I will like the endorsement
		view of brand doesn't change because of influencer
		I don't remember much from the endorsed content
		lack of relationship leads to no attitude being formed for the brand
		trusting influencer and inspiration connection has made me have a positive attitude on brand

		I trust the influencer so I trust the brand honest connection and bond with influencer has affected attitude relationship and bond did not change attitude on endorsed brand
	Brand Image	view of the brand is not changed because of influencer Opinion of influence does not change because of the brand influencers does affect my view on the brand influencers have not altered the idea of the brand influencers should stick to their own person brand image to build brand association good detail communication makes me view the brand as good the value is created by filling the needs of followers good bond with influencer good association with brand influencer content did not have an effect on brand

		image
		influencer did not create band value
		endorsement has change brand image for better
		surface level relationship but the association of brand is good,
		Influencer created value by showing how the product is used and looks
		influencer endorsement does change the brand image for the good
	Attitudinal Loyalty	influencers I don't like I will have a bad attitude towards the brand they endorse
		educated and licensed influencer makes me want to actively try out the brand
		Influencers transparency will make me satisfied enough to purchase
		influencer knowledgeable made me feel safe to actively try out the brand
		influencer knowledge and expertise did make me actively try out the product
		influencer expertise have effected me to actively try

		the brand out
		influencer expertise and inspirational connection has made me a follower want to actively try out the brand
		influencer expertise and honestly make me want to actively try out whatever she markets
		influencer knowledge and expertise does have my affect on me
		I would actively choose the endorse brand to try out
	Reason for Purchase	I get more attracted to buy something when influencers communicate.
		friends and family advice more important,
		Reviews and traditional ads
		real recommendation makes me want to purchase more.
		when the influencer says worked for me
		real recommendation makes me want to purchase more,
		purchases were made based on TikTok not influencers

		but acted when friend recommended it to me, more trust in known family/friends.
		I buy things suggested by my friends.
		friends' opinion more important
		influenced me subconsciously into buying the product.
		influencers push to want to purchase the product that I was thinking of purchasing.
		purchase was made because of influencer.
		influencer made me purchase and was very pleased.
		I feel like I treat myself if I purchase product.
		Purchased are made because of influencer and other reviews.
		purchase is made due to influencer endorsement.
		I was not that satisfied with purchase.
	Behavior Loyalty	loyalty only related to product.
		influencer sponsorship doesn't lead to behavior

		purchase.
		influencer's long-term collaboration with a brand has made loyal to them too.
		influencer credible repurchased a lot from brand.
		influencer is transparent I feel satisfied to purchase.
		expensive product no repeated purchase
		influencer credibility has led me to repurchase product.
		transparency is key for an influencer only then I will be satisfied to purchase.
		influencer credibility has made me want to repurchase.
		influencer endorsement does leave me satisfied to want to purchase.
		influencer credibility and judgments will influence reputation purchase behavior.
		influence does her homework on sponsored content, I would feel satisfied to purchase product.
		Influencer should use product repeatedly if she

		wants repeated purchases. influencer credibility has led to repurchase behavior. price matters the most to me purchase intention was there but the price was a reason did not actually purchase Too pricy products Cannot repurchase because expensive Does not buy expensive no matter how much trust with the influencer is there