Consumer responses to influencer marketing on Instagram.

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Certificate of original authorship

I, Anna Segova, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts (Research) in Humanities and Social Sciences in the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work, unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Preface

This dissertation explores the topic *Consumer responses to influencer marketing on Instagram*. The basis of this thesis is a survey and series of interviews on consumer attitudes to influencers and sponsored content on Instagram, conducted on a sample group of undergraduate university students. It has been written to fulfil the graduation requirements of the Communications Program at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). I was engaged in researching and writing this dissertation from January 2018 to January 2020.

My research question was formulated with my supervisor, James Meese. The research was challenging, but conducting an extensive investigation has allowed me to answer the research questions that were identified.

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I hope you enjoy your reading.

Anna Segova

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Abstract

In light of the emergence and mainstreaming of the influencer industry, it has become increasingly important to understand how consumers respond to influencer marketing techniques. Academic research has previously focused on how influencers interact with their audiences, and little to no work has spoken directly to consumers about their views on influencers and sponsored content on Instagram. Focusing on what this trend means to those who actively engage with influencers, this thesis examines how Australian consumers respond to influencers and influencer marketing on Instagram through mixed-methods research. The thesis reveals that consumers prefer sponsored content over traditional online and offline advertising techniques. One of the main reasons for this preference is the personal relationship that consumers are able to establish with influencers. This research demonstrates high levels of media literacy among consumers and their confidence in recognising sponsored content, even when ad intent is undisclosed. Additionally, this thesis shows that a promotional tone of voice undermines message credibility more than ad disclosure. This paper extends our knowledge of contemporary online marketing by providing a comprehensive account of how consumers react to influencer marketing on Instagram and in turn provides new insights into the consumer–influencer relationship.

Chapter 1. Instagram influencers and the industry

'sooo does anyone else not open Snapchat anymore? Or is it just me … ugh this is so sad.' Kylie Jenner posted this tweet to her 24.5 million followers on the afternoon of the 23 February 2018 (Crockett 2018). The following day when the market opened, Snap Inc. stock tumbled by 7.2 per cent and lost $1.3 billion in market value overnight (Crockett 2018). While Kylie's tweet cannot be held solely responsible for the drop in stock price, this example is evidence of the importance of influence when it comes to brand positioning.

Marketers increasingly use social media to influence consumer behaviour, create trends and capture the attention of audiences. In many cases, companies draw on the fame of existing celebrities. For example, Kylie Jenner reportedly earns $1 million for each sponsored Instagram post (Mejia 2018). Jenner wields influence over a global audience, but this is only partially facilitated through the technological advances of social media. She has also developed an international celebrity through the activities of her broader Kardashian/Jenner family, most notably thanks to the television show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. However, in most other cases in which people engage in what is commonly known as 'influencing', individuals are simply promoting brands to an audience they have built on social media. Their personal brands may differ from those of traditional celebrities, but they also gather audiences of millions through their social media pages.

Influencer marketing is a popular topic in both academic and industry literature and there has been some study of the emergence of influencers (see Marwick 2013; Senft 2008; Abidin 2015a). However, limited research has been conducted on how consumers respond to social media influencers. In response to this, this thesis explores why and how Australian consumers follow and interact with Instagram influencers and analyses their perceptions of influencer advertising. It

also considers the extent to which influencers shape consumer behaviour. In addition, the relationship between Instagram users and influencers is explored, as well as the extent to which this relationship shapes purchasing behaviour.

This chapter begins by describing what it means to be an influencer in current society. I define the terms "influence" and "influencer" and outline the types of influencers this research focuses on. I then look at the growth of the influencer marketing industry in the past decade, consider current issues in influencer marketing practices and discuss how these issues shape the industry, the image of influencer marketing and the follower–influencer relationship. Finally, I define the scope of this thesis and outline its structure.

What is an influencer?

An influencer is someone who influences perceptions and spreads awareness using available communication channels. Marketing literature notes the presence of influencers in as early as 1999. Robert V. Kozinets (1999) describes the relationship marketing strategy in digital communities that follow an 'insider', changing the behaviour of an entire 'e-tribe'. With the development of social media, our idea of an 'influencer' has been transformed into what we recognise today as a social media influencer (Abidin 2018). While most may picture an influencer as a young Instagram model wearing designer items and sharing images of their unattainable lifestyle, in fact, influencers comprise a diverse group. For example, the youngest influencer in the UK is one-year-old (Mcdermot 2018), a five-year-old fashion influencer currently has over 600,000 followers (Coco n.d.) and 97-year-old Iris Apfel (n.d.) has also developed a significant following. Crystal Abidin (2015a), who researches the branding of babies on the internet, noted one example in which the Instagram influencer bongqiuqiu's daughter had an account that drew an audience of over 5,000 followers and had secured SGD25,000 worth of endorsement deals before she

was born. Instagram influencers come in many different forms and cater to a variety of demographics.

In this thesis, I focus on a specific type of social media influencer: the independent third-party endorser. These influencers vary in their demographics and lifestyle niches, but all commercialise their accounts through brand sponsorships. These influencers have the power to shape the attitudes of their audiences through their blogs, tweets and other social media channels (Freberg et al. 2011), much like traditional celebrities, community leaders and marketing mavens (Turner 2014, Gunter 2014, Brown & Fiorella 2013).

While the term 'influencer' is widely used in popular discourse, it is possible to identify different levels of online influence embodied by these individuals. The most common segmentation used in the industry literature divides online influencers into micro- and macro-influencers (Mediakix 2018; Hatton 2018; Ehlers 2017; Dhanik 2016; Starngage n.d.). Mediakix (2017) defines users who have between 1,000 and 100,000 followers as micro-influencers, while Kelly Ehlers (2017) and Ted Dhanik (2016) define micro-influencers as users with at least 10,000 followers. Macro-influencers have a larger reach and following and are defined by Mediakix (2018) as having over 100,000 followers. As the above discussion shows, there is no clear split between these categories. In this study, I segment influencers as follows: micro-influencers have followings of between 5,000 to 100,000, macro-influencers have followings of 100,000 to 500,000 and celebrity influencers have followings above 500,000.

Industry practice often defines any individual with more than 3,000 followers as an Instagram influencer. For example, TRIBE marketplace, which is one of the largest platforms in Australia connecting brands with influencers, allows signups for influencers with at least 3,000 followers (TRIBE 2018). However, when it comes to establishing brand deals, those at the lower end of the spectrum are considered less often due to their smaller reach and exposure. Therefore, for the

purpose of this study, I consider influencers as having over 5,000 followers. Although there is no strict industry separation when it comes to the types of influencers, this breakdown helps differentiate influencers by audience size for the purpose of this research. As Nancy Baym (2015) notes, many factors shape the online community, such as topics, location, size and the medium. Depending on the formation of an influencer's community, the dynamics can differ depending on a variety of factors, including the perceived level of 'fame', which can correspond with the number of Instagram followers.

Growth of the influencer industry

Social media gives influencers the tools for self-promotion. Therefore, the role of social media in consumers' everyday life and its affordances must be examined. The use of influencers in marketing is not new; however, while traditional influencer marketing campaigns have focused on athletes, movie stars and models, in recent years, the trend has shifted to also include online micro-celebrities. More than one billion users are now registered on Instagram worldwide (Constine 2018) and with the platform rapidly growing, many of its users are turning their own accounts into commercial businesses and drawing on the benefits of brand sponsorships.

The influencer marketing industry was worth US$8 billion in July 2019 and is projected to grow to $15 billion by 2022 (Schomer 2019). Thomas Lee states that 'it's a known fact that social media as a promotional tool is definitely on a dramatic rise compared to traditional tools, which are declining' (Dr Lee, cited in Wells & Jones n.d.) Consumers increasingly look to both influencers and traditional celebrities on social media for information, news and recommendations. Data reported by Twitter in their 2016 'Twitter report' showed that 49 per cent of users rely on influencers for product recommendations. Users also act on influencers' recommendations, with 40 per cent of respondents reporting having purchased something online after seeing it

used by an influencer (Katieaka 2016). An influencer's marketing return on investment (ROI) is believed to be $6.5 per every dollar spent (Tomoson n.d.), with some reporting an ROI as high as $8.81 (Mechem 2018).
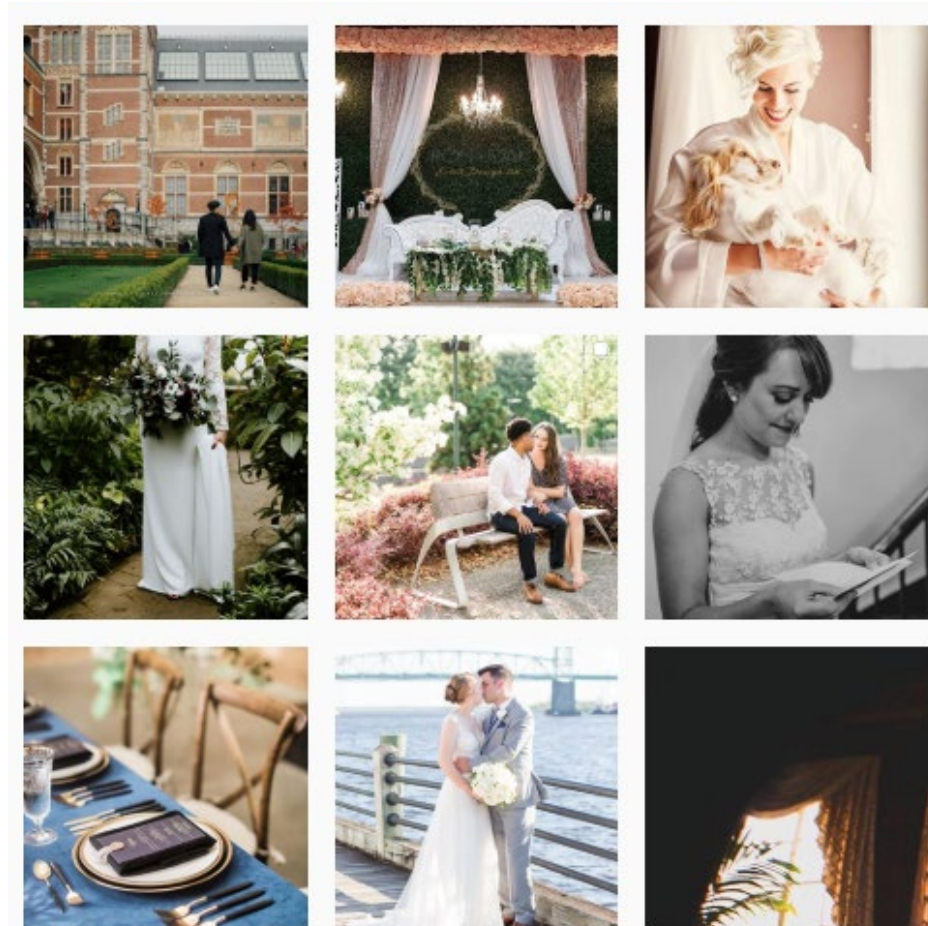
Figure 1.1 #huffpostido feed on Instagram
Source: Instagram 2019

Social media plays a major role in brands' marketing strategies. According to Sensis (2018), 52 per cent of businesses in Australia use social media and 90 per cent of large businesses today have a social media strategy, up from 76 per cent in 2017 (Sensis 2018). Instagram has become a particularly popular choice in brands' marketing strategies, as is evident from the number of branded hashtags that populate the social media platform. According to Sprout Social, 70 per cent of hashtags on Instagram are branded hashtags (Osman 2018). What starts as a hashtag campaign designed by a brand often turns into a trend that goes beyond the brand's name alone. One such example is #huffpostido, which refers to the

weddings section of the Huffington Post. The hashtag now features posts from users and even other brands unrelated to HuffPost (Figure 1.1). The increased interest in social media from the industry and the growing number of businesses that focus on social media as part of a marketing strategy indicate the need for more research into the influence of social media and influencer marketing on consumers' lives, attitudes and behaviours.

Sponsored content on Instagram

Sponsorship on Instagram refers to branded content shared by influencers that is incentivised by brands via monetary or non-monetary compensation. Non-monetary compensation can take the form of goods or services provided in exchange for promotion. These posts may be executed in different forms, including mentions, product photos, giveaways or reviews. One of the most common formats are advertorials: Crystal Abidin (2016c) notes that one of the most common genres of social media posts is a recapping of the day's events. This approach places a product or service in the day-to-day life of an influencer, showcasing it in use or demonstrating how it fits into the influencer's life. As an example, the following is a post from Danielle Bernstein that was sponsored by Fiji water:

> This colder weather already has my skin feeling super dry - I know hydrating is key (shoutout to my @fijiwater fam) but are there any awesome facials in nyc or things you guys suggest? Let me know! #ad (Bernstein 2017).

Figure 1.2 Danielle with a Fiji water bottle
Source: Instagram, Bernstein 2017

In this post (Figure 1.2), the photo shows Danielle opening a Fiji water bottle as she recaps on her day in the caption and mentions that Fiji water helps her to hydrate, before asking her followers for suggestions on facials. This post does not place a great emphasis on the brand, but rather mentions it subtly within the context of her day, while moving from one topic to another. The post does not seem solely promotional and without sponsorship disclosure may not appear to be an ad by users. Posts executed in the manner of advertorials operate in a grey area and it can often be unclear whether a post is an ad or a genuine tip or recommendation.

As a result, industry regulations have become increasingly important. The rising popularity of influencer marketing has forced regulatory bodies to clarify consumer law. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) advertising laws apply to social media advertising, including paid, owned and

earned media. These laws also extend to social media content created by parties other than brands, such as reviews, comments and user-generated content. For example, if a customer makes a misleading review on a brand's owned channel and the brand knowingly decides to leave the misleading claims, they can be held accountable (ACCC n.d.). This also extends to influencers' content and advertising in the form of influencer marketing on social media. The compulsory advertising disclosure legislation under Australian Consumer Law (ACL) (ACL n.d.) and the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) code of ethics guidelines on sponsorship disclosure came into effect in March 2017 (AdStandards 2018), stating that sponsored content must be clearly distinguished, in a bid to make influencer marketing more transparent (AANA 2018). This legislation holds brands and influencers accountable for what they post (AANA 2018).

At the same time, brands use certain loopholes to avoid advertising disclosure. One such loophole involves the use of unpaid posts, whereby brands send influencers complementary products to feature on their pages. An example of this is a complaint about a piece of content posted by singer and actor Kat Risteska on Instagram (Figure 1.3) that promoted a product from beauty brand Eco Tan (Risteska 2017), but which did not include a clear sponsorship disclosure (Powell 2017). The brand argued that the post did not meet the definition of advertising because the company did not pay for the post and instead only sent the products for review (Powell 2017). The Advertising Standards Board found that the post was advertising and that the free products acted as a form of payment and dismissed the case (Advertising Standards Board 2017). Although free products can act as a form of payment, facilitating a business transaction, the line between sponsored content and products sent to influencers free for review are blurred.

Figure 1.3 Katristeska's moisturiser post
Source: Instagram, Risteska 2017

The AANA best practice guidelines state the following:

> The AANA Codes apply to advertising and marketing communication where two key criteria are met:
>
> 1. Does the marketer have a reasonable degree of control over the material? and
> 2. Does the material draw the attention of the public in a manner calculated to promote a product or service?
>
> Both factors need to be present for the material to be deemed advertising under the AANA Codes (AANA 2016).

Consequently, when it comes to determining whether branded content on Instagram is an ad, control is key. Although exchanging free products in return for a post is considered a marketing communication, some hazy areas remain. For example, a brand can send an influencer free products and place no obligation on them to post about the products on social media. Therefore, if the product happens to be mentioned in a post by an influencer at a later date, this

is not considered sponsored content as the brand has no control over whether or not promotion occurs. For example, Zoe Foster Blake (@zotheysay) was criticized for posting a photo of her fridge stacked with You Foodz (figure 1.4) without declaring sponsorship (Hardiman 2018).

Figure 1.4 photo of Zoe's fridge stacked with You Foodz
Source: Hardiman 2018

There is a thin line between what is considered advertising and what is not. It can be argued that receiving free products from a brand can oblige an influencer to share them with their audience. As demonstrated by the backlash to Zoe Foster Blake's post, influencers' audiences may be well aware of these advertising practices and able to identify sponsored content without sponsorship disclosure. However, many may also be unaware of these promotional tactics.

Furthermore, while the '#ad' and '#gifted' hashtags are popularly used to disclose sponsorship, some influencers hide these at the bottom of captions or between sets of hashtags to make the disclosure more subtle. Gil Eyal, writing in

AdWeek said that despite regulations introduced in the US by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), 'more than 90 per cent of posts don't have proper disclosure, or any disclosure at all' (2018). Others might use less popular hashtags, such as "#sp" (sponsored post) to declare sponsorship, which do not tell the audience much about a post's intended meaning. This practice can be explained by influencers' eagerness to appear authentic and their reluctance to admit the commercial nature of their posts. In other cases, brands may deliberately omit sponsorship disclosure for fear of turning the influencer marketing method into traditional advertising and hence ruining its appeal. One such case was when Kanye West unveiled his clothing line on Instagram in collaboration with various models. The posts featured influencers wearing the Yeezy label, with #YeezySeason6 written in the captions instead of traditional sales copy (Bernard 2018). The posts did not disclose the commercial nature of the relationship and were deemed in breach of FTC regulations.

Regulatory bodies are becoming more adept at monitoring macro influencers. However, it is arguably more challenging to regulate influencer marketing on Instagram when it comes to micro influencers' pages. Australian influencer marketplace TRIBE (n.d.(b)) claims to have thousands of influencers in their database. It can be expected that such a large pool of active Instagram influencers makes detecting misconduct more difficult. The AANA often relies on complaints from Australian consumers to identify potentially unethical practices, such as the case of sponsored content by Kat Risteska for Eco Tan, which was reported to the organisation by a regular social media user (Advertising Standards Board 2017). Indeed, the negative reaction to Zoe Foster Blake shows that Australian consumers are becoming more aware of the commercial practices of influencers.

As influencer marketing gains popularity among advertisers, there is an increasing need to examine its influence on consumers. Therefore, this study set out to uncover consumer responses to influencers on Instagram and, in

particular, their use of sponsored content. This involved surveying a sample of communications students and asking them a range of questions on this topic. I then conducted a series of interviews with a smaller sample of survey participants and non-participants to capture more nuance around these issues. This method produced findings that enable a better understanding of the consumer–influencer relationship and, in particular, what makes influencers appear trustworthy and communicate effectively with their audiences. It also revealed how consumers feel about issues surrounding advertising intent and their expectations with respect to industry regulations.

Academic research

To understand current influencer marketing practices, the use of social media in everyday life and the rise of influencers, it is necessary to look in detail at social media and the rise of the micro-celebrity. The internet has moved rapidly from a niche phenomenon to mass adoption, transforming how we learn and communicate. The first social media platform as we know it today was Six Degrees. Launched in 1997, it was based on the 'web of contacts' social media model and acquired a userbase of 3.5 million registered users in its lifetime until 2001 (Terrell 2015). Within ten years from the launch of the first social media website, the success of social media has attracted the interest of myriad researchers who have examined the rise of social influence and social network theory, focusing in particular on issues of digital intimacies (Gross & Acquisti 2005). In these ten years, researchers have considered the impact of social media on society, studying privacy (Gross & Acquisti 2005), the social implications of public displays of connections (Donath & boyd 2004), social media sites for end users (Fisher 2003), the knowledge management potential of social media (Kiehne 2004) and marketing communications (Acar & Polonsky 2007). Since then, the internet and social media have become an integral part of our daily lives.

It can be argued that social media did not start to take off until the launch of MySpace in 2003 (Kozlowski 2012). According to Crunchbase (n.d.), MySpace was one of the world's largest and most popular social media platforms, with a user base of approximately 125 million. MySpace was originally a platform for aspiring bands to advertise on (Manago et al. 2008). However, the platform experienced rapid growth, reaching five million users in its first year (Crunchbase n.d.) and by 2006 had become popular across the globe (Manago et al. 2008). According to Adriana Manago et al. (2008), MySpace provided young adults with new cultural tools for identity construction – the means to construct social, personal and gender identities.

Facebook launched shortly after MySpace in February 2004 (Phillips 2007) as a social network for Harvard University students. Following its growth within Harvard, Facebook started to expand its userbase to all US universities and high schools (Phillips 2007). By December 2005, Australian and New Zealand universities were included, bringing the network to 2,500 colleges and 25,000 high schools worldwide (Boyd 2019). In September 2006, the network extended beyond education, allowing anyone with an email address to sign up (Phillips 2007). From that point onwards, the platform grew rapidly: from 12 million users in December 2006, to 50 million by October 2007 (Boyd 2019). In 2011, Facebook reached one of its major milestones – one trillion page views – according to a study conducted by DoubleClick (Boyd 2019). 2012 has been dubbed one of the most important years in Facebook's history (Boyd 2019). As well as growth in the number of members of the public using Facebook and numerous lawsuit controversies (Boyd 2019), it was in 2012 that Facebook acquired the photo sharing social media app Instagram (Facebook 2012). At the time of acquisition, Instagram had 30 million users but had not been generating revenue (Wagner 2017).

Instagram launched on October 6 2010 (izood 2018) as a photo content sharing app. By December 2010, Instagram had reached one million users and its 150

millionth photo was uploaded in 2011 (izood 2018). The success of the Instagram app can be attributed to its visual appeal and the fact that its content is easy to consume (DeMers 2017). The app was built around photos, with the idea being that users share their day in a photo rather than a lengthy status update. The original Instagram app had no direct message capabilities, no stories and no videos; the platform was solely focused on visual content rather than being a direct communication app. It was also only available on IOS devices until April 2012 (izood 2018). In September 2011, Instagram hit 10 million users (izood 2018): a growth of nine million users in less than a year. Seven months later, Facebook acquired Instagram for $1 billion (Rushe 2012). Advertising on Instagram was introduced by Facebook in 2013, with global release in 2015 (McFarlane 2018). Today, Instagram's advertising revenue is growing faster than that Facebook at 177 per cent growth each year, compared to only 40 per cent for Facebook in 2018 (Simon 2018). After Facebook acquired Instagram, its userbase increased from 30 million users (Wagner 2017) to one billion users worldwide in 2018 (Carman 2018), making it one of the world's most popular social media platforms.

In recent years, Facebook has revamped the Instagram app to stay competitive and maximise their advertising spend potential. Instagram has rolled out direct messaging, stories and Instagram TV (IGTV), which is comprised of longer video formats, making it a potential competitor to the major social media platforms Snapchat and YouTube. In 2016, Instagram rolled out an algorithm-driven feed, replacing its chronological order (Hunt 2016). The algorithm-driven feed was designed to keep users more engaged and spend longer on the platform by showing the most engaging posts first. Although Instagram received a backlash from its users, the platform increased user engagement following the introduction of the algorithm (Buryan 2017). The algorithm favours the most engaging content on Instagram and pushes it up the feed, meaning that bigger, more engaged accounts increase their reach, whereas smaller accounts can get lost in the Instagram feed (Pollock 2018). The algorithm then evolved in 2017 to

take into account additional factors when deciding which posts are the 'best' to show a user. These included timeliness, which was a slight reversion to the chronological order of the original Instagram feed (Pollock 2018). In this way, the algorithm pushed creators and brands to put more work into creating content by linking higher quality content with greater reach.

The brief history above shows how a niche communication method gradually became a central part of many people's lives. According to a 2018 social media report conducted by Yellow (2018), almost eight in ten Australians (79 per cent) now use social media. More than a third of users access social media over five times per day (Yellow 2018) and 89 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds use social media at least once a day (Yellow 2018). This growth has meant that social media has become more than just a communication tool. Social media platforms now serve their users in a number of primary functions and blur the divide between private and public. When studying the social media landscape in San Francisco, Alice Marwick (2013) found that instead of the revolutionary participation flaunted by entrepreneurs, 'social media applications encourage people to compete for social benefits by gaining visibility and attention' (p. 5). To boost social status and online reputation, users compete for attention online – a social validation in the form of views, likes, comment and retweets. Abidin (2014) argues that this competition for visibility online has turned private lives into 'real-time billboards' (p. 119). This motivation to self-brand could underlie the rise of the micro-celebrity and the social media influencer.

I now turn to the specific contribution of this thesis. In order to contextualise this thesis, I briefly discuss relevant academic literature around the topics of celebrity culture, online micro-celebrity and social media influencers. In addition to the brief discussion below, I return to these texts in more depth in the literature review in Chapter Two. There has been a long history of research into celebrity culture, moving from the broadcast era (Turner 2014) to reality television. More recently, a new kind of micro-celebrity (Marwick 2013; Senft 2008) has gained

popularity online and now plays a key role in the marketing landscape: the influencer (Abidin 2016b). Abidin defines influencers as:

> everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in "digital" and "physical" spaces, and monetize their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blog or social media posts and making physical appearances at events (Abidin 2015a).

Online celebrities build their profiles through a curated feed designed to promote their brand and put on an online performance in an effort to attract an audience (Senft 2008). Research into social media celebrities studies the deliberately commercial lives of influencers (Abidin 2017a), online self-promotion (Marwick 2013) and brand partnerships (Brown & Fiorella 2013).

Crystal Abidin and Mart Ots (2015) argue that influencers' online presence is deliberately framed and staged to maximise their commercial potential and attract brand sponsorships. Alice Marwick (2013) developed the idea of self-branding, arguing that the idea of turning the self into a brand formed an essential part of a Web 2.0 strategy. This can also be seen with social media influencers, who aim to appear authentic and build intimate relationships with their audiences. In her post featuring You Foodz, Zoe Foster Blake wrote: 'This isn't sponsored by the way. Just a recommendation. I don't do sponsored posts.' This comment showed her audience her position regarding advertising on her account, which might in fact have been purposefully undisclosed as advertising to appear more authentic (Hardiman 2018). Indeed, in interviews conducted by Jonathan Mavroudis and Esther Milne (2016), influencers acknowledge that the identity they portray online (staged and framed) is an important component of their micro-celebrity status.

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the topic of influencer marketing, largely focusing on the phenomena of micro-celebrity and social media influencers. This thesis builds on this work by considering

consumers and sets out to understand people's perceptions of influencers and sponsored content. In turn, this project builds on existing research on micro-celebrity culture and social media influencers and furthers an understanding of influencer marketing practices. The project focuses on Australian consumers specifically. Australians regularly use social media platforms: 17.1 million Australians aged 14+ (83 per cent) visit Facebook at least once a month, according to Roy Morgan (2019). Australia has a developed influencer market, represented by both marketplaces and agencies. One of these marketplaces, TRIBE, founded by Australian television and radio presenter Jules Lund, has become international, opening offices in Melbourne, Sydney, London, Mumbai and the Philippines (Bennet 2018) after securing $5 million in funding (Crunchbase 2016). The company now has over 48,000 influencers on their platform and had run 9,574 campaigns by the end of 2018 (Tribe n.d.(a)). Australia's digital advertising spend is predicted to reach 54.9 per cent of total media spend in 2019 (Cameron 2018). This accounts for over $8 billion in media spend, demonstrating the increasing demand for digital advertising, which includes influencer marketing on social media.

According to research conducted by the College of Information Sciences and Technology, Pennsylvania State University (2015), 90 per cent of Instagram users are younger than 35 years old. Focusing on the most active demographics ensures that this research gathers the most valuable data from the primary userbase of Instagram. The 3.5 million Instagram users on Instagram in Australia were aged between 18 to 25 as of 2018 (Cowling 2018). According to Sensis (2018), 99 per cent of 18 to 29-year olds use social media. University students studying Communications degrees at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) fit this demographic description accurately, and a sample from this student cohort was recruited for this research. The research utilised a mixed methods approach, applying quantitative research to gather data and qualitative interviews to further explain and build on the quantitative research results. The

first stage involved collecting and analysing survey data, which was then used in the second stage to define the research direction for individual interviews.

Some previous marketing studies have focused on consumers' responses to the introduction of sponsorship disclosure regulations. Nathaniel J. Evans et al. (2017), when researching the impact of sponsorship disclosure on message credibility and perception, discovered that the promotional tone of voice is most impactful on message credibility, rather than the sponsorship disclosure alone. However, Nora Lisa Ewers (2017) discovered no major correlation in a similar study of a pool of university students in Germany. Although these studies provide an insight into social media users' responses to promotional messages, the difference in outcomes shows that findings on this topic remain inconclusive. These studies also did not consider perceptions of influencers' brands, the social media habits of Instagram users, or their purchase intent. In fact, few studies in the academic literature to date focus on consumers alone and consider how they interact with influencers. This thesis thus extends this area of research by focusing on the perceptions of active Instagram users who follow one or more influencers.

Thesis structure

This thesis analyses consumer responses to influencer marketing to identify the dynamics of the relationship between influencers and their followers. To accomplish this, I consider academic literature relevant to the topic of influencer marketing and conduct a mixed method study to identify a set of themes relevant to my target demographic.

In Chapter Two, I critically review relevant academic literature. I first look at the background of the phenomenon of the social media influencer and examine what led to its formation. I examine the foundation upon which 'influence' is built and argue that historical practices around word-of-mouth (WOM)

marketing strategies are now being adopted by brands and social media influencers through sponsored content. I also consider the similarities and differences between influencer marketing and celebrity endorsements by drawing on celebrity studies research. I then discuss the rise of Web 2.0 and its contribution to the creation of the online micro-celebrity. Finally, I draw on existing studies that focus on the lives of influencers and analyse relevant marketing and branding literature on the topics of influence and influencer marketing on social media.

After reviewing academic research relevant to this thesis, Chapter Three presents this study's methods and research design. I provide a rationale for choosing a mixed methods approach and describe the methodology design and research plan in detail. I also define the target demographic for this study and calculate a sample size. I then discuss the line of inquiry and data analysis techniques used.

In Chapters Four and Five, I outline key research findings on the dynamics between influencers and their followers (Chapter Four) and the effects of sponsored content (Chapter Five). I first analyse the relationship that consumers form with influencers and how this relationship can influence trust. I then look at what attracts consumers to Instagram influencers and further explore how they personally benefit from the relationship. In Chapter Five, I consider how the commercialisation of influencers' feeds affects consumers by analysing consumers' reactions and attitudes towards sponsored content. I also consider advertising intent awareness and how this can influence consumers' relationships with influencers. Finally, I consider whether influencer marketing does influence consumer behaviour and, if so, the factors that are relevant to this influence.

In Chapter Six, I conclude this thesis with a discussion of the key findings in relation to current and future research. I reflect on the history of influencers and

speculate on the future of the industry. I also consider the different forms that the relationships between influencers and consumers can take in more detail. To conclude the chapter, I consider the future of social media and influencer marketing and question how influencers may influence the industry.

In Chapter Seven I draw on the key research findings and state how this thesis contributes to academic research on influencer marketing. I draw on existing research that supports the findings of this study and discuss the significance of key findings. I also acknowledge limitations of this research and call for further research on the topic of consumer responses to influencer marketing on Instagram. I then further discuss the future of influence and the challenges influencer marketing on Instagram might face based on my findings.

Chapter 2. Literature review

In this literature review, I provide a critical overview of the current scholarship around influencers and argue that more attention should be paid to how consumers engage with this emerging marketing practice. I begin by examining the formation of the contemporary celebrity and micro-celebrity and analyse how social media platforms have enabled self-branding and a new form of celebrity. I then discuss how social media influencers build their brand and interact online. To further examine the notion of social media influencers, I look at how social media has contributed to the emergence of micro-celebrities and influencers. I then consider how influencer content is consumed by social media users and examine their motivations, the roles brands typically play in setting social media trends and their methods when utilising influencer marketing. I also examine influencer marketing as an advertising technique by comparing how influencers and traditional celebrities have worked as brand ambassadors. To clarify the key factors that lead brands to use influencer marketing, I discuss relevant literature around marketing and branding. Finally, I argue that due to the popularity and influence of social media in facilitating discussions or purchases, it is essential to study consumer responses to influencer marketing on social media platforms.

Social media has transformed celebrity culture over the past decade by promoting 'authentic' communication and blurring the lines between public and private life (Manning et al. 2017). Celebrities now communicate directly with their fans on Twitter and other social media platforms, with a continuous stream of news, updates and selfies in their feeds, producing a form of digital intimacy (Thompson 2008). Social media removes a crucial field of tension in celebrity culture by allowing celebrities to avoid traditional intermediaries and independently engage in direct, many-to-many communication, a strategy that was not possible until recently (Elliott 2018).

Graeme Turner (2014) states that people perceive celebrity as a continuous performance practice that is focused on maintaining a fan base and constructing a consumable persona and performed intimacy, rather than a set of personal characteristics. This understanding translates to social media, where maintaining a social media presence requires consistency and the regular production of quality content. Anthony Elliott (2018) states that social media diminishes the distance between fans and celebrities by imitating a direct, immediate and real-time interaction with their 'idol' (p. 25). Theresa M. Senft (2008) argues that this increased access helps develop a sense of intimacy in relationships with celebrities and states that 'online, popularity established through social media platforms such as LiveJournal, Usenet groups and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) are used by 'camgirls' to stay in touch with their audience' (p. 21). A camgirl is a form of micro-celebrity defined by Senft (2008, p. 1) as a woman who broadcasts herself over the 'Web for [the] general public, while trying to cultivate a measure of celebrity in the process'. For example, Dean, a camgirl interviewed by Senft, would 'often describe her viewers as "family", encouraging people to relate to her' (p. 26). Alice Marwick (2013) provides another perspective on intimacy by citing the importance of 'authenticity' in these exchanges. She explains how 'authenticity' is bound up with intimacy in several ways, 'from direct interaction with admirers to the public discussion of deeply personal information' (p. 114).

Social media presents an opportunity for traditional celebrities to engage with their fans and maintain their fame within their fan base. However, social media also allows regular users to develop micro-celebrity status by providing an accessible channel for self-promotion. Abidin (2015b) explains that this is a worldwide phenomenon, with young people across the world turning to social media to monetise their personal lives as 'influencers'. Social media has become a communication channel for influencers, providing the means for self-promotion and branding. As a result, in addition to serving as a two-way communication channel for traditional celebrities, social media has also created

a new form of celebrity. These contemporary micro-celebrities are known as 'influencers' or 'Instagram bloggers'.

As social media platforms become saturated with content creators, bloggers and celebrities, coming across celebrity or sponsored posts while browsing social media is becoming increasingly unavoidable. This growing trend is likely to have a significant impact on the way people experience social media. Consequently, it is important to study the dynamics between social media micro-celebrities and their audiences on Instagram in order to uncover how it impacts consumer attitudes and Australian society more broadly. Ien Ang (1991) identified a similar gap in the literature in relation to television audiences and argue that understandings of television audiences have been 'colonised by … the institutional point of view' (p. 2) and as a consequence, have silenced actual audiences. Despite it then being decades after the introduction of television, there were mainly presumptions and no actual research on TV audiences and their screen time. As this review discusses, the lack of rigorous research into TV audiences has parallels with the current lack of research on the effects of influencers. The majority of the academic literature focuses on brands or influencers themselves, with little attention paid to how consumers experience social media influencers and sponsored content.

Micro-celebrity

To understand the world of the micro-celebrity, it is necessary to first consider the emergence of the 'attention economy' in detail. The attention economy is defined by Charles Fairchild (2007) as a marketing perspective that assigns value according to the capacity to attract 'eyeballs'. As noted earlier, social media provides new ways of distributing information to large audiences and allows individuals to build 'celebrity status'. danah boyd (2010) summarises these properties as persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. As people began implementing these properties, blogging became popular and led to

certain forms of internet-enabled visibility. Alice Marwick (2013) describes this as 'a state of being famous to a niche group of people' and 'a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention' (p. 114).

Becoming a celebrity requires strategically building a persona, producing and distributing content, appealing to online audiences and maintaining authentic relationships with a fan base. Marwick (2013) emphasises that micro-celebrity status is based on self-promotion. Gaining and maintaining online celebrity status can require a significant amount of work, turning into a form of labour that can be compared to a traditional celebrity's labour but without a team of agents, producers and managers. However, Tiziana Terranova (2000) points out there is a necessary 'backlash against the glamorization' of digital labour, 'simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited' (p. 34). Free labour online takes many forms, including creating websites, maintaining an online presence and engaging with followers. However, the type of labour studied in this thesis is conducted with the ultimate goal of achieving micro-celebrity status and gaining monetary and non-monetary compensation, such as brand deals, in-kind sponsorships and self-branding.

There are different types of micro-celebrities and various ways of attaining fame, such as from viral videos and memes to constant self-branding. Marwick (2013) identifies two distinct ways of achieving micro-celebrity status:

> There are two ways of achieving internet fame – by consciously arranging the self to achieve recognition, or by being ascribed fame by others due to one's accomplishments. Within the scene, both types of micro-celebrities are subject to scrutiny; pursuing attention and visibility for its own sake without commensurate achievement risks having one's personas and activities policed and judged by others (Marwick 2013, p. 114).

Taking a slightly different perspective, Senft (2008) emphasises the similarities of traditional celebrities and micro-celebrities. Despite their differences, in the

context of postmodern branding, 'web celebrities share something important with mainstream media starts: both must brand or die' (p. 26). Senft (2013) discusses how the rise of the 'digital native' has led to a new way of thinking about online identity 'as framed by what people do while on the Internet' (p. 350). Torn as they are between 'real' and 'staged' self-representation online, it is common to see micro-celebrities curate and post what they consider to be the best photos of themselves in order to carefully craft their desired online image. Erving Goffman (1959) describes 'performance' as part of everyday life. He argues that it is in the interest of an individual to control the 'conduct of the others' (Goffman 1959, p. 15) by expressing the self in a way that leads to favourable responses from others, or in other words, controlling others' perceptions. In the context of popularity and celebrity online, self-representation turns into something more than simply impressing one's peers.

This 'performance', as described by Goffman (1959), is prevalent in contemporary influencer culture. Senft (2008) defines micro-celebrity as 'a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their online popularity using technologies like video, blogs and social media sites' (p. 25). One example of this performance can be seen through the use of intimacy to connect with audiences. Online celebrities have a direct connection with their audience via videos, photos and blogs. Due to this seemingly personal connection between a micro-celebrity and their audience, viewers do not treat micro-celebrities as a commodity in the way we traditionally understand the term:

> Unlike film and television audiences, Web viewers don't seem particularly interested in purchasing products endorsed by Web stars. Instead, their interest takes an ethical turn: rather than speculating on who a Web personality "really is", viewers tend to debate the personality's obligations to those who made her what she is. This is because on the Web, popularity depends upon a connection to one's audience rather than an enforced separation from them (Senft 2008, p. 25).

In the case of traditional celebrities, a staged life and reality become somewhat separated, leaving fans to wonder: 'what is Kim Kardashian is "really" like?' In

contrast, online celebrities are seen to have a direct connection with their audiences via videos, photos and blogs. Senft (2008) claims that the relationship between an internet micro-celebrity and an audience feels 'real' until at the end they suddenly turn *real*. Micro-celebrity involves closeness with an audience; Marwick (2013) found that many influencers feel obligated to interact with their fan base through Twitter, instant messaging and other means of direct or semi-direct communication. For this reason, 'audiences often expect micro-celebrities to be more 'authentic' than traditional celebrities, presumably because they are not subject to the processes of the star-making system', according to Marwick (p. 119).

This type of intimacy is just one of the elements of the so-called technique of 'performance' that micro-celebrities utilise. Another component of performance involves the process of self-branding. Micro-celebrities, defined here as an 'any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts' (Thomson 2006, p. 104), use social media to promote their brands and influence their audiences. Status is one of the primary drivers for people to maintain their social media presence: a study by Emily Christofides et al. (2009) found that the main reason why undergraduates used Facebook was due to a desire to be more popular. As with undergraduates, status-seeking is prevalent across all levels of society, even when it does not involve the prospect of financial gain (Huberman 2004). Attaining status on social media means not just being listened to by one's followers, but also appears as an attention- and visibility-based hierarchy – the quest for likes, reposts and new followers has turned individuals into self-branding machines. Status can either be achieved or ascribed. Marwick (2013) emphasises the contemporary form of status in the form of likes, followers and re-tweets:

> The technology scene outwardly values openness, transparency, and creativity, maintaining a vestige of meritocracy. But Silicon Valley has long prioritized entrepreneurship, technical knowledge, and wealth. The mixture of these two sets of ideals peculiar to Web 2.0 creates a climate in which participating in the culture of

techno-business, sharing personal information online, and commanding and maintaining a large audience have become modern status symbols. The highest status is still wrapped up in engineering culture and technology-fuelled wealth, but the popularity of social media has given rise to an equivalent hierarchy based on attention and visibility (Marwick 2013, p. 76).

Both traditional celebrity status and online micro-celebrity status are based on self-branding, with each form of celebrity status formed and maintained in a similar manner: the celebrity is constantly competing for the spotlight, whether this be through significant promotions, such as television and event appearances, or on a smaller scale on Instagram. Senft (2008) defines the development of online celebrity as a 'new style of online performance' (p. 25) which involves users promoting their persona to gain popularity over the internet using tools such as blogs, videos and social media platforms. On the internet, indices such as shares, likes and comments are emblematic of validation and ultimately translate into popularity. Similar to the labour involved in maintaining celebrity status in a traditional celebrity context, online micro-celebrities must also brand themselves to maintain their popularity. When interviewing Instagram micro-celebrities, Mavroudis and Milne (2016) found that the online image is a constructed representation of the self, designed to fit current trends and engender likeability to appeal to and attract an audience; it constitutes labour and is expected by fans. When Mavroudis and Milne (2016) asked micro-celebrity Aaron Turchin why he uses Instagram, he responded:

> For self promotion in general ... you're supposed to get your face out there ... The majority of my followers and likes are for if I post something of myself. The majority of people follow me for my shirtless selfies, so I get frustrated when I post my art because I usually get half as many likes which is frustrating (Turchin 2015, cited in Mavroudis & Milne 2016).

A large amount of research on micro-celebrities analyses how they brand themselves (Marwick 2013), present themselves online (Mavroudis & Milne 2016), as well as their motivations (Christofides et al. 2009) and expectations associated with the image of the micro-celebrity (Senft 2008). However, the fundamental motives that underlie people's desires to follow and engage with

micro-celebrities are not yet clear. This is why it is important not to overlook consumers when studying influencer marketing; in particular, users' responses to social media micro-celebrities and influencers across sociological and commercial contexts should be explored. Understanding how people interact with online celebrities and consume content may lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the phenomena of online micro-celebrity status.

Influencers and influence marketing

As noted earlier, micro-celebrities have begun to move from blogs and take on the persona of social media influencers. These influencers have been subsumed into brands' marketing strategies and are used to promote brands' products and services directly to their fan bases. This strategy has a long history of use in marketing. Robert Brooks (1957) emphasises that personal contacts are the most effective cause of changes in consumer behaviours and opinions in the adoption of new types of products. With this in mind, it is no surprise that endorsements and brand ambassadorships have moved to social media under the umbrella of influence marketing.

Influencer marketing (also known as influence marketing), is a form of marketing in which focus is placed on a key individual. It primarily identifies an individual who has influence over a particular group of potential consumers and orients marketing activities around these key influencers to communicate a brand's message to their audience (Allard 2006). The rise of social media means that every one of us is a potential influencer: by shaping opinions and influencing the decision-making of our connections when we share posts on social media, we act as endorsers, transmitting new trends, reviews or opinions in similar ways to social media influencers.

It is useful to pay attention to user behaviour on social media platforms and the formation of digital communities of interest. Influencers and their followers

represent communities in their own right. Nancy Baym (2015) states that many online groups develop a strong sense of belonging, as 'they serve as bases for the creation of new relationships as people from multiple locations gather synchronously or asynchronously to discuss topics of shared interest, role play, or just hang out' (p. 75). Influencers themselves form a digital community of content creators on Instagram bound by shared values, interests and, in some cases, audiences. Likewise, influencers are often seen to interact with and support each other in the form of liking, commenting and collaborating, which in turn can lead to shared audiences. Kim Seungbae et al. (2017) show that Instagram influencers share common followers and aim to build reciprocal relationships with other influencers and their communities. This can be seen through the trend of 'shout outs', whereby influencers refer their fans to other accounts, encouraging follows and giving exposure to the shared account.

Social media dynamics, therefore, also encourage reciprocal relationships in the form of likes, comments and shares. According to Abidin (2015b), many influencers are likely to 'favourite', 'like', 'retweet' or 'reply with smiley faces and heart shaped emoji […] to comments from followers as a sign of acknowledgement and appreciation'. These ties are strengthened by Instagram's 'explore' algorithm, where users are exposed to content that their connections have engaged with (Instagram n.d.). Therefore, when a brand focuses on a group of interconnected influencers in a marketing campaign, the brand is able to potentially maximise their advertising by drawing on connected influencer accounts to reach a shared audience. Influencer marketing can thus explore the potential of single-post advertising through one account or repetitive advertising through numerous connected accounts. This also means that influencer marketing on Instagram targets the Instagram community as a whole, as opposed to single-audience blogs. With different tiers of users interconnected with reciprocal relationships, influencer marketing on Instagram filters through a community of influencers, passing messages to the followers of an influencer, followed by the followers' followers, and so on.

Similarly to earlier micro-celebrities (see Marwick, 2013), social media influencers also engage in significant amounts of labour. While this thesis has already discussed labour, the increasing professionalisation of the influencer's role that has emerged from the micro-celebrity phenomenon has led to an intensification of this labour. An influencer needs to create high-quality content, stay on top of the latest trends, and maintain a consistent online presence to build and maintain an attractive brand. Mavroudis and Milne (2016) found that Instagram influencers regard maintaining and managing their 'instafame' as a form of labour that is structured by both unpaid and paid compensation. Self-promotion is one of the key drivers for influencers to engage in this labour, increase their influence and maintain their celebrity status.

Abidin (2014, 2016c) follows the war for 'eyeballs' on social media by examining influencers' online lives and looking at influencers who have emerged as 'selfie-producers', for whom taking selfies is purposively commercial. Influencers turn to trends and utilise what is perceived as 'likeable' by social media users, manage their Instagram posts to curate taste displays, and set up an ideal online image that can attract an audience. 'Instagram becomes a project of self-creation, where bloggers conscientiously hone their public personals as arbiters of taste' (Abidin 2014, p. 123). Abidin (2014) explains that influencers work hard to maintain their online persona, through which they exclude and emphasise certain aspects of their life. For example, Abidin refers to an influencer, Linda, who posts luxury items and rarely reveals 'nonluxury items that are a mainstay of her wardrobe off Instagram':

> Bloggers thus labor over maintaining the congruence of their persona to remain believable to followers. In summary, only bloggers whose bodies channel hegemonic beauty, and whose persona is congruent, attract a sizable number of followers, and thus, advertisers (p. 123).

Susie Khamis et al. (2017) have considered why self-branding has become so popular among social media influencers and suggest that it could be due to the promise of the reward of a higher profile and the chance of attracting brand deals. Social media micro-celebrities can use their brand built on media such as Instagram to influence audiences and leverage brand sponsorships. Based on the resonance with their audience and often niche follower base, influencers can share content in a manner that reflects their everyday lives. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, influencers post sponsored posts on Instagram in the form of 'advertorials', which are advertisements expressed in the form of opinion editorials intertwined with influencers' recounting of their daily lives (Abidin 2016c). Or, as Abidin says, 'advertorials are thought to be more effective than dispassionate, clinical advertisements since they take the form of a personal narrative and incorporate influencers' perspectives of having experienced the product or service first-hand' (Abidin, 2016c).

When integrated into an influencer's story, sponsored posts are often executed in similar ways to WOM or review/recommendation marketing strategies. However, when considering the staged online presence of a typical social media influencer, such posts are far from natural, electronic WOM communications. Abidin (2016a) argues that influencers have repurposed Instagram's original philosophy of creating intimacy by adopting the term 'friend' instead of 'fans' or 'followers', by posting professional images (though the platform was intended to be used 'on the go' with a smartphone camera), and by carefully curating their feeds and planning ahead, as opposed to spontaneously capturing moments (p. 7).

Orchestrated by a brand or a communication agency as part of a larger integrated marketing strategy, influencer marketing on Instagram focuses on the potential reach of a sponsored post within an influencer's community and beyond. Therefore, the larger an influencer's following, the more they attract sponsors, brand deals and higher fee rates, and the more attractive their social

media capital becomes to marketers. Abidin and Ots (2015) argue that the digital presence of micro-celebrities or influencers on Instagram is deliberately commercial in order to maximise the advertorial potential.

Celebrities, endorsements and influencers

Although influencers differ from traditional celebrities, it is worthwhile returning to the use of celebrities and brand ambassadorship in marketing to further understand the contemporary use of influencers in marketing. Modern influencer marketing can be compared to celebrity endorsement – a common practice that involves traditional celebrities and superstars. A deeper understanding of the effects of celebrity endorsement may give us a better appreciation of how consumer perceptions are affected by an influencer's profile. 'Celebrity' can be defined as the accumulation of 'attention capital', which is most commonly considered a quality of individuals (Rojek 2015).

Academic literature tends to focus on celebrity as a product of several economic and cultural processes, including the commodification of celebrity through advertising and promotion, the meaning of celebrity in the context of the formation of cultural identity, and the representation strategies deployed by media (Turner 2014). According to Barrie Gunter (2014), individuals who obtain fame act as exemplary role models and opinion leaders, with celebrities being held to stand for or represent particular social values. Turner (2014) views celebrity as resulting from the media processes coordinated by an industry; a celebrity can be seen as a commodity that is consumed by an audience or fans. To maintain celebrity status, celebrities must compete for media appearances, events and journalists' attention to stay in the spotlight. Murray Milner (2010) argues that the attainment of celebrity and fame always results from the combination of social background, performance, public relations and luck. As such, the media plays a significant role in creating and maintaining celebrity status. Media outlets claim to act as image-makers when it comes to celebrities

and their fame status, with television, newspapers and politicians manipulating media celebrity for personal and political gain (Monaco 1978).

Maggie Payne (2018) regards the contemporary celebrity as someone famous for being famous, with celebrities branding themselves to differentiate and maintain their fame. The commodification of celebrities sees their fame translated into commercial realms, moving from a functional 'product' to symbolic and cultural meanings (Payne 2018). Marwick (2013) also supports the notion that celebrity is becoming a product of interaction rather than an identity in the internet era. Celebrities are primary sources of social talking points and gossip; many people follow and discuss an individual celebrity's life, while strong psychological feelings towards a celebrity can encourage fans to desire to emulate them (Gunter 2014).

Celebrities are a regular feature in commercial advertising, as advertisers believe that there is commercial capital to be gained when consumers notice and buy from ads that feature and are endorsed by famous personalities. Research supports this belief and finds that celebrities can enhance the public profile of a brand, though not all celebrities are considered a good or credible fit for any one particular brand (Gunter 2014). Therefore, repeat celebrity exposure can cause consumers to associate a celebrity's attributes and characteristics with the products and brands that are being endorsed by them. This could also apply to influencer marketing on Instagram, which this study aims to discover.

While research on celebrity endorsements illustrates how a celebrity's association with a brand or product can enhance its public profile, it is as yet unclear whether the same phenomenon occurs in the digital space. When it comes to celebrity endorsement, an individual celebrity's characteristics impact on the endorsement's effectiveness, with trustworthiness constituting a significant differentiation factor for purchase intentions. In contrast, a study by

Eugenia Tzoumaka et al. (2016) did not show a statistically significant impact of the endorser's expertise.

Marketing and branding

It is important to note that the outcomes of this research also contribute to the discipline of marketing, which studies influencers, the popularity of influencer marketing and its contribution to advertising outcomes. Danny Brown and Sam Fiorella (2013) argue that emotional connection is the primary factor in successful ads. In turn, influencers should be chosen based on their resonance with a brand rather than product reach and audience size. Daniel Edelman, the late public relations pioneer, understood this when he introduced celebrity endorsement in promotional campaigns using global stars (Brown & Fiorella 2013). As noted earlier, influencer marketing can also be viewed as a digitised form of celebrity endorsement, executed in the manner of WOM marketing. Researchers have demonstrated that the informal exchange of information in personal conversations influences consumers' perceptions of a particular brand or product. According to Brooks (1957), the existence of an opinion leader within a networking group – a leader who is sought by others for information – is of great importance in WOM advertising. Other examples of opinion leaders can be found in Brown and Fiorella's (2013) notion of a 'marketing maven', that is, a person who enjoys advising to friends or acquaintances about new products or services and places to shop. Social media influencers are a modern version of these early opinion leaders. Influencers' fans trust their recommendations within their particular area of expertise, with that expertise most commonly seen as a specific area of personal interest.

Being a marketing maven or engaging in WOM activities is the essence of today's influencer, where WOM is the core foundation upon which an influencer's commercial success is built. Stephen Guo et al. (2011) discuss users' urge to share on social media when purchasing a popular or 'trendy' product. Social

media facilitates such exchanges and the sharing of information, allowing users to share their latest news, events and purchases and gain recognition and validation from their circle of friends or broader community of followers. Instagram users not only directly review or enquire about products or brands but also share their opinions on forums, blogs and other social media platforms. Influencers take advantage of the connections they build with their audiences to appeal to their followers on a personal level, in a peer-to-peer-like manner.

Influencer marketing harks back to earlier celebrity endorsement strategies, as discussed above. Like traditional brand endorsements, the product–influencer fit is a key factor in influencer marketing campaign planning. Marijke De Veirman et al. (2017) found through an experimental study that even though Instagram users with a high number of followers are perceived as more likeable, cooperating with these users can decrease a brand's perceived uniqueness and likeability. Sponsored posts on Instagram stand in line with celebrity endorsements, where the influencer's traits and expertise are associated with the product or service being promoted. While influencer marketing can be beneficial for raising brand awareness, increasing sales and supporting brand loyalty, uncertainty remains about which particular outcomes can be attributed to the influencer marketing promotional method. Brown and Fiorella (2013) claim that influence marketing is built around short-term buzz and raising awareness of a product or service. Buzz-generating campaigns rarely bring into play the longer-term goals of sales, customers, repeated purchases or loyalty marketing. Furthermore, Rick Ferguson (2008) found that this advertising technique produces high returns on brand awareness. The research on social media influencers and micro-celebrities, brand utilisation of influencer marketing and the recent popularity of influencers speaks to the effectiveness of this promotional technique.

Not unlike traditional thought leadership, in many cases, social media celebrities become popular based on their perceived expertise in one or a number of topics.

De Veirman et al. (2017) found that influencers with higher numbers of followers are considered more likeable, resulting in the perception and attribution of opinion leadership to the influencer. However, when marketing a product with an unusual or a niche design that evokes feelings of uniqueness, influencers with high numbers of followers show a weak brand response, which is explained by the fact that the product's uniqueness is undermined by its appearance in a highly occupied community when advertised in a sponsored post by a celebrity or celebrity influencer that is seen by many (De Veirman et al. 2017). By contrast, Elmira Djafarova and Chloe Rushworth (2017) found through interviews with Instagram users that bloggers or micro-influencers appear more influential when their opinions and stories are listened to. However, the likeability of social media influencers may be due to many factors, including their authenticity and expertise, the content of their posts, or perhaps something else entirely.

As noted earlier, one of the prominent factors linked to influencers' likeability is authenticity (Rimmer 2019). As influencers' advertorials typically appear in a WOM manner or recommendation, knowledge of the advertising intent can impact the effectiveness of influencer marketing. This is why some researchers such as Evans et al. (2017) and marketing practitioners are concerned that sponsored content may lose its authenticity and effectiveness when the promotional intent is clear to consumers. Influencer marketing, commonly executed in an editorial or a WOM manner, may not always be clearly disclosed and in some cases, the sponsorship may be purposefully obfuscated by a brand or influencer to maximise the appearance of trustworthiness. Since compulsory sponsored post disclosure, often executed by including the hashtag '#ad' in the copy of a sponsored post, was introduced by the AANA in January 2017, the mechanics and effectiveness of influencer marketing have been questioned by advertisers and brands, as paid posts can seemingly no longer be executed in the same manner as WOM or authentic product recommendations (AANA 2016). However, Evans et al. (2017) found that even though the advertising aspect of sponsored content has a negative effect on a message's credibility, this is not

caused by the sponsorship disclosure itself, but rather by a manner of communication in which a 'sales pitch' is apparent. In light of recent changes to advertising law enforcing sponsorship disclosure on Instagram, it is crucial to understand the attitudes of Australian Instagram users towards #ad disclosure.

Brands utilise social media to engage with and promote two-way communication with their customers. Brands maintain a presence on social media to attract, engage and retain existing and prospective customers. According to the *Sprout Social Report 2016*, 87 per cent of social media users want to and indeed do follow brands on social media (Sprout Social 2016). Examining how users engage with brand-initiated social media pages, Masayuki Yoshida et al. (2018) found that the entertainment value of a piece of content is linked with consumer behavioural loyalty. Utpal M. Dholakia et al. (2004) further confirm that entertaining content strengthens a user's identification with their virtual community, while engagement increases the likelihood of a consumer exhibiting greater brand loyalty and brand support. Brand support based on consumer trust and loyalty can also lead to branding co-creation in brand communities on social media (Kamboj et al. 2018). Social media users tend to share their latest purchases with friends on social media, where those with emotional connections to the brand will tag and mention the brand in the post.

The community built around a brand's presence on social media allows brands to not only share news and insights directly with their audiences but also to engage with their customers. Companies actively use social media to stay connected with their audiences, creating two-way communication, showcasing educational content around their products, and offering reviews and customer support capabilities. According to P. Sri Jothi et al. (2011), users expect communication from brands as opposed to brand marketing on social media. For this reason, brands actively utilise their communication channels on social media for customer support functions through the built-in inbox or direct in-post mentions, with 52 per cent of users expecting a response within one hour when tweeting a

brand, according to the Lithium-commissioned study by Millward Brown Digital (Lithium 2013).

Using social media to gather information is fundamental to purchasing behaviour according to Guo et al. (2011). When making a purchase decision, consumers consult friends and family, look at product reviews and use the internet to gather information. Guo et al. (2011) highlight the influence of information sharing among social media users, such as the urge to share a popular purchase on social media. Discussions facilitated by social media platforms have the potential to increase brand awareness and recognition, as well as facilitate user reviews and peer-to-peer recommendations, taking a form similar to WOM marketing within a digitised community. This comes into play in the context of influencer marketing, where sponsored content shared in the manner of a review or recommendation can spark a discussion, increase a brand's profile, boost awareness and influence purchase intention. According to Toor et al. (2017, cited in Akar & Dalgic 2018), 'social network marketing is significantly related to consumers' purchase intention, and consumer engagement plays a partial mediator role in the effect of social network marketing on consumers' purchase intentions' (p. 4).

As is clear, consumer responses towards brands' activities on social media, display adverts and celebrity endorsements have been well-researched. Although these responses are closely related to influencer marketing on social media, variables in marketing execution can lead to different results and reactions. Therefore, it is crucial to understand consumer responses within the context of influencer marketing. This research, which is local to the Australian market, uncovers consumer perceptions unique to the Australian social media marketing landscape.

Conclusion

In considering the different individuals who hold varying levels of influence over their communities, whether online or offline, the following emerge as key personas: first are the marketing mavens, who are described by Brown and Fiorella (2013) as a person who enjoys recommending new products and services to friends. Traditional celebrities are also taking a stand as brand ambassadors, and are considered to have commercial capital with the advertised product becoming associated with the celebrity (Gunter 2014). Finally, there are the contemporary celebrities – influencers that are perceived as having authenticity and a personal connection with their audiences (Senft 2008). All these personas act as brand endorsers or ambassadors, while taking on different forms and utilising different resources and communication channels. Although brand ambassadorship is not new, the new social media influencers represent a different type of endorser and are therefore treated and perceived differently by both brands and their followers.

This literature review analyses the aspects that come into play when considering the influencer phenomenon, from traditional celebrities to the new social media influencers of the internet era, as well as the emergence of new forms of marketing and branding on social media platforms. Contemporary media technologies have given birth to the contemporary celebrity: the micro-celebrity. Included in this category are camgirls – the 'women who broadcast themselves over the Web for the general public, while trying to cultivate a measure of celebrity', as described by Senft (2008); bloggers; and, after Web 2.0, the social media influencers who build their own brands with the promise of fame and financial compensation (Marwick 2013). The quest for fame can be understood through Goffman's theory of self (1959) insofar as micro-celebrities receive gratification from validation in the form of likes, comments and shares. While such aspirations are not new, the notion of the influencer is a modern concept, and it is crucial to understand how the emergence of the social media tools that gave birth to these celebrities also affect consumers. This chapter has discussed

how brands utilise social media platforms to engage with their customers and has shown that the entertainment value of brand-generated content is linked to customer loyalty (Yoshida et al. 2018). Social media therefore acts as a source of peer-to-peer opinions and reviews, which in turn influences consumer purchase decisions. With this in mind, it is no wonder that social media influencers have become the contemporary brand ambassadors and endorsers. The influencer status is based on self-promotion (Mavroudis & Milne 2016), supported by the promise of reward (Khamis et al. 2017), where sponsored content is shared in the form of advertorials that appeal to the influencer's audience (Abidin 2016c). Despite the wide adaptation of influencer marketing in promotional campaigns, it is unclear whether influencers can influence consumer behaviour. Apart from a platform's signals such as likes and comments, there are little theoretical frameworks that can verify the success of influencer marketing.

Influencers and micro-celebrities are well-researched in the academic literature, despite being a relatively new phenomenon that has only emerged within the last decade (Abidin 2018). It is clear that social media influencers do have the power to attract audiences and brand deals and are an attractive contemporary advertising method for brands and agencies alike. Although Abidin (2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c), Senft (2013) and Mavroudis and Milne (2016) discuss influencers' audiences in their research on online celebrity, they have not talked directly to them in their research into responses to online influencers. Therefore, consumer responses to influencer marketing remain unclear. The work of De Veirman et al. (2017), Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) and Evans et al. (2017) demonstrates that product–influencer fit is a key factor in determining how a message is received, while a message itself can undermine the content more so than sponsorship disclosure. Understanding why social media users follow influencers, how they interact with them and their fundamental perceptions of sponsored content could reveal the user dynamics that could help brands understand the key factors involved in successful influencer marketing.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology and Methods

This study focuses on identifying and analysing Australian consumer perceptions of Instagram influencers. It aims to understand why users follow and engage with influencers and how these interactions influence social media users and their purchase behaviours. This chapter outlines the methods used in this project. It proceeds as follows: firstly, I provide an overview of my research design and methodology. Next, I discuss each research method in detail, justifying its selection, the audience and sample size and provide an outline of my data collection strategy and general approach to data analysis. Finally, I conclude by identifying the potential limitations of this research.

Research Question

This thesis analyses and identifies how consumers respond to influencer marketing on Instagram and explores how relationships are built between influencers and Instagram users. It is oriented around the following question:

> 'How do Australian consumers react to influencers and sponsored content on Instagram?'

To answer this question, I examine what attracts consumers to Instagram influencers and how consumers view, perceive and engage with them. Specifically, I examine the various emotions that consumers associate with Instagram influencers and their sponsored content, and the behaviours that the sponsored content can elicit.

I have chosen this topic because, as noted in the literature review, consumers are under-represented in existing research on influencer marketing. Of course, many academics have researched micro-celebrities and influencers, from Senft (2008), who considers camgirls as an early example of the online micro-celebrity,

to Abidin (2015(a&b), 2016(a,b&c)) and Marwick (2013), who examine online celebrity and influencers, the audiences of sponsored content – the consumers – remain an under-researched area of scholarship. Some marketing scholars have studied consumers, but findings about consumer behaviour remain inconclusive (Ewers, 2017; Evans et al. 2017; De Veirman et al. 2017). To contribute to the broader scholarship around consumer responses to influencer marketing, I have designed a mixed-methods research project that also incorporates literature from media and cultural studies (Abidin 2015(a&b); 2016(a,b&c); Marwick, 2013; Senft 2008).

Research design and approach

This study uses a mixed-methods research methodology that consists of a quantitative research method (in the form of surveys) and follow-up qualitative interviews using narrative inquiry. From the surveys, I collected a series of responses from an indicative sample of consumers about their feelings towards influencers. Follow-up interviews built on the results of the survey were conducted to collect more in-depth data from participants. This allowed me to capture in-depth attitudes towards influencers as well as more nuanced information that was only available through interviewing.

The survey and quantitative methodology

The survey was designed to gather data on questions related to how consumers react to Instagram influencers, sponsored content, and influencer marketing methods used by brands. A mix of survey questions allowed me to consider the broader context surrounding the consumer-influencer relationship. The survey used a series of questioning methods: multiple-choice questions, yes-or-no questions and comparison (or ranking) questions. Moreover, to ensure response verification, both the survey and interview design repeated similar questions on the central subject, such as questions on purchase intention.

Two surveys were conducted. An initial pilot survey targeted a general Australia-wide demographic. Participants were aged between 18 and 35, active on Instagram and were following at least one influencer. This sample target demographic was determined following a review of the scholarly and industry literature, which found that the majority of Instagram users are under 35 (Pennsylvania State University, College of Information Sciences and Technology, 2015). The 18 to 35 age restriction allowed me to focus on the demographic that is most active on social media and most likely to be exposed to influencer marketing on Instagram. Further pre-qualifying questions ensured that respondents were based in Australia and actively followed at least one influencer on Instagram.

In order to ensure a representative sample, I planned for 663 respondents. This would provide me with 99 per cent confidence and a 5 per cent confidence interval based on the size of the target demographic. I was also willing to bring the confidence level down to 95 per cent with a 5 per cent confidence interval, which would require 384 responses. I based this on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (ABS 2016), which had assessed that the Australian population between the ages of 20 to 34 was 5,243,121. With a population of 1,484,355 between 15 and 20 years old, it could be assumed that the population between 18 and 20 years old was around 742,000 (ABS 2016). The age group 35 to 39 accounted for 1,611,731 people, which translates to roughly 322,000 35-year-olds in Australia (ABS 2016). Subsequently, the total general Australian population between 18 to 35 years old was approximately 6.3 million. The representative sample size was determined based on the size of the overall target population using the Qualtrics sample size calculator (Qualtrics 2018). To ensure that the survey results were representative would have required a sample size of 663 respondents to provide a 99 per cent confidence and 5 per cent confidence interval based on the size of the target demographic. The lowest number of responses needed to fulfil a representative sample, based on a 90 per cent confidence level and 10 per cent margin of error, was 68.

The pilot survey was promoted on Instagram through native ads. As users of the platform were the target market of the survey, this was an appropriate promotional method for this study. For these purposes, a series of ads were created targeting metropolitan areas in Australia. Potential participants were recruited through an in-feed advertisement, which took the participants to a secure LimeSurvey questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire displayed a description of the study and contact information for further questions or feedback. When participants started the survey, they were taken to a pre-qualifying questions page, after which the survey would either end or proceed to the main survey questions. To further amplify the reach of the survey, shareable capabilities were embedded in the survey with a call-to-action.

The budget for the ad campaign was set at $200. After spending more than half of this amount, there were only 90 qualifying responses to the survey, and of these, only 56 responses were useable. The number of responses was therefore below the 68 required and could only support an 85 per cent confidence level with a 10 per cent margin of error. Although the pilot survey gave some insight into consumer responses to influencers on Instagram, the confidence level was too low to represent any significance. Thus, the pilot survey was treated as an early insight into user behaviour concerning influencers and as the foundation for a second survey.

Based on the data gathered in the pilot survey, the target audience was refined and a second survey was conducted. The pilot survey showed that 42.9 per cent of respondents resided in New South Wales (NSW) and the dominant age group in the pilot survey was between 18 to 23 (46.4 per cent of respondents), followed by the 24 to 29 age group (30.4 per cent). Thus, a decision was made to narrow the demographic to NSW residents aged between 18 to 29 years. Undergraduate students from the UTS School of Communication fit the profile of the refined target audience, so I targeted this population for the second survey.

In addition, because UTS communication students constituted a small demographic group, not as many respondents were required for quality assurance as were required in the pilot survey. In addition, they were an accessible demographic due to both time and financial constraints.

I devised the sample as follows: in 2018, the UTS undergraduate communication cohort comprised a total of 3,905 enrolled students; 49 per cent of the total UTS students were women and 69 per cent were under the age of 25 (UTS 2018). Based on UTS intake records in 2018, 3,905 students were enrolled in undergraduate enabling and non-award courses in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) communication degrees (UTS 2018). Based on the demographic size of 3,905 people, the number of responses required for a representative sample would be 94 to yield a 95 per cent confidence level and 10 per cent margin of error, which was achieved with a collected total of 94 qualified survey responses. In summary, the survey procedures were the same as used in the pilot survey, but a narrower demographic of UTS students was targeted in the second survey.

The quantitative component of the research project looked at whether or not consumers would purchase from Instagram, listen to an influencer's recommendations and have a positive reaction to sponsored posts. The survey consisted of a total of 10 questions (Appendix B), which included yes-or-no, comparison, ratings and multiple-choice questions. The yes-or-no questions were represented through a linear data analysis showing the statistical share of users who identified with either a yes or no. Multiple choice questions followed a similar data analysis approach, representing a direct comparison of the most and least frequent choices. However, a different approach was used in relation to questions that included ranking and comparison. For example, a question on trust required respondents to rank their trust towards influencers on a Likert scale (a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is distrust and 5 is trust). A box plot showed how data were distributed, providing a clearer picture of consumer attitudes

towards Instagram influencers than the standard linear comparison. Responses to comparison questions, such as the advertising methods questions, where respondents ranked methods of advertising from most to least favourable, were presented in average ranking order and by a graph showcasing rankings for each advertising method. For example, rankings were assigned to influencer marketing as an advertising method to analyse how the data were distributed.

Qualitative methodology

For the qualitative component of this research, a series of one-on-one interviews was determined the most suitable method. This allowed for a direct conversation with each interviewee on the topic, which was a critical element. This research method is characterised by real-time communication in time and place (King 1994), meaning that there are no time delays in answering the question. This leads to more spontaneous answers and allows the researcher to observe social cues that can be added to the response.

I interviewed five of the questionnaire respondents who had expressed an interest in a follow-up interview as part of the quantitative questionnaire. I also recruited three interviewees from the same demographic through electronic direct mail and in-class announcements. The qualitative methodology was designed to follow-up and explore the data collected in the quantitative stage of the research. Therefore, this element of the study used the same target audience of communication students from UTS recruited through the survey and in-class announcements. In the semi-structured interviews, I asked questions similar to those in the surveys, which meant I could further explore consumer behaviour on Instagram and their attitudes to influencers. However, these questions were also designed to start a discussion and allow participants to justify particular attitudes and responses.

The interviews started with introductory questions '[h]ow long have you been on Instagram?' and '[h]ow active are you on Instagram?' (Appendix D). These

questions were designed to start a conversation as well as gain background information on the interviewees' use of the platform. I then dived into the topic by discussing how many influencers they followed and for how long (questions two & three, Appendix D), followed by question four, which asked for detail on what had made the interviewee interested in the influencer. If the interviewees agreed, they were asked to look at and/or show their own Instagram page and discuss examples of the influencers they were currently following and their opinions on the content that these influencers were sharing. In this way, the interviewees were able to demonstrate the piece of content mentioned and give the discussion a more explicit context.

Question nine was a situational question designed to examine and re-evaluate an interviewee's response to a sponsored post, as follows: 'You see a post by an Influencer that you follow, recommending a product that you seem to like from their description. What do you do?' (Appendix 4). After gaining situational insight into interviewees' typical consumer responses, the interviewees were then asked to rank advertising methods from most to least favourable using visual cards with advertising methods (Appendix E) and explaining their choices. The interview finished with a final question and discussion on attitudes and feelings associated with sponsored content and perceptions of brand advertising. The end of the interview was typically marked with a general discussion and follow up questions related to the main interview questions. To ensure the reliability and validity of the interview data, anticipated follow-up questions and prompts were prepared for each of the main questions to ensure that all questions were directly related to the research topic. However, for not initially anticipated questions, new follow-up questions were ad-libbed based on interviewees' answers. The interviews were conducted according to a script, with some moderations, depending on the answers given.

The data analysis for the qualitative component of this research project was implemented using a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis is defined by Virginia

Braun et al. (2019) as a 'method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set' (p. 57). I first used a deductive approach to code and interpret the data by bringing to the data a 'series of concepts, ideas or topics' (p. 58). Following this, I used an inductive approach, in which the codes and themes derive from the content of the data (Braun et al. 2019), to identify the key themes and concepts in the individual interviews. These themes and concepts were then used to analyse participants' perceptions towards Instagram influencers. After identifying themes, I sorted, analysed and presented the data to identify the main keywords associated with influencers and sponsored content. In the data analysis chapters, each interviewee is given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality, as required by research ethics clearance number ETH18-3097.

Limitations

It is essential to acknowledge that this research is not without its limitations. The quantitative sample group was small, consisting of 94 completed responses, providing a 95 per cent confidence level with a 10 per cent margin of error. Through focusing on university students as a target sample, this research project also focused on a narrow demographic: one that is especially active on Instagram and generally trend-savvy. The results may differ when sampling a general Australia-wide population or another consumer group. Students from communication degrees are also more likely to be aware of influencer marketing practices than other demographics due to their field of study and possible interest in marketing methods. Therefore, when considering attitudes towards ad disclosure and sponsored content, they may express stronger opinions than an average Instagram user.

Previous research has found that an endorser's personal characteristics can affect message perceptions (Gunter 2014), which include but are not limited to likeability (De Veirman et al. 2017), communication manner (Evans et al. 2017),

trustworthiness (Tzoumaka et al. 2016) and even the perceived fame that is typically gauged by the number of followers (Guo et al. 2011). This study focuses on respondents' individual experiences and evaluates their common attitudes to influencers. As experiences vary, other cohorts of Instagram influencers may evoke different responses. A future control study might select similar types of content and influencers to keep these factors constant and allow the observed results to be moderated.

Chapter 4. Research findings: Influencers and trust

In this study, I asked Australian consumers to explain how and why they interact with influencers on Instagram and how they respond to branded content posted by the influencers they follow. I employed a mixed method research design that combined a quantitative survey and a series of face-to-face interviews. The quantitative component provided initial research findings and the qualitative data collection helped explain these findings in more detail.

Using a thematic analysis to draw commonalities between participants, a number of themes emerged about the relationship between users and influencers. In this chapter, I outline relevant research findings in relation to the factors that affected participating consumers' online interactions with influencers, what made them follow and interact with influencers, and whether they found influencers trustworthy. I also examine the factors that can shape consumers' perceptions of Instagram influencers.

In the first section of this chapter, I look at influencers, the reasons why participants follow and interact with influencers on Instagram and examine how influencers' traits shape consumers' perceptions. I then look at whether consumers trust influencers and what factors tend to affect their level of trust towards influencers. In the remaining sections, I discuss the findings from the survey data and outline the interview data, using a thematic analysis to determine commonalities between participants.

Influencers

The most logical starting point for this study is to understand why the participating consumers were attracted to influencers and wanted to follow them on Instagram. Figure 4.1 illustrates the responses to the question '[w]hat are the reasons you follow influencers?'
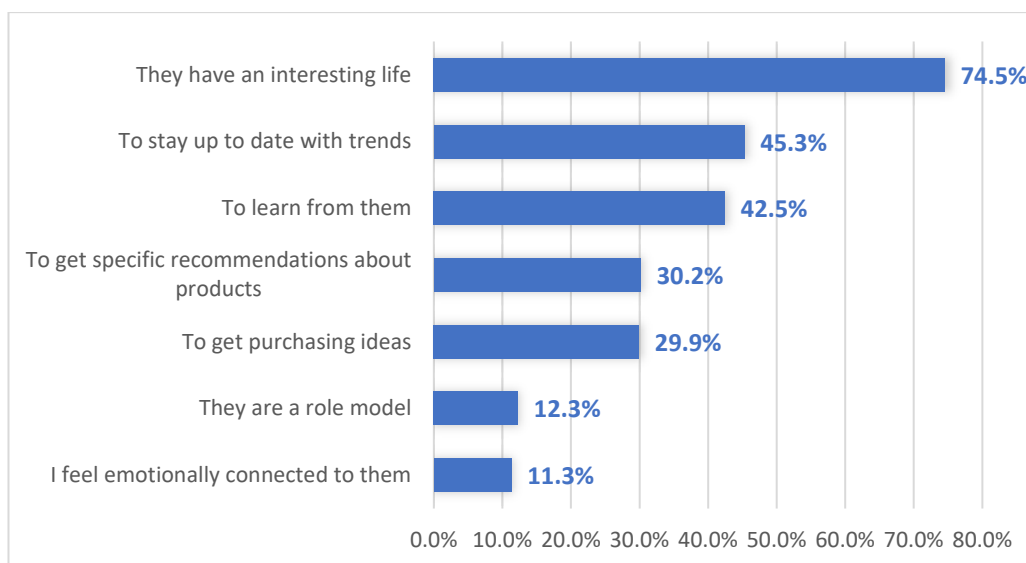
Figure 4.1 Survey question 2 'What are the reasons you follow influencers? (select all that apply)'

Participants could select all options that applied. The majority of survey respondents (74.5 per cent) selected '[t]hey have an interesting life' as the primary reason. This indicates how important an influencer's lifestyle is to consumers when deciding whom to follow. Half of all interviewees also said that they either aspired to the influencer's lifestyle or that the influencer's life and lifestyle served as an inspiration.

The second most common reason was to stay up to date with trends (45.3 per cent of survey respondents). Abidin (2014) discusses this motivation in the context of an influencer's curated lifestyle using the example of one of her research participants, Linda, who would typically be seen wearing designer items on her Instagram feed, despite these designer items comprising a smaller share of her wardrobe. This indicates that influencers are aware that user behaviour is driven by trends on Instagram and illustrates how they adapt by curating their own feed to appear 'trendy' in order to attract and wow their audience. However, a trendy wardrobe is not the only aspect of an influencer's lifestyle that users are interested in. In this study, interview participants mentioned an

array of different accounts they followed, ranging from book reviews and ethical fashion to Instagram comedians making short sketches to entertain their followers – each catering to participants' individual interests. Therefore, it is clear that trends go beyond outfit of the day (#OOTD) content styles. For example, interviewee Eleanor discussed how the posts of influencers she follows help her to stay up to date with sustainable practices by making her more aware of sustainable products. This is one of the trends she is particularly interested in, and she is drawn to accounts that reflect her values and interests.

Coming closely behind these responses, another key reason why survey respondents followed influencers was '[t]o learn from them', which was selected by 42.5 per cent of survey respondents. This response was particularly relevant for interviewees, where nearly all respondents stated that they got tips from influencers about fashion, fitness and places to visit. Interestingly, aside from learning about new tips or trends, some interviewees also felt that following influencers gave them motivation. For example, the interviewee Claire followed a fitness influencer who motivated her to exercise more and go to the gym, Eleanor felt more motivated to read more books when following a book review blog on Instagram, and Emma admitted that following an influencer could help her improve:

> I guess it's like that idea that there's a possibility that you could better yourself from watching what they do. I feel like that's the idea behind following them.

Although only 12.3 per cent of survey respondents said that they regarded influencers as role models, five out of eight interviewees listed motivation and/or aspiration as one of the benefits they received from following influencers. Claire, for example, aspired to an influencer's lifestyle, which involved beautiful photos and frequent travel. However, she qualified this by stating that she would rather note some of the places the influencer had travelled to on her personal bucket list than emulate the influencer precisely. Charlotte, on the other hand, said she desired to be like her favourite influencer and have the same or a similar

lifestyle. Consumers thus appear to treat influencers as experts in their particular areas and vary in the degree to which they aspire to the influencers' lifestyle beyond their niche expertise.

Olivia reflected on how her response to an influencer's content could change depending on her personal circumstances:

> They have a life that you wish you had almost. Sometimes that does make me feel bad but it depends on what I'm going through in my life. Right now, I'm knee deep in uni studies so sometimes seeing their posts is just like I don't want to know if you're in Paris right now or doing whatever fabulous thing you're doing. But then sometimes I'm on holidays and I'm like ooh this is interesting. It's like a fantasy world for me because it's not my life. It's a form of escapism just kind of going into another world and they give you access.

Surprisingly, 30.2 per cent of survey respondents chose '[t]o get specific recommendations about products' and 29.9 per cent chose '[t]o get purchasing ideas' as among their reasons for following influencers. Similarly, only two out of eight interviewees mentioned product recommendations as a reason for following influencers. This indicates that in my sample, a significant but not overwhelming minority of consumers relied on influencers' opinions and, moreover, were open to seeing branded content on Instagram. The ways in which Instagram influencers can influence consumer purchasing decisions are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Personality and uniqueness

A number of respondents reported that the influencer's personality was a factor that made them stand out or be more likeable. Personality was an important factor for six out of eight interviewees. According to Abidin (2015b), influencers aim to create and maintain 'intimacy' with their followers by showing their backstage 'behind the scenes' lives, using a personal tone of voice, or offering interactive content (e.g. 'ask me anything'). Abidin (2017b) described the practise of labour 'over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw

aesthetic of an amateur', defined by her as "Calibrated Amateurism". Thus, influencers carefully orchestrate seemingly 'amateur content' alongside polished presentations of themselves in hopes of maintaining an impression of authenticity and relatability (Abidin 2017b). By using such strategies, influencers aim to stimulate communication with their followers and make themselves appear engaging and trustworthy. This creates the appearance of 'unfiltered' content that can help create a stronger connection and increase likeability. For Claire, an influencer's personality was one of the key reasons why she engaged with an influencer. When asked what made her favourite influencer stand out, she reported: 'I like her personality, she's very optimistic, very bubbly.'

It may appear difficult to grasp an influencer's personality from a curated feed of online content. Although the real and online personas can appear to be separated (as seen in the earlier discussion about an influencer's curated lifestyle), interviewees felt as though they could gauge an influencer's personality behind the curated feed. Research by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) supports the notion that consumers find bloggers or micro-influencers more influential when listening to influencers' opinions and stories. This sheds light on why influencers who share their lives with their audiences can appear more likeable and therefore more influential to the research participants.

Personality was not the only factor research participants paid attention to. Four of the six interviewees who discussed personality were also more attracted to 'unique' influencers. The word 'unique' was used to describe influencers who were particularly distinctive. Such influencers might go against popular beliefs, discuss contentious social issues, have a unique fashion style or come from a minority background. This lends an 'edge' to an influencer that allows them to stand out compared with other online micro-celebrities. However, the characteristics that consumers perceive as unique could change depending on the consumers' individual likes and preferences. For Phoebe, who liked seeing

messages about self-love and body positivity, an influencer's changed appearance led to her partial loss of interest and perception of uniqueness:

> I used to like her a bit more because she was a bit unique in that she didn't have the perfect body, but now she's lost a lot of weight so she kind of does have a good body.

An influencer could also be described as 'unique' because their self-representation differed from the majority of accounts or contained polarising insights into their own lifestyle choices. For example, an influencer who openly shared her controversial religious views appeared more trustworthy to Eleanor:

> Just the fact that she was open about her religious stance and she went against what was popular made me think that her opinion was more authentic and that I could trust her.

An influencer's online personality can also be a reason why some influencers appear more authentic than others to their followers. Engagement techniques and varied or 'unfiltered' content that influencers implement to engage their audience can arguably make an influencer appear more 'real' and, consequently, more authentic. For example, an influencer who shares their daily activities online may have more success in establishing 'intimacy' with their audience than an influencer who only shares staged photos that do not reflect reality.

Another factor that cannot be established without sharing personal information online is relatability, which is also linked to an increase in influencers' perceived authenticity and trustworthiness. 'Relatability' refers to how well consumers can relate to an influencer and their content. When relatability is high, the content shared and produced by an influencer makes participants feel more relevant and 'real'. Four out of eight interviewees mentioned relatability as an important factor. For example, Olivia said that she unfollowed an influencer when the life that the influencer shared on Instagram started to feel too 'perfect', which led to her losing relatability and relevance in Olivia's eyes. Some basic factors that can also make an influencer feel more relatable are shared age group and/or

background. Charlotte and Olivia felt that they could relate to an influencer more because of a shared ethnic background that allowed the influencer to stand out to them personally. Such shared traits encourage the consumer to think of an influencer in ways that can be compared with the self, forging relations and attachment. According to Matthew Thomson (2006), the fulfillment of autonomy and relatedness explains the strength of attachment. This can explain why shared personal traits help make an influencer appear more likeable and authentic. However, the balance between these factors is fragile. Emma said that influencer Tammy Hembrow stood out to her because she and Tammy are the same age, even though Tammy already had a family and led a different lifestyle. Emma eventually felt that Tammy was no longer relevant to her because of how much her content changed over the years, making the lifestyle that she portrayed unattainable, unrelatable and thus irrelevant to her.

Trust

Sponsored content on Instagram often takes the form of an 'advertorial' (Abidin 2013) that integrates the product or service into an influencer's life to appear as a WOM endorsement or recommendation. Therefore, in the third survey question, I asked survey respondents whether they trusted Instagram influencers and their content (see Figure 4.2).
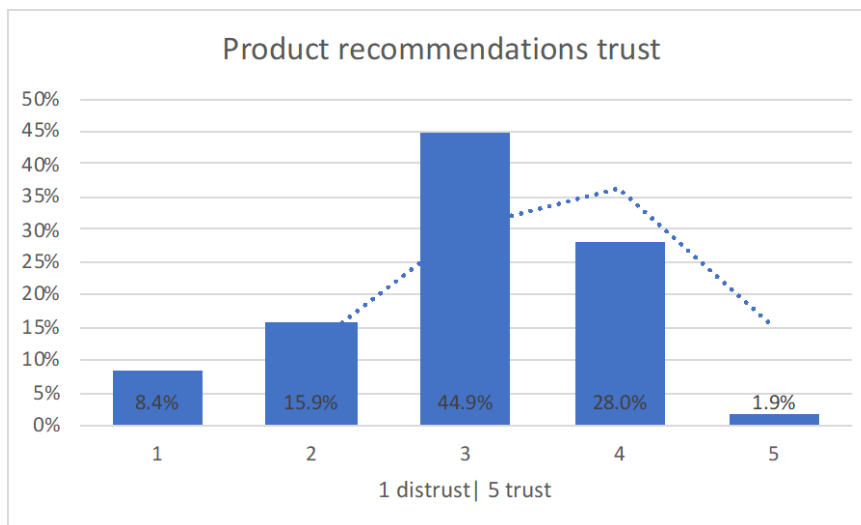
Figure 4.2 Survey question 3 'Do you trust the product recommendations from the influencers that you follow?'

Survey respondents were asked to rate how much trust they would usually put in an influencer's specific recommendations on Instagram. This question asked respondents to rank trust on a scale of one to five, where one stands for distrust and five stands for trust. Nearly half the respondents (44.9 per cent) rated their level of trust at rank three, indicating a neutral position on the question. Overall, 73.8 per cent of all responses were distributed between ranks three and four. Fewer than 10 per cent of respondents indicated complete trust or distrust towards influencers, showing that most respondents tended to hold more neutral positions. Most of the interview participants also indicated their levels of advertising awareness and consumer caution when it came to the level of trust invested in influencers. The initial level of trust demonstrated by each interviewee ranged from the sceptical to the more trusting. For example, Hannah was influenced by sponsorship awareness and would 'take a sceptical approach to what influencers promote because I know that they're probably being paid very handsomely for it'. By contrast, Phoebe was more trusting: when asked whether she trusted recommendations from the influencers she followed, she stated: 'If they're specifically recommending a beauty product or something, yeah, probably.'

However, it is not possible to make generalisations about the grounds on which participants based their trust towards product recommendations from influencers. Each interviewee had individual thought processes in relation to making the decision to trust an influencer. For example, Claire noted that although influencers receive payment for promoting a product, she could find a way to judge the trustworthiness of sponsored posts:

> I know their recommendations aren't necessarily 100 per cent truthful at the time, because if you're getting paid to say something, the company wants you to tell your followers a specific thing. You can tell when they're recommending something and they're not truthful about it, or you know they're getting paid, they might not actually think the product is that great, so I feel like judging by the caption.

Claire also explained that, based on her pre-existing relationship with an influencer, she was aware of their typical style and tone of voice, which helped her determine the authenticity of a post:

> When the caption is like, they're too keen or too eager, and you can tell it's not necessarily how they normally write the content, because if you're an influencer and you read their captions all the time, you can tell how they type when they're being authentic, whereas if it's a sponsored post, you know sometimes they'll talk differently, if that makes sense, in the caption, it just doesn't add up to their previous post that wasn't sponsored.

On the other hand, Chloe reported that she would be more likely to trust what the influencer said, while remaining cautious of instances in which an influencer has received new products from brands:

> I feel like I can trust them if they say that they're not getting paid or they've just found something new or they've been using it for ages. But then I distrust them where they're just doing like a trial and clothing haul of something. Or saying, I use this product in my hair and I've just been sent all this stuff.

Emma based her trust on the visual results she could see, while remaining sceptical of what the influencer says:

> I'll be sceptical, but yeah, it depends on the product. If it's something that I can see a result from, like clothes. I mean, I just feel like you can't hide that, whereas yeah, with

> HiSmile and all those protein shakes and powders and stuff, then I don't believe it. But beauty products and clothes and that sort of accessory stuff, yes.

These findings reveal that the participants still have a level of trust towards recommendations from influencers on Instagram. As expected, the proportion of interviewees who distrusted influencers was higher than the proportion who said they fully trusted influencers' recommendations. However, the number of survey respondents who ranked their trust at four out of five was considerably higher than those who reported not trusting influencers' recommendations. It was apparent that consumers may believe that sponsoring poor quality products or making misleading claims hurts an influencer's reputation. Indeed, according to Claire:

> People with a massive following … won't advertise products that are out of line with their image, because they don't want to ruin their reputation.

Claire also said that she had greater trust in sponsored content from influencers with a larger audience, as they do not have to fight for brand deals compared to micro-influencers:

> I feel like big influencers would be more cautious about what they're advertising compared to micro-influencers, because micro-influencers are trying to get more followers, get more brand connections and even though they're doing it for free, they're trying to keep growing, whereas a bigger influencer, they don't really need to rely on things like that because brands will come to them …

Indeed, making misleading claims can significantly damage both influencers' and brands' reputations and can result in legal actions and/or fines, as noted in chapter one. Under Australian consumer protection legislation (ACCC n.d.), both businesses and influencers may be held accountable for making misleading or inaccurate claims.

Breaking the trust of one's followers can have considerable repercussions for an influencer. A negative backlash from the audience and media (as discussed in

chapter one) can lead an influencer to lose their credibility and the trust of their audience. Emma talked about her experience of purchasing clothing recommended by an influencer that did not measure up to her expectations:

> That did sort of make me question her credibility, because she's purchasing something to wear it once potentially and never again. … Yeah, so it made me question I guess like, her needs versus my needs. So, if she says something is good, doesn't necessarily mean it's good for me.

Influencers' responsibilities

The topic of influencers' responsibilities was brought up regularly in the interviews. Six out of eight interview participants mentioned influencers' responsibilities for their sponsored content in regard to clear advertising disclosure, misleading information and/or verifying the product quality. They regarded the level of responsibility and accountability of an influencer as being directly linked to their reputation and, therefore, their trustworthiness.

The sample group in this research tended to be highly aware of advertising methods and the majority of interviewees could clearly distinguish sponsored content from non-sponsored content, though four interviewees noted that the failure of an influencer to declare a post as sponsored content would influence their perception and potentially raise ethical concerns. Hannah suggested that although the commercial nature of a post may be clear to her, consumers from other demographic sectors exposed to undisclosed sponsored content on Instagram could be more likely to be misled:

> I do have some ethical issues with people not being explicit about their paid partnerships. It doesn't affect me, but obviously it affects other people because they buy these things that they're promoting thinking that it's genuine.

Eleanor offered her take on undisclosed sponsorships, arguing that influencers hide advertising intent in an attempt to appear more authentic:

> I think it's their way to try to keep their authenticity because they never want to come off as someone who is being paid even when they are in essence. It is the fact that authenticity is the thing that verifies that the product is real. And the people would generally only consider the product that they think someone had authentically verified.

Chloe said she believes that influencers should only advertise products that they personally use and trust:

> I know that they do need a career and make money, but I think they should have the responsibility of only doing sponsored content that they genuinely use and trust. And, the purchasers would get the same thing. We would actually benefit from using the product.

She also added that influencers should be considerate of their followers in regard to product and advertisement quality.

Macro vs micro influencers

Recent issues in the influencer marketing industry, such as the promotion of the FYRE festival, have harmed influencers' reputations and trustworthiness (Richardson 2017). For this reason, I decided to explore whether micro-influencers, who are not typically in the public eye, appeared more authentic to Instagram users. Only one out of eight interview participants (Claire) favoured macro-influencers over smaller Instagram accounts based on their perceived reputation and visibility.

Phoebe stated that she regards micro-influencers as more trustworthy because their smaller following means they are less likely to be sponsored by a brand:

> I'd probably be more likely to get something that a smaller influencer has used, because then it is less likely that they've been paid for [the post].

This was the position of the majority of interviewees, with five out of eight stating that they would trust micro-influencers more as they are perceived to

either not receive payment for promoting products, not be as reliant on brand deals as their source of income as influencers with large followings, or to be more 'natural' and 'authentic' in their posted content. As Chloe said:

> The smaller ones, I feel like would be contacted from brands that they actually use. Not that the big ones don't use it but the brands would be happy to work with smaller micro-influencers, because they know it's not going to a whole lot of people. They know that people most likely, maybe trust a smaller, natural look. But, I do trust the smaller ones, to be honest.

Hannah also pointed out that being an influencer is a full-time job for some, which could force them to take on more sponsorship offers to maintain their income:

> Because I feel like the small influencers ... they're probably not doing it, social media influencing, as a full-time job yet. They've probably got other forms of income, so they're not as dependent on the income from promoting products as the bigger influencers might be, whereas they would be 100 per cent dependent on that because it's their full-time job.

However, the number of followers that an influencer had was unimportant for two out of eight participants interviewed. Olivia and Emma did not seem concerned about an influencer's number of fans, but rather judged them on other factors, such as the influencer's personality and post attributes. Olivia blamed the hunger for fame as being behind some of the unethical practices that influencers might engage in and felt that, in this regard, the number of followers was comparatively unimportant:

> It depends on the way they act and the way they ... sometimes those micro influencers you might think they don't have as many followers, they are more trustworthy because the fame hasn't gone to their head yet but I have seen some where all they want is fame. They're starting out and they're micro influencers but it's so clear that they have 5,000 followers but they want more and they want to be like others and they're mimicking other bigger names and trying to piggy back on that fame.

Eleanor reflected on a similar issue, stating her view that micro-influencers are not yet corrupted by the industry:

> I feel like they haven't been corrupted by the industry yet. I think it all comes back down to authenticity, so for me it's really figuring out whether the person, like, what their intent is with Instagram. Are they trying to be famous? Are they trying to get money? Or are they trying to just create a platform where they can do both, but also voice their opinion? I think that's kind of the major thing.

The belief that the perceived level of fame makes a person more likeable or credible (Sliburyte 2009) does not appear to apply when deciding whether to trust recommendations from an influencer. De Veirman et al. (2017) recruited 117 Instagram users to test how the numbers of followers and followees affected an influencer's likeability. Their study showed a positive effect of number of followers on perceived popularity, which in turn affected perceived opinion leadership and popularity. This thesis demonstrates that despite of a perceived popularity, influencers with higher number of followers are considered less trustworthy than micro-influencers. This could be due to recent scandals in the industry, such as the promotion of the FYRE festival, which involved a number of famous celebrities and influencers. A significant part of this finding also relates to consumers' advertising awareness, where micro-influencers are believed to attract fewer brand sponsorship deals or receive non-monetary compensation. For this reason, smaller personal blogs and Instagram pages are perceived as more independent by consumers than those of more widely known influencers.

Chapter 5. Research Findings: Advertising and consumer behaviour

This chapter continues to examine and analyse research findings by combining survey and interview data. Here, I look at consumer behaviour in more detail, analysing how consumers respond to sponsored content on Instagram and how it can shape their purchasing behaviour. I specifically discuss sponsorships and ad awareness, analyse consumer purchases made as a result of sponsored content and the influences behind those decisions. I also consider how influencer marketing and sponsored content on Instagram compares to different forms of advertising. I first look at how consumers perceive sponsored content on Instagram, while examining advertising awareness. I then consider respondents' purchasing behaviour and attitudes to sponsorship. Finally, I compare various advertising methods and discuss how sponsored content differs from other common forms of advertising.

Sponsored posts

Question nine in the survey asked respondents about their perceptions of influencer posts that feature products. The vast majority of respondents (70.8 per cent) perceived posts with products as advertising, while another 18.9 per cent viewed them as a recommendation (see Table 5.1).

How do you perceive posts about a product on an influencer's feed?	
As a general awareness raising about products	10.4%
As a recommendation	18.9%
As advertising	70.8%

Table 5.1 Survey question 9 'How do you perceive posts about a product on an influencer's feed?'

Advertising awareness

The interview sample group in this study proved to be highly aware of advertising practices on social media and claimed to be able to recognise sponsored content posted by influencers on Instagram. Some interviewees also raised ethical issues with undisclosed partnerships.

Four out of eight interviewees mentioned that they could recognise sponsored content by its contrast to non-sponsored posts, even if sponsorship was not disclosed. In this instance, the interviewees stated that they looked for signals such as exaggeration, unnatural and/or different tone of voice in the caption, or posed and/or highly stylised photos. Emma, for instance, said that she disliked sponsored content because of the wording in the caption, while visual aspects of posts might appear organic:

> The wording is so fake. You look at the picture and you forget that it's fake, but when you read and you're like, "All right. It's an advertisement." Like, "I forgot for a second."

Charlotte said that the influencers she follows on Instagram write captions in sponsored posts differently from their non-sponsored content:

> They're hyping it up a bit. Because Remi, she's like, "This is the best thing I've ever seen in my life." Or like, "This is my favourite product in the whole world." But then you've seen her use other brands and stuff. But then that one is sponsored, so she says more stuff.

Claire could also differentiate sponsored from other content; however, she determined the trustworthiness of reviews by reading the captions:

> You can tell when they're recommending something and they're not truthful about it, or you know they're getting paid, they might not actually think the product is that great, so I feel like judging by the caption, what the influencer writes about the product, how they review it, I'd be like "Oh, she says it's good, but she's also getting paid", so then what do you do?

Chloe, on the other hand, reported taking into account a combination of signals when determining whether a post is sponsored or authentic:

> So, most of the time … they do the little hashtag ad or in their videos, but Sarah's Day actually doesn't... you can sort of tell and everyone comments "this is sponsored" but she never really says it is. So, hers, is I think she tries to pretend like it isn't. But, I think it is.

Chloe also said that some influencers use 'fluffy words' such as 'I'm working with this brand' to make sponsorship disclosure unclear. On other occasions, she assumed that posts were sponsored when the influencer posted several pieces of content tagging the brand and/or including a link to the brand's website.

The preceding data show that the Instagram users interviewed were highly aware of advertising practices and could detect sponsored content even when it was not disclosed. Thus, these consumers considered an influencer's branded content as advertising in the majority of cases, and less than a third perceived posts that featured a product as recommendations or awareness-raising about a product or service. The interviews also showed that some interviewees were more familiar with influencers' unique styles and tones of voice and could therefore identify posted content that was out of step with an influencer's other posts and/or was influenced by a brand.

Claire also said that it is clear to her when an influencer genuinely likes or dislikes a product by the caption and writing style and when the tone of voice is different from an influencer's typical style. Chloe also stated that it was apparent to her when influencers were being truthful when talking about a brand:

> It was a video of Sammy Robinsons a while ago, with a brand. I'm not sure which brand, but she got a lot of comments. And you could tell that she was saying scripted things and it just wasn't the same as her personality. But, it might have been with a makeup brand. Maybe, Revlon or Maybelline or something, ages ago and you could just tell that it was very … it just wasn't her choosing her words, if that makes sense.

Consumer behaviour

Purchase behaviour

When asked about purchase decisions in question four of the survey (Appendix B), only 34 per cent of survey respondents said that they had purchased a product from Instagram. However, in question five (for those who answered 'yes' to question 4), 22.6 per cent said that they had purchased a product advertised in a sponsored post (featured in a piece of content by an influencer). This means that two-thirds of all purchases made as a result of an Instagram post could be attributed to influencer marketing. The interviews also supported this, as all interviewees reported having either made or considered making a purchase after seeing a sponsored post. Six out of eight interviewees had bought a product advertised in a sponsored post on Instagram. The following sections discuss the different factors that influenced interview participants to make a purchase as a result of seeing sponsored content on Instagram.

Seeing the products in use

One of the common themes in consumers' purchase decisions was seeing the product or its effects on someone else. For five out of eight interview participants, seeing the product in use influenced purchase intent or trust. This was especially true for Olivia, who reported preferring to see how makeup products looked on someone else, rather than simply following the advice of a store sales assistant:

> I don't buy anything in makeup unless I know it's been recommended and someone else knows that it's good. I don't trust the people in the store telling me it's amazing. I need to know that it looks good on someone else.

For Emma, the fact that sponsored content is not styled and captured in a perfect scenario as in other forms of advertising increased her trust and gave her an idea of what the product might look like in person:

> I think it is the fact that it's not necessarily captured in the perfect scenario. When you have proper advertising in marketing, there's perfect lighting, there's exquisite photoshopping, it's all picture perfect to a 'T', which 'cause I mean, they want you to think it's the best.
> When I saw the Gymshark like activewear on Tammy, I was like, "Oh, okay. They look nice." I guess because you've seen the product on the person, you're like, "Oh yeah, it looks good."

Emma recounted the appeal of seeing clothing on someone else and its effects on purchase intent:

> I feel like for certain things like clothing for myself and beauty products 'cause I feel like I can actually say it. Seeing it on somebody, I'm more persuaded to purchase it, because I feel like I know it's a good product. Whereas when I see a commercial and I'm like, "Oh yeah, looks interesting." But I know it's a commercial, like I know it's made to look the best that it could be.

This influencer's sponsored content showed Emma a different perspective on the clothing brand, adding a personal touch that made it seem more 'real' and appealing.

Olivia reported purchasing a pair of tights after seeing an influencer's detailed review in her stories on Instagram:

> She probably did like six or seven of them about the tights and she was like they're really good, they do this, that, I actually really love them, I've got this many pairs. She was showing us different styles. I was like you know what? I might buy it … and that's one of the first times I was like "God, I want to buy that" because it was on Instagram.

This in-depth review and showcasing of the product made the information more accessible for Olivia, increasing her interest and involvement in the sponsored content. In this instance, the fact that the product was effectively showcased and described showed the influencer's involvement and knowledge of the product, while communicating valuable information to her audience.

These comments illustrate how seeing a product used by an influencer on social media can help consumers learn more about a product and increase their trust in its quality and visual appeal. A clear product demonstration may give consumers

greater insight into how the product can benefit them, thereby enticing them to connect with the brand and/or take the next steps in learning more about the product.

Repetitive advertising

Another factor that came up during the interviews was repetitive advertising. In three out of eight instances, interviewees mentioned how repetitive advertising might persuade them to consider and potentially purchase a product advertised in a sponsored post. Repetitive advertising here refers to a number of influencers (most likely within the same niche community, and/or with a shared audience) advertising the same product or brand. Claire said that repetitive advertising draws her attention to a brand more than single posts:

> If I see a lot of different people advertising it or sponsoring it, then I would want to check it out. Doesn't mean I'll buy it, but I'll check that brand's Instagram page, see the reviews and things like that, and if I feel it's good then I'd probably buy it, depending on the price.

Eleanor said that seeing greater number of people advertising and using a product speaks to the quality and reputation of the product or brand and could influence her purchasing intent:

> I know a lot of influencers have it and it's all over Instagram, it's promoted on Instagram, and so I think a lot of the reason why I picked that brand was because of its association with its reputation and there's a lot of people using it and if it was a really shit product, not everyone would be using it.

Olivia also said that after seeing sponsored content she 'would check who ha[s] partnered with a brand before'. She added: 'If I've seen more than one influencer promoting something and it looks really good I will be more inclined to buy it'. This might also be her method of verifying the quality and gaining more information about a product by seeing different reviews/perspectives from different influencers. For Chloe, on the other hand, seeing repetitive advertising on Influencers' pages was a signal of the brand's online strategy and made her

less likely to perceive the review as authentic. Repetitive advertising was demonstrative of an advertisement's intent and was unappealing to her:

> It probably influences me less because then you can tell that the brand has strategically done this. So, everyone sees it. And, it just looks more fake and unauthentic when every single influencer of this, sort of, same demographic is doing it at the same time.

Repetitive advertising through influencer marketing has also been shown to take away the effects of exclusivity. De Veirman et al. (2017) found that products with a 'unique' design show a weak brand response when advertised by influencers with high numbers of followers. Similarly, seeing a product or service advertised by multiple influencers appeared to weaken Chloe's perception of the uniqueness and exclusivity of a brand or product/service. Chloe did, however, admit that repetitive advertising 'probably' made her remember the brand more often, compared to when seeing a single ad.

According to the interviewees, repetitive advertising could affect consumers' recall, increasing the likelihood of them remembering a brand and considering buying from it. Advertising research has shown that multiple exposure to advertisements increases awareness and consumer recall (Vuokko 1997). Susanne Schmidt and Eisend Martin (2015) argue that the effect of repetitive advertising is stronger when the 'exposures to the advertising are massed' (p. 424). The frequency objective in advertising theory (Moriarty et al. 2014) addresses the amount of consumer exposure to advertising needed to maximise its effectiveness. Just as in traditional media, repetitive exposure to influencer marketing increases awareness and recall. High-frequency strategies, as seen with Claire's and Eleanor's purchase decisions, can be effective in building awareness and excitement (Moriarty et al. 2014), while simultaneously leading to a mass spike in awareness, purchase intent and greater recall over a short period of time.

Attitudes to sponsorships

Despite a high attribution of purchases on Instagram to sponsored content, in response to question seven of the survey, 66.4 per cent of respondents said that they did not like sponsored content (Appendix 2). To discover more about the factors that could influence purchase decisions on Instagram, question eight asked those who responded 'no' to question seven what it was about sponsored influencer content that was unappealing to them ('Why Don't you like sponsored posts?'). Table 5.2 displays the answers to question eight. Respondents could choose multiple answers.

the promotional style of the message/caption	68.7%
#ad – the fact that it was sponsored	61.2%
#gifted #pr the fact that samples/products were provided	29.9%
can't relate to a post/story	28.4%
the focus on the product in a shot	9.0%

Table 5.2 Survey question 8 (follow-up) 'Why Don't you like sponsored posts? (select up to 3)'

Based on studies on advertising disclosure and advertising knowledge on Instagram conducted by Evans et al. (2017) and Ewers (2017), this study asked survey respondents about their attitudes to sponsorships on Instagram and content that might appear promotional or unauthentic. The most common answer to question eight in a survey questionnaire among the multiple answers, indicated that the most frequent answer was that users did not like sponsored content due to the promotional style of the message and/or caption (68.7 per cent of respondents). This supports the findings of Evans et al. (2017), who found that a promotional tone of voice impacts message credibility more negatively than the sponsorship disclosure itself. This was proven to be the main factor affecting the likeability of a piece of content in this research.

Emma said that she avoids reading captions because of the 'salesy' tone of voice:

I never read the captions. I don't really care what she says about it. It's pretty much what I see is what I like. Does that make sense? Like if I look at the photo, I like the way the clothes look or something, then I'd be interested. Or if I saw her doing a makeup look and I liked the shade of lipstick or something like that, then that's all. Once I start to actually read captions of proper sponsored ... I get so turned off, 'cause once you start reading them, it reminds you that it's an ad. Even if it looks good, it's still an ad. Just the way that they word things. Yeah, it's like, "I pop on this HiSmile for like ten seconds and I have it in my handbag." And no normal person is going to have a HiSmile pen in their handbag. It's just ... I don't know. It just reminds you that these people aren't normal per se and this isn't real life.

Chloe commented that she finds posed photos off-putting:

When they pose in a really unnatural way, as we saw with Sky. With the protein and the gym stuff. She wasn't even wearing gym clothes. So it looked very posed.

The promotional style of a particular influencer's message refers to an atypical or overly promotional description in a post's caption, image and general . As discussed earlier in the advertising awareness section, consumers are aware of promotional methods and can identify sponsored content. Therefore, seeing atypical or promotional content execution may raise concerns for them.

When discussing the promotional appearance of a piece of content, it is important to note that this refers to not only the caption but also the visuals and the way the post is executed. Content traits that are either different or appear 'unnatural' to the situation/product portrait can lead to negative reactions among consumers and undermine their trust. As previously discussed in the section on ad awareness, Instagram users are able to distinguish whether a post is sponsored and/or truthful by comparing the style and content of the post to previous content shared by an influencer. For example, Chloe discussed a sponsorship that she believed to be driven by commercial interest:

Shani was trying on all these clothes and it was nothing like what she would usually wear. So, everyone was saying 'you can tell that you're just pretending'. You're just very emotionless and saying 'oh this is really cute' to every little thing. But, you can just tell that she won't wear it again.

The fact that the message was sponsored, with or without sponsorship disclosure, was the second most frequent reason why survey respondents found sponsorships unappealing (61.2 per cent). Question ten of the survey asked how sponsorship either in monetary or non-monetary compensation influenced trust: 'Does the fact that the post was sponsored or a product gifted by a brand undermine the trustworthiness of the recommendation?' In response, 76.2 per cent of respondents said that this form of compensation also undermined the trustworthiness of the recommendation, while the remaining 23.8 per cent did not believe this affected their trust. One survey respondent commented on why they disliked sponsored posts:

> I don't like the way they are acting like they're endorsing the product because they really believe in it, when really, they're just getting paid. However, some influencers don't do this, and you begin to learn who you can 'trust' more.

Emma also highlighted that while not being completely put off, she is cautious in relation to sponsored content:

> I try and take it now with a grain of salt. To remember that it is an ad, but yeah, trying to judge it for what it is. So, if it is a makeup product, if I do like the way it looks on her, then that's fine. But if it is a protein shake or something that I can't physically see a result of, then [I] probably don't trust it.

However, fewer than a third of the survey respondents (29.9 per cent) viewed the product being exchanged for post sponsorship (or a 'contra collaboration' as it is often referred to) in the same way as content sponsored for monetary compensation.

The third most frequent reason why respondents did not trust content was 'not being able to relate to the post and the story'. This answer was chosen at a similar rate as posts featuring PR samples or gifted products in exchange for posts. This indicates that being able to relate to the post can be just as important as the perceived independence of an influencer's content.

Phoebe said that she believes that sponsored content is often executed in a similar manner, which she finds unappealing, leading to a loss of interest:

> It's just, like, kind of boring. And it's not very interesting. I'd rather see people ... I don't know; posting about something that means something to them, or something that's more unique, that they like, and they're trying to promote ... but not without sponsorship, rather just like brands that are already popular and like marketable. And just using the caption like, "20% off with my code," or whatever.

These findings support those of Evans et al. (2017), who show that the promotional manner in which sponsored content is executed can undermine trust more than the fact that the post is sponsored or products/services provided as compensation. In this study, the interviewees prioritised the 'unnatural' and promotional manner of content execution and reported exercising caution in relation to the commercial nature of influencers. Focus on the product, however, negatively influenced trust for 9 per cent of survey respondents, yet this was not mentioned by the interviewees.

This leads to the issue of brand–influencer fit. As Instagram users can quickly pick up on content that is not in line with the influencer's usual style, interests or beliefs, a brand that is not aligned with their typical style of content might make users cautious about the nature of the influencer's relationship with the brand and could potentially undermine trust (Brown & Fiorella 2013). This ties in to research on celebrity endorsements. Literature on advertising has shown that a celebrity's association with a brand can enhance its public profile. For example, according to Gunter (2014), celebrity exposure can lead consumers to associate a celebrity's personal attributes and characteristics with the product and brands that are being endorsed by them. The results of this research suggest that this is also the case with social media influencers.

Four of the eight interviewees were of the opinion that not only could an influencer's characteristics be transferred to the brand and/or product being advertised, but that an association with a certain brand could also change

consumers' perceptions of an influencer. Eleanor, for example, described how an influencer she did not trust could diminish the perceived quality of a product:

> If there's an influencer that I don't like, that I think's really fake, and they start promoting a product, I'm immediately like, that product's shit. That product doesn't work. That product won't work because of who's promoting it.

Olivia described an influencer partnership with the brand Supre and the influencer's involvement in the brand's diversity advertising campaign:

> Sometimes yeah, I definitely think with Supre I never thought that they'd have a girl who wears the hijab as one of their models. I just thought wow, that honestly is a huge step because you don't see a lot of models on a mainstream ... with a mainstream brand, a clothing brand especially, I just never see a ... it's happening more and more now so when I see her photos for Supre or ... There was a video ad as well. She's done lots of photo shoots, I think it does reflect the company's values of inclusivity.

The partnership between the influencer and the brand in the diversity-themed advertisement not only changed Olivia's perception of the brand but also made the influencer appear more likeable to her.

In the social media space, the influencer–brand fit is an important factor in the execution of influencer sponsorships. Just as influencers' traits can become associated with a brand or a product to consumers exposed to branded content, an influencer's brand and credibility can also be affected by an association with certain brands.

Advertising method comparison

In this study, I wanted to explore how consumers feel about influencer marketing techniques in comparison to other common advertising channels so as to better understand different consumer attitudes. In question six of the survey, respondents were asked to rank advertising methods according to their preferences from most (1) to least favourable (5). During the individual

interviews, the participants were also asked to reflect on the ranking and explain the reasons behind their choices. The ranking order was as follows:

1. Sponsored Content
2. Social media ads
3. TV ads
4. Display ads
5. Print ads

To further examine these replies, I examined the data distribution for each choice presented to survey respondents. I considered how each choice was ranked by survey respondents to demonstrate consumer attitudes to advertising methods and how each of the rankings compared to sponsored content on Instagram. When it came to choosing the most favourable advertising methods, sponsored content was the most favourable advertising method for 39 per cent of survey respondents. This was replicated in the interviews, with interviewees reporting that sponsored content was their favourite method of advertising. This was because it was represented and produced by the influencer whose content they already liked, as explained by Claire:

> I feel like influencers are very creative with the way they incorporate products into their posts, and if you like the influencer then you'll probably like the photo, which means you might identify more with the product, because you're following people that you like and you have the same interests, so I feel like it's more personalized, I guess?

Figure 5.1 demonstrates the data distribution for the sponsored content advertising method. Sponsored content was ranked second by 22.1 per cent of respondents. This represented a significant drop from the 39 per cent preference for the most favoured method, with a steady decline continuing for rankings three to five.
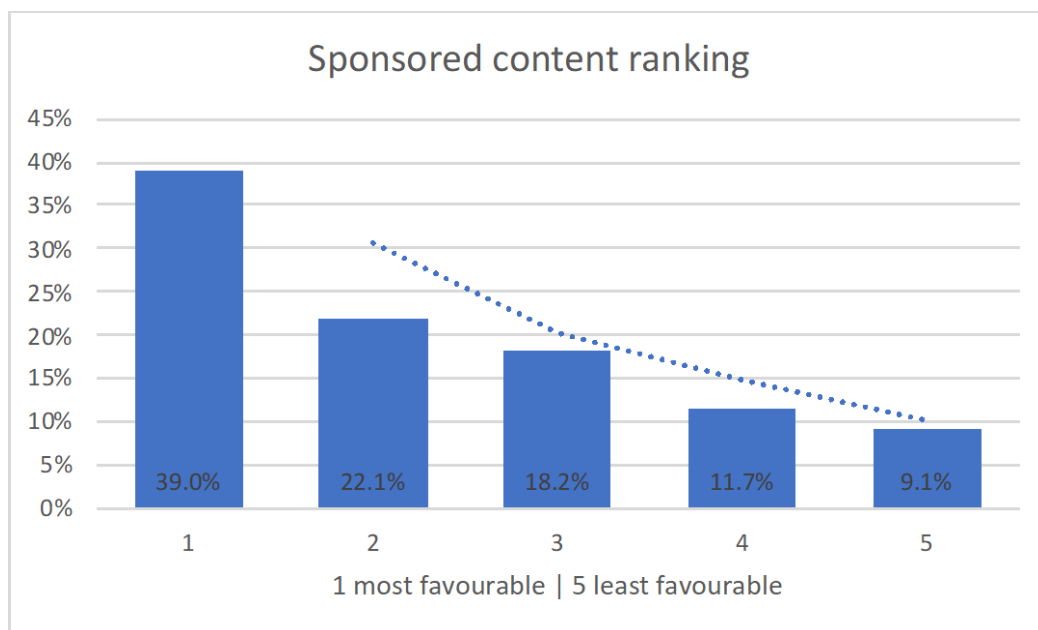
Figure 5.1 Survey question 6 'Rank these methods of advertising from most to least favourable'. Answer choice 'Sponsored content (influencers)'.

One of the advantages of sponsored content is consumers' connection with influencers. When consumers see branded content that is in keeping with the usual manner associated with an influencer and his/her experience, users can choose to follow and engage with the influencer. They may feel that their own tastes resonate with what the influencer posts and they can also unfollow the influencer at any time if their content no longer serves their interests. Taste as identity performance is not only practised by influencers, but also by their followers - the consumers. Social media sites enable both micro-celebrities and ordinary users to curate an online persona based on the latest trends and to curate content that appears on their feed based on personal taste or interests. This was especially relevant to four of the eight interviewees, who said that their existing connection with an influencer made their content appear more relevant, attention-worthy and engaging compared to other forms of advertising presented to them.

Seeing a product incorporated into an influencer's life appeared to make the content more appealing to users. For example, Charlotte said that her personal

connection with influencers and the product being incorporated into the influencers' feeds made sponsored content appear more authentic:

> When you follow them, you get a connection with them. Because I've been following some influencers for years. Then they incorporate the content that they know that matches them and their followers. They curate it so.

Sponsored content appeared to stand out for its perceived authenticity and ability to grab consumers' attention. Compared with other advertising methods presented to research respondents, a distinctive feature of influencer marketing identified by the respondents was that it involves a third-party stakeholder, as opposed to being controlled entirely by the brand.

Despite not being truly confident that sponsored content is an unbiased source from which to learn about the product or service, Eleanor said she believed the interpersonal connection made an influencer's content preferable to other advertising methods:

> It's like a 50/50, 'cause there's too many factors that go into trusting an influencer that would make me go beyond, but then I also know it's much better than TV advertising or display advertising because to a baseline degree it has an interpersonal connection between you and that influencer.

This correlates with the existing academic research on influencers and online micro-celebrities, which has observed that influencer marketing is more effective because it takes the form of a personal experience. According to Abidin (2013), 'advertorials' are believed to be more effective than conventional advertisements since they take the form of a 'personal narrative and incorporate Influencers' perspectives of having experienced the product or service first-hand' (p. 7). Therefore, sponsored content features a 'personal touch' and implies the influencer's active involvement.

Figure 5.2 shows how social media advertising was ranked by survey respondents. 37.7 per cent of respondents ranked social media advertising as

their preferred advertising method, and this method was almost on par with sponsored content shared by an influencer (see Figure 5.1). Social media advertising was only 1.3 per cent behind the top-ranked response of sponsored content. 70.2 per cent of respondents ranked social media advertising in the their top two favourable positions.
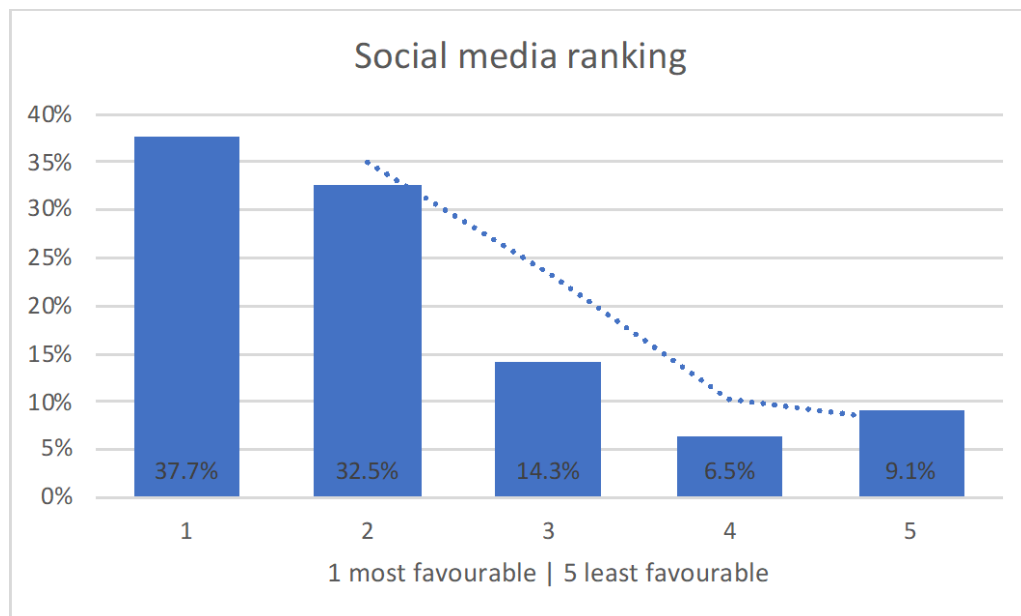

Figure 5.2 Survey question 6 'Rank these methods of advertising from most to least favourable'. Answer choice 'Social media'

However, the data distribution in the case of social media advertising was less consistent compared to sponsored content, where a steady decline could be seen. For social media advertising, there was a significant decrease of over 18 per cent for the third place in the ranking.

I then looked at the interviews to explain the favourable ranking for social media advertising. One factor accounting for the ranking was social media advertising algorithms; this was highlighted by three out of eight interviewees. The algorithms present advertisements to users that align with their online behaviours and they are therefore more likely to find them appealing. In comparison with traditional advertising, online marketing enables brands to specifically target their ideal audience and adapt to their customers' needs.

Claire stated that social media was the most authentic type of advertising of the five that were asked about:

> Because of the algorithms and it's based on what I've searched, who I follow, my age, my demographic, so I'd say social media, because I feel like when I see ads, they are relevant to me.

Chloe found that she could get information she had been looking for from Instagram adverts because of the smarter algorithms:

> The social media, or the banners or the in-feed sponsored posts, I found because they do pick up on what you're talking about and what you're looking for. It becomes more relevant for you and easy.

Three of the eight interviewees had favourable attitudes towards social media advertising because they spent a considerable amount of time on social media platforms and were used to seeing adverts on these platforms. This was the reason why Phoebe preferred social media advertising above the other choices presented:

> I put social media first, because social media is where I get most of my inspiration, even if it's not Instagram, I'll use Tumblr and stuff like that. And so if I see something I like on there, it might give me an idea for something I want to buy or something I want to wear and stuff like that.

The majority of responses ranked sponsored content and influencer marketing as their most preferred methods of advertising, showing a significant preference towards advertisements on social media as a whole. Described by respondents as more authentic and appealing, these two forms of advertising were preferred largely because they presented content and products that the interviewees were interested in. Influencers' sponsored posts was the most preferred advertising method, mainly because such posts aligned with respondents' tastes and likes, which was the primary reason that had induced the respondents to follow a certain influencer in the first place.

Figures 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 show the ranking distribution for print, display and television advertising, respectively. The least favourable advertising method indicated by survey respondents was print advertising (Figure 5.3). Half (49.4 per cent) of the respondents gave print advertising the least favourable ranking (Figure 5.3). Many interviewees said they did not read print media frequently and some felt that print advertising was too polished to be able to accurately represent a product. The ranking results for television advertising and display advertising resembled each other, with 27.3 per cent of respondents giving a ranking of three for both (Figures 5.4 & 5.5). Display advertisements, however, were more frequently ranked fourth (Figure 5.4). Television advertisements ranked third, followed by display advertisements.
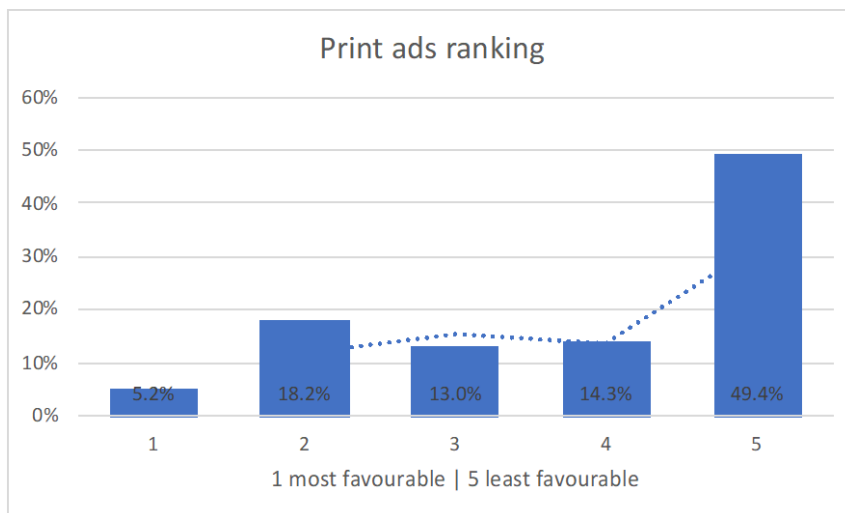

Figure 5.3 Survey question 6 'Rank these methods of advertising from most to least favourable'. Answer choice 'Print ads'.
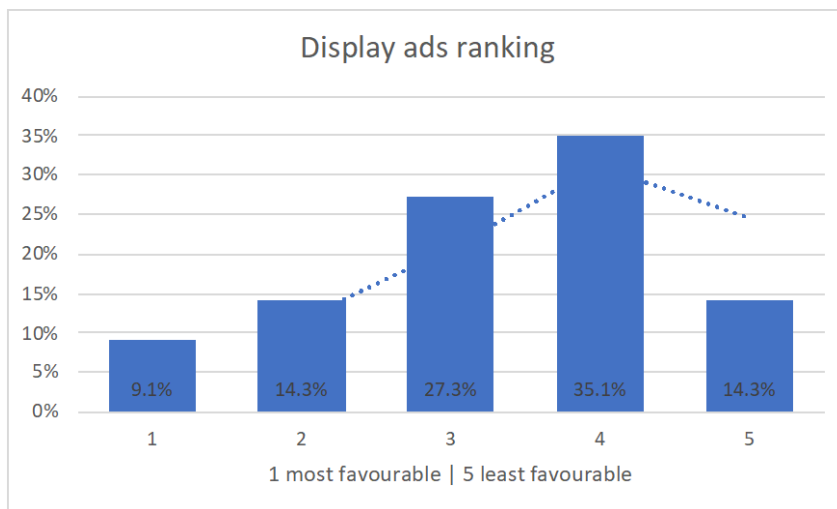
Figure 5.4 Survey question 6 'Rank these methods of advertising from most to least favourable'. Answer choice 'Display ads'.
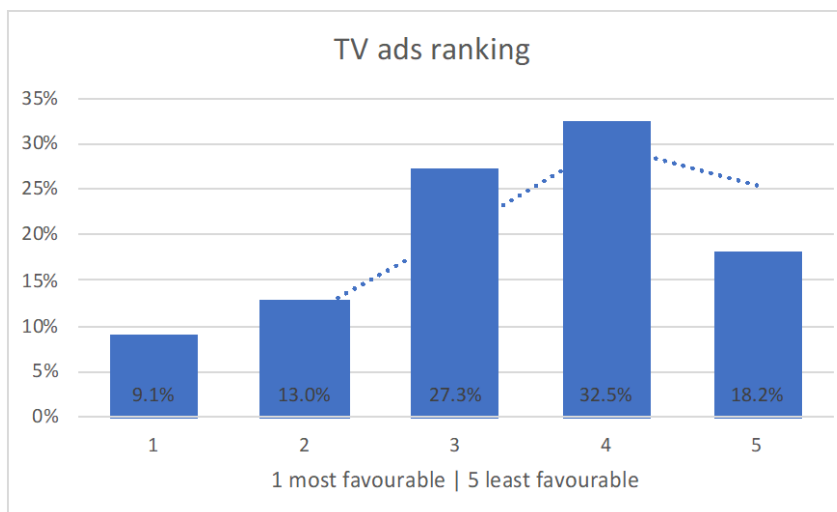

Figure 5.5 Survey question 6 'Rank these methods of advertising from most to least favourable'. Answer choice 'TV ads'.

In this chapter, I have outlined the key themes from consumer responses to influencers and sponsored content on Instagram that arose during the course of this research. The data analysis of both interview and survey data collected revealed four key findings:

1.	Consumers are more attracted to influencers who show their personality

2.	Consumers are cautious in deciding whether to trust an influencer

3.	The promotional style of content impacts trust more negatively than ad disclosure

4.   Consumers prefer sponsored content above other advertising methods

In the next chapter, I summarise key findings and discuss them in the context of previous academic research. I also discuss the implications of these findings in the context of the contemporary influencer marketing industry and discuss the future of influencer marketing in more detail.

Chapter 6. Discussion

Influencers are not a new phenomenon. Word-of-mouth strategies, celebrity endorsements and brand ambassadors have long been used in offline brand promotions, and bloggers and online micro-celebrity have appeared in digital marketing strategies. All these personalities resemble the social media influencer we know today. However, the development of digital communication platforms has given these influencers the technological capacities needed to communicate their messages to a wider audience and has subsequently changed the practices of numerous marketing professionals (Marwick 2013).

Influencers are at the front line of content production on Instagram. After learning to self-brand on Instagram to gain a following and attain a certain level of fame, influencers have become experts in promotion. Their tactics have set an example that others, including brands, now follow. Influencers have been able to achieve what brands continually strive for – an engaging relationship with their audience. Influencers have shifted the focus of communication strategy from gaining eyeballs to creating engagement. Today, engagement signals such as likes and comments are key metrics used by marketers to measure the success of an online promotional campaign (McKay 2017). Influencers' content also features an entertainment component that keeps their audiences engaged. The entertainment factor is embedded in how they promote products or services to their audiences when capitalising on their fame through brand partnerships.

In this chapter, I situate my findings in the broader context of the academic literature, and discuss how this research contributes to academic research on influencers and the implications on the influencer industry. I first discuss the influencer's online persona and why consumers connect and engage with influencers. Secondly, I reflect on consumers' media literacy in terms of influencer marketing practices and discuss the potential impact of consumer

awareness of these practices on advertising regulations and industry practices. Finally, I discuss how influencers have transformed the marketing industry and examine how recent changes may affect the future of influencers.

Changing influence

Social media influencers combine the models of the marketing maven and traditional celebrity when communicating in the digital space. Marketers typically use the marketing maven and celebrity roles in different promotional strategy scenarios: WOM marketing, where the focus is placed on customers who enjoys to recommend services and places to shop to their friends, along with celebrity endorsement, where the high-profile personality is separated from the target audience. Influencers can be considered a new type of celebrity who have accumulated a fan base using the communication tools available on the internet, such as photo sharing tools on Instagram or video on YouTube. Often, these influencers possess a level of expertise in one or several areas, similar to those of traditional brand ambassadors and influencers. Influencers typically make brand or product recommendations to their audience in the form of advertorials (Abidin 2016c). Since influencers maintain an intimate relationship with their audiences, an influencer can feel like a friend to a user. This communication manner resembles the WOM marketing method: the message is based on the day-to-day life and personal experiences of an influencer, while taking advantage of the close relationship between the influencer and their audience. Combining both the maven and the celebrity personalities in a single persona – the influencer – creates a personal connection (typical of the marketing maven) and a celebrity status that comes with a sense of reputation, aspiration and access to a larger audience (typical of the traditional celebrity). Therefore, the influencer can be considered a hybrid of different models, ultimately leading to the creation of new marketing models.

This research shows that an influencer's personality plays an important role to their followers as it affects the influencer's perceived likeability and sustains the relationship between an influencer and their audience. Behind a perfectly curated feed, consumers feel as if they can apprehend an influencer's personality. It can be argued that influencers choose the brands they promote through their content through curation, shaping their online performance by choosing what and what not to share. In this sense, Instagram allows influencers to create a controlled self-representation by honing their online persona based on what is most likeable and has the most resonance with their followers. Abidin explores this practice when considering how influencers self-brand online (2014, p. 123). Despite the curated online persona, consumers perceive the representation of an influencer's life and daily events as if in real-time and as an accurate representation. My research shows that influencers are effective in communicating their online self and creating an intimate connection with their audience through content curation, as described by Abidin (2014).

Influencers often adopt a specific communication style or mode that further influences the relationship with their followers. Instead of only providing images, influencers often recap on their day and share personal experiences and tips with their audience. This content has both an informative value by way of tips, information about places they visit and opinion pieces, as well as entertainment value, by providing insight into influencers' lives, similar to the reality television genre. The takeaway messages from an influencer's content vary by genre, but the informative component of an influencer's content provides benefits to their audience. This mode of communication deployed by influencers gives consumers insight into their lives and adds value in the form of entertainment, offering a way to pass the time and acquire knowledge. The influencer's perceived level of expertise within one or multiple genres (e.g. travel, fashion, diet, fitness or interior design) can make the influencer's recommendations seem more trustworthy and indicate that the influencer is in a better position than the follower to recommend related brands and products. An influencer's presumed

expertise encourages followers to regard their sponsored content as relevant and trustworthy. This supports research conducted by Chen Lou and Shupei Yuan (2019), who show that influencers' expertise directly affects brand awareness.

The evidence from the survey and interview data in this study showed that consumers aspire to the influencer's lifestyle. Through their posts about their activities (such as collaborations with brands, travel and access to exclusive events), the influencer gives their audience a sneak peek into a lifestyle that is exciting yet generally not attainable for ordinary members of the general public. The rising popularity of the online celebrity suggests that people are keen to relate to these aspirational lifestyles.

As an influencer's content becomes commercialised through branded content, the informative and entertainment value often persists, not only in organic posts but also in advertorials. This new mode of marketing combines the entertainment and informational value that influencers' posts offer with promotional messages, which means that advertorials are no longer 'just ads' but are capable of providing value to the consumer. In essence, the advertorial incorporates a product or a service into an influencer's lifestyle, framing it in the context of a narrative, whether this is a day in the influencer's life, a story or crafted as a specific tip. This achieves a higher engagement and level of interaction with promotional content, resulting in a more favourable consumer response. As an overly promotional message can lead to disengagement by consumers or cause them to skip the branded content altogether, the entertainment factor of influencer content is necessary to keep the consumer interested in the message, while also incorporating information about a product or service. The entertainment and informative value of promotional content makes the consumer feel that they can benefit from the information, shifting the focus away from its promotional intent.

Although the dynamic between influencers and their audiences offers commercial rewards for influencers, in other ways it can appear to resemble a personal relationship with an intimate connection. For example, influencers offer their followers an insight into their aspirational lifestyles and knowledge about new trends or product information. Despite the fact that influencers frequently convey consumerist ideals on their feeds and through their partnerships with brands – all of which are designed to influence consumers' purchasing behaviour – the entertainment and informative value of influencers' content can make this relationship 'feel' less commercial to their audiences and more about entertainment.

Media literacy

This research showed that influencers' audiences trust branded content more than traditional and social media advertising. However, this level of trust is not absolute, as influencers' audiences are highly critical and knowledgeable. Consumers are acutely aware of the promotional methods used by brands on social media, including influencer marketing. Nearly 71 per cent of consumers recognised sponsored content as advertising. This undercuts a popular industry belief that influencer marketing is native advertising (that is, appears as authentic user-generated content) or another form of WOM marketing (Long 2017). Consumers are becoming more aware of advertising methods and can differentiate organic posts (content that is not endorsed by a brand) from branded content. For this reason, consumers are becoming more sceptical of influencers' sponsored content and will consider a particular piece of content or recommendation when deciding its trustworthiness.

Consumers are confident in their ability to differentiate between organic and sponsored content, even if brand sponsorship is not clearly disclosed. Sponsored content often differs in its manner of execution or tone of voice in comparison with an influencer's typical style. Influencers' followers believe they can pick up

on these differences and recognise them as a sign that the content is sponsored or that an influencer is not being completely honest about recommendation. These differences can be obvious to consumers who regularly stay up to date and engage with a particular influencer. Consumers generally have previously established relationship with influencers before the point at which they are exposed to sponsored content. Due to consistent online self-representation and the intimate relationship that influencers create with their followers, consumers become highly familiar with an influencer's style to the extent that even slight deviations from that online image are perceptible to them. At times, sponsored content also includes a call to action (encouraging followers to engage with a brand or make a purchase) that can appear overly promotional to consumers. Influencers may exaggerate their excitement about a particular product or add a strong call to action without identifying the characteristics of the product. This research found that consumers who follow influencers primarily for entertainment find overly promotional posts unappealing. This was shown to undermine the perception of entertainment and the informative value of a post, while simultaneously making the post appear more commercial. This research found that the promotional style of a message affected the likeability of sponsored content more than advertising disclosure, which supports similar findings by Evans et al. (2017). The consumer's trust of sponsored content is often based on a set of subjective characteristics (such as how an image is styled or the tone of voice used when describing a product) as well as personal experience with an influencer.

In my research, consumers adopted a cautious approach when determining the trustworthiness of information from an influencer. This caution could be explained by consumers' awareness of advertising practices and could also be influenced by recent controversies and scandals in the influencer marketing industry. The last few years have seen an increase in conversations about influencers' responsibilities, authenticity and advertising guidelines both in Australia and worldwide. This is due to the rising popularity of influencers,

anxiety around the growth of "fake news", and the many cases of misleading advertising promoted by influencers. One of these was the FYRE festival scandal that gained exposure primarily through social media, which had more than 400 famous models and influencers involved in promotion of the festival. This promotional activity reached an audience of 300 million online in 24 hours (Barradale n.d.). Among those involved were famous celebrities such as Kendall Jenner, Bella Hadid and CC Clarke Beauty (Soen n.d.). Most of the celebrities and influencers who promoted the festival neglected to tell the public that they were paid to do so, despite being paid as much as $250,000 for a single sponsored post (Parry 2017). When the festival turned out to be a disaster, complaints and class action lawsuits followed not only against the event organisers, but also the influencers who had played a crucial role in promoting it (Roberts 2017). While it can be argued that the influencers had no way of foreseeing the impending disaster, which was due to bad planning and management, many criticised the influencers for failing to disclose the commercial nature of their involvement and for raising their followers' expectations. Bella Hadid apologised on Twitter shortly after news of the festival's collapse went viral, saying that she had truly believed that the festival would be 'amazing' (Park 2019). Other influencers involved also issued apologies or deleted their previous posts (Brockington 2019). The example of FYRE festival shows the potential of influencer marketing as a promotional method as well as the potential backlash that can occur when the product or service promoted by an influencer does not meet expectations. Events such as these, as well as the rising popularity of influencers and anxiety around the growth of 'fake news' have led to increasing discussion about influencers' responsibilities, authenticity and advertising guidelines both in Australia and worldwide.

Influencer marketing only became regulated in Australia in 2017 (AdStandards 2018) when advertising standards enforced the disclosure of advertising in influencer's branded content (AANA 2018). In 2019, the Australian Influencer Marketing Council (AIMCo) was formed to develop clear guidelines on

sponsorship disclosure (Cheik-Hussein 2019). Frequently, however, as in case of FYRE festival and other such scandals, influencers have been observed to hide sponsorship disclosure (as described in chapter one) or omit it altogether in a bid to maintain authenticity. However, as shown by this research, consumers are highly aware of influencers' commercial activities on Instagram and can identify sponsored posts, even when undisclosed. A failure to clearly disclose sponsorships can raise ethical concerns among consumers and damage trust.

Examples like the failed FYRE festival could also explain why consumers trust micro-influencers more than macro and celebrity influencers, as micro-influencers appear to be less commercially driven than influencers with larger audiences. My research showed that micro-influencers are also perceived as being compensated at a lower level or attracting fewer brand deals due to the smaller size of their audience. This leads consumers to view them as less biased than influencers for whom social media is their primary or only source of income. This contrast may also apply when considering the difference between micro-celebrities and those with hundreds of thousands of followers whose lifestyles can be perceived as unattainable or less relevant to consumers. This supports claims made by Melody Nouri (2018) that, in contrast to traditional celebrities, people see influencers as 'real' people, with audiences having been given greater access to their personal lives via social media updates, blogs and Instagram stories that show the 'not so polished' side of their lives. Thus, the 'intimacy' influencers strive to create and maintain may appear more real in the case of smaller communities, where an influencer can create a quasi-personal relationship with the consumer, in turn increasing trust. In contrast, a higher number of followers can create a gap between an influencer and their audience, where the fame is perceived as a differentiator between 'high up' or 'down to earth', making the influencer seem unapproachable or unrelatable to some Instagram users. This is supported by Marcel Danesi (2008), who argues that influencers are believed to be 'more interesting than actors because they are perceived to represent commonality' (p. 225). Therefore, the fact that micro-

influencers do not have the same level of fame as macro-influencers sets them apart and elicits different attitudes from consumers.

The future of influence

From camgirls and micro-celebrities to social media influencers, what it means to be an influencer in the online space has evolved dramatically in recent years. Influencers continue to change digital communities on the internet, using the tools available to grow their online presence and build a community. Influencers have always been on the front lines of new digital networks and social media platforms, leading the way for other users, brands and advertisers. Those who become influencers are often amongst the early adopters of social media networks (Lee 2018). These users often learn how to use the new communication tools to build a personal brand in the digital space before everyone else does. By being at the frontier of new trends, influencers can dominate the space before a new network is brought to advertisers' attention. Thus, by the time a new social media platform becomes the latest trend, it already features prominent influencers with established followings. Influencers set trends and become tastemakers with the potential to dictate the norms or standards of content that are typical for the network. Early social media adopters are able to become marketing experts in their own right after learning the algorithms and trends typical of a particular social media platform. One example is the US-based social media marketing agency Jerry Media founded by Elliot Tebele, who was originally famous on Instagram for his viral meme page. After his success on Instagram, Tebele founded his agency to harness the power of social media and create branding and advertising that resonates with young consumers (Berg 2016). Tebele stands as an example of the opportunities available to companies who move fast in the lightly regulated space of social media marketing. While Jerry Media has been hailed as a success story, in recent years, it has been criticised for failing to disclose original authorship on Tebele's

Instagram pages (Sands 2019) and for the agency's work on FYRE festival's marketing campaign (Mangiaracina 2017).

Over the last decade, influencers have accomplished what brands have long sought to attain: a connection with consumers. Brands are now learning from influencers' tactics to create similar connections. Brands can be seen 'talking' like humans, displaying human-like characteristics in their brand communication and adopting a specific tone of voice based on the brand's identity to cultivate a similar level of engagement and relationship that is akin to the relationship many influencers share with their audiences. The importance of brand personality is stressed throughout the academic literature on branding (Aaker & Fournier 1995; Veloutsou & Taylor 2012). Jennifer L. Aaker (1997) describes a brand's personality as a set of human traits and characteristics associated with any given brand (p. 347). Brands strive to represent their brand values and characteristics to consumers through a defined tone of voice. This brand positioning, which ascribes to the brand human-like characteristics (such as sincerity or ruggedness), is designed to foster relationships with its target audience. According to Utpal M. Dholakia and Emily Durham (2010), brands that maintain meaningful social media interactions with their consumers are likely to see a positive impact on their bottom line.

The history of influence has gone through a period of constant evolution throughout the last decade. What was considered 'influencer' status a decade ago has evolved from bloggers and the online micro-celebrity into the social media influencers we know today. However, although the number and reach of today's influencers are growing faster than ever, while gaining popularity amongst brands and marketing professionals, the future of influencers is yet not clear. Today's influencers are liked by consumers for being authentic and engaging with their audiences on a personal level. Sponsored content on Instagram is deemed more effective in getting through to the consumer and encouraging brand consideration due to the personal relationship consumers

form with influencers and the general perception among consumers that influencers' content is less biased than other forms of advertising. However, the increasing commercialisation of the influencer industry threatens this paradigm. The more that brands seek to advertise through influencer partnerships, the more sponsored content is going to appear on influencers' feeds. This has the potential to lead to advertisements oversaturation in the influencer space, as has already occurred with online and social media advertising. Indeed, my research shows that consumers can already easily recognise advertising. Saturation of sponsored content and the growing commercialisation of the influencer marketing industry could damage the influencers' authenticity, intimacy and engagement, leading to a loss of likeability and trust.

The future of social media influencers is also dependant on the availability of the digital tools offered by social media platforms. As Instagram changes, so must influencers adapt and evolve. Instagram has undergone major transformations in recent year through the introduction of stories, live videos and IGTV, which have allowed influencers to share their content in different media forms and communicate with their audience in real-time. This change has given influencers more opportunities to share 'behind the scenes' content and communicate with their audiences directly, such as in live Q&As. The introduction of algorithms and the abundance of chronological timelines, on the other hand, have made using the platform more challenging and limited content exposure. The algorithms prioritise the most popular and best-performing content, rather than showing users' content based on the time it was posted (Hunt 2016). This can work in the favour of celebrity influencer accounts and make it more difficult for new talent to succeed on the platform. Instagram has also hidden the like count (Constine 2019); a change that has received negative pushback from some users, especially influencers for whom the number of likes was one of the key signals of their popularity. These changes indicate that Instagram is evolving in ways that may potentially create a more favourable environment for some users but not for others.

The research presented in this thesis showed that influencers have been able to combine content offering entertainment value with promotional messages in sponsored posts. As advertorials focus on communicating real life experiences, the focus lies not only in the product or service advertised, but also in the narrative details of features stories, experiences and feelings evoked by influencers as they narrate their experiences online. This changes the approach to marketing on social media, where the value an advertisement offers largely emphasises its entertainment content rather than being purely about the product. This type of content is more engaging for consumers and offers them more information about how a product is used. Social media influencers are also able to build interpersonal relationships with their followers and create intimacy that brands capitalise on through partnership deals.

Looking back on the evolving influencer phenomenon, it appears likely that we will see new forms of online celebrities arise in future. As communication tools change, so do social media platforms evolve. The development of digital affordances will keep driving change in the influencer industry, making space for new online talent. Even though it cannot be known whether Instagram will still be operating in a decade's time, influencers are likely to remain, regardless of what media or formats are available to online celebrities in the future.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Contribution of this study

This study identified a range of consumer responses towards influencers and sponsored content on Instagram. My research extends current understandings of Instagram influencers by examining how consumers feel about influencers, the impacts of sponsorship disclosure (previously examined by Evans et al. 2016) and how consumers perceive the effects of influencers' content on their own behaviour. In so doing, this study supports existing research conducted by Abidin (2013, 2014, 2015(a,b), 2016(a,b,c)), Senft (2008), Marwick (2013) and Mavroudis and Milne (2016) on influencers' self-promotional tactics and the labour involved in the process of self-branding online. Specifically, it demonstrates that these practices can be effective in building connections with consumers. Moreover, as influencer marketing is such a new industry, this project is one of the first to analyse the complex relationship that exist between influencers and their followers from the perspective of consumers.

The data were obtained using a mixed method approach consisting of a survey and a series of individual interviews. 94 survey respondents and eight interview respondents recruited from undergraduate students studying at the School of Communications at the UTS. This approach allowed me to collect general information on consumers' attitudes to influencers through a survey sample while also obtaining in-depth insights through qualitative data collection. The interview questions focused on the broader aspects of consumers' interactions with influencers. Even though the semi-structured interviews were designed to explain survey findings, the qualitative component of this research provided further insights into consumer responses to influencers.

This study focused on a limited sample of undergraduate communications students who were likely to be more knowledgeable about the promotional

techniques used in the communications industry than the general population based on their academic study of relevant subjects. The relevance of this study's findings is therefore restricted to this particular demographic. Further research may be warranted to verify whether the findings of this research also apply to consumers Australia-wide.

The findings revealed that the participants did trust influencers and would prefer to be exposed to their sponsored content than to traditional and social media advertising. The personal connection and trust they experience during their interactions with an influencer were found to have a significant influence on their receptiveness to advertising.

This study also shed light on why consumers feel more attracted to influencers who show their personalities online. While previous research has shown that consumers feel as though they have a close relationship with influencers (Abidin 2014; 2015(a&b); 2016(a,b&c); 2018; Senft 2008), this study shows that this relationship can directly impact consumer behaviour. The consumers sampled in this study whould rather trust Instagram influencers than distrust them and they would also determine the trustworthiness of a message on a case-by-case basis, influenced by their personal relationship with the influencer and the style of the message. With trust and consumption intersecting, the quality of a perceived relationship with an influencer was likely to influence the extent of a consumer's receptiveness to a sponsored post.

In spite of the strong personal connection and a level of trust consumers experience when interacting with influencers online, respondents in this study said they were sceptical of branded content due to high ad awareness. Indeed, these consumers were highly aware of the promotional methods used on social media and felt confident in identifying sponsored content, even when the sponsorship was not disclosed. However, knowledge of promotional intent did not appear to undermine trust as much as may have been expected. Instead, this

study found that the promotional style of content impacted trust more negatively than general ad disclosure, which correlates with findings of Evans et al. (2017). Although participants were aware of the commercial nature of sponsored content, this did not impact on a post's likeability or undermine trust to the same degree as overly promotional content. This indicates that even though consumers may be aware of marketing practices used on Instagram, they expect influencers' content to be about more than a product or service: it should offer information or be entertaining.

The future of influence

As noted above, consumers are becoming media literate, meaning that they are highly aware of influencer marketing as a promotional method and are confident in their ability to recognise paid-for adverting. However, this does not necessarily mean that influence marketing cannot appear as a genuine recommendation. While consumers can be more likely to ignore promotional content, an influencer's content that offers value other than the featured product can appeal to a consumer from an entertainment perspective. In this study, while participants had a neutral reaction to advertising intent, they were more likely to feel disinterested due to a promotional tone of voice than the fact of sponsorship itself. For example, Emma explained how the promotional tone of voice in an influencer's post reminded her that the post was not a real-life example of the product's use: 'It's like, "I pop on this HiSmile for like ten seconds and I have it in my handbag." And no normal person is going to have a HiSmile pen in their handbag.' Along with a strong call to purchase, such promotional practices were often viewed as having an excessive focus on a product by demonstrating an unnatural degree of excitement towards it or exaggerating its qualities. Best practices, on the other hand, involved providing relevant information about a product's benefits or showcasing its use in an entertaining manner. Olivia described how a piece of sponsored content persuaded her to make a purchase because of a detailed review an influencer had shared: 'She

was describing the features rather than, "Oh, this is really good, buy it, swipe up."'

Higher levels of media literacy among younger people means that influencer marketing is recognised as advertising even if the sponsorship is not disclosed. Moreover, posts featuring an undisclosed partnership could appear misleading and generate negative sentiment among audiences, as discussed in chapter one. The recognition of such misleading practices has raised legal concerns, leading to the introduction of compulsory ad disclosure on social media. For example, in 2017, ACCC developed advertising guidelines applicable to influencer marketing (AdStandards 2018), and the Australian Influencer Marketing Council is also developing clear guidelines on influencer marketing on social media (Cheik-Hussein 2019). However, it is worth noting that while these regulatory responses are welcome, key target markets for influencer advertising are well aware of common advertising strategies and may not require the high level of regulatory protection that has been suggested in public debates.

Influencer marketing, unlike traditional paid-for media formats, presents a product or service to consumers in a form of an advertorial through the lens of an influencer's experiences. This approach to sponsored content changes how the ad is perceived. Instead of focusing on a particular product, the content can be incorporated into a story from an influencer's daily life, linked to a particular event with personal value, or featured in a how-to tutorial. These types of communications not only incorporate information, but, as noted throughout this thesis, also provide entertainment value. As previously discussed, the fact that participants would rather see sponsored content that they found interesting indicates that a piece of content's entertainment value may increase the rate of positive consumer responses. Therefore, incorporating entertainment into an influencer promotional marketing has the potential to change consumers' relationship with advertising. While there could also be negative attitudes to an

ad's intent, the participants described more positive responses when the content displayed entertaining characteristics along with the promotional message.

Although advertising often focuses on information about a product or service, the over-saturation of information can lead to lower advertising recall. This may be challenged by introducing entertainment aspects that reinforce the feelings associated with a particular ad. This can explain why marketing professionals are beginning to combine entertainment and marketing more frequently. By limiting the amount of information a consumer receives from one advert, the shift from informational advertising to entertaining advertising is gradually changing the landscape of the advertising industry.

As noted in Chapter 6, Instagram is constantly evolving. With the introduction of an algorithm and the launch of new media formats and hidden likes, Instagram continues to transform the user experience. These developments and the expectation of future changes illustrate the inherent instability of the influencer marketing industry. As the platform can evolve so rapidly, the primary media format can change in ways that influence the dynamics of the platform, which could increase the power of influencers. For example, if influencers were to adopt live video, this could lead to challenges in enforcing advertising regulations while also intensifying the sense of intimacy between the influencer and their audience. It is yet unclear what the future might hold for this relatively new industry of influencers and influencer marketing.

It is hoped that this study can form a foundation for future research into consumer responses to influencer marketing from the perspectives of both marketing and social science. Future research may also focus on consumers' relationships with influencers in other contexts. For example, a semantic analysis of influencers' communications might more clearly explain the connections they form with consumers. Another avenue for further research could be to examine the possible effects of specific branded campaigns on consumer purchasing

behaviours and brand loyalty. This study lays the foundation for further research on influencers in the fields of social sciences and marketing.

Appendices

Appendix A. Survey pre-qualifying questions

1. Are you a current UTS student?
- Yes
- No

2. Do you follow influencers on Instagram?
- Yes
- No

3. How old are you?
- Under 18
- 18 - 23
- 24 - 29
- 30 - 35
- 36+

Survey Logic: A respondent will be taken to the survey if answering 'yes' in question 1 and 2 and if answering '18 – 23' or '24 – 29' in question 3.

Appendix B. Survey questions

1. Gender
- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to answer

2. What are the reasons you follow influencers? (select all that apply)
- To stay up to date with trends
- To learn from them (such as the perfect beauty routine or lifehacks)

- To get specific recommendations about products

- To get purchasing ideas

- They are a role model

- They have an interesting life

- I feel emotionally connected to them

- Other:

3. Do you trust the product recommendations from the influencers that you follow?

(Please rate on 1 - 5 scale, where 5 indicates trust and 1 indicates distrust.)

- 1

- 2

- 3

- 4

- 5

4. Have you ever purchased a product from Instagram (i.e. through e-commerce or through sponsored post)?

(A sponsored post is an influencer's post that was endorsed by a brand either monetarily or in goods/services.)

- Yes

- No

5. Was the product advertised in an influencer's sponsored post?

- Yes

- No

6. Rank these methods of advertising from most to least favourable?

- Sponsored content (influencers)

- Social media ads

- TV ads

- Display ads

- Print ads

7. Do you like sponsored posts?

- Yes

- No

8. Why Don't you like sponsored posts? (select up to 3)
    - the promotional style of the message/caption (i.e. the sales pitch)
    - #ad – the fact that it was sponsored
    - the focus on the product in a shot
    - you can't relate to a post/story
    - #gifted #pr the fact that samples/products were provided
    - Other:

9. How do you perceive posts about a product on influencer's feed?

- As a recommendation

- As a general awareness raising about products

- As advertising

10. Does the fact that the post was sponsored or a product gifted by a brand undermine the trustworthiness of the recommendation?

- Yes

- No

Appendix C. Survey contact consent and information

1. Would you like to participate in a follow-up interview?

(If you show interest to participate, you will be invited to a one-on-one interview held in person or through video/phone call. The interview will further examine the same topic,

aiming to explain the survey results. You will be able to withdraw your interest to participate at any time with no explanation required.)

- Yes

- No

2. Please leave your contact details

- Name

- Email

- Phone number

Appendix D. Interview Questions

1. How long have you been on Instagram? How active are you on Instagram?

2. How many influencers do you follow?

3. When did you first start following influencers?

    a. PROMPT: What attracted you to them?

4. What makes you follow them?

    a. Are there any benefits for you personally? (eg. Following trends, discount codes)

5. Do you have any favourite influencers?

    a. PROMPT: What makes them stand out?

    b. PROMPT: What sort of content do they post?

6. Have you seen any sponsored content on Instagram?

    a. PROMPT: What content do you remember? Can you describe it to me?

    b. Visual aids: promotional style of content

7. Does social media play a role in your purchasing decisions?

a. IF YES: Have you purchased a product from Instagram?

b. IF YES: What inspired you to make the purchase? Was it an impulse buy?

c. Was it from a sponsored piece of content?

8. Do you trust recommendations from influencers? How about from regular users on social media? Why? Who do you trust more?

9. Situational question: You see a post by an Influencer that you follow, recommending a product that you seem to like from their description. What do you do?

10. What types of adverts do you like the most? (give visuals to rank)

a. How does it compare to sponsored posts? Could you give me pros and cons?

b. What forms of ads you find to be most appealing/authentic/attention grabbing?

11. How does sponsored content makes you feel? Does it changes your perception towards the brand advertised? Why?

Appendix E. Interview visual stimuli – advertising methods ranking
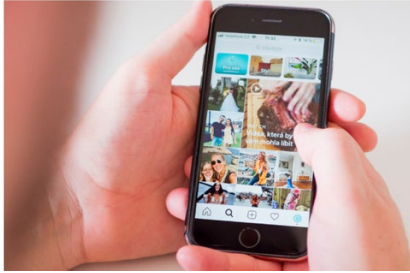
Print advertising
Newspapers, magazines etc.

Display adverts
Banners, flyers etc.

Social media

Banners, display, in-feed sponsored posts etc. on social media

TV advertising

Banners, sponsored posts etc. on social media

Sponsored content

Endorsed or sponsored posts on social media influencer's feed

Appendix F. Ethics clearance

ETH18-3097

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