



LUND UNIVERSITY  
School of Economics and Management

# The Social Media Influencer and Brand Switching.

*What is the role of the Social Media Influencer when the  
consumer decides to voluntarily switch brands?*

By: Amber Gulamali & Julia Persson

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Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya

Examiner: Jon Bertilsson

# Acknowledgements

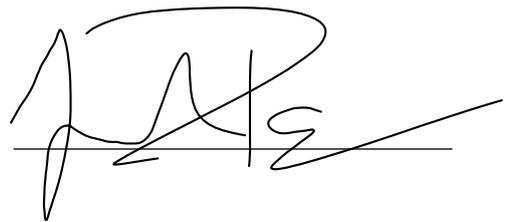
This thesis was written during the spring semester of 2017. While the journey was challenging and confusing at times, the process has taught us important lessons both personally and academically. For guiding us through this process we want to, first and foremost, thank Veronika Tarnovskaya for her support and valuable suggestions. Secondly, we would like to extend our appreciation to Antonio Marañon and Peter Gustafsson for taking the time to guide us through the analysis of our data set and other methodological struggles. Furthermore, we would also like to extend our appreciation to all participants who took the time to contribute to our study and were essential for the successful completion of this thesis.

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Thank you for being part of our story,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amber Gulamali', written over a horizontal line.

Amber Gulamali

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julia Persson', written over a horizontal line.

Julia Persson

# Abstract

- Title:** Social Media Influencers & Brand Switching - What is the role of the Social Media Influencer when the consumer decides to voluntarily switch brands?
- Handed in:** May 24, 2017
- Course:** BUSN39 Business Administration: Global Marketing
- Authors:** Amber Gulamali & Julia Persson
- Supervisor:** Veronika Tarnovskaya
- Examiner:** Jon Bertilsson
- Purpose of the thesis:** The purpose of this study was to find out which type of informant the Social Media Influencer embodies when consumers voluntarily switch brands after the endorsement of a brand by a Social Media Influencer.
- Methodology:** To answer the research question, this thesis utilised a quantitative questionnaire which was created with the help of a qualitative pre-study to assess the relevance of dimensions proposed in the literature.
- Findings:** The data results of the 190 successful questionnaires indicated that when the consumer switches out of dissatisfaction and a need for variety, the Social Media Influencer foremost embodies the role of an opinion leader. Oppositely, when the consumer switches out of a desire for social identification, the results indicated that the Social Media Influencer functions as an opinion leader, social leader and micro-celebrity.
- Research implications:** The findings provide academics and practitioners with valuable insights into how the Social Media Influencer can be perceived and analysed, specifically when the consumer voluntarily switches brands.
- Keywords:** Social Media Influencer, Brand Switching, Instagram

# Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	9
1.1 Background.....	9
1.2 Problem formulation.....	11
1.3 Research purpose.....	14
1.4 Research delimitations.....	14
1.5 Research contribution.....	15
1.6 Outline of the thesis.....	15
2. Literature review.....	17
2.1 Voluntary brand switching.....	17
2.1.1 Instrumental brand switching.....	17
2.1.2 Exploratory brand switching: Intrapersonal motivation.....	18
2.1.3 Exploratory brand switching: Interpersonal motivations.....	19
2.2 Social Media Influences.....	21
2.2.1 The opinion Leader.....	22
2.2.2 The micro-celebrity.....	23
2.2.3 The social Leader.....	23
2.3 Instagram.....	24
2.3.1 Visual & Verbal Content.....	25
3. Research model and hypotheses.....	27
3.1 The role of the Social Media Influencer and the consumer’s brand switching motivation.....	27
3.2 The role of visual and verbal content.....	29
4. Methodology.....	31
4.1 Research philosophy.....	31
4.2 Research approach.....	32
4.3 Qualitative pre-study.....	33

4.3.1. Research design: semi-structured interviews .....	33
4.3.2 Sampling method .....	34
4.3.3 Data collection method .....	35
4.3.4 Data processing .....	36
4.3.5 Results qualitative findings .....	37
4.4 Quantitative study .....	41
4.4.1 Theoretical framework .....	41
4.4.2 Research design: questionnaire survey .....	42
4.4.3 Sampling method .....	43
4.4.5 Pre-data collection measurements to increase validity and reliability .....	44
4.6 Ethical considerations .....	46
4.7 Methodological limitations .....	47
4.7.1. Chosen research method .....	47
4.7.2 Research design and sampling technique .....	48
4.7.3 Time and budget constraints .....	48
5. Results .....	50
5.1 Reliability and validity of the scales .....	50
5.1.1 Method bias .....	50
5.1.2 Construct validity .....	50
5.1.3 Internal consistency .....	51
5.2. Data analysis .....	53
5.2.1 Sample characteristics .....	53
5.2.2 Hypotheses testing .....	54
6. Discussion .....	60
6.1 Implications of the model .....	64
7. Conclusion .....	67
7.1 Theoretical implications .....	68

7.2 Managerial implications.....	69
7.3 Future Research .....	70

# Table of Figures

Figure 1. Outline thesis .....	16
Figure 2. Conceptual framework .....	27
Figure 3. Topic guide qualitative interviews .....	36
Figure 4. Theoretical framework .....	41
Figure 5. Example nominal scale.....	42
Figure 6. Example difference between pre-test and final survey.....	46
Figure 7. Mean of individual variables- Dissatisfaction.....	55
Figure 8. Mean of individual variables- Variety seeking .....	56
Figure 9. Mean of individual variables- Social identification .....	58
Figure 10. The impact of visual and verbal content.....	59
Figure 11. New model consumer's brand switching decision.....	64

# List of tables

Table 1. Scales opinion leader .....38

Table 2. Scales micro-celebrity.....39

Table 3. Scales social leader .....40

Table 4. Analyses Cronbach's Alpha .....52

Table 5. Sample size brand switching conditions .....54

Table 6. Results Paired sample T-test: Social Identification .....57

# 1. Introduction

## *1.1 Background*

In the past five years, social networks have doubled in size and paid advertisements on social media have become steadily less effective due to a growth of ad aversion among online users (Dinesh, 2017). These new developments are causing marketers to look at new solutions to reach their consumers of which influencer marketing has become a popular one. Influencer marketing entails the collaboration with a Social Media Influencer (SMI) who has commonly been identified as “a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg et al., 2011b, p.90).

At present, some SMIs are receiving up to US\$10,000 per post; making an endorsement deal a costly project for brands. For example, Kristina Bazan, an SMI with 2.4 million followers at present, is expected to receive up to US\$1 million for her endorsement deal with L’Oréal (Chafkin, 2016). Many companies calculate these prices by approximating the SMI’s reach via the number of followers he or she has (Noricks, 2015a). For example, one influencer with 7K followers could suggestively charge \$146 for a post while another with 434K followers could ask \$6,278 (Noricks, 2015a). While these prices are high, there is a large support for the notion that collaborations with SMIs can give brands the possibility to be where their customers are which enables consumers to discover new brands to love (Noricks, 2015b).

*“With the right influencer, brands can effectively introduce themselves to target or niche audiences, and it’s often still more affordable than traditional advertising. Collaborations are particularly handy when brands are evolving or seeking to connect with a new demographic” (Noricks, 2015b)*

The SMIs are found to be influential for several reasons. Firstly, the SMIs impact the consumers via electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Research on traditional word-of-mouth found that the opinions of peers have a significant impact on the consumer’s attitude and knowledge of brands (Chu & Kim, 2011; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006). For example, Jalilvand & Samiei (2012) found that the sharing of opinions regarding a brand

between two consumers has a larger influence on the consumer's perception of the brand than editorial recommendations or advertisements as it is perceived to come from a more reliable source. More recent research on the impact of eWOM found that the sharing of brand experience and information in the online environment has the same impact as the sharing of experiences and knowledge offline. However, the main difference found is that the impact of eWOM is larger due to its greater reach (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). This finding thus leads to the notion that the sharing of opinions by the SMIs regarding brands on SNS has an even greater effect on the consumer's consideration of products and brands than traditional WOM or even traditional marketing strategies would (Riegner, 2007).

Secondly, while the opinion of a fellow consumer thus has a large influence on the consumer's purchase decisions, the SMIs are considered even more influential than other consumers due to their content creation regarding issue relevant topics and their sharing of information that meets the consumers' informative and emotional needs (Pang et al., 2016). The advent of social media, and specifically social networking sites, has facilitated the formation of online communities around topics of interest such as fashion, hobbies and brands. Within these groups, it has been found that certain consumers become central to these networks due to their high level of opinion-giving behaviour (Allué, 2013; Chu & Kim, 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011). This type of behaviour is typical for SMIs who, because of their position, lead the community by searching for, selecting, editing, creating and sharing information that is considered relevant and important for the community (Allué, 2013). Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) therefore argue that SMIs often function as a reference group- a group of individuals that people look up to when forming values and attitudes and serve as a reference in their purchase decision. Their reviews thus not only play a significant role in the consumer's purchase behaviour but also in the consumer's desire for insights into new brands and products.

The consumers who follow SMIs to inspire their future purchase are also called social shoppers (Chalal, 2016). Social shoppers are consumers who actively use social media platforms to find new products. While this new trend alone already denotes a shift in consumption patterns, it has also been found that consumers are no longer brand loyal (Llopis, 2014). This denotes that besides influencing a consumer to try a new brand, the SMI could also play a role in the consumer's desire to try various brands besides the one he or she possessed before.

This phenomenon in which consumers try and accept various brands is called brand switching. Although brand switchers can be vital for the existence or even success of a brand, it can also

harm the brand. For example, according to Al-Kwafi & Ahmed (2015), brand switching can induce a reduction in the company's market shares and/or cause them to rely on a more unpredictable consumer mix which makes the implementation of marketing strategies more difficult. All in all, brand switching could thus be a problem of "contradictory nature" (Aroean, 2012, p.70).

While brand switching used to be rare due to a high brand loyalty among consumers, an analysis of cultural shifts has found a steady growth in the acceptance of change (Kusek, 2016). Where change used to be feared in many aspects of life, change is now embraced which has become visible in the consumer's purchase behaviour. As supported by previous research (i.e. Al-Kwafi & Ahmed, 2015), Kusek (2016) arguments her point by stating that: "the standard for brand switching is no longer the failure of a brand to perform but rather its inability to seem like an entirely new and interesting option at every single purchase cycle".

## *1.2 Problem formulation*

Brand switching behaviour has been analysed in both Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumer contexts. Literature focussing on the latter has defined brand switching as "terminating the relationship with a certain brand and moving toward a more attractive alternative" (Ping, as cited in Al-Kwafi & Ahmed, 2015). In simpler wording, brand switching is the purchasing of a brand different to the one he or she bought previously.

While some brand switching decisions are found to be involuntary, such as when the brand is not available at the store, research has found that most brand switching decisions are made voluntarily (Raju, 1984). Examples of voluntary brand switching are brand switching because of external factors such as saving money through price deals (Van Trijp, Hoyer & Inman, 1996) and brand switching out of internal voluntary motivations such as a decline of brand loyalty, desire for increased functional or symbolic benefits or interpersonal relations.

A foremost argument given for brand switching is the decline of brand loyalty (Dash & Alexander, 2010; Deighton, Henderson & Neslin, 1994; Grover & Srinivasan, 1992; Kenney & Khanfar, 2009; Kokkiadi & Blomme, 2013; Lam et al., 2010; Woodham, Hamilton & Leak, 2017). According to Oliver (1999, as cited in Liu-Thompkins & Tam, 2013), brand loyalty is defined as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product/service

consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour". This definition of brand loyalty refers to behavioural brand loyalty which has commonly been used in quantitative research on brand switching as it allows for a direct measurement (Gupta, 1988; Shukla, 2009).

However, recent research has indicated that behavioural brand loyalty alone leads to spurious brand loyalty- a phenomenon in which consumers appear to be brand loyal because they buy the same brand repeatedly but do so mostly out of habit (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007; Day, 1969; Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2017; Kim, Morris & Swait, 2008; Liu-Thompkins & Tam, 2013). For this reason, more attention has been given to attitudinal brand loyalty, also called brand commitment, which places a greater emphasis on satisfaction (Kenney & Khanfar, 2009; Kokkiadi & Blomme, 2013; Mai & Canti, 2008; Oliver, 1999; Şahin, Zehir & Kitapçı, 2011; Sung & Campbell, 2009). While it is not deemed sufficient by itself, satisfaction is an antecedent of brand loyalty (Şahin, Zehir & Kitapçı, 2011) and thus the higher the satisfaction with a brand, the lower the chances of brand switching. This satisfaction can be dependent on functional benefits as well as symbolic benefits. Analysed from economic choice theory, McFadden (1986) argues that consumers switch brands to maximise the functional benefits while Lam et al. (2010) state that a change in brand purchase may occur for self-enhancement purposes and thus for greater symbolic benefits.

Research on brand switching and self-enhancement purposes have indicated two main reasons for a change in consumer choice. Firstly, recent developments in choice modelling literature have suggested that the self-enhancement purpose of brand switching can be related to social identification (Lam et al., 2010). This theory suggests that people psychologically merge themselves with social groups and define themselves according to the group's main characteristics (Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann, 2013). These groups have set values, and members are persuaded to follow the collective's interest, including to their buying behaviour.

Oppositely, Randheer (2015) found that consumers could also switch brands for the self-enhancement purpose of reducing boredom or fulfilling a certain curiosity (Jayanthi & Rajendran, 2014). This type of brand switching has been called brand switching out of a need for variety. Caused by a desire to maintain optimum stimulation levels, variety seeking impels the consumer to experience something new or to try unique solutions to a problem which may be offered by a brand different from the one he or she possessed before (Aroean, 2012).

While brand switching theory has thus linked the behaviour to factors such as brand dissatisfaction, social identification and the need for variety and newness to maintain optimum stimulation levels, literature in the field has given limited attention to the type of informant that influences the decision. Research on word-of-mouth (WOM), however, found that WOM affects the majority of purchase decisions and has a greater impact than advertising (Baker, Donthu & Kumar, 2016; Hung & Li, 2007; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Kozinets et al., 2010). More recently, analysis of online Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has found that eWOM has the same influence as WOM on the consumer's choice, though on a greater scale (Abalaesei, 2014). While eWOM can take place between peers, research on online communities on Social Media found that consumers are often most influenced by consumers with a high digital status (Liu et al., 2015) who have recently been given the name of Social Media Influencers (SMIs).

As the phenomenon of Social Media Influencers is relatively new, current literature has attempted to explain the effectiveness the SMI on the consumer's purchase decisions from several traditional influential roles. For example, it has been argued that the SMI functions as a digital opinion leader, indicating they are perceived as a member of an online community with a great ability to influence others due to expertise on the relevant topic (Cho, wang & Lee, 2012). Another group of researchers, however, have stated that the SMI functions as a micro-celebrity- a person who desires visibility and attention and is influential through their admirability and, high social status (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016; Pedroni, 2016). Opposite to the two previously mentioned groups, the last group of researchers that have attempted to identify the effectiveness of the SMI on the consumer's purchase decision have called the SMIs social leaders- people that through their large social capital lead the online community and set the standard with regards to the values and behaviour of its members (Forsyth, 2015; Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann, 2013).

According to the review on brand switching by Al-Kwif & Ahmed (2015), the most important way of maintaining customers is for a brand to remain attractive. The researchers additionally put forward that one of those strategies would be to integrate the consumer in its marketing efforts. One of those consumers would be the SMI. While it has been established that SMIs can be influential source in the consumer's purchase decision, literature on voluntary brand switching has not yet specified which type of informant is most influential. Additionally, while literature on Social Media Influencers is growing, research remains dispersed as to what type of informant the Social Media Influencer embodies

### *1.3 Research purpose*

This thesis is led by the question: what is the role of the Social Media Influencer when the consumer decides to voluntarily switch brands? This question is based on the phenomenon in which the consumer voluntarily buys a brand different to the brand he or she previously possessed after being influenced by an SMI.

To investigate the role of the SMI when the consumer switches brand, this thesis will look at SMIs on Instagram, also called the “Instafamous” (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This decision was made as it was found that social commerce, commerce via social media, on Instagram is significantly increasing (Chahal, 2016). Additionally, Instagram's growth is accelerating quickly with an expected revenue generated from advertisements to reach \$2,81 bn in 2017, which is greater than the revenue of both Google and Twitter in the US (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Although Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) have previously proved the influence of SMIs on Instagram on the consumer's purchase decision, their research did not specifically look at the situation in which consumers voluntarily switched brands. For this reason, this thesis will build further on the supposition that SMIs are influential and aims to deduce what type of informant they embody when doing so.

### *1.4 Research delimitations*

Research on brand switching among consumers has indicated that the phenomenon could occur because of marketplace characteristics, switching costs, marketing strategies, interpersonal relationships and consumer characteristics (Al-Kwafi & Ahmed, 2015). As the objective of this research is to analyse the role that the SMI embodies, which could fall under both marketing strategies and interpersonal relationships, the impact of switching costs and marketplace characteristics lie outside of the scope of this study. Furthermore, while the consumer's characteristics such as variety seeking and the desire for social identification are discussed due to their link to the voluntary brand switching motivations, this thesis will not examine the personality types of the consumer and how that could the way that the SMIs are perceived

## *1.5 Research contribution*

Through answering the research questions, this thesis will have practical implications for marketers and brand managers as it will provide new knowledge on the role of the SMI in the consumer's voluntary brand switching decision. While the impact of SMIs has been greatly advocated by SMI agencies and marketing consultants, some companies remain apprehensive (Linqia, 2017). Furthermore, while it has been claimed that they have an impact on consumer's purchase decisions, little attention has been given to the group of consumers who switch brands. Through knowing what type of informant or even which characteristics consumers in certain brand switching conditions look for, companies would thus be better prepared before making collaboration deals with SMIs.

In regards to theory, this thesis will contribute to brand switching literature which, thus far, has only looked at traditional advertising as a direct influence on consumer brand switching. The analysis of the phenomenon on social media, through SMIs, will thus provide academics with a more current understanding.

Overall, the aim of this paper is not to invalidate previous research but rather to interrelate existing literature on brand switching literature with the findings on SMIs and their influential role in the consumer's purchase decision. Our objective is to provide insights for marketers and academics alike on the present phenomenon and to further build on the current understanding of SMIs as well as the importance of visual and verbal content on Instagram.

## *1.6 Outline of the thesis*

The introduction of this thesis outlined the phenomenon of interest as well as the research gap and the contribution it aims to make to the knowledge of both academics and marketing or brand managers. As can be seen in figure 1, this thesis will continue with a literature review which will provide an analysis of previous research on the relevant concepts which will subsequently be utilised for the creation of the conceptual framework and hypotheses. Next, it will present the research methodology which will argue for the research design and its respective parts such as the qualitative pre-study, the formation of the quantitative

questionnaire and the method of conducting the fieldwork. The results will be presented in chapter 5 and further discussed in chapter 6. The last chapter of this study will summarise the findings and ultimately answer the research questions. Additionally, the last chapter will emphasise the managerial implications of this thesis as well as provide directions for future research.

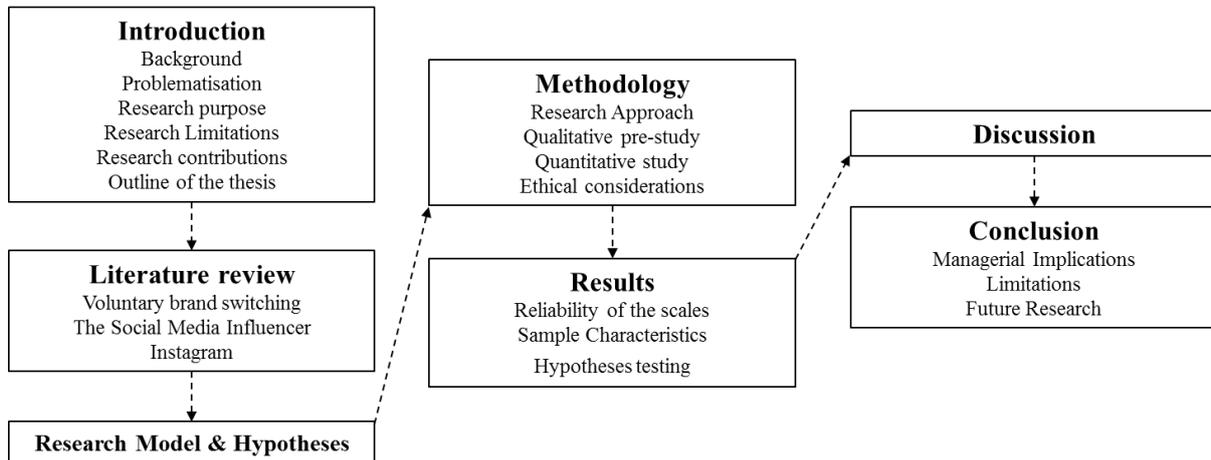


Figure 1. Outline thesis

## 2. Literature review

### *2.1 Voluntary brand switching*

Brand Switching in the business-to-consumer context has been defined as “terminating the relationship with a certain brand and moving towards a more attractive alternative” (Ping, as cited in Al-Kwif & Ahmed, 2015,p.177). As identified by Raju (1984), voluntary brand switching behaviour can be divided into two categories: instrumental brand switching and exploratory brand switching. While the first occurs due to dissatisfaction with the previous brand, Raju (1984) found that the latter is caused by intrinsic motivations such as the desire for variety, novelty and change. However, Raju’s (1984) explanation fails to accommodate the influence of the consumer’s social groups. As indicated by McAlister and Pessemier (1982), the intrinsic motivation to switch brands can be both intrapersonal, meaning it comes from within, and interpersonal, meaning the influence comes from advertising and peers.

While further research has analysed the phenomenon from several perspectives and attributed brand switching behaviour to marketplace characteristics, interpersonal relations, switching costs, marketing strategies and consumer characteristics (Al-Kwif & Ahmed, 2015), the interest of this research lies within the psychological and voluntary motivations of brand switching. The following review of the literature on voluntary brand switching will therefore further develop the concepts of instrumental brand switching and exploratory brand switching with the latter including both interpersonal and intrapersonal motivations.

#### *2.1.1 Instrumental brand switching*

Instrumental brand switching is the phenomenon in which the consumer switches to a different brand with the objective of alleviating or eliminating the problems he or she had with the previous brand (Raju, 1980). For example, a consumer may have bought a new pair of shoes after the previous brand was not of the quality he or she desired. In this case, the consumer’s

dissatisfaction caused the consumer to switch brands, which is the underlying reason for instrumental brand switching.

According to Engel et al. (1990, as cited in Bloemer & Kasper, 1995), brand satisfaction can be defined as the positive result of a subjective evaluation of the brand. While the concept of satisfaction has been given several definitions, they find common ground in the notion of satisfaction being the comparison of expectations with the brand performance (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995; Shukla, 2004). According to Şahin, Zehir and Kitapçı (2011) satisfaction is the precursor of brand loyalty and thus a necessary component in the creation of brand loyalty.

This argument was later supported by Kokkiadi and Blomme (2013), who found that, out of the factors age, satisfaction, brand commitment, the length of the consumer decision process, social groups, user experience and brand perception, the most substantial predictors of consumers staying with a brand were brand satisfaction and commitment. Thus, when consumers are dissatisfied with a brand, the chances of the consumer switching to a more attractive alternative, as presented to them by the SMI, become greater.

### *2.1.2 Exploratory brand switching: Intrapersonal motivation*

As stated earlier, exploratory brand switching is caused by a desire for variety or newness (Raju, 1984). From this perspective, brand switching can thus be described as the purchasing of a brand different than the previous due to a sensitivity to attractive stimuli (Aroean, 2012). However, it is important to note that there is a difference between exploratory brand switching caused by an intrinsic urge and that which is caused by a desire for social identification.

The intrinsic urge that causes brand switching behaviour has been defined as the intrapersonal motivation to seek variety. This means there is an intrinsic urge to try a new brand or create a variety in brand choice (Michaelidou, Dibb & Arnotts, 2005). Previous research has found several reasons for the occurrence of variety seeking behaviour. For example, Sheth and Raju (1974) were one of the first to assign this behaviour as a result of curiosity. Building upon that, Kahn, Kalwani and Morrison (1986), found that variety seeking behaviour can also be a result of the consumer's attempt to balance the product's attributes to maximise its utility as well as increase the flexibility of product choice to evade future uncertainty in taste. Ten years later, Van Trijp, Hoyer and Inman (1996) argued that the behaviour occurs as an attempt to eliminate the boredom that is associated with the brand or its attributions. Lastly, Sharma, Sivakumaran

& Marshall (2010) argued, the consumer acts upon his or her desire to seek variety as it offers a novel purchase experience and a change of pace which relieves the consumer from boredom.

While varying reasons are thus found for switching brands due to the intrinsic desire to seek variety, research in the field has commonly concluded that this behaviour is linked to an individual's attempt to reach an ideal level of stimulation (Aroean, 2012; McAlister & Pessemier, 1982; Olsen et al., 2016; Raju, 1980, 1984; Sharma, Sivakumaran & Marshall, 2010; Van Trijp, Hoyer & Inman, 1996). According to the Cambridge dictionary (2017), stimulation can be defined as “an action or thing that causes someone or something to become more active or enthusiastic, or to develop or operate”. For this reason, Optimum Stimulation Level theory (OSL) proposes that individuals seek a preferred level of stimulation and when this does not occur, the consumer will change his or her behaviour in an attempt to increase or decrease it (Raju, 1984). For example, when a person gets bored with their current shoes, they might refer to a different brand to reach their preferred level of stimulation and thus become enthusiastic about their shoes again.

As one of the first researchers to link OSL to exploratory behaviour, Raju (1984) argued that OSL has a significant correlation with brand switching. In his research, Raju (1984) found that individuals with a high OSL will feel more comfortable in exploring new stimuli than individuals with low OSL. While those with low OSL will need information to reduce risk in their purchase decision, those with high OSL will take the risk and mainly look for inspiration and innovation in the product category he or she is willing to switch brands (Olsen et al., 2016).

However, on the whole, it has been found that consumers who switch brands out of intrapersonal exploratory motivations do not require much information for their purchase decision (Raju, 1980). Since consumers who make up this group of brand switchers are thus more willing to buy a new brand to reduce boredom or future uncertainty, the emphasis in this brand switching decision lies on creating a variety of choice rather than, for example, to alleviate or resolve problems experienced with the previous brand.

### *2.1.3 Exploratory brand switching: Interpersonal motivations*

Although exploratory brand switching can thus take place as a consequence of satisfying one's OSL, an interdisciplinary review on exploratory consumer behaviour by McAlister & Pessemier (1982) found that consumers can also display varied behaviour due to a desire of

group affiliation. This desire could drive the consumer to be influenced by the group's values (Shukla, 2009) and/or to follow a change of behaviour within the peer group (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982).

The desire to follow the group's values is attributed to social identification which can be defined as "the process in which an individual psychologically consolidates his or herself with a social group to attribute group-defining characteristics" (Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann, 2013, p.32). In other words, social identification refers to the process in which consumers merge themselves into a group by adapting to the group's specific characteristics. As member of a social group, individuals often take the collective interest to heart which is exhibited by their buying behaviour (Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann, 2013). This was argued by O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy (2002), who, in an attempt to evaluate the factors of marketing and the consumer society on purchasing behaviour, put forward that consumers actively buy goods to demonstrate group membership and to identify with their peers. The authors argued that individuals seek social membership and social acceptance through their consumption.

While social identification thus looks at the process of an individual trying to merge with his or her social group, it does not explain how the norms and behaviours are transmitted within the group. The process by which the norms, attitudes, motivations and behaviours are conveyed from one source to the other has been called socialisation (Keillor, Parker & Schaeffer, 1996). The individuals at the top of this communication process, those who persuade the social group, are called socialisation agents. Concerning consumer purchase behaviour, research has found that family members as well as peers are influential socialisation agents and have a large influence on the consumer's decision-making process (Feltham, 1998; Keillor, Parker & Schaeffer, 1996). Later research, however, found that besides parents, vicarious role models such as entertainers and athletes also play a significant role in the individual's consumption patterns (Martin & Bush, 2000).

Although this would imply that consumers seek to be like their socialisation agents, Auty & Elliott (2001) found that consumers base their purchase decision primarily on the desire of being liked by their social group rather than to be like the socialisation agents. This indicates that although social agents play a significant role in the socialisation process, the consumer brand switching decision is ultimately motivated by the desire to have a positive social identity.

This was further substantiated by Lam et al. (2010) who suggested that the switching of brands could thus serve socio-psychological purposes.

To illustrate, the phenomenon of exploratory brand switching caused by interpersonal motivations can be observed when a consumer who used to buy Adidas sports shoes decides to switch to Nike to fit in with their social group and social leader who commonly endorse Nike as their preferred brand. It is thus not done to alleviate problems or to create a variety of brand choice but rather to create the desirable social identity aimed at social acceptance.

## *2.2 Social Media Influences*

A Social Media Influencer can be defined as a third-party endorser who creates and shapes consumer attitudes through the use of blogs, tweets or other social network media sites (Freberg et al., 2011). Even though SMIs have been coined as effective spokespersons, literature stresses that there is still little known about how their audience perceive them (Freberg et al., 2011).

While the role of the SMI is thus still unclear, research on electronic word-of-mouth through Social Media Influencers has indicated that the SMIs' influence has had an enormous boost over the last years (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). According to Freberg et al. (2011), SMIs have not only grown by number, but the collaboration with an SMI can be of immense value for brands due to their persuasive power. Since their presence and significant power has become established, Booth & Matic (2011) argue that it has become vital to evaluate what makes them the most influential.

Currently, the term Social Media Influencer has been widely used and defined through the lens of diverse types of informants. According to Merwe & Heerden (2009), an SMI can be perceived as an opinion leader that typically is knowledgeable in a particular topic. Oppositely, Lv, Guang & Tian (2013) argue that an SMI should rather be identified as a micro-celebrity- a person who is talented, successful and attractive not the least for the products they possess. Finally, an SMI has also been identified as a social leader as they are able to influence others to identify with their values and to desire a membership with their social group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). To explore these arguments further, the following literature review will explore these three types of informants to which the SMI has been compared to.

### *2.2.1 The opinion Leader*

Through the advent of Web 2.0, consumers increasingly communicate their opinions and concerns online as well as provide suggestions to their peers through online reviews. As SNSs are rapidly growing, the mutual influence among online consumers is prevalent (Miao, Meng & Sun, 2016). Accordingly, Winter & Neubaum (2016) found that the influence of interpersonal communication on people's attitudes and behaviour has a greater impact than the direct influence of mass media. Furthermore, within the online communities where this interpersonal communication regarding products and brands finds place Miao, Meng & Sun (2016) found that certain consumers have a greater influence on the opinion and decisions of others due to communication opinions that are authoritative and representative. This highly authoritative type of informant has commonly been referred to as an opinion leader.

First coined by Katz and Lazarsfeld, opinion leaders are strategically situated individuals in social networks on all levels of society who are often influential on one or several topics (Buttle, 1998). These individuals efficiently capture the most representative and authoritative opinions and play a crucial role in transmitting those through word-of-mouth, or in this case electronic word-of-mouth (Miao, Meng & Sun, 2016). The authoritative label given to opinion leaders comes from a combination of knowledge and expertise in a product category they are highly involved in (Feick & Price, 1987). Although they may have diverse interests, skills and expertise, it has been argued that the success of the opinion leader is linked to being an expert in one category, thus being domain specific (Miao, Meng & Sun, 2016; Weimann et al., 2007).

The high involvement in a product category causes the opinion leader to be motivated to talk about the products and brands (Feick & Price, 1987). Not only does this evoke a brand awareness in a certain topic but it also benefits others with their unique psychological motives they pursue (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). More specifically, it has been found that they have a large influence on consumers buying behaviour. For example, Hsu, Lin & Chiang (2015) found that when consumers decide to buy something new, the recommendation of an opinion leader helps reduce the risk of buying something unfamiliar.

### *2.2.2 The micro-celebrity*

The term micro-celebrity was first coined in 2001 by Theresa M Senft, who argued that a micro-celebrity is a person who amps up his or her popularity on the internet through blogs, vlogs and other social networking sites (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Similar to real celebrities, these micro-celebrities depend on self-branding as well as relationships with their audience to maintain their status (Pedroni, 2016). However, as the name suggests, micro-celebrities have a small audience that they can strategically maintain via consistent communication (Pedroni, 2016). This is opposite to the traditional celebrity who often has an audience far above the level that allows for constant communication between the fan and the celebrity.

In recent years, digital groups or non-traditional celebrities such as Youtube personalities, bloggers, Vloggers and the "Instafamous" have risen exponentially and are increasingly perceived as more credible sources than traditional celebrities, since they are perceived as more relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In general, micro-celebrities have often been described as successful, talented and attractive and not the least for the brands they possess.

Moreover, research by Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) found that micro-celebrities are identified with admiration, association, aspiration and recognition. For this reason, they are effective in triggering consumers' desire for a brand (Lv, Guang & Tian, 2013). Since they have the ability to promote brands in admiring and selling environments, i.e. beautiful nature, or exclusive inspiring settings the follower longs for, the micro-celebrity can have a positive impact on brand attitude and brand loyalty as they can pass on their recommendations to their large scale of online followers (Lv, Guang & Tian, 2013). All in all, it has been found that they have the ability to function as a reference to consumers in the process of creating attitudes and values, implying that they have a great impact on consumers' purchase intentions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

### *2.2.3 The social Leader*

Social leaders are individuals that can significantly impact the behaviours, thoughts, and feelings of others (Forsyth, 2015). This influential power has been attributed to the individual and social capital of the social leader. According to Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann (2013), a person's individual capital stems from his or her knowledge, involvement and expertise while

social capital is a result from one's social dominance which increases due to specific and sustained relations within a social group. The authors assert that the individual capital motivates the social leader to influence others while the social capital helps him or her to calculate the opportunities in which he or she can do so.

According to Forsyth (2015) these individuals are thus perceived as having the qualifications to identify, as well as satisfy, the interpersonal and social needs of their group. Subsequently, the messages they relay often appeal to their peers' biases, emotions and unconscious motivations. Due to the notion that the social leader usually runs a large network, their opinions and messages can efficiently influence the opinion of many (Shafiq et al., 2013).

For members of the social group, the primary features of the group as well as the opinion of the social leader are significant when striving to demonstrate their position in the network. According to Forsyth (2015), this behaviour is rooted in the hidden psychological bindings that exist between the leader and the followers that identify with the particular leader. Those bindings can be traced all the way back to the period of Aristotle, when it was concluded that people tend to love those who are like themselves. Similarity brings friendship and hence the saying "Birds of a feather flock together" was coined (Mcpherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001).

## 2.3 Instagram

Since the launch in October 2010, Instagram has become one of the fastest-growing social networking sites (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). With over 600 million active users, the platform is one of the most used social networking sites, ahead of, for example, Twitter and Tumblr (Statista, 2017) In general, individuals spend more time on Instagram than any other similar sites, making Instagram an efficient marketing platform for SMIs to deliver marketing messages to their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

*"Advertising budgets will inevitably flow to any medium where large numbers of people are spending large amounts of time—Instagram has attracted a sort of professional class. These "influencers," as they're known, are media properties unto themselves, turning good looks and taste into an income stream: Brands pay them to feature their wares."* (Chafkin, 2016)

Instagram is primarily a platform focused on image and video based content where users can employ manipulating tools to customise their photos or videos and share them with others (Chu et, al. 2016). Furthermore, the platform allows its users to describe their posts or give reactions to other users' posts in text by adding traceable keywords, also defined as hashtags (Chu et, al. 2016). Most commonly the content on Instagram can roughly be categorized into five main categories: 1. Activity; 2. A product, for example, a personal photo with a product; 3. Advertisement, for instance, a professional photo changed with embedded text of a company name; 4. Text, such as an image that mostly contains text or that is combined with text; 5. Other, something not included in the previous four categories (Chu et al., 2016). Even though images are becoming more important in online communication, there is still a vague knowledge about how people fully engage and interact with the content shared by SMIs (Bakhshi, Shamma & Gilbert, 2014). A better understanding of how content can be delivered best to create engagement in a certain setting can hence affect the future design, production, and distribution (Darsono & Huarng, 2015).

### *2.3.1 Visual & Verbal Content*

As mentioned earlier, the posts on Instagram often contain both visual and verbal content. According to Kim & Lennon (2008), visual and verbal content can have significant cognitive effects on customer's attitudes and purchase intentions. In fact, the characteristics of the visual and verbal content can be the key ingredients of designing effective marketing messages (Shaouf, Lü & Li, 2016). Using both types of content can facilitate the process for companies that find it difficult to deliver marketing messages to existing and new customers, in a competitive market with steadily increasing numbers of diverse social networking sites (Liu, Chou & Liao, 2015). Furthermore, while the importance of either type of content is yet to be measured in the social media setting, research on product placement in traditional advertising has found that verbal and visual information are both significant to marketing strategies.

Redondo & Bernal (2016) argued for the impact of verbal and visual information by explaining the impact of either type of content on the recipient of the message. According to the writers, people experience a mental transportation into the world evoked by the narrative they are shown. This narrative can occur in various settings such as movies and novels as well as advertisement. While the post of the SMI is a not traditional type of advertisement, the product

placement in their posts could be compared to it, implying that when the consumer sees the post of the SMI, they might undergo a mental transportation into the narrative of the post.

When the message is designed successfully, the consumer's multi-sensory systems (including taste, sight, smell and other sensations) and inner sensory experience can be awoken (Kim & Lennon, 2008). According to Kim & Lennon (2008), visual content is connected to the multi-sensory system, and verbal stimuli tend to derive from inner discursive experiences. Even though both content types are influential, the verbal content is perceived as essential when wanting to provide a deeper and more detailed product description (Kim & Lennon, 2008). Moreover, verbal information is found of great importance when aiming to convince others to change their beliefs regarding product attributes (Mitchell, 1986).

However, Research on visual and verbal content found that brand evaluation will have more decision outcomes if connected to visual content than to verbal/discursive content (Kim & Lennon, 2008). According to them, verbal content lacks sensory experience, causing it to become less concrete in the consumer's mind than visual content. Furthermore, LaBarbera, Weingard & Yorkston (1998) found that exposure to imagery that is matched to the target group's personality types and processing styles will likely have far greater influence on the consumer's purchase intention. Mikhailitchenko et al. (2009) add to that, that advertising is more effective when the visual imagery is highly provoking- causing a change in the consumer's attitudes, beliefs, intentions and behaviour. Lastly, Kim & Lennon (2008) support the powerful role of visual content, indicating that visually orientated advertisements have a superiority in communicating brand attitudes in comparison to verbally orientated advertisements.

### 3. Research model and hypotheses

In this section, the hypotheses that relate to the proposed model are developed. The first three hypotheses (H1, H2, H3) regard the possible role the Social Media Influencer could embody when the consumer’s motivation to switch brands is instrumental (dissatisfied), exploratory intrapersonal (variety seeking) or exploratory interpersonal (social identification). H4, on the other hand, specifies the expected importance of visual content, over verbal content, on the consumer’s ultimate brand switching decision.

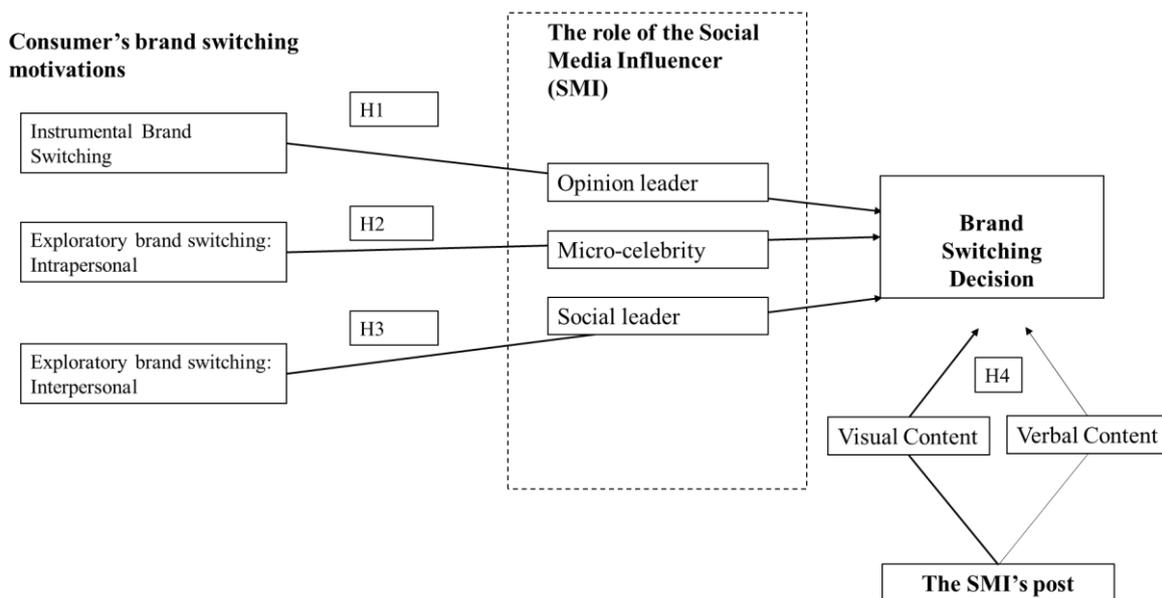


Figure 2. Conceptual framework

#### 3.1 The role of the Social Media Influencer and the consumer’s brand switching motivation

The analysis of literature has found that there are three main reasons for voluntarily brand switching: due to dissatisfaction with the previous brand, a need for variety and newness or a desire for social identification. Research on the former found that dissatisfaction occurs when

a brand does not live up to the consumer's set expectations (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995). The consumer, therefore, switches brands with the objective of alleviating or eliminating the problems he or she experienced with the previous brand (Raju, 1980).

An analysis of the type of informants the SMI could embody found that some researchers have evaluated them as opinion leaders (Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann, 2013; Pang et al., 2016). This type of informant is found to be skilled, has a high expertise in a certain topic and is furthermore characterised as a person who efficiently captures the most representative and authoritative opinions. Additionally, the analysis of literature indicated that consumers listen to opinion leaders to reduce the risk of buying something new. Therefore, due to their influence based on sound knowledge in the product category, it is expected that consumers who switched brands out of dissatisfaction will indicate that the SMI foremost embodied the role of an opinion leader.

*H1: When the consumer switches out of dissatisfaction, the social media influencer will foremost be perceived as an opinion leader.*

However, consumers who switch brands due to a need for variety or newness do so not to alleviate problems with the previous brand but rather to maintain optimum stimulation levels. While it was found that people with low optimum stimulations levels require information to reduce the risk of purchasing a product, individuals with high optimum stimulation levels mainly look for inspiration and innovation (Aroean, 2012; Olsen et al., 2016). All in all, however, Raju (1984) indicated that the consumers who seek variety and newness in their brand assortment do not require a lot of information on the new brand.

While the opinion leader is significant in disseminating authoritative product reviews, the micro-celebrity is linked to an increased brand awareness due to his or her inspirational lifestyle, their success and talent as well as the aspiration that the consumer will have for him or her (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). While this type of informant is not directly linked to expertise in a product category, it is deemed that the inspirational lifestyle and high social status of the micro-celebrity will provide the variety seeking consumer with the information and inspiration needed to try a new brand. For this reason, it is expected that when the consumer switches out of a need for variety, the Social Media Influencer will primarily embody the role of a micro-celebrity.

*H2. When the consumer switches out of a need for variety, the Social Media Influencer will foremost be perceived as a micro-celebrity.*

Lastly, when the consumer switches brands out of a desire for social identification, he or she will purchase a brand with the goal of obtaining social acceptance and social membership (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy (2002) found that consumers actively buy brands to demonstrate group membership and to be liked by their socialisation agents. Since an SMI can be a socialisation agent and influence the group's values and behaviours, it is expected that the Social Media Influencer in this brand switching condition will foremost embody the role of a social leader.

A social leader is a type of informant that possesses its influential powers through his or her individual and social capital. This signifies that the individual seen as a social leader will be someone who significantly influences the consumer behaviour of group members who seek to be identified with this leader and the social group to which he or she belongs. Moreover, it is found that the social leader is someone similar to the consumer, as people tend to create networks within communities to which they want to belong in and prefer to affiliate themselves with someone whom they are similar to. Thus, due to the desire to belong to a certain social group which often has a leader that is similar to oneself, it is expected that the consumer who switched out of a need for social identification foremost perceived the Social Media Influencer as a social leader.

*H3. When the consumer switches out of a desire for social identification, the Social Media Influencer will be perceived foremost as a social leader.*

### *3.2 The role of visual and verbal content*

Instagram is a social media platform with the philosophy "Image first, text second". Although this already denotes the importance of visual content, research on Instagram and the consumer's purchase decision has not yet quantitatively determined whether the verbal content or visual content has the greatest impact on the consumer's purchase decision.

According to Kim & Lennon (2008), verbal information can provide the consumer with a more implicit or explicit summary of the most significant brand features and attributes. However, Shaouf, Lü & Li (2016), argue for the importance of visual imagery, stating that visual content enables consumers to utilize the multi-sensory system which allows for the formation of a more concrete image and evaluation of how the brand would fit into the consumer's life. Kim &

Lennon (2008) furthermore argue that visual information has a greater influence on the consumer's purchase intention than verbal information as it improves information recall and recognition. For this reason, as visual information is regarded as being more important than verbal information, it is presumed that the visual content will be of greater importance when the consumer switches brands after the endorsement of a Social Media Influencer on Instagram.

*H4: The visual content of the Social Media Influencer's post on Instagram will affect the consumer's brand switching decision more than the verbal content.*

# 4. Methodology

## *4.1 Research philosophy*

To capture and interpret all necessary information needed to answer the research question, the ontological considerations of realism and nominalism, as well as the epistemological considerations of positivism and social constructionism, were compared. Ontology regards the nature of reality while the epistemology regards the theory of knowledge and provides the tools to best enquire the nature of reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The departure of the thesis is an internal realist ontology with an epistemological approach of positivistic character, which means that the world exists externally and objective methods to measure and test prevailing theories were conducted (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2015).

The two ontological philosophies that were considered are nominalism and realism. The nominalism approach is paradox and believes that no single truth exists since life is socially constructed in which people attempt to establish their own version. A less radical philosophy is relativism which pictures a socially constructed world that contains many truths instead of none. On the contrary, realism states that there exists only one single truth that either can be confirmed or exposed through the usage of existing theories (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). While research has already established theory on brand switching as well as the influence of the SMI according to the three proposed types of informants, the writers of this thesis deemed these facts concrete. However, since it is believed that the whole phenomenon of the role of the SMI when the consumer voluntarily switches brands cannot be assessed directly, this thesis is written from an internal-realist ontology.

Furthermore, this ontology led to a positivistic epistemology. To ensure an answer to the research question was found, it was considered imperative to reduce all other variables that could have affected brand-switching behaviour as well. The approach of reducing all possible explanations would not have been accepted when following the epistemology of social constructionism and strong constructionism. Since not all alternative explanations can be excluded in the research phenomenon as was also stated in the literature review, there might

still be factors not considered, which explains why the strong positivistic standing would not be appropriate. The epistemological approach of positivism was, therefore, most appropriate as the ambition of this thesis was to expose rather than to discover the reality.

## *4.2 Research approach*

The primary aim of this study was to expose what the role of the Social Media Influencer was during the consumer's decision to voluntarily switch brands. Current literature has analysed the SMI as an opinion leader, micro-celebrity and social leader. However, it has not yet been analysed which of these roles is more prevalent during the consumer's decision to switch brands.

To measure the role of the SMI, it was decided to measure which characteristics of the SMI, respective to each role, were most influential in the consumer's brand switching decision. However, a thorough analysis of literature found that research was dispersed on what these characteristics were. Additionally, it was found that the description of the social leader was vague. For this reason, it was deemed significant to test the literature through qualitative research to ensure that the scales adopted for the study would contain variables of relevance to the participants.

While scholars on either side of the research paradigms, positivists and nominalists, advocate for the incompatibility thesis that suggests both research paradigms, including their respective qualitative or quantitative research methods, cannot be mixed, this thesis follows the argument given by Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004). In their discussion of research philosophies, the two researchers propose that the utilisation of both methods could be important as the two methods will draw from each other's strengths and make up for each other's weaknesses.

For instance, it has been argued that while a qualitative study could provide a comprehensive description of the consumer's experience, the weakness of this type of research lies in the high possibility of bias in the reporting (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Graue, 2015; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The bias could be caused by the authors' previous beliefs or their attitude towards certain participants which could prevent the researchers from conducting an objective analysis. Opposite to a qualitative study, a quantitative approach such as a survey is less time consuming and allows for the elimination of undesired variables, making the

research more focused on certain aspects of the phenomenon (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). However, due to the focus on theory, this type of research may not reflect the understanding of concepts by the participants.

Though it has previously been argued that this thesis follows a positivist epistemology, it was believed that the division in research on the specific characteristics of each role could be solved best through conducting a qualitative pre-study. These findings were then matched with the dimensions proposed in the literature and adopted for the quantitative research that followed. Regarding the analysis of the importance of verbal and visual content, the writers of this thesis found appropriate scales to measure the impact of these two factors on the consumer's purchase intention. For this reason, it was felt unnecessary to include this topic in the qualitative research.

All in all, this research thus used a sequential mixed-method approach in which the quantitative research was dominant, so that it could provide an answer to the research question: what is the role of the Social Media Influencer when the consumer decides to voluntarily switch brand?

### *4.3 Qualitative pre-study*

#### *4.3.1. Research design: semi-structured interviews*

As argued for, the use of a qualitative pilot study based on either interviews or direct observation can aid in the development and testing of the items relevant for the main study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Galliot & Graham, 2016; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Since the phenomenon of voluntary brand switching often happens in more secluded setting and is mainly a psychological process, a direct observation would not serve the purpose of this study. For this reason, it was decided to adopt an interview-based format.

The purpose of the qualitative interview was to test the relevance of the dimensions proposed in previous research. According to Galliot and Graham (2016), the design of the qualitative interview was therefore of importance as the quality of the survey data collected depends on the quality of the items that shape the survey. It has been suggested that the format of the interview could be structured, unstructured or semi-structured. As an unstructured interview is mostly used to describe the setting in which a phenomenon takes place, it was believed that a

structured or semi-structured format would increase the potential of receiving the right type of information. After a deeper analysis of the impact of each format the structured interview format was considered too restrictive. Additionally, it was felt that this style would cause important answers to be missed. For this reason, it was ultimately decided to adopt a semi-structured interview format. This format does not only allow one to adapt the style, speed and pace of the questions, but it also allows the researcher to both be specific in the questions as well as deviate from the topic guide (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Lastly, while the researchers had considered the option of focus groups, it was ultimately decided to conduct separate interviews. This decision was taken as it was thought that separate interviews would provide the researchers with greater insights. Research on focus groups has found that participants could conform to a common opinion due to social pressure (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). While it was acknowledged that this format would aid in coming to a conclusion, the one-on-one interview was believed to be more beneficial as it allowed the writers of this thesis to collect a variety of statements that could be matched to the dimensions proposed in previous research.

#### *4.3.2 Sampling method*

In general, there are two sampling techniques: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. While both can have the same sample size, those obtained by probability sampling are approached at random and have an equal chance of being included as well as excluded from the study. Non-probability sampling, on the other hand, entails the selection of a sample group without allowing everyone in the population an equal chance of being included in the study.

Regarding the qualitative part of the study, research has indicated that employing a probability sampling technique to find participants for interviews is too rigorous and often too time consuming (Marshall, 1996). Furthermore, Marshall (1996) argued that a qualitative study requires information rich informants. By applying probability sampling, it is thus very possible to miss these informants. To illustrate, the writer gave the example of researching how to repair a broken window. With probability sampling, it could be that you end up with normal people while non-probability sampling allows a researcher to directly ask a car mechanic.

Due to limited time and the need for participants who follow an SMI, it was decided to apply the non-probability sampling technique of purposeful sampling. As defined by Coyne (1997),

purposeful sampling is the technique of selecting information-rich participants who could have been selected because of age, gender, status or experience with the phenomenon. While one could also opt for convenience sampling, which involves asking friends or family, it has been argued that this method could result in poor quality data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). For this reason, the purposeful sampling technique in which the researchers found participants who followed SMIs and bought a product endorsed by them was essential to obtain the information needed to design an accurate survey.

To ensure this qualitative sampling would be adequate it was decided to interview 6 participants. A homogeneity among participants was guaranteed by ensuring that all participants were millennials between 18-29 and students. Furthermore, they all had experience with buying a product that was shown to them by an SMI on Instagram.

#### *4.3.3 Data collection method*

The qualitative study adopted for the mixed method approach was of inductive, exploratory nature. While deductive is aimed at testing hypothesis, inductive studies allow the researcher to explore a phenomenon and develop a deeper understanding (McAbee, Landis & Burke, 2016). As the data of this study was used to assess the relevance of dimensions proposed in previous research, an exploratory approach would provide a greater amount of statements that could be used for the analysis.

The interviews were roughly between 20-30 minutes and were recorded on a phone so they could later be transcribed. As stated earlier, a semi-structured interview format was applied to allow some flexibility during the interviews. However, to provide the researchers with some structure, a topic guide was formed (See figure 3.1). Besides using open-ended questions, rather than directive questions, the interviewer used probing questions, such as “Could you tell me more about how the SMI helped you with finding a new product?”, and directing questions, such as “Some authors have called SMIs micro-celebrities. What makes someone a micro-celebrity according to you?”, to keep the flow of the interview going. Furthermore, to guarantee the participants would feel comfortable during the interview, they were introduced to the topic which would be discussed, and the utilisation of jargon and abstract theoretical concepts was avoided.

Taking the advice of Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) and Qu & Dumay (2011), the interviews were structured accordingly:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Introductory questions
- 3) Main questions
- 4) Closing questions
- 5) Debrief and a thank you

Topic Guide	
Our thesis aims to find out what the role of the social media influencer was when a consumer decided to switch brands. In this interview, we are just going to ask you a couple of questions to get an idea of how you perceive certain type of informants that have been linked to the SMI. There are no right or wrong answers, we would just like to get a better grasp of a consumer's perceptions on the phenomenon.	
Opinion Leader	Characteristics How are they influential?
(micro-) Celebrity	Characteristics? How are they influential?
Social Leader	Characteristics How are they influential?

Figure 3. Topic guide qualitative interviews

#### 4.3.4 Data processing

To narrow the interview excerpts down to statements that could be used in the survey, a qualitative text content analysis was used (Schmidt, 2010). This method aims to measure the repetition of specific words or word groups, also called lexical units, within a text that could, for example, come from interviews. According to Graue (2015), a content analysis is a powerful technique when wanting to reduce data into categories and adds credibility to the results as it requires a transparent coding process. However, it was found that some interviews were more descriptive. For this reason, hermeneutic interpretations were sometimes necessary to reduce the many lexical units to more specific labels where it was felt appropriate.

This technique was also used by Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) who studied the influence of Social Media Influencers on consumer's purchase behaviour. While their study was only of a qualitative nature, the technique they used enabled the writers to put their qualitative findings into categories and explore definitions according to the consumer's opinion. Since the aim of the qualitative study is to assess the relevance of the proposed dimensions in literature, the reduction of data to categories allowed for a quicker comparison.

#### *4.3.5 Results qualitative findings*

The qualitative interviews firstly found that to many, a Social Media Influencer is a person with many followers, often above 10.000, and were inspirational through their posts which often allowed the participants to be influenced in terms of their opinion on products and/or brands as well as their ideal image of lifestyle or fashion sense. Some stated they found the SMI inspirational because of their lifestyle while others focused more on their fashion style or even skills in make-up or photography for example.

During the qualitative interviews, the participants were asked what in their opinion each of the roles represented and how that specific role, according to them, could influence a person to buy something. From the qualitative content analysis, it was found that the opinion leader was mostly influential because of his or her expertise in the product category. The participants indicated that the opinion leader is authentic and often objective in their reviews. While it was recognised that opinions are often subjective, the majority stated that opinion leaders do not merely endorse products but also provide opinions on those they do not like. The latter was emphasised by one participant who stated she would trust and like an opinion leader even more if he or she would say something negative about a product as it made the person seem more trustworthy.

As can be seen in Table 1, most of these qualitative findings correspond with scales proposed in previous research. As argued by many, knowledgeable and domain-specific are central characteristics of the opinion leader (Chan & Misra, 1990; Li & Du, 2011; Merwe & Heerden, 2009; Weimann et al., 2007). While objectivity and unbiased was foremost mentioned in the literature review of Weimann et al. (2007), all participants highlighted the notion that an opinion leader is objective and willing to provide negative and positive feedback regarding the brand.

<b>The opinion leader</b>			
<b>Literary findings</b>		<b>Qualitative findings</b>	<b>Scales adopted for the quantitative study</b>
<i>Writers</i>	<i>Dimensions proposed in literature</i>		
Miao, Meng & Sun (2016)	<b>Expertise</b>	<b>Expertise Expert</b>	The Social Media Influencer has an <b>expertise in the product category</b>
Li et al. (2013)	<b>Expert in the field</b>	<b>Knowledgeable</b>	
Li & Du (2011)	Central importance, <b>Knowledgeable</b> , respective and innovative	Risk-reducer because the opinion leader is an <b>expert</b>	
Chan & Misra (1990)	<b>Knowledgeable and enduringly involved in the relevant product class</b>	Approachable <b>Involved with the product</b>	The Social Media Influencer has <b>experience with the product</b>
Merwe & Heerden (2009)	<b>knowledgeable, Domain specific</b>	<b>Category specific Objective</b> through well-grounded argumentation	The Social Media Influencer has a <b>well-grounded, objective, argument</b> for the product
Weimann et al. (2007)	<b>Experts in their field, domain specific</b> , evaluate and synthesise information in an <b>unbiased way</b>	Honest Opinion Authentic	

Table 1. Scales opinion leader

Opposite to an opinion leader, the participants indicated that a micro-celebrity is more influential because of his or hers aspiring lifestyle. Lexical units such as “wanting to be like them”, “wanting a piece of their lifestyle”, “looking up to them” indicated that admiration and inspiration played a significant role in the influence a celebrity has on the consumers. However, opposite to an opinion leader, the participants indicated that the promotion of a product by a celebrity is less authentic and could even be fake. One participant highlighted that most celebrity endorsements were too artificial and most likely paid for by a company.

In comparison with the scales proposed in the literature, most proposed characteristics are in agreement. As can be seen in Table 2, both previous research and the qualitative study conducted for this thesis found that micro-celebrities enjoy a high social status, are successful and talented and foremost admired.

The micro-celebrity			
Literary findings		Qualitative findings	Scales adopted for the quantitative study
Writers	Dimensions proposed in literature		
Lv, Guang & Tian (2013)	<b>Successful, talented</b> , trigger consumers to experience a desire for a product	<b>Inspirational because of the lifestyle or extra-ordinary accomplishments</b> Unrelatable	The Social Media Influencer is <b>successful and talented</b>
Djafarova & Rushworth (2017)	<b>Admiration</b> , association, aspiration and recognition	<b>Admirable</b> Artificial	I <b>aspire</b> to be like the Social Media Influencer
Lunardo, Gergaud & Livat (2015)	<b>Social elite, admired</b> , inspirational	<b>A star/ someone with Hollywood glory</b> Promotes for monetary compensations <b>Famous/ Well-known</b>	The Social Media Influencer is of <b>high social status</b>

Table 2. Scales micro-celebrity

Although the participants stated that the social leader is also admirable, the difference between the micro-celebrity and the social leader was argued to be that the admiration for the social leader is on a significantly smaller scale “like when a friend is good at something you are not”. Overall the participants indicated that a social leader was someone similar to the participant. Their influence on the consumer’s purchase decision was argued to be rooted in a desire for social identification and to fit in with the social group. It was specifically highlighted by one participant that a brand could decide whether or not you belong to a group as he had experienced being left out because he bought a brand against the group’s values.

Overall, the literature on the social leader was not as well defined as that of the opinion leader or the micro-celebrity. Most of the literature used in this study stems from research that refers to social leaders as leaders made influential through their social network as well as individual and social capital. The concepts provided by previous literature were found to be more complex and descriptive than those stated by the participants. To ensure future participants of the quantitative study would understand the characteristics of the social leader, it was decided to adopt the formulations given by the participants of the qualitative study.

The social leader			
Literary findings		Qualitative findings	Scales adopted for the quantitative study
Writer	Dimensions proposed in literature		
Forsyth (2015)	<p><b>Someone with a large social capital</b>, consumers are motivated through <b>social binding</b></p> <p><b>Guides the group on its behaviour and common values.</b></p> <p><b>generates uniformity in members' actions</b> and outlooks as emotions, ideas and information</p> <p>The psychological binding relationship between the leader and the followers <b>who identify with</b> the leader allows for the motivation to follow the leaders influence.</p>	<p><b>Friend-like</b></p> <p><b>Lifestyle related</b></p> <p>Like one-of-us</p>	The Social Media Influencer is <b>someone I identify with</b>
Mcpherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook (2001)	<p><b>"birds of a feather flock together"</b>, people follow those who are <b>similar to oneself.</b></p>	<p><b>Belonging</b></p> <p><b>Identification with social group</b></p> <p>Provide entrance to friend group</p>	<b>My friends also like</b> the Social Media Influencer and often follow his/her suggestions
Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann (2013)	<p>intensify in-group salience <b>by influencing in-group behaviour.</b></p>	<p><b>Relatable</b></p> <p>Inspirational because of achievements but not famous</p>	I can <b>relate</b> to the Social Media Influencer

Table 3. Scales social leader

Lastly, the qualitative content analysis found an overlap in the lexical units of risk-reducer and inspirational. The former was used for both the role of the celebrity as well as the opinion leader, though for distinct reasons. One participant stated the opinion leader functioned as a risk-reducer as it was felt that the opinion of that person was authentic and trustworthy. Oppositely, another participant stated the celebrity functions as a risk-reducer as the celebrity is of a high social status and thus "if that person finds it cool it must be cool". The word "inspirational" on the other hand was mentioned for both social leaders and celebrities, stating that a celebrity is inspirational because of his or her desirable lifestyle while a social leader can be more inspirational because of his or her life story. For example, a person who was deemed

similar to the participant but was better at makeup or had lost a lot of weight. It can thus be concluded that the level of inspiration differs between the two roles.

## 4.4 Quantitative study

Opposite to the qualitative study, the quantitative study was a deductive approach based on hypotheses that aimed to ultimately answer the research question. The data that was collected was used to uncover the degree to which the hypotheses were supported (McAbee, Landis & Burke, 2016).

### 4.4.1 Theoretical framework

After the qualitative study, the conceptual framework was further developed into a theoretical framework that contained the variables selected. This framework is explained in figure 4.

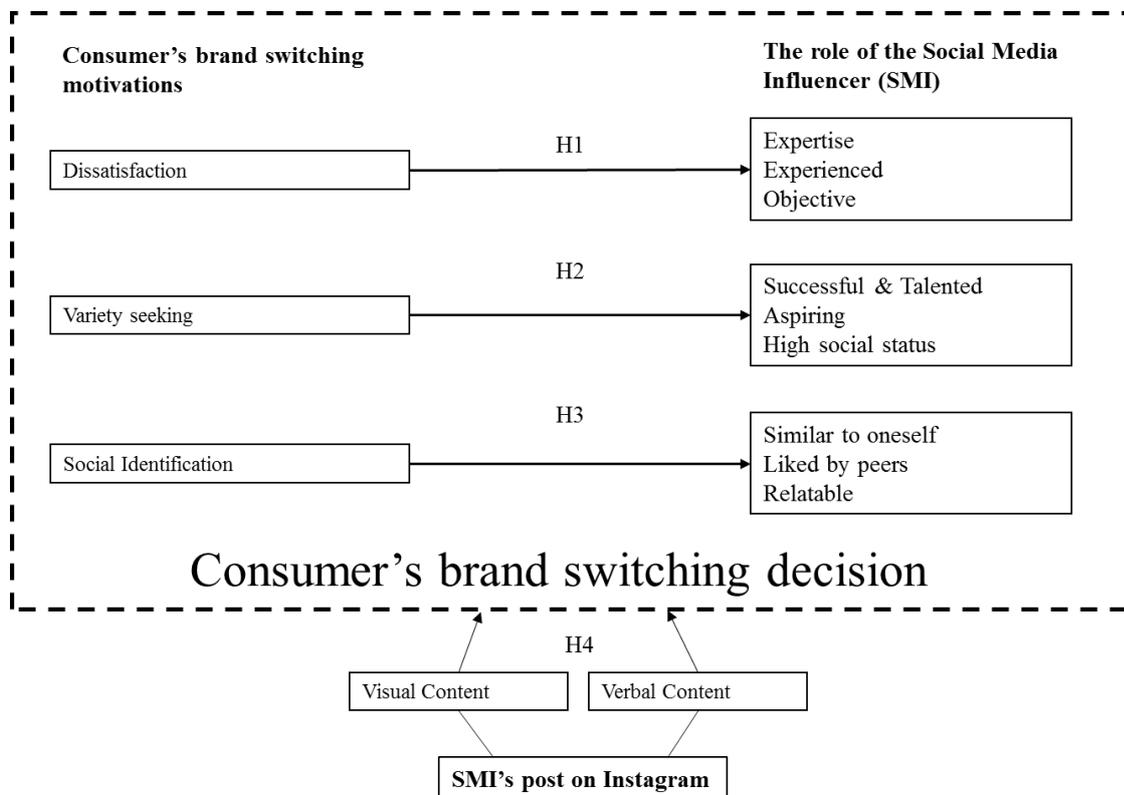


Figure 4. Theoretical framework

Per the qualitative study, it was found that the characteristics *expertise, experienced* and *objective* were most distinguished for the opinion leader. Oppositely, it was found that the characteristics *successful & talented, aspiring* and *high social status* best defined the prominent characteristics of the micro-celebrity. Moreover, the characteristics *similar to oneself, liked by peers* and *relatable* were attributed to the social leader. Succeeding, these characteristics were transformed into the variables that measured the role of the SMI respectively.

#### 4.4.2 Research design: questionnaire survey

Following the qualitative study that helped determine the most relevant dimensions, the questionnaire survey was formed. Regarding the design of the survey it was imperative that the collected data would ultimately permit the comparison of the averages of the three factors- the three roles of the Social Media Influencer- in each brand switching condition. To allow for this comparison to happen, the survey required two sets of scales.

The first part of the questionnaire required category scales that would collect the descriptive statistics necessary for the analysis of the sample characteristics as well as to determine the sample size of each brand switching condition (See Appendix A for the questionnaire). Most of these category scales were nominal, meaning there could not be a natural order in the answers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). For example, the last question of the first part of the questionnaire aimed to determine in which brand switching condition the consumer belonged. As can be seen in figure 5, the answers were provided in no particular order as there is no natural order of brand switching motivations. Oppositely, a question regarding the age of the participants used ordinal scales, meaning the answers were provided in ascending age categories.

**8. Which of the following three reasons was most applicable for your decision to buy the new brand?**

- You were dissatisfied with the brand you previously bought
- You wanted variety or something new
- For social identification (Because your friends and social group like/use that brand)

Figure 5. Example nominal scale

The second part of the survey started with the open-ended question “What type of product did you buy that was shown by a Social Media Influencer?”, which would allow the consumer to think back to the moment he or she switched brands. The answer would then provide a mental

frame to reference to during the course of the participation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

The rest of the second part of the study, regarding the most influential characteristics of the social media influencer respective to the type of informant- opinion leader, micro-celebrity or social leader- and the impact of visual and verbal content on the purchase decision, contained 7-point Likert-scales (Burns & Burns, 2009). For the role of the SMI, 1 meant not important, and 7 very important whilst for the statements regarding visual and verbal content, 1 meant strongly disagree, and 7 strongly agree. This type of measurement scale was utilised as it allows for the calculation of the mean; the average of the scores given to a variable. This was important as it would permit for the comparison of averages given to the individual items as well as the three factors overall, which was the chosen way of testing the hypothesis.

Besides the type of questions, the questionnaire was designed using a multi-item approach to increase the validity and reliability of the survey results. After the qualitative study, three item scales were adopted for each role of the Social Media Influencer (See Appendix B). To measure the importance of visual and verbal content on the consumer's purchase intention, two item scales were adopted. The Scales regarding the importance of visual content were adopted from Shaouf, Lü & Li (2016). The scales for the importance of verbal content were adopted from Erkan & Evans (2016).

#### *4.4.3 Sampling method*

Just like the qualitative part of the study, the quantitative survey also required a non-probability sampling method. As the phenomenon is rather specific, a probability sampling technique would likely end up with a low response rate which would hurt the validity of the results. Additionally, this would consequently need to be solved with adjustments for which there would not have been enough time. Non-probability sampling, however, would allow the researchers to find adequate participants in a shorter time frame. For this reason, it was decided to employ the method of judgemental sampling and approach possible participants at study areas in Lund and Malmö in Sweden. Although this method does not allow for an indication of the estimate of the sampling error nor generalization of the results, it does provide valuable information and insights into the phenomenon, specifically as this area of brand switching and

SMI literature has been under-researched (Burns & Burns, 2009; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

To ensure the minimum requirement for a valid quantitative study was met, the researchers kept count to guarantee each brand switching condition would contain a minimum of 30 participants each. The survey was physically handed out so that the data could be collected more rapidly. While online surveys would allow for a quicker transformation of data to statistics, handing out the survey would provide a quicker response rate (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). For this reason, the writers of this thesis conducted a spot survey at several study locations in Lund and Malmö where they would physically hand out the questionnaire.

As it was of importance that the participants had bought a product that was endorsed by an SMI and was from a different brand than the brand they bought before, it was decided to limit the study to millennials between 18-29. This age limit was chosen as it was found that they were most likely to trust online product reviews and consequently buy the items (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016) as well as change their buying behaviour according to their social groups (Shukla, 2009). The native language of the participant did not matter but it was significant that he or she would be proficient in English.

#### *4.4.5 Pre-data collection measurements to increase validity and reliability*

Before the field study it was felt important to put measurements in place to limit method bias which is broadly defined as the content of the survey items, the survey format, the general instructions, the characteristics of the researchers and the setting of the survey which could negatively affect the response of the participants (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). As explained by MacKenzie & Podsakoff (2012), method bias can significantly influence the motivation of the participants to give accurate answers and thus the validity and reliability of the results. For this reason, the writers of this thesis analysed the conditions that could cause method bias before conducting the field study to ensure the participants would answer out of motivation rather than satisficing as the latter would decrease the validity of the method and thus the results.

Firstly, the writers of this thesis were highly aware of the impact they could make on the participant at the point of approach. As advised by Krosnick (1991) it was deemed essential to

approach the potential participants positively and to relay the importance of this study to them. According to Krosnick (1991), this would improve the motivation of the participants to optimise rather than to satisfice their answers. Furthermore, it was brought to the attention of the writers that participants feel more social pressure to provide the wished-for answer when the researcher was present while filling out the survey. Following the findings of Bowling (2005) on modes of questionnaire administration, it was therefore decided to give the participant space when filling out the questionnaire

Secondly, a pre-test was conducted to ensure the questionnaire did not contain any confusing, badly written and or problematic questions. The pre-test included 10 participants, 5 males and 5 females. After pre-testing the survey, it was found that the survey was too lengthy and too repetitive which could harm the validity of the participants' responses. While the participants of the pre-test did not state that the constructs were too abstract or complex, the feedback given did signal the participants felt overwhelmed by the length of the scales. In the research of Krosnick (1991) that focused on the consumer's response strategy when coping with cognitive demands, it was found that the participant's motivation might decrease when too much cognitive effort is required which can lead to less careful judgement and/or stylistic responding.

The first survey consisted of 6 pages with a set of questions regarding the importance of the SMI's characteristics and the visual and verbal content per brand switching condition. This set-up allowed the consumer to fill out their opinion based on multiple brand switching experiences, for example when they had once switched brands after being dissatisfied and once when looking for variety. While this would thus give an insight into whether the phenomenon was significantly present and experienced multiple times for varied reasons, it did cause the survey to be very repetitive. Therefore, it was decided to first ask the consumer what the reason was for their last brand switching decision as influenced by an SMI on Instagram- out of dissatisfaction, variety seeking or social identification- followed by one set of scales measuring the SMI's characteristics and the significance of the visual and verbal content of the SMI's post on the purchase decision (See figure 6).

### Example survey pre-test

7. Have you ever bought a product shown to you by a social media influencer because you were dissatisfied with a similar product you used or bought previously from a different brand?

- Yes
- No (Move on to question 11)

8. The last time this happened, what type of product was it? .....

9. The last time this happened, on a scale from 1 to 7 how important were the following characteristics of the Social Media Influencer in your purchase decision:

The Social Media Influencer has an expertise in the product category  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
not important very important

The Social Media Influencer is inspirational  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Not important Very important

### Example final survey

8. Which of the following three reasons was most applicable for your decision to buy the new brand?

- You were dissatisfied with the brand you previously bought
- You wanted variety or something new
- For social identification (Because your friends and social group like/use that brand)

9. The last time this happened, on a scale from 1 to 7 how important were the following characteristics of the Social Media Influencer in your purchase decision:

The Social Media Influencer has an expertise in the product category  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
not important very important

The Social Media Influencer had experience with the product  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Not Important Very Important

Figure 6. Example difference between pre-test and final survey

Lastly, to further reduce the method bias, the characteristics of the participants were carefully considered. As stated earlier, the participants for this study were found in study areas from Lund University and Malmö Högskola which are both tertiary institutions. Research by Krosnick & Alwin (1987) found that the lack of verbal ability and education could cause a person to satisfice their response rather than optimise. For this reason, it was believed that by sampling in these environments, the risk of findings participants with low cognitive abilities would be reduced.

Furthermore, to ensure that the participants were cognitively able to fill out the survey, they were asked whether they had ever experienced the phenomenon before filling out the survey. Additionally, they were asked in which type of product category they switched brands as it would assist the participant to recall the situation. While this sampling technique introduced bias in the sampling, it was of importance that the survey would be personally relevant to the participant. As explained by MacKenzie & Podsakoff (2012), the relevance of the participant and the experience with the phenomenon makes a participant more motivated to optimise their answer, which increases the reliability of the results.

## 4.6 Ethical considerations

In any research, whether for an academic article or a thesis, the consideration of ethical issues is of great significance. Especially in this day and age, Qu & Dumay (2011, p.252) emphasise the consideration of ethics as there is a “greater social emphasis on human rights and the

protection of personal information”. While several guidelines exist, it has been stressed that the responsibilities of a researcher can be placed in two overlapping contexts: the protection of the participants as well as the protection of the integrity of the research community (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Firstly, a researcher is obliged to be objective, to “maintain a scientific rigour” (Burns & Burns, 2009, p.34) and to be honest and transparent in the communication of research results (Burns & Burns, 2009; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). For this reason, the writers of this thesis have been critical in the analysis of the literature and have cited accordingly. With regards to the data analysis, it has been assured that misleading conclusions are avoided as it is believed that even unexpected outcomes could be of extreme value. Being aware of the responsibility of writing and publishing a research article, it is believed that honesty and integrity are vital.

Besides the responsibility of being part of the research community, the rights of the research participants have been acknowledged throughout the research. Following the specific ethical guidelines provided by Qu & Dumay (2011), it was ensured that the participants of the qualitative interviews were done no harm, informed about the research objectives, their rights to stop their participation when wished for as well as their privacy and the confidentiality of their answers. A consent form (See Appendix C) was given to each participant before starting the interview to inform them about their rights. Concerning the quantitative survey, the initial page explained the same rights, and it was ensured that the participants were not coerced to take part.

## *4.7 Methodological limitations*

### *4.7.1. Chosen research method*

The chosen research method placed a very narrowed scope on the phenomenon of brand switching and the role of the Social Media Influencer- specifically the SMI on Instagram. If a purely qualitative study was conducted, however, a greater light could have been shined on the entire process and the extent of the influence of the SMI. A qualitative study could even have explored whether the SMI caused the brand switching motivation or whether the brand

switching motivation came first or even how long the process was from the moment they were influenced to the point they made the purchase decision.

However, as previous research has found that brand switching occurs frequently among social shoppers and that SMIs are influential, it was decided that these findings were an adequate basis to build upon. Furthermore, in regard to whether the SMI or the brand switching motivation came first, the authors of this thesis build the study on the assumption that the brand switching motivation must be in place before the SMI could influence the consumers to do so.

#### *4.7.2 Research design and sampling technique*

The questionnaire utilised during the research was aimed at those who had experienced the phenomenon. This decision was taken as it was felt significant to the study that the consumer would have experienced the phenomenon. A lack of experience could cause the consumer to fill out answers based on imagination which would not accurately reflect the reality of the phenomenon which was of great importance to the writers of this thesis. Furthermore, while imaginary questions would allow for a larger population to draw from, the disadvantage of adopting experiential questions was that the sample size in some brand switching conditions was only just above the minimal amount required.

Moreover, by allowing the participant to choose a certain brand switching motivation via category scales, the ability to measure correlation or causation was taken away. These two types of quantitative data analysis methods require rating scales so that the correlation or cause-and-effect relationship between two variables can be established. However, the aim of this study was not to find a relationship between the variables. For example, this thesis did not seek to find out how the degree of dissatisfaction with the previous impacts the degree of opinion leadership the consumer perceives the SMI to have. Rather, this thesis intended to describe the status of the variables, thus the described roles of the SMI as well as the visual and verbal content, during the brand switching phenomenon.

#### *4.7.3 Time and budget constraints*

The actual fieldwork for this study had to be conducted in a very limited time frame which meant that compromises had to be made regarding the scope of the study, the sample size and

the analysis of the collected data. Under ideal circumstances, the writers of this study would have liked to further explore the phenomenon and utilise the probability sampling technique as it would have given a good indication of how prevalent the phenomenon is. Furthermore, if time would have allowed it the data analysis could have provided more insights. Nevertheless, the writers of this thesis ensured steps were taken so that the research question could be answered and that any problems were solved to the best of the writers' abilities.

# 5. Results

## *5.1 Reliability and validity of the scales*

### *5.1.1 Method bias*

As indicated in the methodology chapter, the writers of this study carefully analysed and adapted the survey and their behaviour to minimise the risk of method bias which could have negatively influenced the validity and reliability of the survey results. However, to ensure the method bias was minimised, Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee & Podsakoff (2003) suggested an analysis of Harman's single factor test. This test involves an exploratory factor analysis and should have an outcome of more than one factor.

The analysis of this study's data revealed two factors for the first part of the study related to the role of the Social Media Influencer of which the first factor only accounted for 31.9% of the variance. Regarding the second part of the survey, related to the impact of verbal and visual content on the consumer's purchase intention, the exploratory factor analysis found 2 factors as well, of which the first factor only explained 46% of the variance in results (see Appendix D). For this reason, it can be concluded that method bias was not a problem in the research data.

### *5.1.2 Construct validity*

Besides the analysis of the method bias, it is imperative to analyse the validity of the construct, the questionnaire, to ensure it measured the factors it intended to measure. In this case, it was thus important that the variables, the items in the survey, would measure the roles of the SMI, visual content and verbal content. This analysis was done with an exploratory factor analysis as well. An exploratory factors analysis analyses the patterns of relationships, thus the correlation, between variables with the objective of discovering underlying factors (Burns & Burns, 2009). A factor, in this case refers, to the concepts measured, thus the 3 roles or the visual and verbal content. Moreover, besides the number of factors, it is imperative that the

factors together explain at least 60% of the variance in the variable. In this research, the analysis of variables, the items of the survey, thus had to find 3 factors for the role of the SMI and 1 factor for visual content as well as 1 for verbal content that explained more than 60% of the variance in the variables.

The first exploratory factor analysis was done on the factors related to the role of the SMI: the opinion leader, micro-celebrity and social leader. The initial exploratory factor analysis found only two factors that explained 46% of the variance in the variable. For this reason, the program was asked to give a minimum of 3 factors. The 3 factors found, explained 66% of the variance in the variables. Furthermore, the rotated component matrix showed that the 3 factors extracted were equal to the 3 roles (See Appendix D). An exploratory factor analysis of the variables belonging to verbal and visual content respectively found 1 factors for each. The factor for visual content explained 84.7% of the variance while the factor for verbal content explained 92.6% (See Appendix D). From this, it was thus concluded that the survey was construct valid and that all items together represent the underlying factors well.

### *5.1.3 Internal consistency*

Internal consistency is a valuable and necessary component when wanting to ensure the reliability of the data set as well as the measuring tool. Additionally, the result of this analysis indicates whether scales consistently measure the same factor and thus can be combined to form a new variable that can be used further on in the data analysis; in this case to test the hypotheses.

To assess the internal consistency of the scales adopted for this study, the Cronbach's alpha was analysed. While the internal consistency could also be analysed with the Kuder-Richardson 20 (KR-20) coefficient, which is typically adopted for dichotomous data, the Cronbach's alpha was more suitable as it analyses the correlation of data obtained by scales such as the Likert-scales in this study.

Factor	Item	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Opinion Leader	The Social Media Influencer has an expertise in the product category.	.791	.732
	The Social Media Influencer had experience with the product.		.653
	The Social Media Influencer had a well-grounded, objective, argument.		.760
Micro-Celebrity	The Social Media Influencer is successful and talented.	.486	.392
	I aspire to be like the Social Media Influencer.		.695
	The Social Media Influencer is of high social status.		.256
Social Leader	The Social Media Influencer is someone I identify with.	.735	.607
	My friends also like the Social Media Influencer and often follow his/her suggestions		.772
	I can relate to the Social Media Influencer.		.568
Visual Content	After seeing the visual content of the Instagram post with the product shown by the Social Media Influencer on Instagram, I became interested in making the purchase	.819	
	After seeing the visual content of the Instagram post with the product shown by the Social Media Influencer on Instagram, I was willing to purchase the product		
Verbal Content	After considering the verbal information given by the Social Media Influencer, I became interested in buying the product.	.92	
	After considering the verbal information given by the Social Media Influencer, either spoken or in the caption, I was willing to purchase the product		

Table 4. Analyses Cronbach's Alpha

As can be seen in Table 4, the Cronbach's alpha of the opinion leader and the social leader satisfied the requirements of having a value  $\alpha \geq .7$  (Burns & Burns, 2009). For this reason, the 3 items per factor were combined to form the two new variables *opinion leader* and *social leader* which were used in the rest of the data analyses. Opposite to the two previously

mentioned constructs, the Cronbach's Alpha for the micro-celebrity did not satisfy the necessary requirement. However, upon evaluating the table "Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted", it was observed that when item two would be deleted the Cronbach's Alpha would be  $\alpha = .695$ . Although this is not higher than .70, an analysis of previously tested coefficients by Peterson (1994) found that  $\alpha \geq .6$  would still be adequate. For this reason, the item "I aspire to be like the Social Media Influencer" was not considered when forming the new variable *micro-celebrity* that would be used when testing the hypotheses.

Although the exploratory factor analysis already indicated that the items regarding visual and verbal content contained highly correlated variables that measured one factor, an analysis of internal consistency was done for double insurance. As the Cronbach's alpha requires two scales minimum, there were no results for "Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted". All in all, the analysis found  $\alpha = .819$  for the items measuring visual content. Regarding the verbal content,  $\alpha = .92$  which is far above the necessary .7. These findings indicate that the items adopted for the factors *visual content* and *verbal content* have internal consistency and can thus be combined to one variable respectively for further analysis.

## 5.2. Data analysis

### 5.2.1 Sample characteristics

During the data collection, every student in the approached study areas was asked whether he or she had ever experienced the phenomenon. 252 surveys were handed out from which 42 had to be excluded from the data set due to not belonging to the target group or not having experienced the phenomenon. This meant that 75% of the participants were included in the dataset.

After eliminating unusable responses, 190 usable questionnaires remained. The sample included 144 females, 45 males and 1 participant who selected "other". 51% of the participants belonged to the age category of 22-25, while 25.3% was between 18-21 years old and 23.7% between 26-29 years old. The majority of the participants,  $n=115$ , had experienced brand switching due to a need for variety. In the other two brand switching conditions, it was found that, 34 participants had bought a product shown to them by a Social Media Influencer because

of dissatisfaction with the previous brand, while 41 did so out of social identification (See Table 5).

**Which of the following three reasons was most applicable for your decision to buy the new brand?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Dissatisfaction	34	17,9	17,9	17,9
	Variety seeking	115	60,5	60,5	78,4
	Social Identification	41	21,6	21,6	100,0
	Total	190	100,0	100,0	

Table 5. Sample size brand switching conditions

### 5.2.2 Hypotheses testing

To assess the hypotheses, this study utilised the paired sample- T test to analyse the data. This type of test allows for the measurement of differences within the same sample (Burns & Burns, 2009). As the sample sizes for the 3 brand switching conditions differed significantly, it was deemed to be the most reliable way of analysing what the role of SMI was per brand switching condition.

#### **Brand switching condition: Dissatisfied**

Following the literature review, the hypotheses for this study stated that, per brand switching condition, one of the perceived roles of the Social Media Influencers would be given a higher score on average than the other two. For instance, in the case of dissatisfaction, it was hypothesised that the SMI would foremost be perceived as an opinion leader. Consequently, the central tendency or average score of the scales forming the factor opinion leader, further referred to as the mean, would be significantly higher as well as different from the means of the scales that made up the factors social leader and micro-celebrity.

The first group analysed were the participants who stated they switched out of dissatisfaction (n=34) (see Appendix D). With a significance level set at  $p=.05$ , meaning the finding would only be significant if the value was below  $.05$ , it was found that there was a statistically significant difference in means between the opinion leader and the social leader ( $\mu_{\text{differenceOL-SL}}=.86$ ,  $p=.009$ ) and the opinion leader and the micro-celebrity ( $\mu_{\text{differenceOL-MC}}= 1.29$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

With a mean of  $\mu_{\text{opinionleader}}=5.51$ , which was significantly higher than the mean of the other two roles, it was found that when the consumer was dissatisfied the Social Media Influencer was foremost perceived as an opinion leader. This finding led to the acceptance of hypothesis 1.

A further exploratory analysis of the means of the variables that make up the factor opinion leader found that there was no statistically significant difference between the means. This indicates that the *expertise, the experience* with the product and the *well-grounded, objective arguments* of the social media influencer were all equally important for the consumer when they switched brands out of dissatisfaction (See Appendix D). Furthermore, as can be seen from figure 7, while the variable *successful and talented* came close, the means of the variables making up the opinion leader are also individually higher than any of the other variables.

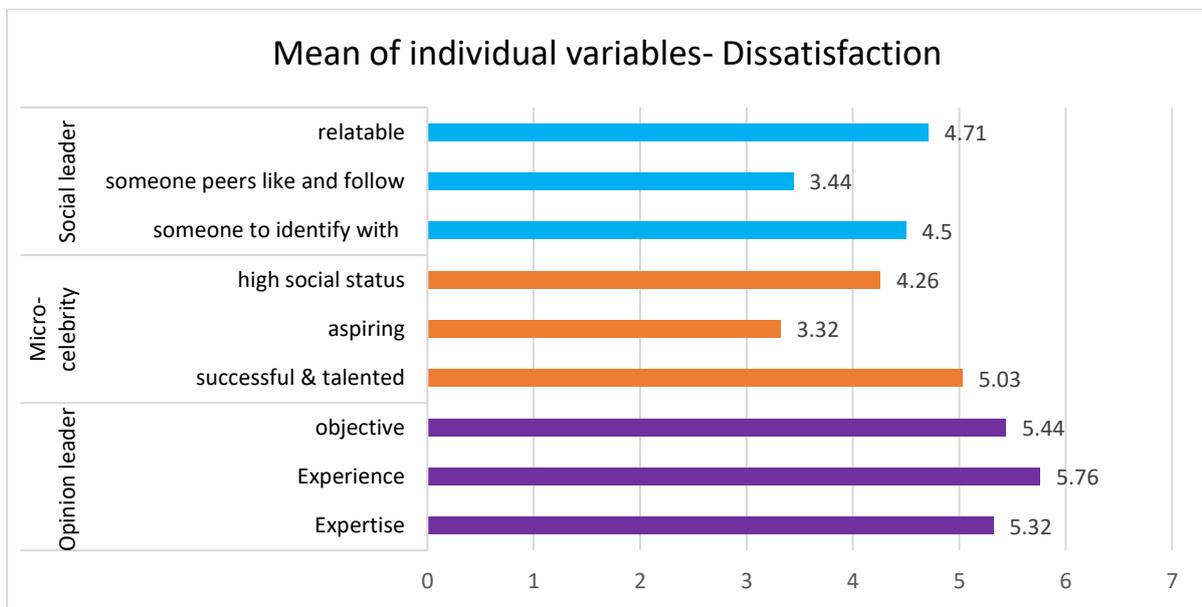


Figure 7. Mean of individual variables- Dissatisfaction

### Brand Switching condition: Variety seeking

The second hypothesis of this thesis stated that when the consumer switches brands out of a need for variety, the social media influencer will foremost be perceived as a micro-celebrity. This indicates that the mean of the micro-celebrity should be significantly higher and different than the mean of the opinion leader and the social leader. With  $n=115$ , the mean of the micro-celebrity in the brand switching condition of variety seeking was  $\mu=3.94$ . This was lower than that of the opinion leader ( $\mu=4.57$ ) but higher than that of the social leader ( $\mu=3.76$ ).

An analysis of the paired sample T-test (See Appendix D) found that the difference in means between the micro-celebrity and the social leader ( $\mu_{\text{differenceMC-SL}}=.18$ ,  $p=.169$ ) was statistically insignificant at a significance level of  $p=.05$ . However, a statistically significant difference of means was found between the micro-celebrity and the opinion leader ( $\mu_{\text{differenceMC-OL}}=-.64$ ,  $p=.001$ ), and the opinion leader and the social leader ( $\mu_{\text{differenceOL-SL}}=-.81$ ,  $p=.000$ ). These findings indicate that when the consumer switches out of a need for variety or newness, the social media influencer is also foremost perceived as an opinion leader rather than the predicted micro-celebrity. Thus hypothesis 2 was rejected.

A further analysis of the individual variables, see figure 8, showed that, besides the higher mean of the opinion leader overall, the variables *successful and talented* as well as *someone one I can identify with* and *relatable* were highly regarded factors in this brand switching category.

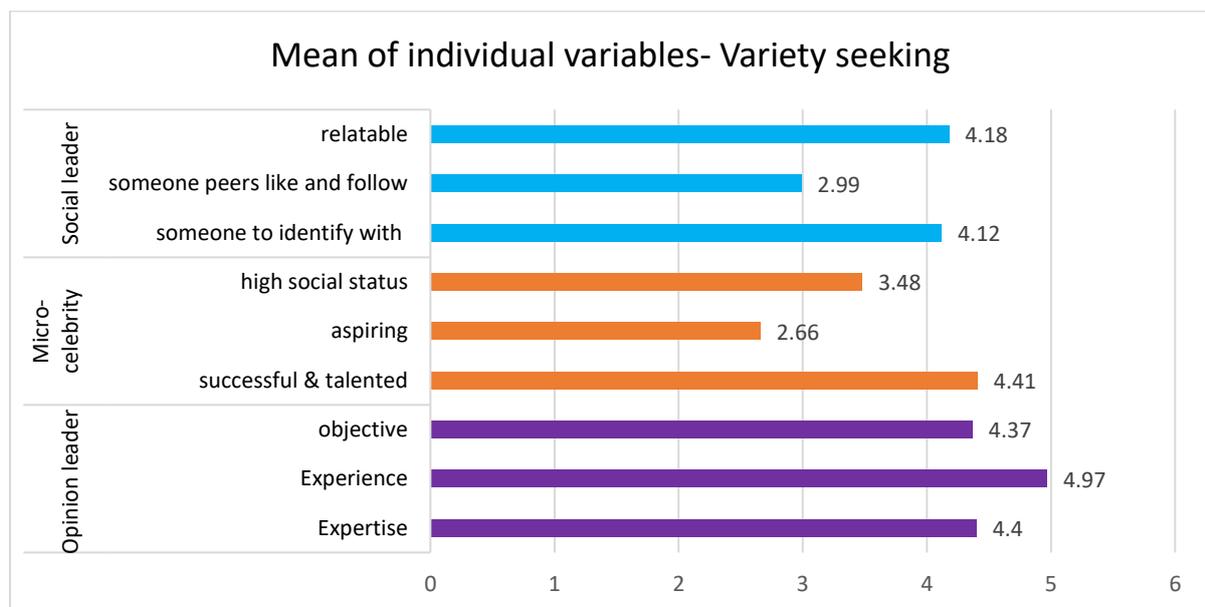


Figure 8. Mean of individual variables- Variety seeking

### Brand switching condition: Social identification

The third hypothesis, the last one relating to the role of the social media influencer, supposed that when the consumer switches brands out of social identification, the social media influencer will function as a social leader. With  $n=41$ , the mean of the social leader in the brand switching condition of social identification was  $\mu=5.22$ . The descriptive statistics table indicated that this was higher than the mean of the opinion leader ( $\mu=4.89$ ) and the mean of the micro-celebrity ( $\mu=5.05$ ). However, an analysis of the significance of these difference through the paired sample T-test found that none of these differences was significant at the significance level of

p=.05 (See Table 6). Thus, each of these proposed roles was equally important in the consumer’s brand switching decision motivated by social identification. This finding was in contrast with hypothesis three, signifying it had to be rejected as well.

**Paired Samples Test: Social Identification**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Social Leader – Opinion Leader	.32520	1.99651	.31180	-.30497	.95538	1.043	40	.303
Pair 2 Social Leader – Micro-Celebrity	.17073	1.48159	.23139	-.29692	.63838	.738	40	.465
Pair 3 Opinion Leader – Micro-Celebrity	-.15447	1.58307	.24723	-.65415	.34521	-.625	40	.536

Table 6. Results Paired Sample T-test: Social Identification

This non-significant difference of means becomes apparent in the analysis of individual variables that form the factors. Figure 9 indicates that a *well-grounded, objective, argument* as well as the variable *someone my peers like and follow* were given the lowest scores overall. Oppositely, the *reliability* with the social media influencer got the highest scores overall. This is in contrast with the other two brand switching conditions, as reliability there was only the 5<sup>th</sup> important variable. Additionally, while *someone I identify with* had the second highest mean overall in this brand switching condition, it did not make it into the top 5 in the other 2 conditions. Overall, regardless of the brand switching conditions, it was found that the variables *experience with the product, expertise, successful and talented, well-grounded, objective argument, and reliability* were rated the highest (See Appendix D).

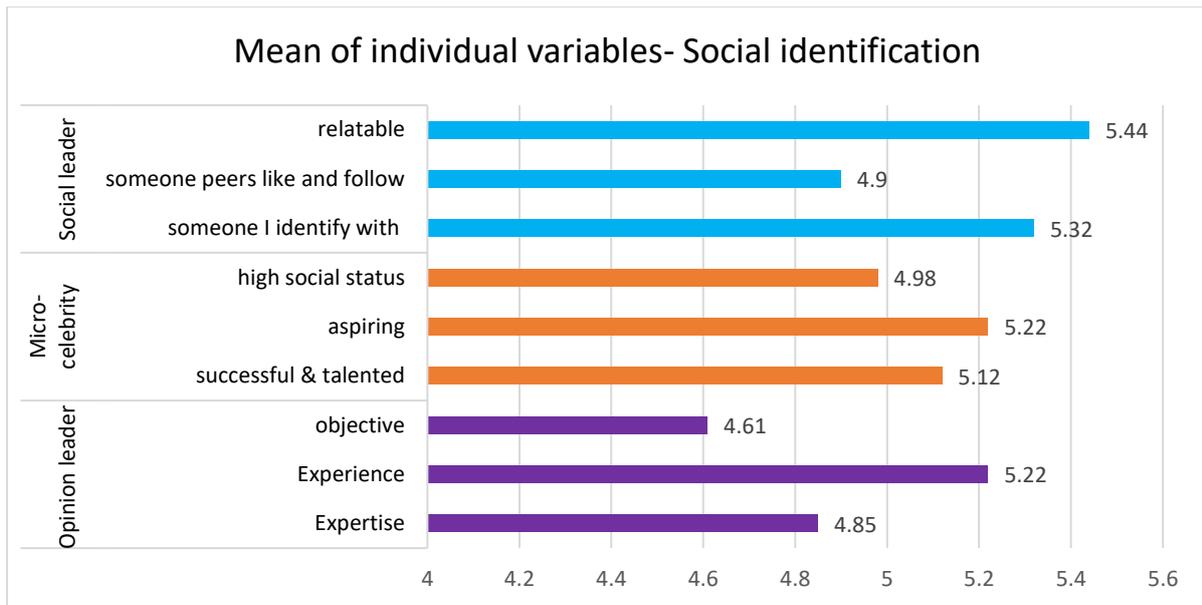


Figure 9. Mean of individual variables- Social identification

### *The impact of visual and verbal content on the brand switching decision.*

The last hypothesis of this study upheld that the visual content on Instagram would have a larger impact on the consumer's purchase intention when they switch brands than the verbal content. When combining all samples together, it was found that the mean of the visual content ( $\mu=5.42$ ) was higher than the mean of the verbal content ( $\mu=4.68$ ) (See Appendix D). Furthermore, the paired sample T-test found a significance coefficient of  $p=.000$ , indicating there was a significant difference in the means of verbal and visual content. Therefore, hypothesis 4 was accepted.

A further exploratory analysis of the data, see figure 10, found that while the visual content had a significantly higher impact on the purchase intention when all 3 conditions were combined, the differences of mean scores in the brand switching condition of dissatisfaction was insignificant ( $p=.331$ ). Additionally, an analysis of means shows that the mean for verbal content ( $\mu=5.74$ ) was slightly higher than the mean for visual content ( $\mu=5.44$ ). Thus, while the difference in means was statistically insignificant, the importance of text or spoken words in a post does have an influence on the consumer who switches out of dissatisfaction.

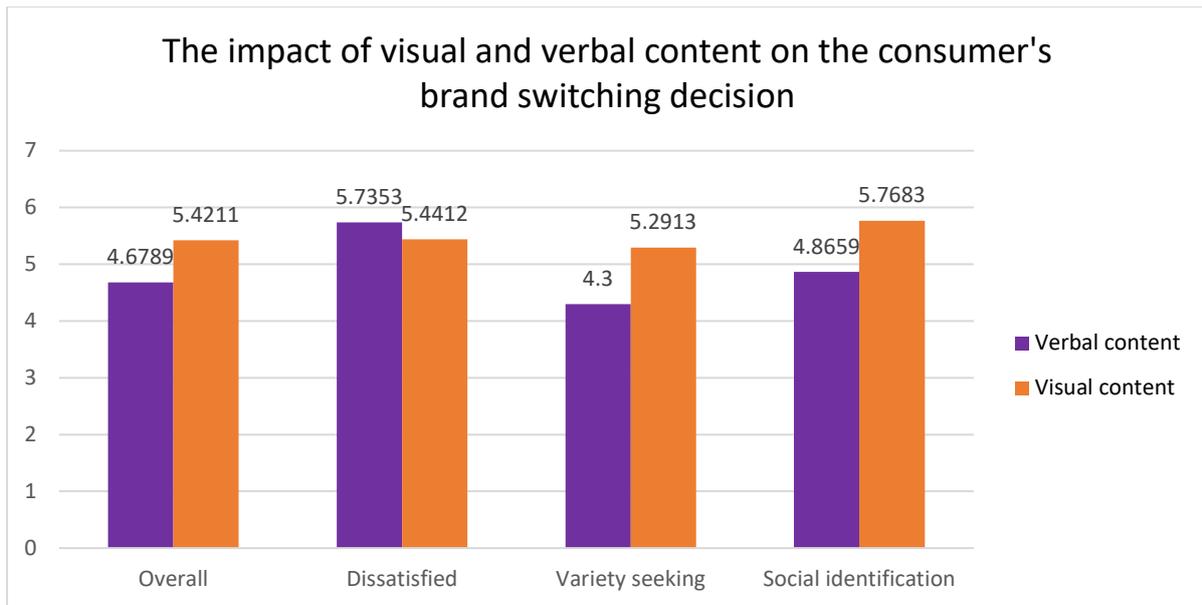


Figure 10. The impact of visual and verbal content

## 6. Discussion

The results of this study indicated that hypothesis 1 and 4 could be accepted. Hypothesis 1 stated that when the consumer switches brands out of dissatisfaction with the previous brand, he or she will perceive the SMI foremost as an opinion leader. Prior to the research, this hypothesis was based on the notion that when the consumer is dissatisfied, he or she will look for authoritative information to diminish the risk of buying another brand that will not eliminate the problems he or she experienced with the previous brand. An analysis of the results indicated that the mean of the factor opinion leader was not only higher than the mean of the factors micro-celebrity and social leader, the individual variables *experience with the product*, *expertise* and *well-grounded, objective, argumentation* were overall given the highest scores in this condition as well.

The findings of this study thus support the idea put forward by Weimann et al., (2007) who found that consumers put a high trust in opinion leaders when it comes to decision making. The writers argued that the trust in the opinion leader comes from the notion that an opinion leader will have had hands-on experience with the product and is objective in the argumentation, giving both negative and positive information about the product and its performance. Furthermore, as the consumer's choice is found to be sub-optimal, a decision rooted in satisficing rather than optimising, the opinion leader offers a solution to the consumer's lack of expertise and time (Merwe & Heerden, 2009). Lastly, the results of both the qualitative and quantitative study seem to be consistent with other research concerning the influence of opinion leaders on the consumer's purchase decision. Previous studies have indicated that consumers typically look for non-commercial yet authoritative sources to reduce the risk of consuming something expensive or something new (Chen, Hsu & Lin, 2010). Thus, in the case of dissatisfaction, the Social Media Influencer was primarily successful in persuading the consumer to buy the new brand due to its perceived opinion leadership in the product category.

While hypothesised that the consumer would perceive the SMI as a micro-celebrity when switching brands out of dissatisfaction, the second hypothesis was rejected as the results indicated the participants in this brand switching condition foremost perceived the SMI as an

opinion leader as well. The brand switching condition that entailed variety seeking was found to be caused by a need to satisfy one's optimum stimulation levels (OSLs) (Raju, 1984). While forming the hypothesis, the writers of this study mainly considered the argument of Aroean, (2012) who stated that the need to satisfy one's OSL triggers consumers to take risks and try new brands. These consumers feel comfortable exploring new and unique brands and do so without the need of much information. As the micro-celebrity causes increased brand awareness through their lifestyle and aspiration (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), it was felt that the micro-celebrity would function as a source for those who want to try something new. However, as the analysis of the individual variables indicated, the variables *experience*, *expertise* and *objective, well-grounded, argument* had the highest mean which belonged to the opinion leader.

Although the findings of this study necessitate the rejection of hypothesis 2 and contradict the reasoning for the hypothesis, the results could possibly be explained by the notion that the participants of this study foremost look for a risk-reduction when buying a new and unfamiliar brand. As explained by Raju (1984), there are two types of consumers: those with high optimum stimulation levels who seek information to find new brands and individuals with low optimum stimulation levels who do so to reduce the risk of trying an unfamiliar brand. According to Mahatanankoon (2007) the latter type of consumers feel more comfortable when something is familiar rather than new and unusual. Through obtaining sufficient information, these consumers thus take away the risk and discomfort of trying a new brand. Since the participants in the brand switching condition of variety seeking indicated that the characteristics of the opinion leader were most important in their brand choice, it could be thus hypothesised that the majority of our participants had low stimulation levels and therefore needed a source that would reduce the risk of buying the new brand. However, since the visual content was more important than the verbal content in this brand switching conditions, it is also probable that these participants had high optimum stimulation levels. This would require further research.

Opposite to hypotheses 1 and 2, hypothesis 3 did not find any significant differences between the types of informants the SMI could embody when the consumer switches brands out of social identification. Although it was anticipated that the SMI would embody the role of the social leader- someone who is seen as the leader of a social group due to his or her large social capital (Forsyth, 2015)- the results in this brand switching condition, unexpectedly indicated it could be that of an opinion leader and micro-celebrity as well.

One explanation of this finding could be that there are certain characteristics in each role that are valuable to the consumer in this brand switching condition. For example, as argued for by Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann (2013), social identification is the process in which a person adapts to the defining characteristics of his or her peers. Part of this consolidation is visible in the consumer's buying-behaviour as it is found that consumers often actively buy goods to demonstrate group membership and to identify with the group (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). The social leader, in this case, is someone who sets the bar as to what is accepted and liked. Additionally, as argued for by Forsyth (2015) the social leader is effective in its persuasion as he or she is someone who is similar to the person. The results of the data analysis indicate that the social leader had the highest average score with the variables *relatable* and *someone I identify with* as the highest individual variables, indicating that these two characteristics were significant in this brand switching motivation.

The second highest mean average belonged to the micro-celebrity. Interestingly the independent variable *aspiring* rated higher in this brand switching condition than in any other condition. While the hypothesis for this brand switching condition was based on the expectation that the consumer would buy a product out of wanting to fit in with his or her social group, social identification has also been theorised as the process in which consumers are persuaded by the desire of wanting to be like or actually wanting to be the other person (Jin & Phua, 2014). Fraser & Brown (2002) analysed this phenomenon with the fans of Elvis Presley and found that those fans with a strong wish for identification with Elvis modelled their values and lifestyles according to that of their idol. Although the idol in this study was a micro-celebrity, the results of this study imply that some participants who switched brands out of social identification may have done so to emulate the SMI. The high rating of *aspiring*, *successful & talented* as well as *high social status* indicates that for some participants these characteristics were essential when desiring social identification.

Opposite to the other two brand switching conditions, the mean of the opinion leader was lower, than the means of the other two roles in the brand switching condition of social identification. From the 3 variables belonging to the opinion leader, the variable *experience with the product* was rated the highest and had the same mean score as *aspiring*. The variable *experience with the product* was also rated the highest in the other two brand switching conditions, suggesting that the experience the SMI has with the brand is imperative for the consumer to switch brands.

A further comparison of the variables found that the variables *experience*, *someone I identify with* and *relatable* had a high mean in almost every brand switching condition. This suggests that, despite the brand switching motivation, it was imperative for the consumers that the SMI had experience with the product and was somewhat similar to him or her. As the analysis of literature could not find a definition of who the SMI is, these findings may assist research on the endorser to understand why they are able to persuade consumers and to create a holistic definition.

To deepen the analysis of the phenomenon, this thesis also analysed the impact of the visual and verbal content on the consumer's ultimate purchase decision. Previous to the field study, it was hypothesised that the visual content would be more significant to the consumer than the verbal content. This hypothesis was based on the notion that Instagram has gained its popularity and thrives through its emphasis on imagery (Erkan, 2015). The analysis of data found that the visual content was indeed central in all purchase decisions. This finding thus confirms the powerful impact of visual content and contributes to earlier research that had only looked at traditional or web advertising, rather than social media posts created by consumers.

However, interestingly, while the importance of visual content was found in every brand switching condition, the difference between visual and verbal content was not significant when the participants indicated they switched out of dissatisfaction with their previous brands. The mean scores for both types of content indicated that in this brand switching condition, verbal content was more important than visual content. According to Kim & Lennon (2008), verbal information can provide the consumer with a more implicit or explicit summary of the most significant brand features and attributes. Therefore, the information provided by the SMI can function as a risk reliever and helps the consumer reduce the perceived risk to a level that is adequate to make the purchase decision. This finding thus signposts that consumers who are dissatisfied require additional information, either spoken or in the capture of the Instagram post, to ultimately make the purchase decision.

The acceptance of hypotheses 1 and 4 and the new insights gained concerning hypotheses 2 and 3 have led to a new model. As can be seen in figure 11, when the consumer switched brands out of dissatisfaction and a need for variety, the Social Media Influencer was foremost perceived as an opinion leader- someone with *expertise*, *experience* and *objective argumentation*. When the consumer switched out of social identification, the social media influencer did not have a specific role, but rather scored high on several characteristics each

belonging to a different type of informant. Although the participants overall rated the variables *someone I identify with* and *relatable* the highest, the findings also suggested that the Social Media Influencer in this brand switching condition was *aspiring* and had *experience* with the product. All in all, however, as is consistent with other research on Instagram and purchase behaviour, the visual content on Instagram was the most influential in the consumer’s purchase decision. Nevertheless, it was decided to include the factor verbal content, as it was of equal importance to those who switched out of dissatisfaction with the previous brand.

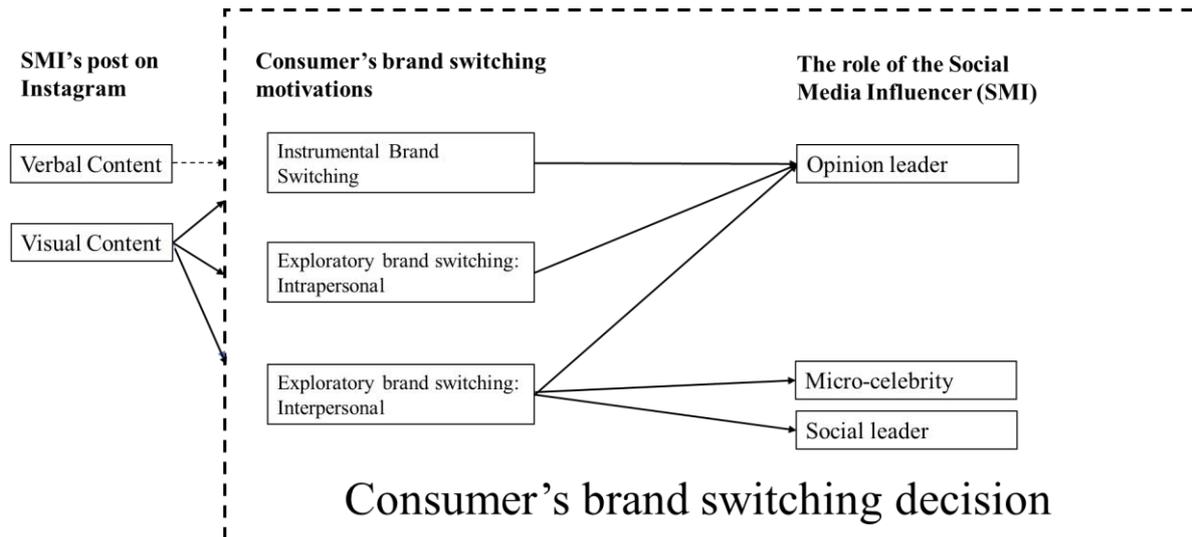


Figure 11. New model consumer's brand switching decision

## 6.1 Implications of the model

The new model proposed, regarding the role of the Social Media Influencer when the consumer switches brands, was formed on the basis that the consumer was influenced by an “Instafamous” and that he or she was a millennial. While this is very specific, some general findings can be concluded. Firstly, the brand switching motivation has a considerable influence on what type of role the SMI embodies. While one SMI can be perceived differently by 2 different consumers, the findings of this thesis indicate that certain characteristics are more influential in certain brand switching conditions than in others.

However, all in all, while previous research has argued for the persuasive power of the SMI from the perspective of an opinion leader, a micro-celebrity and a social leader, an analysis of the impact of the characteristics of each of these roles per brand switching condition showed that those belonging to the opinion leader were always highly rated. This signals the notion

that, regardless of the brand switching motivation, the consumer that buys a new brand following the SMI's endorsement will always search for an objective argument, expertise and, more importantly, experience with the brand before making its purchase decision.

Furthermore, another general insight that can be concluded from this model is that the quality of visual content is imperative for the consumer to consider purchasing the brand. This finding was previously put forward in research on traditional advertisements, such as TV commercials and paper advertisements. While preceding research on Instagram had stated that visual content is imperative on the platform, no research to the authors' knowledge had looked at whether it was essential in the consumer's purchase intention. The findings of this thesis thus add to the conclusion that visual content is imperative in general as well as on the consumer's purchase intention, even on social media.

However, while these general conclusions can be put forward from this thesis' findings in combination with previous research, there needs to be some caution with applying this model when dealing with other consumer groups. As stated previously, the participants of this study fell into the age category of 18-29. Among the participants of this study, it was found that variety seeking was the most dominant brand switching motivation, followed by social identification and dissatisfaction. As research on the psychology of adolescence found that identity formation is significant for youth between the age of 10-19 (Bratt, 2015), the type of informant that the SMI embodies could be dissimilar to the findings of this study when conducted with younger participants. Similarly, Eastman & Iyer (2012) found that the younger a person feels, the more likely the consumer will buy products and or brands to obtain a certain status. Therefore, it could mean that the same study would also have different findings if it were conducted with older participants.

Furthermore, this study specifically focused on the role of the "Instafamous". While this type of SMI has been mentioned alongside other types such as bloggers, vloggers and those on Twitter, the impact of visual and verbal content could be significantly different when the model is applied to a different platform. For example, while vloggers also depend on high quality visual, the blogger and SMI on twitter depend more on verbal content when it comes to the interaction with their followers. Therefore, caution needs to be taken when applying this model on other platforms, specifically with the aim of determining the quality of and emphasis on either type of content.

Nevertheless, this thesis set out to determine the role of the SMI when the consumer switches brands. While it was chosen to focus on the SMIs on Instagram, the brand switching motivation is intrinsically determined and independent from the type of SMI who influences this decision. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesised that this model could be applied to any type of SMIs- the blogger, vlogger or those on Twitter. While the SMIs' influence might be different in terms of the format with which they communicate with their followers, the writers of this thesis feel confident that when applying the model and hypotheses to a different platform, they would find that the SMI will be perceived as an opinion leader when the consumer is dissatisfied or looking for variety, and recognised as an opinion leader, social leader and micro-celebrity when switching out of social identification.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to determine what the role of the Social Media Influencer was when the consumer voluntarily switched brands. The research was based on the assumption that the switching motivation was present at the point of seeing the brand endorsement of an SMI the consumer followed. Furthermore, due to the growth of the platform, it only focussed on the “Instafamous”-SMIs on Instagram. This was done to ensure that the type of content with which the SMI could influence the consumer was somewhat of equal design in terms of the size of the photo or even duration of the short video and the format of the capture below the post.

The research findings indicate the SMI could embody the role of the opinion leader, the social leader and micro-celebrity. However, it depends on the brand switching motivation which of these 3 roles is most prominent. It was found that when the consumer switches brands out of dissatisfaction or a need for variety, the SMI will foremost be perceived as an opinion leader, as the consumer primarily valued that the SMI had experience with the product, was an expert in the product category and was objective in his or her argumentation. However, when the consumer switches out of a desire for social identification, it was found that the SMI was influential due to several characteristics, each belonging to a different type of informant. The analysis of the independent variables foremost indicated that, for consumers with this brand switching motivation, it was important that the consumer could identify with the person, that the SMI was relatable yet also aspiring and that the SMI had experience with the product. Lastly, as this thesis sought to deepen the analysis through investigating the impact the SMI has on the consumer’s brand switching decision, it was found that the visual content of the SMI’s post was most significant in the consumer’s purchase decision. This was accounted for in all brand switching conditions except for the participants who indicated they switched out of dissatisfaction. The mean of verbal content in this brand switching condition indicated that verbal information was more significant, signalling that extra information for these participants was necessary to reduce the risk of the next brand being unsuccessful in eliminating problems found with the previous brand.

These findings thus suggest that in general the SMI can be perceived as 3 types of informants of which the opinion leader is most dominant. Furthermore, the results denote that the brand switching motivation of the consumer determines what type of informant the SMIs are perceived as. Therefore, the interplay between brand switching motivations and SMI is important to consider when determining the effectiveness of the SMI as an endorser of a brand.

## *7.1 Theoretical implications*

The current study indicates a need to further broaden the academic knowledge of the relationship between consumers, their brand switching motivations and the SMI since the results exposed obscured ties. The principal theoretical implication of this study was the finding that SMIs can persuade consumers to buy a brand that is different from the one they bought previously. This finding is significant for further research as it indicates that the influence of the SMI on the consumer's purchase decision is greater than previously established.

Furthermore, the results of this thesis indicate that the SMI can indeed be perceived as an opinion leader, a micro-celebrity and a social leader as previous research has suggested. However, future research should be cautious when analysing the SMI from one type of informant, as it has come to light that the consumers' motivations affect the way the SMI is seen and thus which characteristics make them more persuasive. Moreover, although, all three roles were identified to be influential, the second major finding indicated that the SMI is foremost recognised, as an opinion leader since the characteristics of this type of informant were prominent in all brand-switching conditions.

Depending on the purpose of future research, this research will serve as a base for the understanding of what makes these influential actors efficient brand ambassadors in the online setting. Though consumers considered the characteristics of an opinion leader as most valuable when they switched brands because of dissatisfaction, variety seeking and social identification the influence that is linked to the other informants cannot be dismissed in future research. Lastly, another theoretical contribution that in previous research had not yet been verified in an Instagram setting, is the results confirming that the visual content of the SMI's post is the most persuasive.

## *7.2 Managerial implications*

The main contribution of this study is the gained insights into which type of informant the Social Media Influencer can be compared with when the consumer switches brands. Additionally, an analysis of the characteristics respective to these roles indicated which characteristics make the SMI so influential in the consumer's purchase decisions. Since the presence of SMIs, as well as the price of their endorsements, have had a large increase the last couple of years, the insights gained from this thesis could be crucial for management to consider while evaluating and taking decisions regarding online marketing strategies. Since it all starts in the mind of the consumer, firms must understand the psychological motivations of consumers in the process of switching brands and how this can help the company catch prospective consumers or prevent existing ones. Thus, by understanding the consumers' mindsets, more strategical and intelligent future business decisions can be taken. Management can combine insights found in this research with existing knowledge about their consumers' behaviour and anticipated identity so that offers can be customised in an irresistible way for existing as well as new customers.

Furthermore, it has generally been acknowledged that due to the increase of consumer generated content, companies have lost some of their power to consumers. With the insights provided, companies and organisations can claim part of this power back as more has become known about the interaction between the consumer and the SMI. Moreover, these understandings can also assist with measuring the efficiency of the SMI, as more has become known about what makes the SMI so effective when the consumer wants to switch brands.

Lastly, the results highlighted the importance of opinion leadership in all brand switching motivations. This knowledge is crucial and enables management to take fast marketing decisions that can hit the market with precision. SMIs are constantly increasing in number and so do their self-value in the form of monetary compensations. While compensations for a single post can sometimes be defined as everything but moderate, the findings of this thesis can now make companies more in charge of their negotiations of what kind of characteristics they might look for and to what particular price.

### *7.3 Future Research*

First, this thesis did not consider whether the consumer's personality could impact the way the SMIs are perceived. Research by Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) found, through qualitative research, that the consumer's self-esteem and self-confidence impact the persuasiveness of the SMI. With regards to brand switching, Aroean (2012) revealed that innovativeness can impact the consumer's brand switching decision as well. Therefore, the consumers' personalities can potentially affect what kind of role the SMI plays in their brand switching decision or even which characteristics are most significant when they switch out of dissatisfaction, a need for variety or the desire for social identification. An analysis of the impact of the consumers' personalities on the proposed dimensions could therefore potentially challenge the proposed model.

Secondly, another approach that could be of relevance would be to investigate how diverse consumption motivations might be related to certain brand switching motivation. Therefore, future research could aim to understand how hedonic and utilitarian consumption might differ from each other when it comes to brand switching motivations and hence which type of informant the SMI embodies respective to the type of consumption.

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# Appendix A. Questionnaire

## Social Media Influencers & Brand Switching

Hi & Welcome to our survey!

We are Amber & Julia, two Master-level students at Lund University. The following survey is part of our thesis which aims to find out what role the social media influencer plays in a consumer's brand switching decision and which factor of the endorsement, the visual content or the verbal information was most important in the purchase intention. We would like you to fill out the survey to the best of your ability and know that there is no right or wrong answer.

The survey should take you no more than 5 minutes. Your participation is on full voluntary basis meaning you can refuse to participate and are free to withdrawn at any moment. Furthermore, the data will be handled confidentially and your participation will remain anonymous. If you have any comments, please feel free to leave them on the last page of the survey.

Thank you for participating in the survey. You have been of tremendous help!

Amber Gulamali & Julia Persson

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### 1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other

### 2. How old are you?

- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-29
- 30>

### 3. Do you use Instagram? (i.e. do follow people on Instagram or do you upload photos yourself?)

- Yes
- No



Not important Very important

I aspire to be like the Social Media Influencer

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not important Very Important

The Social Media Influencer is of high social status

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not Important Very Important

The Social Media Influencer is someone I identify with

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not important Very Important

My friends also like the Social Media Influencer and often follow his/her suggestions

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not important Very Important

I can relate to the Social Media Influencer

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not Important Very Important

**10. On a scale from 1 to 7 how much do you agree with the following statements:**

**\*Note visual content means solely the picture or video without any other type of (spoken) information given about the product. Verbal information means the caption (text) below the photo or what the person says in the video about the product.**

After seeing the visual content of the Instagram post with the product shown by the Social Media Influencer on Instagram, I became interested in making a purchase.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

After seeing the visual content of the Instagram post with the product shown by the Social Media Influencer on Instagram, I was willing to purchase the product

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

After considering the verbal information given by the Social Media Influencer, I became interested in buying the product

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

After considering the verbal information given by the Social Media Influencer, either spoken or in the caption, I was willing to purchase the product

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

That was it! Thank you so much for helping us out. ***Please check if you have missed any answers.*** As promised before, your answers will remain anonymous and will only be used for this study. If you have any comments feel free to leave them here.

Have a nice day!  
Amber & Julia

## Appendix B. Scales quantitative survey

<b>Opinion Leader</b>	Expertise/knowledgeable	Qualitative study + Chan & Misra (1990), Li & Du (2011),
	Experience	Qualitative study + Weimann, Tustin, Vuuren & Joubert (2007)
	Objective	Qualitative study
	Domain Specific	Qualitative study + Merwe & Heerden (2009), Weimann, Tustin, Vuuren & Joubert (2007)
<b>Micro-Celebrity</b>	Admirable	Qualitative study + Djafarova & Rushworth (2016)
	Social Elite	Qualitative study + Lunardo, Gergaud & Livat (2015)
	Successful and talented	Qualitative study + Lv, Guang & Tian (2013)
<b>Social Leader</b>	Relatable	Qualitative study
	Similar to self	Qualitative Study + Mcpherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook (2001)
	Identifies with the consumers social group	Qualitative study + Abrams & Hoggs (1990)
<b>Verbal information and Purchase Intention</b>		Erkan & Evans (2016)
<b>Visual Content &amp; Purchase Intention</b>		Shaouf, Lü, & Li (2016).

# Appendix C. Consent Form



**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
School of Economics and Management

## *Social Media Influencers & Brand Switching*

*Amber Gulamali & Julia Persson*

### *Interview Consent Form.*

I have been given information about “Social Media Influencers and Brand Switching and discussed the research project with who are conducting this research as a part of a Master’s in International Marketing and Brand Management, supervised by Veronica Tarnovskaya.

I understand that, if I consent to participate in this project I will be asked to give the researcher a duration of approximately 20 minutes of my time to participate in the process.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

By signing below, I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for thesis and journal publications, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Name: .....

Email: .....

Telephone: .....

Signed: .....

# Appendix D. SPSS results

## Results exploratory factor analysis- The role of the SMI

**KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.750
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square
	521.448
	df
	36
	Sig.
	.000

\*note: The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy measures whether the the sampling measures were adequate. The requirements for this measurement are fulfilled when it is above .5. Furthermore, the associated probability (sig.) of the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity indicates that the variables have some sort of correlation when it is lower than .05. (Burns & Burns, 2009). As can be seen in the above table, the findings of this study fulfilled both requirements.

**Total Variance Explained**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.203	35.588	35.588	3.203	35.588	35.588	2.285	25.394	25.394
2	1.885	20.948	56.536	1.885	20.948	56.536	2.215	24.612	50.006
3	.925	10.283	66.819	.925	10.283	66.819	1.513	16.813	66.819
4	.827	9.185	76.004						
5	.610	6.773	82.777						
6	.507	5.630	88.407						
7	.368	4.091	92.499						
8	.345	3.838	96.337						
9	.330	3.663	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

**Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>**

Factor	Factor		
	1	2	3
The Social Media Influencer has an expertise in the product category.		.808	
The Social Media Influencer had experience with the product.		.875	
The Social Media Influencer had a well-grounded, objective, argument.		.809	
The Social Media Influencer is successful and talented.			.466
I aspire to be like the Social Media Influencer.			.813
The Social Media Influencer is of high social status.			.686
The Social Media Influencer is someone I identify with.	.854		
My friends also like the Social Media Influencer and often follow his/her suggestions	.650		
I can relate to the Social Media Influencer.	.823		

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 4 iterations.

\*Note: Factor 1 is the social leader, factor 2 represents the opinion leader and factor 3 the micro-celebrity.

### **Results exploratory factor analysis- Visual content**

**KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.500
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square
	123.349
	df
	1
	Sig.
	.000

**Total Variance Explained**

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.694	84.715	84.715	1.694	84.715	84.715
2	.306	15.285	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

**Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>**

Item	Factor
	1
After seeing the visual content of the Instagram post with the product shown by the Social Media Influencer on Instagram, I became interested in making the purchase	.920
After seeing the visual content of the Instagram post with the product shown by the Social Media Influencer on Instagram, I was willing to purchase the product	.920

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

**Results exploratory factor analysis- Verbal content**

**KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.500
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square
	243.560
	df
	1
	Sig.
	.000

**Total Variance Explained**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.853	92.638	92.638	1.853	92.638	92.638
2	.147	7.362	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

**Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>**

Item	Factor
	1
After considering the verbal information given by the Social Media Influencer, I became interested in buying the product.	.962
After considering the verbal information given by the Social Media Influencer, either spoken or in the caption, I was willing to purchase the product	.962

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

**Paired sample T-test: Dissatisfied**

**Paired Samples Statistics**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Opinion Leader	5.5098	34	1.08008	.18523
Micro- Celebrity	4.6471	34	1.47981	.25379
Pair 2 Opinion Leader	5.5098	34	1.08008	.18523
Social Leader	4.2157	34	1.35309	.23205
Pair 3 Micro-Celebrity	4.6471	34	1.47981	.25379
Social Leader	4.2157	34	1.35309	.23205

**Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Opinion Leader – Micro-Celebrity	.86275	1.80789	.31005	.23194	1.49355	2.783	33	.009
Pair 2 Opinion Leader – Social Leader	1.2941	1.53470	.26320	.75863	1.82960	4.917	33	.000
Pair 3 Micro-Celebrity – Social Leader	.43137	1.34284	.23030	-.03717	.89991	1.873	33	.070

## Paired sample T-test: Independent variables opinion leader- Dissatisfied

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	The Social Media Influencer has an expertise in the product category.	5.32	34	1.512	.259
	The Social Media Influencer had experience with the product.	5.76	34	1.304	.224
Pair 2	The Social Media Influencer had experience with the product.	5.76	34	1.304	.224
	The Social Media Influencer had a well-grounded, objective, argument.	5.44	34	1.236	.212
Pair 3	The Social Media Influencer has an expertise in the product category.	5.32	34	1.512	.259
	The Social Media Influencer had a well-grounded, objective, argument.	5.44	34	1.236	.212

## Paired sample T-test: Variety Seeking

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	MicroCelebrity	3.9435	115	1.52431	.14214
	OpinionLeader	4.5797	115	1.53395	.14304
Pair 2	MicroCelebrity	3.9435	115	1.52431	.14214
	SocialLeader	3.7652	115	1.40659	.13117
Pair 3	OpinionLeader	4.5797	115	1.53395	.14304
	SocialLeader	3.7652	115	1.40659	.13117

**Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Micro-Celebrity – Opinion Leader	-.63623	1.91391	.17847	-.98979	-.28268	-3.565	114	.001
Pair 2	Micro-Celebrity – Social Leader	.17826	1.38016	.12870	-.07669	.43322	1.385	114	.169
Pair 3	Opinion Leader – Social Leader	.81449	1.81728	.16946	.47879	1.15020	4.806	114	.000

**Paired sample T-test: Social identification**

**Paired Samples Statistics: Social Identification**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	SocialLeader	5.2195	41	1.07654	.16813
	OpinionLeader	4.8943	41	1.41508	.22100
Pair 2	SocialLeader	5.2195	41	1.07654	.16813
	MicroCelebrity	5.0488	41	1.21349	.18952
Pair 3	OpinionLeader	4.8943	41	1.41508	.22100
	MicroCelebrity	5.0488	41	1.21349	.18952

**Paired Samples Test: Social Identification**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Social Leader – Opinion Leader	.32520	1.99651	.31180	-.30497	.95538	1.043	40	.303
Pair 2	Social Leader – Micro-Celebrity	.17073	1.48159	.23139	-.29692	.63838	.738	40	.465
Pair 3	Opinion Leader – Micro-Celebrity	-.15447	1.58307	.24723	-.65415	.34521	-.625	40	.536

## Means Overall

**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The Social Media Influencer has an expertise in the product category.	190	1	7	4.66	1.818
The Social Media Influencer had experience with the product.	190	1	7	5.16	1.718
The Social Media Influencer had a well-grounded, objective, argument.	190	1	7	4.62	1.723
The Social Media Influencer is successful and talented.	190	1	7	4.67	1.658
I aspire to be like the Social Media Influencer.	190	1	7	3.07	1.811
The Social Media Influencer is of high social status.	190	1	7	3.94	1.815
The Social Media Influencer is someone I identify with.	190	1	7	4.45	1.720
My friends also like the Social Media Influencer and often follow his/her suggestions	190	1	7	3.48	1.954
I can relate to the Social Media Influencer.	190	1	7	4.55	1.689
Valid N (listwise)	190				

## Paired sample T-test: Visual & verbal content

**Paired Samples Statistics**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 VerbalContent	4.6789	190	1.66017	.12044
VisualContent	5.4211	190	1.25634	.09114

**Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	VerbalContent - VisualContent	-.74211	2.00906	.14575	-1.02962	-.45459	-5.092	189	.000