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Social Media Influencers as Human Brands

Examining the Effect of Influencer Brand Personality on
Follower-influencer Identification and Influencer Trust

by

Liina-Lotta Latvala & Lauren Mocol

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Supervisor: Javier Cenamor
Examiner: Jens Hultman

Abstract

- Title:** Social Media Influencers as Human Brands: Examining the Effect of Influencer Brand Personality on Follower-influencer Identification and Influencer Trust
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- Keywords:** Brand personality, consumer-brand identification, brand trust, human brands, influencer marketing
- Thesis Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to quantitatively examine the effect of influencer brand personality in the US on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust, as a way for influencers as human brands to strengthen follower influencer relationships.
- Methodology:** Quantitative methods were applied in this research. A combination of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, and Pearson's correlation coefficient were employed on the collected data.
- Theoretical Perspective:** This study establishes a nexus between the streams of brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust by drawing on the literature of Aaker (1997), Ashforth and Mael (1992), and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). It also links this nexus to the topics of human branding and influencer marketing.
- Empirical Data:** A cross-sectional study deployed via a digital survey was used on a sample of US participants (n=100) where a five-point Likert scale was used to measure their level of agreeance with statements regarding social media influencers as human brands.
- Conclusion:** Influencer brand personality was proven to affect follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. More specifically, Sincerity and Competence were identified to be the most significant dimensions in strengthening both follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. This indicates that brand personality can be used as a tool to enhance relationships between followers and influencers in the social media influencer context.

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Liina-Lotta Latvala

Liina-Lotta Latvala

Lauren Mocol

Lauren Mocol

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1 Introduction

In this introductory chapter, we introduce the concepts of human brands and influencer marketing that work as a setting for this research. Furthermore, the variables of this study: brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust are addressed in the problem discussion. This will be followed by the research purpose and question. Lastly, the objectives of this study are presented.

1.1 Background

Brand personality is the notion that brands can take on anthropomorphic qualities, a concept which has been long established in the field of marketing (Aaker, 1997). As brands do not just serve utilitarian functions (Belk, 1988), brand personality reflects the notion that brands can be used for self-expressive and symbolic purposes (Aaker, 1999). Consumers can use this self-expressive tendency to evaluate brands based on their shared values and identification (Richens, 1994 cited in Harquail, 2007). As a result, consumers are drawn to brands that align with their true self or their ideal-self; the stronger the similarity, the more likely consumers are to identify with the given brand (Carlson, Donavan & Cumiskey, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000). Thus, consumer-brand identification (CBI) has been found to have a positive effect on strengthening relationships between consumers and brands (Tuškej, Golob & Podnar, 2013). This could be due to brand personality being derived from human personality traits, which in turn makes them more relatable to consumers (Khamis, Lawrence & Welling, 2017). Thus, a strong brand personality has been seen to strengthen customers' emotional attachment to a brand, and simultaneously increase brand trust (Austin, Mattila & Siguaw, 1999). However, the question then remains, what happens when brands are not just human in nature but are actual human brands?

Traditionally, the term 'brand' has been associated with firms, organizations, products, and services, but today even humans can be classified as brands (Hirschman, 1987; Thomson, 2006; Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2011). A human brand refers to "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts." (Thomson, 2006, p.104). To further illustrate, the concept of human brands can be witnessed in various forms, such as athletes, celebrities, CEOs, and politicians, as they all possess specific brand features which can be professionally managed (Thomson, 2006). Nowadays, social media has enabled ordinary people to become human brands. With social media enabling the quick spread of communication and opinions, certain individuals began to obtain large followings with high level of influence, these individuals have now become

modern day ‘micro-celebrities’, deemed social media influencers (SMIs) or influencers (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, Rokka, Aiello, Donvito & Singh, 2016).

As influencers are seen as thought leaders in digital communities (Scott, 2015) and have extensive reach due to their large followings, they hold a crucial role in the ‘making or breaking’ of brands. Therefore, influencers are viewed as desirable partners to diffuse brand messages and to endorse products (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). However, this makes them rather susceptible, as their livelihood is heavily consumer reliant. Thus, it is crucial that influencers and their marketing practitioners strategically maintain and strengthen consumer-brand relationships with their followers through ongoing communication and interaction (Marwick & Boyd, 2010).

As brand personality has often been used to help understand how non-human brands can maintain and strengthen these consumer-brand relationships, this prompts the idea that influencers as human brands could benefit in a similar manner. Therefore, this study will examine how their brand personality affects consumer-identification and brand trust in order to improve their relationships with their followers.

1.2 Problematization

Companies are willing to collaborate with influencers due to their wide reach and thought leader status (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017), thus influencer Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are heavily consumer reliant. Therefore, much like how companies develop and maintain consumer-brand relationships, it is arguably even more imperative for influencers to understand how to manage and strengthen their relationships with followers in order to meet KPI standards and justify their profitability to essential stakeholders. Thus, the question remains as to how vital antecedent variables of consumer-brand relationships can be used by human brands, specifically social media influencers, to strengthen follower-influencer relationships.

As stated by Breivik and Thorbjørnsen (2008), the framework for consumer-brand relationship offers researchers numerous opportunities to further examine the links between consumers and brands from various perspectives. Although previous studies have found that brand personality can have a positive effect on some of the elements of consumer-brand relationships (Sirgy, 1982; Fournier, 1998), little research has empirically tested brand personality’s role on consumer behavior (Sung, Kim & Jung, 2010). Therefore, Kim, Han and Park (2001) called for further research on brand personality’s effect on important marketing variables. Since then, the relationship between brand personality and other important variables has been studied. However, none of these studies have researched how influencers’ brand personality affects other consumer-brand relationship variables.

A number of studies (e.g. Tuškej, Golob & Podnar, 2013; Kim, Han & Park, 2001) highlight the importance of consumers' identification with a brand in order to establish and manage consumer-brand relationships. Based on previous research, consumers use brands to communicate their self-concept (Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988). Hence, they tend to select brands with personalities that align their own self-image (Heath & Scott, 1998; Aaker, 1997), which builds a strong relational link between the consumer and the brand (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). In other words, through a brand's personality consumers can connect to the brand (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Importantly, consumers' identification with a brand has been recognized as influencing consumer behavior, including brand preference (Tildesley & Coote, 2009; Tuškej, Golob & Podnar, 2013). Although noticeable attention has been given to consumer-brand identification (Popp & Woratschek, 2016), there is still much to learn (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Tildesley & Coote, 2009). Tuškej, Golob, and Podnar (2013) agree with this and mention that there has been little attempt to link the concept of consumers' identification with other variables in literature. Thus, it is recommended that further studies be conducted in order to better understand the effect of consumer identification on different factors of consumer-brand relationship such as brand trust (Kumar & Kaushik, 2018). Kumar and Kaushik (2018) additionally point out that little is known about the factors that influence consumer-brand identification; this raises the question of how brand personality may affect this variable in the social media influencer context. Similarly, Kim, Han, and Park (2001) state that further research is needed to better understand consumers' identification with brands in relation to different marketing contexts such as internet marketing. This study will address this gap by applying the concept of consumer-brand identification to human brands in influencer marketing.

Interrelatedly, it has been established that brand personality plays a crucial role in strengthening consumer-brand relationship by conceiving and sustaining consumers' overall perception of the brand, which has a significant impact on brand trust (Sung & Kim, 2010). Although the effect of brand trust has been analyzed with many variables within consumer research, such as loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), equity (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001), and satisfaction of repurchase intentions (Zboja & Voorhees, 2006), the exploration of brand trust alongside other pivotal variables within consumer brand relationship literature is rather unexplored. According to Matzler, Grabner-Kräuter, and Bidmon (2008) further studies linking brand trust with other brand characteristics is needed. And Molinillo, Japutra, Nguyen, and Chen (2017) also note that exploring brand trust within other contexts outside of the product category is recommended.

Furthermore, branding humans raises practical, ethical, and conceptual issues which are rarely acknowledged in branding literature (Khamis, Lawrence & Welling, 2017). Much of the work examining humans as brands has been practical in nature, less emphasis on theoretical principles (Peters, 1999 & Andrusia & Haskins, 2000 & Graham, 2001 cited in Speed, Butler & Collins, 2015). Moreover, of the existing literature on human brands (Thomson, 2006; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Close & Monroe, 2011), minimal research has been carried out in the social media influencer context. Previous research has overtly proven brand personality's impact on consumer-brand

relationships (Blackston, 1993; Aaker, 1997; Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Additionally, research has acknowledged the importance of brand personality on brand trust (Sung & Kim, 2010) and brand personality on brand identification (Kim, Han & Park, 2001), but there is a dearth of research analyzing the link between all three key variables. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by extending current research on human brands, specifically the extremely profitable yet under-researched world of human brands within the social media influencer context. This study will also introduce theory-driven definitions of concepts that we will refer to as ‘influencer brand personality’ (IBP), ‘follower-influencer identification’ (FII), and ‘influencer trust’ (IT) based on prior literature on brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust.

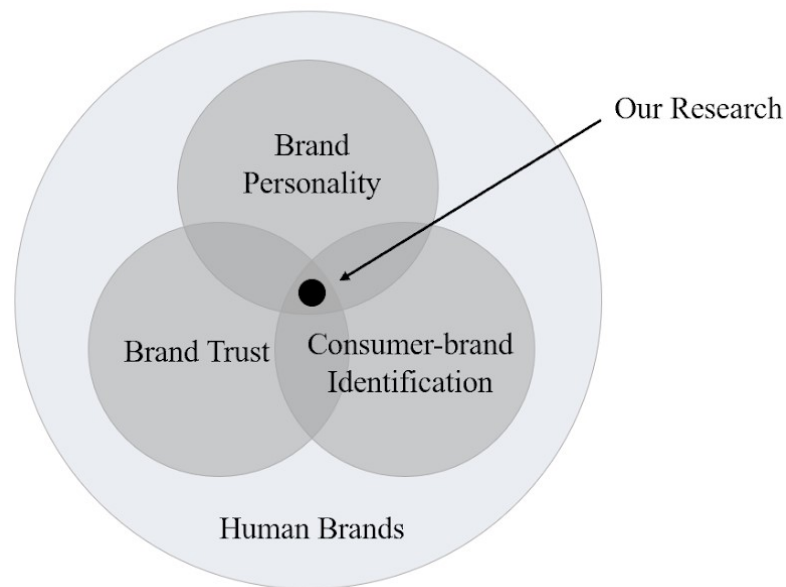


Figure 1.1 Research Gap

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to quantitatively examine the effect of influencer brand personality in the United States on follower influencer identification and influencer trust, as a way for influencers as human brands to strengthen and maintain follower influencer relationship. This research will therefore address the following research question:

RQ: What is the effect of influencer brand personality and its dimensions on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust?

1.4 Aimed Contributions

The aimed contribution of this research is to conceptualize and empirically investigate the relationship of influencer brand personality on critical dependent variables within consumer behavior. More specifically, this study conceptually links the following streams of research, brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust by examining influencer brand personality and its attributes' impact on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. In doing so, we also aim to examine the role of follower-influencer identification on follower trust. Understanding these relationships will enable a more holistic approach to strengthening and managing follower-influencer relationships. Moreover, this study aims to continue prior research on human brands, specifically contributing to the theoretical basis for social media influencers as human brands. Therefore, the objectives of this study are threefold:

- 1) *To understand how influencer brand personality can be used to strengthen follower-influencer relationships;*
- 2) *To examine the effect of influencer brand personality and its dimensions on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust.*
- 3) *To study the effect of follower-influencer identification on follower trust.*

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis contains six chapters (see Figure 1.2). This first chapter is followed by a literature review chapter where we will introduce the influencer marketing context as well as the topic of human brands in which this study will be grounded. Furthermore, the relevant concepts and theoretical basis for this study will be presented, including main constructs such as brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust. This chapter will conclude with hypothesis development and conceptual framework. In the third chapter, we will introduce the methodological choices of this study. We start by presenting our research approach which will guide us throughout this study. This will be followed by research design, data collection methods, and data analysis. Afterward, we will discuss the reliability and validity, as well as ethical considerations of this study. The fourth chapter focuses on empirically analyzing the findings of the correlations provided in the previous chapter. In the fifth chapter, we will discuss the findings as well as confirm or reject the established hypotheses. Finally, the sixth chapter will summarize the study, address the limitations, and present areas for future research, including theoretical and practical implications.

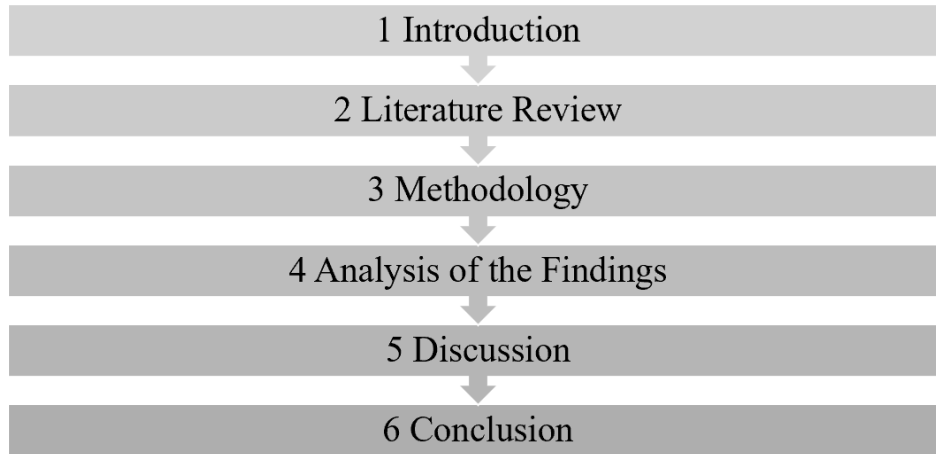


Figure 1.2 Outline of the Thesis

2 Literature Review

The aim of this chapter is to give an outlook on the concepts relevant to this study. The chapter begins with a review of existing literature on Influencer Marketing and Human Brands to introduce the context of this study. This is followed by an introduction to the following concepts: Brand Personality, Consumer-brand Identification, and Brand Trust. Drawing on insights from these concepts, we will present the conceptual framework and the hypotheses of this research at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

Social media is an important outcome of the internet, and it comes in several different forms, including blogs, forums, business networks, photo-sharing platforms, social gaming, microblogs, chat apps, and last but not least social networks (Statista, 2019). According to Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011), due to the rise of social media, conversations about brands and products have shifted online. With more than 2.77 billion active users worldwide on social media platforms, and an expected 3 billion by the end of 2019 (Statista, 2019), it is no surprise that the digital sphere has become a pivotal place for consumers to openly discuss their opinions on products, politics, and other popular news (Hansen, Shneiderman & Smith, 2011). Therefore, it is in brands' best interest to make themselves available where consumers are congregating, and it is an essential mechanism to establishing and maintaining relationships with consumers (Gilfoil & Jobs, 2014). In addition, Kietzmann et al. (2011) elaborate that social media is also important for establishing brand awareness, and with a brand's absence on social channels, it is unlikely that the modern consumer will find them to begin with.

In today's saturated business environment, garnering the attention and trust of modern consumers is difficult but also essential for relationship building (Kumar, Kee & Charles, 2010). As consumers have become weary of traditional marketing and advertising methods (Blackshaw, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007), the ways in which marketers and advertisers reach their audience must evolve too. Thus, brands have begun acknowledging the potential of utilizing paid eWOM to amplify brand messages through thought leaders, in a process known as influencer marketing (Scott, 2015).

Consumers have long demonstrated that conversation and exchange of information among their peers influence their choices and purchase decisions (Chu & Kim, 2011; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012;

Thorson & Rodgers, 2006), and people generally trust fellow consumers more than traditional advertisers or marketers (Blackshaw, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007), so it comes as no surprise that as the online world facilitates the quick communication of opinions and information consumers have begun to turn to other consumers for advice on products (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004). Through this process, certain individuals have accrued large followings, with a high level of influence on the decision making of other consumers (Rogers & Cartano, 1962), as well as their overall attitudes (Godey et al., 2016). These individuals have now become modern day ‘micro-celebrities’, deemed social media influencers (SMIs) or influencers.

Today, brands use paid eWOM to amplify brand messages through the use of social media influencers, who are seen as thought leaders in digital communities (Scott, 2015). Influencers are able to exert strong influence on their audience, which then has an effect on their audiences’ behavior (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). This is further illustrated by Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith (2011) who state that according to their extensive reach, influencers hold a crucial role in the ‘making or breaking’ of brands, politicians, and news stories. Moreover, social media influencers are able to diffuse their own brand traits, such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, and competence, onto the brands that they partner with (Debevec & Iyer, 1986). Through influencer marketing, brands are now able to capitalize on influencers to advertise products and events based on mutual interests with their target audience, while in return, influencers broadcast their own human-brand-related posts to their large base of followers, which has led to a mutually beneficial relationship between brands and influencers (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017). As influencers benefit to companies are due to the access they possess to target audiences, it is inevitable that the KPIs they are measured by are consumer reliant (Murdough, 2009).

2.2 Human Brands

A brand can be considered to be the set of associations identified with the products or services of a particular seller (Keller, 1993). It is broadly defined as:

A name, term, sign, symbol, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors (Kotler, 1991, p.442 cited in Keller, 1993).

Also, branding can help products, services, or firms obtain a personality (Khamis, Lawrence & Welling, 2017). When personality dimensions such as Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness (Aaker, 1997) are associated with products, services, or firms, it gives them a human-like quality which in turn makes them more relatable to consumers (Khamis, Lawrence & Welling, 2017). Traditionally, the term ‘brand’ has been associated with firms, organizations, products, and services but today even humans can be classified as brands

(Hirschman, 1987; Thomson, 2006; Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2011). Having said that, human brands are viewed as “one of several operationalizations of the broader concept of a brand” (Thomson, 2006, p.104). According to Thomson (2006, p.104), a human brand refers to “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts.” As product or service brands, human brands can also be thought of as the sets of associations which come to individuals’ minds when they think about particular people (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

In the late 1960’s, Kotler and Levy (1969) broadened the concept of marketing and argued that individuals could be marketed much like products. However, much of the work examining humans as brands has not been theoretical in nature (Peters, 1999 & Andrusia & Haskins, 2000 & Graham, 2001 cited in Speed, Butler & Collins, 2015). Speed, Butler and Collins (2015) argue that human branding is still one of the most recent topics in marketing and brand research where theory is “both new and comparatively rare” (p.137). However, there has been a growing interest in human brands (Chae & Lee, 2013) and thus a number of researchers, such as Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005), Thomson (2006), and Hearn (2008), have now started building theory in this area. Moreover, many studies have further researched this topic by applying the concept of human brands to various contexts, such as celebrities (e.g. Thomson, 2006; Lunardo, Gergaud & Livat, 2015), athletes (e.g. Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia & Agyemang, 2016), CEOs (e.g. Cottan-Nir & Lehman-Wilzig, 2018), and political parties and their leaders (e.g. Speed, Butler & Collins, 2015). These studies confirm that members of the broad category of ‘famous people’ can be considered to be brands because they can be professionally managed, and they possess additional associations and brand features (Thomson, 2006). However, Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017) point out how challenging it is to manage and maintain consistency when applying the concept of branding to humans. Therefore, it is essential to understand how brand personality and its dimensions can be used in order to strengthen the consistency of desirable personality attributes. This reinforces the chances of building stronger identities, which will lead to greater trust and loyalty as well as relatability, which is ultimately beneficial for marketing purposes (Khamis, Law & Welling, 2017).

2.2.1 Influencers as Human Brands

The rise of social media has enabled ordinary people to enhance their popularity over the Internet (Senft, 2008 cited in Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). By establishing a strong social media presence, the potential for fame and celebrity has significantly increased (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). Therefore, personal branding has become a popular method among influencers to stand out from other social media content creators. As proposed by Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017, p.191), personal branding “involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital”. Also, Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber (2013) highlight the importance of establishing points of differentiation. Nowadays, influencers are well-known social media stars who earn their living through marketing efforts on various social media platforms. Based on these

observations and considering Thompson's (2006) aforementioned definition of human brands, influencers can be classified as human brands. In fact, they are viewed as one form of micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008 cited in Abidin, 2016). According to Marwick and Boyd (2010, p.121), "micro-celebrity implies that all individuals have an audience that they can strategically maintain through ongoing communication and interaction." This differs from product and service brands, as human brands are capable of interacting with their audience and thus may engage and create emotional bonds (Saboo, Kumar & Ramani, 2016). Therefore, these relationships are comparable to regular interpersonal relationships, since they elicit similar expectations, behaviors, emotions, and cognitions (Leets, 1999). This is reflected in the influencer context, where followers see influencers as their friends, which further emphasizes the importance of consumer relationships in human brands such as influencers.

2.3 Brand Personality

The term brand personality was first coined by advertisers and marketing practitioners (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). In fact, the idea of brand personality already existed in the early 1900s, long before brand personality had an established name. For example, Gilmore (1919) claimed consumers permeate brands with human personality attributes enabling the symbolic use of brands. Later, a number of practitioners, such as Gardner and Levy (1955) and Martineau (1958), loosely used the term brand personality synonymously with a multitude of consumer brand associations (Avis & Aitken, 2015). In their articles, Gardner and Levy (1955) used brand personality as a synonym for brand image and discussed how brands can have sets of personality characteristics. On the other hand, Martineau (1958) used the term to describe immaterial items that distinguish retail stores from one another - their personalities. Gradually, academics noticed that "non-product-based features of the brand" that go beyond functional product characteristics started to play greater importance in consumers' buying decisions (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003, p.145). It was understood that not only the product functions but also brand personality affected the brand preference among customers (Aaker, 1997). Therefore, in order to attract consumers, brands started using the brand personality concept as a method to emphasize the brand's symbolic values and humanlike traits (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998 cited in Radler, 2017).

However, despite a growing interest in brand personality, the term remained loosely defined and was used in an open-ended manner (Avis & Aitken, 2015) because there was a lack of consensus in terms of what brand personality really was (Aaker, 1997). Also, the construct of brand personality lacked a reliable, valid, and generalizable scale in which to measure by (Aaker, 1997). Therefore, research on brand personality and the symbolic use of brands remained rather limited (Aaker, 1997). Nevertheless, these issues regarding the conceptualization, measurement and implication of brand personality were recognized by Aaker and Fournier (1995). Thus, they addressed the following questions:

- (1) What *is* brand personality?
- (2) How can brand personality be *measured*?
- (3) What are the *implications* of (a) having a brand personality, and (b) the advocated conceptualization of brand personality? (Aaker & Fournier, 1995, p.391).

Their study made significant progress in the development of academic brand personality research by presenting the link between human personality characteristics and brands. Accordingly, Aaker (1997, p.347) defined brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand.” A few years later, in her seminal work, Aaker (1997) continued empirical research attempting to address the measurement issue with the introduction of her brand personality framework. Through extensive research based on the psychology of human personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003), Aaker (1997) was able to clarify the concept of brand personality into a generalizable, universal scale to measure brand personality by adapting the ‘Big Five’ human personality theory (see Section 2.3.2). As stated by Azoulay and Kapferer (2003), Aaker’s (1997) work created a new stream of brand personality research. It works as an essential basis for brand personality research (Radler, 2017). However, much like other constructs, it has received some critiques by academics in brand personality literature (Tsiotsou, 2012). Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) argue in their study that rather than measuring brand personality, the scale actually merges other facets of brand identity, personality being just one of them. Austin, Mattila, and Sigauw (2003) pointed out methodological flaws in Aaker’s (1997) work, such as the fact that Aaker (1997) only used methods that identified dimensions that differentiate brands across diverse range of product categories and thus she did not measure the personality of individual brands or a specific product category. Despite this critique, Aaker’s (1997) definition of brand personality continues to be the most widely used concept by academics and marketing practitioners, and constitutes the foundation for brand personality research (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Kakitek, 2018; Tsiotsou, 2012). Therefore, Aaker’s framework is one of the most highly regarded in brand personality literature (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006).

The brand personality scale (see Table 2.1) consists of five dimensions and 15 facets that cover 42 attribute items (Aaker, 1997). Aaker (1997) tested the scale using both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to discover that Americans distinguish five brand personality dimensions: (1) Sincerity, (2) Excitement, (3) Competence, (4) Sophistication, and (5) Ruggedness. According to her, each dimension represents a set of core brand personality facets.

Table 2.1 Aaker's Brand Personality Scale (Aaker, 1997)

Brand Personality				
Sincerity	Excitement	Competence	Sophistication	Ruggedness
Down-to-earth	Daring	Reliable	Upper class	Outdoorsy
Honest	Spirited	Intelligent	Charming	Tough
Wholesome	Imaginative	Successful		
Cheerful	Up-to-date			

Sincerity, the first dimension of the brand personality scale is composed of the following facets: down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful (Aaker, 1997). Sincerity has been used to describe brands that keep their word and are honest (Thomas & Sekar, 2008), and it has been used to describe popular brands such as Hallmark, Coca-Cola, and Disney (Carlson, Donovan & Cumiskey, 2009). The second of the brand personality dimensions, Excitement, is classified by the facets daring, spirited, imaginative and up-to-date. Brands such as Target measure highly in this dimension due to their “high-energy advertising campaigns” (Carlson, Donovan & Cumiskey, 2009, p.373). The third brand personality dimension, Competence, depicts the following facets: reliable, intelligent, and successful. The Competence, Excitement, and Sincerity dimensions are closely related to the ‘Big Five’ theory which is used to describe human personality (Aaker, 1997). Relatedly, Sung and Kim (2010) established that the Competence and Sincerity dimensions are trust related. The last two dimensions of the brand personality scale, Sophistication and Ruggedness however are not trust-related or closely tied to the ‘Big Five’ theory (Aaker, 1997). Sophistication, which has upper-class and charming as its facets, has been used to describe brands such as BMW and Lexus (Carlson, Donovan & Cumiskey, 2009). And the final dimension, Ruggedness, defines outdoorsy and tough brands. Contrary to the other dimensions, Ruggedness and Sophistication tap into dimensions that individuals do not necessarily possess but desire to obtain (Aaker, 1997; Briggs, 1992).

2.3.1 Brand Personality Concept in Marketing

Brand personality benefits both consumers and marketing practitioners (Sung & Kim, 2010). Already in the late 1980s, Belk (1988) noticed that consumers recognize brands as extensions of themselves when they associate human characteristics with brands. Previous research suggests that consumers select brands with a certain personality that support their self-expression (Aaker, 1997; Sirgy, 1982; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Also, Heath and Scott (1998) found that consumers tend to choose brands that reflect their self-images and personalities. In fact, consumers can use brands as extensions of themselves (Belk, 1988). In other words, consumers use brands to develop,

emphasize, and communicate their self-concept. Thus, brand personality has a symbolic and self-expressive meaning for consumers (Aaker, 1999). Furthermore, Austin, Mattila, and Siguaw (1999) argue that a strong brand personality strengthens customers' emotional attachment to the brand, and that it increases preference, support, trust, and loyalty towards the brand.

From the viewpoint of marketers, brand personality is one way for brands to develop and maintain consumer-brand relationships (Louis & Lombart, 2010). The more distinctive, robust, desirable, and constant brand personality is, the more likely it is that a brand builds strong bonds with its consumers (Lannon, 1993 cited in Sung & Kim, 2010). It is also a fundamental element of a brand's image and equity (Keller, 1993). Thus, a well-established brand personality can strengthen brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Lieven, Grohmann, Herrmann, Landwehr & van Tilburg, 2014). It has also become an effective tool for marketers and advertisers to differentiate their brands in a competitive environment (Crask & Laskey, 1990; Sung, Kim & Jung, 2009) because consumers find it easier to distinguish between brands when they can link them with human characteristics (Levy, 1985 cited in Sung and Kim, 2010). This also improves the influence of marketing communications (Sung, Kim & Jung, 2009).

2.3.2 Human Personality versus Brand Personality

When applying the concept of brand personality to human brands, it is essential to understand the difference between human personality and brand personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Kakitek, 2018). As mentioned previously, Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale drew upon Goldberg's (1992) 'Big Five' human personality theory. The 'Big Five' consists of five inherent human personality dimensions: Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Personality traits are influenced by a person's upbringing and heredity (Fridhandler, 1986). Chaplin, John, and Goldberg (1988) therefore argue that human personality traits are stable, long-lasting and internally caused. However, Carlson and Donovan (2013) claim that personality characteristics in branding are states rather than traits, as states are caused by external circumstances and are characterized as being temporary and brief (Chaplin, John & Goldberg, 1988). They argue that "brand personality is a dynamic amalgamation of unique attributes (i.e. brand adjectives) working together to create an overall personality for a brand" (Carlson & Donovan, 2013, p.196).

Although human personality and brand personality are different, it is not unusual for them to occasionally overlap to some extent in certain areas (Aaker, 1997; Kakitek, 2018). Carlson and Donovan (2013) studied athletes as human brands and found that they have unique human personality traits as their "ability to influence consumers rests in his/her ability to create and manage a desirable brand personality (i.e., states)" (Carlson & Donovan, 2013, p.196). Thus, brand personality can be thought of as the characteristics that a consumer associates with a human brand (Carlson & Donovan, 2013).

In a similar manner, it can be argued that social media influencers as human brands also possess both human personality traits and brand personality states. Their personalities are combinations of human personality traits, though not every trait may be known to their audience (Kakitek, 2018). Influencer brand personality is formed by followers' perception of the influencer's personality states. Through marketing communications such as media depictions and endorsed product associations (Carlson & Donovan, 2013) influencers can affect which brand personality states are associated with them. However, since influencer brand personality is temporary, brief, and caused by external circumstances, it can change in the eyes of the followers for a variety of reasons. For example, when there are controversies between an influencer's human personality and brand personality, this can lead to a situation where the influencer's brand personality changes in response to followers' perceptions of the human brand.

2.4 Consumer-brand Identification

Research on identification is based on a social identity theory perspective (Carlson & Donovan, 2013) which originates from social psychology (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Based on this theory, individuals identify themselves and others with certain groups (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). According to Hogg, Terry, and White (1995), this process of categorizing oneself into different groups has a self-definitional role because the social groups where one belongs contribute to their social identity. Hogg and Abrams (1988 cited in Stets & Burke, 2000, p.225) define a social identity as "a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group". Therefore, people are drawn to social groups that consist of individuals who have a similar identification, and these groups reflect one's actual-self or ideal-self (Carlson, Donovan & Cumiskey, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000). In other words, when there is a strong similarity between an individual and a group, it is more likely that one identifies with the group.

A number of researchers from diverse disciplines have drawn on social identity theory to further study identification in different contexts. Organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; 1992) was examined first, and member identification (e.g. Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995), consumer-company identification (e.g. Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), and consumer-brand identification (e.g. Lam, Ahearne, Hu & Schillewaert, 2010; Tuškej, Golob & Podnar, 2013) were studied later.

As stated by Kuenzel and Halliday (2008), social identity theory helps in understanding consumer behavior. This behavior can be strongly affected by the strength of individuals' identification with a brand (Saboo, Kumar & Ramani, 2016). Therefore, it is no surprise that the theory was employed in marketing research. In fact, consumers' identification with brands has been recognized as one of the most important topics in marketing research in recent years (Lam, 2012). According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), consumers tend to identify themselves with a brand when the brand

matches with their true self or their ideal-self, thus reflecting and reinforcing their self-identities. Consumer-brand identification has been found to have a positive effect on developing and maintaining influence on consumer-brand relationships (Tuškej, Golob & Podnar, 2013). It also positively affects word-of-mouth communication (Kim, Han & Park, 2001; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), consumer repurchase (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), and loyalty (Nikhashemi, Paim, Osman & Sidin, 2015).

2.5 Brand Trust

Trust is defined as the willingness to depend on someone or something based on beliefs in their reliability, truth, or ability in the face of risk (Jevons & Gabbott, 2000). Interrelatedly, brand trust enables consumers to rely on a brand, based on the grounds of their understanding and beliefs of that brand, and with the acknowledgment of potential risk or uncertainty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, 2002; Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Alemán & Yague-Guillen, 2003). As the inception of brand trust literature emerged from the analysis of human relationships within social psychology, it is no surprise that as the importance of relational orientation grew within the field of marketing, brand trust became more widely researched (e.g. Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Ganesan, 1994; Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer & Kumar, 1996). Today, with marketing initiatives shifting online, consumer brand trust on the web is becoming a central focus for firms as they face high competition with increasing unpredictability and decreasing brand differentiation (Fournier & Yao, 1997). As consumers are frequently turning to social media to gain information about products, brands, and services (Knowledge Networks, 2011), the question then arises how brands can strengthen their relationships with their consumers, and thus build trust?

According to Aaker (1996), brand trust goes beyond the utilitarian functions of a product and its attributes. Brand trust has been explained as a feeling of stability held by consumers during interactions with a brand, which forms perceptions that the brand is reliable for the interests and wellbeing of the consumer (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). Previous research within the field of social psychology has also shown that high levels of trust can be attributed to human trust components such as individuals' familiarity with a person or brand (Luhmann, 1979 as cited in Hardy, Philips & Lawrence, 1998), the level of security felt in the situation where trust is encountered (Lewis & Weigart, 1985), and cognitive processes such as categorizing and stereotyping (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 1998). Interestingly enough, when it comes to brand trust in products, it has been shown that consumers may trust a brand without identifying with them (Lam et al., 2010). Sung and Kim (2010) have also proven that brand personality can affect trust when in the context of self-expressive products.

Whereas, Belaid and Temessek Behi (2011) also identified brand trust as a prerequisite to brand attachment and noted its ability to enhance this effect, while Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2001) noted brand trust’s central role in influencing consumers commitment.

It has been further established that brand trust is an indispensable factor in establishing loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and long-term consumer-brand relationships (Gretry, Horváth, Belei & van Riel, 2017). A greater level of trust results in stronger relationships between influencers and their audience (Sudha & Sheena, 2017), therefore brand trust is necessary for influencers to cultivate and maintain their followers, subscribers, and fans.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Figure 2.1 depicts the entire conceptual framework that will be tested by this study. As shown in Figure 2.1, influencer brand personality is conceptualized along with its five primary dimensions – sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These are hypothesized to have an impact on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. It is also hypothesized that there is a correlation between follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. In total, three sets of hypotheses are specified in this framework. H1 and H2 also include five sub-hypotheses each, which examine the effect of all individual dimensions (Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness) on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. These sub-hypotheses are introduced in the following sections (see Sections 2.6.1 and 2.6.2).

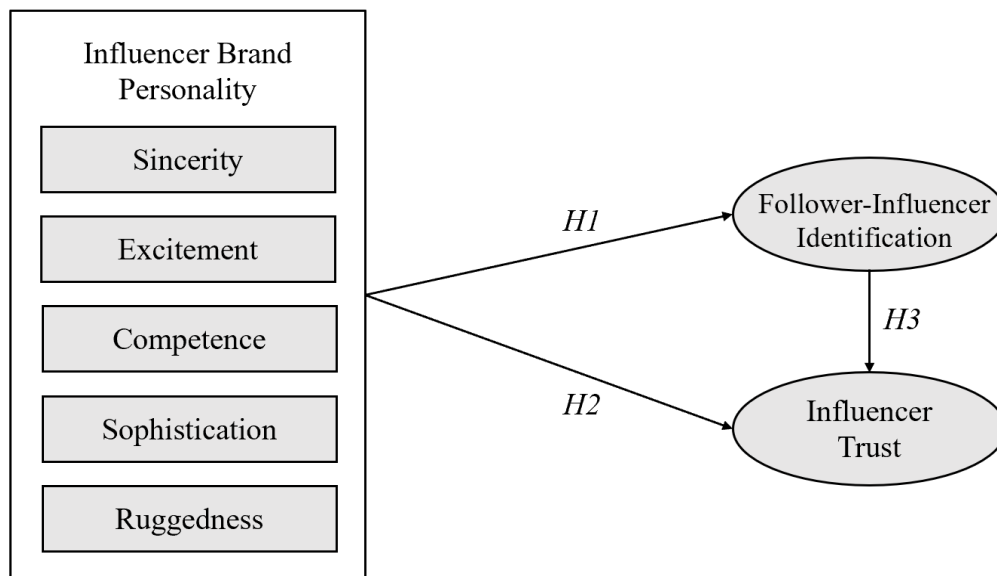


Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.6.1 Hypothesis Development

This section provides the theoretical support drawn from the previous sections for the hypothesized relationships that will be tested in this study.

2.6.1.1 Influencer Brand Personality and Follower-influencer Identification

As previously mentioned, brand personality can positively affect consumers' identification with a brand. This prompts the belief that within the influencer context, influencer brand personality and follower-influencer identification will interact in a similar manner. Likewise, the influencer brand personality dimensions, Sincerity, Excitement, and Competence, are expected to be positively related to follower-influencer identification because they share similar personality traits with the 'Big Five' human personality theory (Agreeableness - Sincerity, Extroversion - Excitement, and Conscientiousness - Competence) (Aaker, 1997), which postulates that followers may find it easier to identify with human brands due to their similar personality traits. But, due to their proven positive effect on consumer behavior variables in other contexts, the brand personality dimensions of Sophistication and Ruggedness should not be discounted (Sung & Kim, 2010). Thus, on the basis of the above discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Influencer brand personality is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1a: Sincerity is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1b: Excitement is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1c: Competence is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1d: Sophistication is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1e: Ruggedness is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

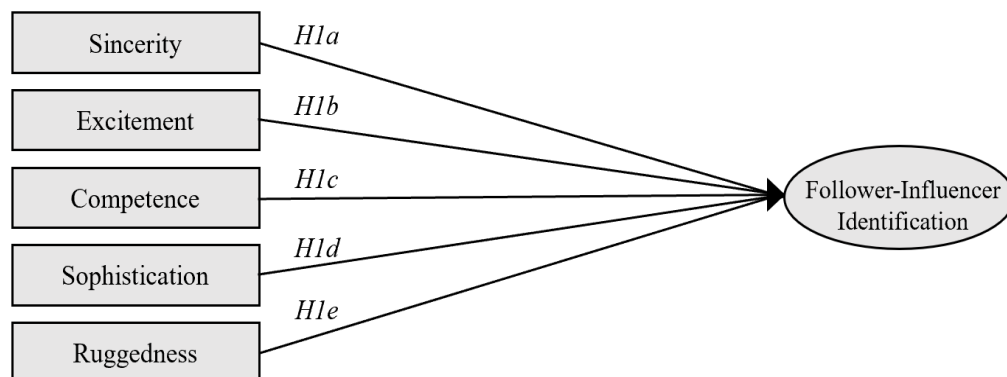


Figure 2.2 H1 Hypotheses

2.6.1.2 Influencer Brand Personality and Influencer Trust

Based on previous studies, brand personality has the ability to enhance consumers' emotional attachment to a given brand, which can then increase trust towards the brand (Austin, Mattila & Siguaw, 1999). Additionally, brand personality plays a critical role in strengthening consumer-brand relationship through sustaining consumers' overall perception of the brand, which has a significant impact on brand trust (Kang & Sharma, 2012). Further noted by Sung and Kim (2010), Sincerity and Competence are identified as being trust-related dimensions, thus it is assumed that these dimensions will be positively related to influencer trust. Excitement, Sophistication, and Ruggedness have been shown to be positively correlated to brand trust in various product brand contexts (Sung & Kim, 2010). Therefore, we anticipate similar findings in the social media influencer context. We hypothesize the followings:

H2: Influencer brand personality is positively related to influencer trust.

H2a: Sincerity is positively related to influencer trust.

H2b: Excitement is positively related to influencer trust.

H2c: Competence is positively related to influencer trust.

H2d: Sophistication is positively related to influencer trust.

H2e: Ruggedness is positively related to influencer trust.

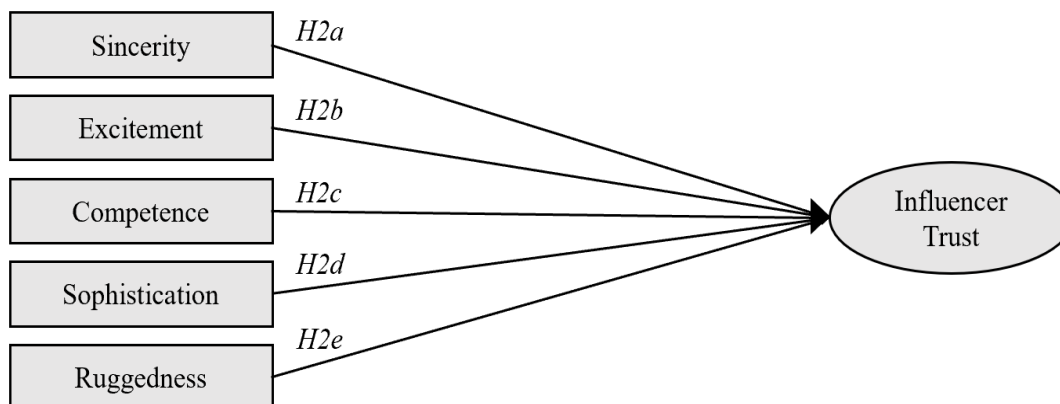


Figure 2.3 H2 Hypotheses

2.6.1.3 Follower-influencer Identification and Influencer Trust

Previous studies have shown the role of identification in improving consumer-brand relationships, more specifically, it has been highlighted in other contexts that brand personality positively affects brand trust behavior (e.g. Mengxia, 2007; Louis & Lombart, 2010). In addition, it has been previously established by Keh and Xie (2009) that brand trust affects identification in business-to-business (B2B) service firms, which suggests that identification may interact with brand trust in a similar manner when the variables' relationships are flipped. Further theorized by Ha and Janda (2014), consumers tend to develop higher levels of trust with brands that possess personality characteristics that resonate with their own personality. Therefore, we assume that followers' identification with influencer brand personality positively relates to followers' trust towards an influencer in the influencer context and thus hypothesize:

H3: Follower-influencer identification is positively related to influencer trust.

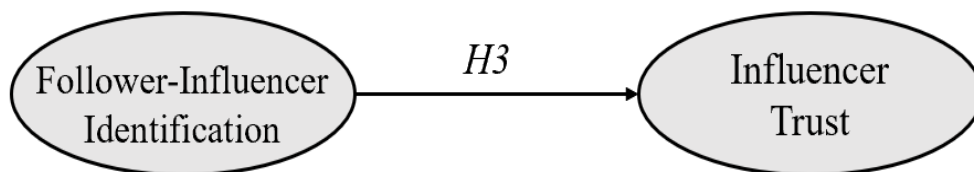


Figure 2.4 H3 Hypothesis

3 Methodology

In this chapter, a better understanding of the methodological aspect of this study will be presented and discussed. We start by presenting our philosophical standpoint which is followed by the research design of this study in terms of influencer selection and measurements. After this, we will introduce the data collection methods used in this study and lastly, present the findings of this study and critically discuss the research quality criteria.

3.1 Research Approach

As the academic approach yielded by brand personality, brand trust, and brand identification research falls most predominantly within the positivist realm, due to its quantitative nature, this study will emulate this approach. Positivist epistemology originates out of philosophical perspectives based on realistic ontological views, notably realism or internal realism which take on the position that reality and existence are concrete (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). By applying an internal realism ontological lens to this research, it enforces the notion that the observations gathered can and will provide direct correlation to the investigated phenomena, and that one single truth does exist (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Although, as indicated by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015), when articulating this ontological perspective, it is not plausible to identify this pronounced single truth in its entirety. Rather, the aim of the presented research is to remain as objective as possible. We recognize however, producing fully objective results is unattainable as aspects of research constitute elements of involuntary subjectiveness (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

As previously mentioned, utilizing the philosophical perspective of internal realism calls for a positivist approach to conducting research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, this research will assume a positivist stance, which believes that reality possesses an external existence which is able to be measured with quantitative methods (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). With this in mind and because the fields of brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust are based on objective principles we have attempted to make assumptions in this research that are objective and devoid of our own personal beliefs. Furthermore, the results of this thesis are based on deductive and causality principles, which should be capturable with quantitative data. Lastly, due to our chosen positivist perspective, it is assumed that the ability to simplify data via data reduction originating from a substantial randomly chosen

sample generates favorable results for interpreting and generalizing. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015), the weaknesses associated with the positivist epistemology are characterized by its inflexible nature and the plausible risk of measuring aspects that were not intended to be measured (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Nevertheless, there are several beneficial reasons for applying a positivist epistemology to this research. As argued by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015), positivist epistemology is characterized as being quick, generalizable, and cost-effective, which tends to result in credible findings for practitioners.

As previously discussed, this research is derived from three lines of research in the fields of brand personality (Aaker, 1997), brand identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1992), and brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), all of which have also employed quantitative methods and remained positivist in nature, which further supports our philosophical decision. Moreover, a five-point Likert scale was deployed, a closed question technique frequently associated with positivist paradigms (Brand, 2009). To further justify, a cross-sectional survey was utilized enabling the measurement of multiple variables, which allows for the examination of relational associations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, (2015), cross-sectional survey designs are often associated with positivist epistemological views. Given the aforementioned reasoning, we will employ both positivist and internal realist philosophy, which will be further reflected throughout this study.

3.2 Research Design

In the planning and implementing of this research, the following research design was constructed as to best answer the research question, this includes: influencer selection, measures, a pre-study, a questionnaire design, and sampling and respondents.

3.2.1 Influencer Selection

Since this study examines the effect of influencer brand personality on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust, it was essential that the selected influencers could be classified as human brands. In addition, they had to be well-known due to their distinctive brands in order for the respondents of our survey to evaluate their brand personality in the most reliable manner. In order to capture influencers as a broad category, both male and female influencers, from diverse categories, who established their followings through a variety of social media platforms needed to be represented in this study. Based on Forbes' (2017) list of 'Top Influencers', we were able to select nine influencers that fulfilled these requirements. Thus, the selected influencers and their represented categories were: (1) Jeffree Star - beauty, (2) Julia Engel - fashion, (3) PewDiePie -

gaming, (4) King Bach - entertainment, (5) Luis Cole - travel, (6) Amber Fillerup - parenting, (7) Kayla Itsines - fitness, (8) Rosanna Pansino - food, and (9) Gary Vaynerchuk - tech and business.

3.2.2 Measures

Validated multi-item scales from previous research were adopted for this study. To measure the constructs in our model, Aaker's (1997) brand personality, Ashforth and Mael's (1992) organizational identification, and Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) brand trust scales were used and modified to fit this study (see Table 3.1). All of the scales are viewed as widely recognized and established in their given streams of research (Kumar, 2018; Lam, 2012; Dhurup, van Schalkwyk & Tsautse, 2018), hence, this increases the accuracy of this study.

Influencer Brand Personality

To measure personality traits of the nine top influencers, the brand personality scale developed by Aaker (1997) was used because it is the most cited scale when it comes to measuring brand personality (Kumar, 2018). Some studies have used all 42 personality traits when examining brand personality in different contexts (e.g. Kim, Han & Park, 2001; Kakitek, 2018), however, this would have made the questionnaire excessively long. We were also advised by an academic who has done research on brand personality to consider shortening the scale. Therefore, we decided to use Aaker's original fifteen facets scale to measure influencer brand personality. This decision was justified because other academics have also used the main fifteen personality facets in their brand personality study (e.g. Kim & Sung, 2010). In the end, the scale used in this study had a total of fifteen personality facets (out of 42 personality attributes) that represented the five brand personality dimensions: Sincerity (down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful), Excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date), Competence (reliable, intelligent, successful), Sophistication (upper class and charming), and Ruggedness (outdoorsy and tough) (Aaker, 1997). All 15 items of this scale were measured based on a five-point rating of agreement (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree).

Follower-influencer Identification

Ashforth and Mael's (1992) six-item scale was selected to measure followers' identification with the influencers in this study as it is the most well-cited identification scale in marketing (Lam, 2012). Although Ashforth and Mael (1992) originally developed the scale in an organizational setting, many studies in marketing have applied the scale to other contexts to examine consumers' identification, such as consumer-brand identification (e.g. Kim, Han & Park, 2001; Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Hi, Li & Harris, 2012). Thus, this justified our choice of using Ashforth and Mael's scale in influencer marketing. Based on a Likert five-point rating of agreement (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree), the following six items were used and modified to fit

the context of this study: “When someone criticizes this influencer, it feels like a personal insult,” “I am very interested in what others think about this influencer,” “When I talk about this influencer, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they’,” “This influencer’s successes are my successes,” “When someone praises this influencer, it feels like a personal compliment,” and “If a story in the media criticized the influencer, I would feel embarrassed” (Ashforth & Mael, 1992).

Influencer Trust

Influencer trust was measured using a four-item scale created by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). The scale has been used and validated in many studies (e.g. Sung, Kim & Jung, 2009; Sung & Kim, 2010; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014), hence we decided to apply it to this study. When we ran the pre-test, one of the items created confusion among the respondents. Since the scale was developed using product brands, we could not apply the scale to the context of our study without making appropriate modifications (see Section 3.3.1). Therefore, the four items used were as follows: “I trust this influencer,” “I rely on this influencer,” “This influencer is honest,” and “This influencer is a safe choice to follow” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). The original study used a seven-point Likert scale (1 = very strongly disagree, 7 = very strongly agree) but since five-point scales are more commonly used than seven-point scales (Burns & Burns, 2008), we decided to use a five-point rating of agreement (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) which also aligned with the previously mentioned scales.

Table 3.1 Measures of the Study

Original Scale	Items Used in this Study	Number of Items	Authors
Brand Personality Scale	Down-to-earth Honest Wholesome Cheerful Daring Spirited Imaginative Up-to-date Reliable Intelligent Successful Upper class Charming Outdoorsy Tough	15	Aaker (1997)
Organizational Identification	When someone criticizes the this influencer, it feels like a personal insult. I am interested in what others think about this influencer. When I talk about this influencer, I usually say “we” rather than “they”. This influencer’s successes are my successes. When someone praises this influencer, it feels like a personal compliment. If a story in the media criticizes the influencer, I would feel embarrassed.	6	Ashforth & Mael (1992)
Brand Trust	I trust this influencer I rely on this influencer. This influencer is honest. This influencer is a safe choice to follow.	4	Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)

3.2.3 Pre-study

A pre-study can be a beneficial way to reduce measurement error, locate problem areas, and identify if participants are interpreting the questions in the intended way (Reynolds, Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 1993). Therefore, we conducted a pre-study with six respondents from the target population. This was done through the survey platform SoSci Survey via ‘pre-test mode,’ which enabled participants to take the survey and leave feedback. Based on their comments some minor modifications were applied. First, the brand personality section originally contained the fifteen personality traits along with their additional facets taken from Aaker’s (1997) original brand personality scale. However, multiple participants mentioned that the additional facets created confusion. As indicated by one of the participants:

Also, some of the words in parentheses do not seem to match up with the adjective being used. For example, I do not see the relation between being wholesome and being original. ... Similarly, I do not associate being charming with being feminine.

This prompted the removal of the additional facets which made the influencer brand personality section more intuitive. Further justified by the fact that this study was only focusing on the core fifteen attributes.

As the scale applied to influencer trust was derived for evaluating brand trust in products, one of the statements raised confusion for participants. As illustrated by the following respondent: “I’m lost at the question of if I find them safe. Do I feel safe with them? Are they a safe choice to follow? Are they safe in the industry?” This prompted the rewording of the statement as to properly fit the context. Therefore, the statement: “This influencer is safe” was rephrased as “This influencer is a safe choice to follow.”

In addition, due to the use of pre-established scales, two sections contained overlapping statements. For the pre-test, we opted to keep both statements. They were: “This influencer is honest” in the influencer brand personality section, and “This influencer is honest” in the brand trust section. Originally, we contemplated removing one of the statements as to not be redundant. However, because none of the participants identified the repetition of statements and the prior research (Sung & Kim, 2010) employed both scales without addressing this overlap, we opted to keep the overlap.

Lastly, participants acknowledged that the instructions could be strengthened by adding definitions. To address these concerns, definitions were added for ‘influencer’ and ‘influencer familiarity.’ The questionnaire was also verified by two university professors before publishing it.

3.2.4 Questionnaire Design

The main study for this research consisted of an online survey administered through the survey platform SoSci Survey. This platform was selected on the basis of its robust question types, cost-effective nature, and its ability to import data directly into the analysis software used in this study, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

As previously mentioned, multi-item measurement scales were applied in this study. According to Eisinga, Grotenhuis, and Pelzer (2013), multiple-item questionnaires are preferred over single-item tests to obtain reliable measures. The survey contained five sections with a combined total of 25 questions (see Appendix A). Section one contained general demographic questions such as age, education level, and occupation status. This portion also consisted of confirmatory questions to establish participation eligibility for the study, such as verification that the participants were from the United States, verification of their social media usage, and verification that they follow influencers on social media. In section two, the participants were asked to select an influencer that they were familiar with, applying a top-of-mind method. To avoid selection bias, we rotated the order of influencer options. In section three, participants were then asked to gauge to which degree they believed a set of fifteen adjectives (brand personality scale facets) accurately described the previously selected influencer. The description words provided were also rotated. Sections four

and five focused on the variables of influencer trust and follower-influencer identification. In section four, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with four statements pertaining to trust. And in a similar manner, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements regarding their identification with their selected influencer.

3.2.5 Sampling and Respondents

The target population for this research was males and females, from the United States, between the ages of 18 and 33, who use social media, and who follow social media influencers. This age range was selected because it is currently the most active age group on social media (Pew Research Center, 2018).

As previously stated, an online survey was dispersed via convenient sampling and snowball sampling methods. Respondents were initially asked to participate in an anonymous survey on the general topic of social media influencers, and after they had completed the survey they were prompted to send the survey to others that fit the sampling parameters. Convenient sampling and snowball sampling were conducted on the basis of their cost-effective, quick, and simple nature (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Due to the time constraints and lack of resources, this made these nonprobability sampling methods desirable for this research. Notably, non-probability sampling entails that the probability of being selected in the sample is unknown, therefore it can never be assured that the sample is generalizable or representative of the entire population (Burns & Burns, 2008).

In total, the survey received 180 respondents. Of those, 148 fully completed the survey in its entirety, however, only 100 respondents (18% male, 82% female) met the research qualifications. 53% of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 29. The most used social media platform was Instagram as further illustrated in Table 3.2 below. More information about the respondents can be found in Appendix B.

Table 3.2 Profile of the Participants

Age Group	Percentage	Occupation	Percentage
18-21	13%	Student	22%
22-25	18%	Employed	74%
26-29	53%	Unemployed/seeking employment	2%
30-33	16%	Other	2%

The Most Used Social Media Platform	Percentage	Hours Spent on Social Media Per Day	Percentage
Facebook	15%	Less than 1 hour	9%
Instagram	67%	1 to 2 hours	39%
LinkedIn	-	2 to 3 hours	32%
Snapchat	6%	3 to 4 hours	14%
Twitter	6%	4 to 5 hours	2%
YouTube	6%	More than 6 hours	2%

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

Before statistically analyzing the collected data, the data was reviewed and cleansed to ensure accuracy and consistency, as to avoid errors. Afterward the data was analyzed using both Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient and Pearson’s correlation coefficient.

3.4.1 Data Preparation

In total, 180 survey responses were received. However, of those 32 responses were removed on the basis of not meeting the target population parameters. From here an additional 44 were removed due to incomplete questionnaire entries. This left us with 104 responses, upon further investigation additional four were removed due to neutral responding. Therefore, 100 valid responses were qualified for this study.

Once we achieved an analyzable sample, mean value indices were created in order to view each variable as its own entity derived from its indicated questions. As the original fifteen brand personality facets fall under five core dimensions, for each influencer brand personality dimension

an average of the included facets was computed. Moreover, the full influencer brand personality index is simply the average of the mean value indices of the five dimensions. In a similar fashion, mean values were created for follower-influencer identification and influencer trust by computing their average scores. Through the creation of these indices, both Spearman's and Pearson's correlation coefficients were able to be applied. Furthermore, Cronbach's Alphas were calculated in order to ensure internal consistency and reliability, and also to show the amount of error within each measurement (see Section 3.5).

3.4.2 Correlations

Correlation is a “measure of the degree of correspondence between variables” (Burns & Burns, 2012, p.349). It investigates the strength and direction of relations between the variables when the observations are taken from the same source (Burns & Burns, 2008). The most highly recognized methods to evaluate correlations between variables are Pearson's correlation, Kendall's Tau, and Spearman's rank correlation. For this study, Pearson's correlation and Spearman's rank correlation are employed which made it possible to investigate if significant correlations were present from influencer brand personality to follower influencer trust, influencer brand personality to influencer trust, and follower influencer identification to influencer trust. This also included correlations for the aggregate brand personality items (i.e. Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness) to influencer trust and follower influencer identification.

3.4.2.1 Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient depicts the strength and direction of monotonic relationships between two variables (Hauke & Kossowski, 2011), in which if one variable increases or decreases the other variable will also increase or decrease. In fact, it is similar to Pearson's correlation coefficient, however, Spearman's rank correlation is a non-parametric technique and thus it uses ranked data rather than raw data like Pearson's correlation coefficient does (Gauthier, 2001). To increase the quality of research (Jamieson, 2004) it was essential to acknowledge what level of measurement was used for this study (Knapp, 1990). Since Likert scales were employed to collect data, the obtained sets of data were at ordinal (ranked) level. Therefore, an appropriate method for testing the hypotheses of correlations was through the use of Spearman's rank coefficient correlations (Burns & Burns, 2008). Moreover, according to Gauthier (2001), Spearman's rank correlation coefficient offers a range of advantages that Pearson's correlation coefficient does not. First, the distribution of the population does not affect the correlations between variables, therefore the data does not have to be normally distributed in order to run Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Second, since ranked data is used, this correlation technique is relatively insensitive to outliers. And lastly, it can be used with small sample sizes.

3.4.2.2 Pearson's Correlation Coefficient

Pearson's correlation coefficients was used in this study as a benchmark in the event of a continuous scale. Although several statisticians have raised the question of the Pearson's correlation's applicability on ordinal data (Jamieson, 2004), this statistical choice is supported by the fact that Likert scale data was later computed to form overall mean value indices (Carifio & Perla, 2008). Pell (2005) argues this is an appropriate instance to conduct parametric techniques to non-parametric data, hence Pearson's correlation can be applied.

3.5 Research Quality

Evaluating the quality of research is essential to maintaining the integrity of the findings (Onwuegbuzie, 2000). Thus, concepts such as reliability and validity should be considered since the data was obtained from human subjects via a questionnaire. The following sections will introduce the actions taken in order to ensure high reliability and validity of measurements used in this study.

3.5.1 Reliability - Cronbach's Alphas

Reliability is of high importance when handling variables developed off of summated scales. Due to the fact that summated scales are constructed of interrelated components which are used in quantitative models, it is essential to know whether the same set of components would elicit the same outcomes if the same questions were re-administered (Santos, 1999). Alpha developed by Lee Cronbach (1951) is one of the most highly regarded measures of internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha must first be deployed to ensure reliability, and also to show the amount of error within each measurement (Cronbach, 1951).

In this study, the following Cronbach's Alphas were measured for all eight variables (see Table 3.3). When using Cronbach's Alpha, George and Mallery (2003, p.231) recommend the following values as a rule of thumb: “ $\alpha > .9$ – Excellent, $\alpha > .8$ – Good, $\alpha > .7$ – Acceptable, $\alpha > .6$ – Questionable, $\alpha > .5$ – Poor, and $\alpha < .5$ – Unacceptable”. With this in mind, it can be seen that all three main indices show high reliability with values well over 0.80 (influencer brand personality = 0.839, follower-influencer identification = 0.826, and influencer trust = 0.820). Cronbach's Alphas were also run for the individual dimensions of the brand personality scale (sincerity = 0.752, excitement = 0.601, competence = 0.721, sophistication = 0.295, and ruggedness = 0.288).

Per George and Mallery (2003) standards, both of the dimensions, sophistication and ruggedness received low reliability. However, according to Pallant (2013), low consistency may be due to the

small number of facets the dimensions include, which can be witnessed in these brand personality dimensions (see Table 2.1). For example, the dimensions of sincerity and excitement consist of four facets, while competence consists of three facets, and sophistication and ruggedness only consist of two facets each. As two items is the minimum allowed for computing for Cronbach's Alpha, this could result in lower values (Pallant, 2013). Nevertheless, as several researchers have managed to achieve high loadings for these two variables within the product context (e.g. Sung & Kim, 2010; Sung, Kim & Jung, 2009), it raised the question of whether the sophistication and ruggedness attributes are applicable to the social media influencer context. Therefore, additional Cronbach's Alpha and both correlation coefficients were run for influencer brand personality as a whole with the removal of the Sophistication and Ruggedness attributes to see if they yielded significantly higher results, which would further indicate that the dimensions could be measuring something different in this particular context. Upon achieving the updated value for Cronbach's alpha, it demonstrated a minimal increase of 0.016. Therefore, with respect to our predecessors who previously validated this scale's accuracy and reliability in a variety of contexts (Austin, Mattila & Siguaw, 2003; Buresti & Rosenberger, 2006) coupled by the fact that many of these studies have not achieved high Cronbach's Alpha values like those demonstrated in Aaker's study (1997), we therefore do not regard the minimal increase in values as enough support to remove them from the influencer brand personality index. Therefore, all eight variables are carried out in this study.

Table 3.3 Cronbach's Alphas

Item	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Influencer Brand Personality (IBP)	15	0.839
Sincerity	4	0.752
Excitement	4	0.601
Competence	3	0.721
Sophistication	2	0.295
Ruggedness	2	0.288
Follower-influencer Identification (FII)	6	0.826
Influencer Trust (IT)	4	0.820
Total	25	0.886

3.5.2 Validity

Validity refers to the suitability of measures to evaluate the constructs which they intend to measure (Burns & Burns, 2008). According to Bryman and Bell (2013), a symbiotic balance between internal and external validity is needed to establish the optimal outcome of the study. External validity refers to the degree to which the findings of a sample are applicable to a population (Burns & Burns, 2008). Internal validity is focused on the extent to which the experiment variables remain controlled, as to indicate that relationships can be attributed to the independent variable, and not other factors (Burns & Burns, 2008).

To be mindful of the external validity, a few measures were taken to assure a generalizable sample. As our sample included several age brackets and participants of varied educational backgrounds, the sample was diverse and not homogenous in these categories. Conversely, due to the time constraints and resources of this study, non-probability methods were applied through the use of convenience and snowball sampling. Though this approach allowed attainment of a larger sample population, it does not come without faults. According to Bryman and Bell (2013), the use of a non-probability sample negatively affects the external validity of a study and therefore a convenience sample cannot be fully generalizable. Nevertheless, we stand by our decision, as the application of a probability sample was not attainable for this research time frame and budget, and non-probability methods would allow us to achieve a sample size quantifiable enough to answer our research question by statistical standards, therefore was the best option to employ.

Furthermore, as internal validity carries considerable significance when employing a survey method for data collection, it is essential that the survey is measuring what it intends to measure (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In addition, the scales measuring the three constructs in this research have previously been well-tested and are regarded as highly valid within their individual streams of research. To further elaborate, the brand personality scale utilized in this study is established to be generalizable across a variety of brands (Aaker, 1997), and has continuously been shown to contain both internal validity and content validity (Aaker & Fournier, 1995). Similarly, the scales measuring brand trust and consumer-brand identification have been well-established and used in many studies (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1992; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Bryman and Bell's (2011) ethical principles were acknowledged when conducting this research. Firstly, respondents were informed about the intent of the study, and understood they had the right to remove themselves at any moment. This information was supplied in a text at the beginning of the questionnaire. Furthermore, the principle of consent was applied by addressing that participants were able to exit the survey and thus enabled for a voluntary environment, free of any coercion

(Bryman & Bell, 2011). And lastly, the principle of confidentiality was attended to, as no personal data was stored pertaining to individual respondents, only general data pertaining to the wider demographic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

4 Data Analysis

This chapter will present the empirical findings of this study. The hypotheses of this study will be tested through the application of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and the use of Pearson correlation coefficient functioning as a benchmark.

4.1 Analysis of the Results

The following thresholds were applied to the data to ensure the values meet statistical standards. It is therefore of the utmost importance to first calculate the data's statistical significance to test the hypotheses of this study. In order to do so, the null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis must first be set up. As stated by Burns and Burns (2008), these hypotheses are as follows:

H_0 : The finding was simply a chance occurrence (null version) – very little really occurred.

H_1 : The finding did not occur by chance but is real (alternative version) – something beyond chance variation did occur. (Burns & Burns, 2008, p.230).

This is first done by attempting to disprove the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis is presumed to be true until the contrary is proven. According to Burns and Burns (2008), based on the calculated significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is either rejected or accepted. When the significance level is 5% or less ($p < .05$), the null hypothesis is rejected, whereas if the level is more than 5% ($p > .05$) then the null hypothesis is accepted.

After determining the significance level, the values achieving significant correlations will then be measured for their effect size. Both Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient and Pearson's correlation coefficient range in values from -1 to +1 (Burns & Burns, 2008). The closer the value lies to 0, the more it indicates no linear or monotonic association. The closer it gets to 1, the stronger it becomes (Schober, 2018). As indicated by Cohen's standard guidelines, the strength of the relationships, also called the effect size, between variables can be interpreted as follows: 0.10 - 0.29 identifies a weak relationship, 0.30 - 0.49 identifies a medium relationship and 0.50 - 1.0 identifies a strong relationship (Pallant, 2013). Spearman's rank correlation coefficient values were used for determining the strength of the correlations between the tested variables.

4.1.1 Influencer Brand Personality and Follower-influencer Identification

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient for the full influencer brand personality index and follower-influencer identification indicated a positive .225 value. As a confirmatory step, Pearson's (r) correlation coefficient was ran and yielded similar strength and direction (.233). The significance level ($p = .025$) fell below the established $p < .05$ level, thus the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicated a statistically significant relationship between the full influencer brand personality index and follower-influencer identification. However, it is worth noticing that based on Cohen's standard guidelines, this positive relationship was classified as weak. Also, after calculating the coefficient of determination, only 5.4% of the variation in follower-influencer identification was explained by the variation in the full influencer brand personality index. Although the relationship was weak, we can still say that our Hypothesis 1 was supported.

H1 (supported): Influencer brand personality is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

Sincerity also demonstrated a positively correlated relationship to follower-influencer identification with a Spearman's correlation coefficient value of .290, and it was verified with Pearson's correlation at a value of .309. Positively correlated relationships were also identified for Competence with a Spearman's correlation indicating a value of .218, supported via Pearson's with a .227 value. Therefore, we rejected both null hypotheses since the p-values for sincerity and competence were .003 and .030 respectively, thus they fell below the established $p < .05$ level. Based on the coefficient of determination, 9.5% of the variation in follower-influencer identification was explained by the variation in Sincerity, whereas only 5.2% of the variation in follower-influencer identification was explained by the variation in Competence. Although this signaled that the strength of relationships between Sincerity and follower-influencer identification, as well as between Competence and follower-influencer identification were relatively weak, we can still say that Hypotheses 1a and 1c are supported.

H1a (supported): Sincerity is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1c (supported): Competence is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

Excitement, Sophistication, and Ruggedness did not yield statistically significant correlations, as demonstrated by the following Spearman's rank correlation coefficients: Excitement (.101), Sophistication (.007), and Ruggedness (.182). This was further verified by the following Pearson's correlation results: Excitement (.132), Sophistication (.017), and Ruggedness (.133). All three

variables had their p-values above the established $p < .05$ level (Excitement = .318, Sophistication = .949, and Ruggedness = .182). Thus, the null hypotheses were accepted, meaning that there were not statistically significant differences. Therefore, it was evident that Hypotheses 1b, 1d, and 1e were not supported.

H1b (not supported): Excitement is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1d (not supported): Sophistication is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

H1e (not supported): Ruggedness is positively related to follower-influencer identification.

Table 4.1 Correlations between Influencer Brand Personality and Follower-influencer Identification

	Follower-influencer Identification	
	Spearman's Correlation	Pearson's Correlation
Full Influencer Brand Personality Index	0.225* p = .025	0.233* p = .020
Sincerity	0.290** p = .003	0.309** p = .002
Excitement	0.101 p = .318	0.132 p = .192
Competence	0.218* p = .030	0.227* p = .023
Sophistication	0.007 p = .949	0.017 p = .865
Ruggedness	0.182 p = .182	0.133 p = .187

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.1.2 Influencer Brand Personality and Influencer Trust

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient between the full influencer brand personality index and follower-influencer identification was found to be a value of .661. Pearson's correlation was then run as a benchmark, indicating a .670 value, thus supporting Spearman's findings. The associated

probability level was .000, hence falling drastically below the .05 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the correlation between the full influencer brand personality index and influencer trust was found to be positive and statistically significant. Based on Cohen's standard guidelines, the positive relationship was classified as strong. Moreover, after calculating the coefficient of determination, almost half of the variation (44.9%) in influencer trust was explained by the variation in the full influencer brand personality index. Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

H2 (supported): Influencer brand personality is positively related to influencer trust.

In line with Hypothesis 2, all influencer brand personality dimensions showed statistically significant correlations with influencer trust. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient values were as follows: Sincerity (.686), Excitement (.441), Competence (.714), Sophistication (.201), and Ruggedness (.290). These were further supported by the Pearson's correlation results: Sincerity (.693), Excitement (.530), Competence (.717), Sophistication (.270), and Ruggedness (.203). Notably, we rejected the null hypotheses due to the p-values (see Table 4.2) falling below the established $p < .05$ level and thus all of them were statistically significant. Therefore, strong positive relationships were identified for Sincerity and Competence to influencer trust, a medium positive relationship was identified for Excitement to influencer trust, whereas weak positive relationships were found for Sophistication and Ruggedness to influencer trust. Moreover, based on the coefficient of determination, the variation in influencer trust was explained by the variation in Sincerity (48%), Excitement (28.1%), Competence (51.4%). However, Sophistication and Ruggedness respectively explained only 7.3% and 4.1% of the variation in influencer trust. Although some of the correlations were found to be relatively weak, Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d, and 2e were supported based on their statistically significant probability levels.

H2a (supported): Sincerity is positively related to influencer trust.

H2b (supported): Excitement is positively related to influencer trust.

H2c (supported): Competence is positively related to influencer trust.

H2d (supported): Sophistication is positively related to influencer trust.

H2e (supported): Ruggedness is positively related to influencer trust.

Table 4.2 Correlations between Influencer Brand Personality and Influencer Trust

	Influencer Trust	
	Spearman's Correlation	Pearson's Correlation
Full Influencer Brand Personality Index	0.661** p = .000	0.670** p = .000
Sincerity	0.686** p = .000	0.693** p = .000
Excitement	0.441** p = .000	0.530** p = .000
Competence	0.714** p = .000	0.717** p = .000
Sophistication	0.201* p = .045	0.270** p = .007
Ruggedness	0.290** p = .003	0.203* p = .043

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.1.3 Follower-influencer Identification and Influencer Trust

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient for follower-influencer identification and influencer trust indicated a positive .412 value. As a confirmatory step, Pearson's (r) correlation coefficient was run and yielded similar strength and up-going direction (.426). The significance level ($p = .000$) fell below the established $p < .05$ level, therefore the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. It is worth noting that based on Cohen's standard guidelines, this relationship was classified as medium. After calculating the coefficient of determination, 18.1% of the variation in influencer trust was explained by the variation in follower-influencer identification. Based on the abovementioned evidence, we can say that our Hypothesis 3 was supported.

H3 (supported): Follower-influencer identification is positively related to influencer trust.

Table 4.3 Correlations between Follower-influencer Identification and Influencer Trust

	Influencer Trust	
	Spearman's Correlation	Pearson's Correlation
Follower-influencer Identification	0.412** p = .000	0.426** p = .000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.2 Summary

In conclusion, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was run in order to determine statistically significant and statistically insignificant relationships between the variables based on their associated probability levels. Further elaborated, the strength and direction of the relationships were analyzed. It was found that Hypothesis 1, as well as its sub-hypotheses H1a and H1c were statistically significant and thus supported. However, sub-hypotheses H1b, H1d, and H1e were statistically insignificant or equal to zero, therefore they were not supported. Hypothesis 2 and its sub-hypotheses H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d, and H2e were all proven to be statistically significant. Similarly, Hypothesis 3 was statistically significant. Moreover, the correlations that were statistically significant between the full brand personality index and all of its sub-hypotheses (H1a and H1c) had positive and weak correlations with follower-influencer identification. Whereas, the correlations between the full brand personality index and influencer trust were found to be positive. H2, H2a, and H2c had strong effect sizes indicating strong relationships. H2b resulted in a medium effect size thus this indicated a medium strength relationship. However, H2d and H2e demonstrated weak relationships via their weak effect sizes. Lastly, the correlation between influencer-follower identification and influencer trust (H3) indicated a positive and strong relationship. The following Table 4.4 summarizes the findings of this study by presenting which hypotheses are statistically supported and which are not. In Chapter 5, we will further discuss the presented results in relation to the literature review.

Table 4.4 Summary of the Results

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1	Brand personality is positively related to follower-influencer identification.	Supported
<i>H1a</i>	Sincerity is positively related to follower-influencer identification.	Supported
<i>H1b</i>	Excitement is positively related to follower-influencer identification.	Not Supported
<i>H1c</i>	Competence is positively related to follower-influencer identification.	Supported
<i>H1d</i>	Sophistication is positively related to follower-influencer identification.	Not Supported
<i>H1e</i>	Ruggedness is positively related to follower-influencer identification.	Not Supported
H2	Brand personality is positively related to influencer trust.	Supported
<i>H2a</i>	Sincerity is positively related to influencer trust.	Supported
<i>H2b</i>	Excitement is positively related to influencer trust.	Supported
<i>H2c</i>	Competence is positively related to influencer trust.	Supported
<i>H2d</i>	Sophistication is positively related to influencer trust.	Supported
<i>H2e</i>	Ruggedness is positively related to influencer trust.	Supported
H3	Follower-influencer identification is positively related to influencer trust.	Supported

5 Discussion

This chapter will present the empirical findings of this study. The results will be discussed and analyzed in relation to the literature review and the hypotheses. This chapter is divided into three main parts.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of influencer brand personality and its dimensions on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. As predicted, influencer brand personality as a whole was demonstrated to have a positive influence on follower-influencer identification, which indicates that influencer brand personality can be used to strengthen follower-influencer identification. Further exemplified, both the Sincerity and Competence dimensions were noted to play a statistically significant role in the fortifying of follower-influencer identification despite their weak effect sizes. Therefore indicating, followers tend to identify themselves with influencers who are seen as down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful, as well as reliable, intelligent, and successful. As Aaker (1997) identified, these attributes tap into innate aspects of human personality derived from the 'Big Five' theory, and thus could potentially be an explanation why followers tend to identify with influencers with these dimensions. As mentioned earlier, given that influencers are human brands, the relationships between followers and influencers can be comparative to normal interpersonal relationships, as they elicit similar expectations, behaviors, emotions, and cognitions (Leets, 1999). This supports the notion that followers select influencers as if they were their friends (Leets, 1999). Which could indicate why followers identify with influencers with the Sincerity and Competence dimensions. Most interestingly, Aaker (1997) indicated Excitement was also a dimension that was characteristically human in nature, and thus raises the questions as to why Excitement in human brands within the influencer context would establish a statistically non-significant relationship to follower-influencer identification. Although daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date are closely tied to human personality traits, this could pose the question of whether followers do not identify these traits in themselves across all personality facets that are aggregated under the Excitement dimension. Further noted, the dimensions of Ruggedness and Sophistication were found to be statistically insignificant. This could be explained by the fact that Sophistication and Ruggedness are dimensions that individuals do not necessarily identify themselves with, yet desire to obtain (Aaker, 1997). Another potential explanation is that 83% of the respondents were female, and the facets that make up the dimension of Ruggedness are perceived to be more masculine, therefore this may indicate why they have not associated with this dimension.

Interrelatedly, influencer brand personality was recognized as playing a critical role in creating influencer trust. Much like their effect on follower-influencer identification, Sincerity and Competence were also proven to have statistically significant effects on influencer trust. However, their effect sizes were considerably higher when comparing them to their effect on follower-influencer identification. This prompts the idea that followers' perception about an influencer's sincere and competent personality traits were more consequential in their level of influencer trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Sung & Kim, 2010). Also, Sincerity and Competence are trust-related personality dimensions, which might explain why they were strongly related to influencer trust. Notably, Excitement, Sophistication, and Ruggedness showed a significant relation to influencer trust despite yielding statistically nonsignificant relations to follower-influencer identification. Interestingly, while the effect sizes for both Ruggedness and Sophistication were minimal, excitement did yield a medium effect size. Nonetheless, this suggests that followers can still view an influencer as trustworthy regardless of if they personally identify with them, which aligns with Lam et al. (2010) findings that consumers can trust brands even when they do not necessarily identify with them.

What is interesting, however, is that influencer trust also was found to be affected by follower-influencer identification. The effect size between follower-influencer identification and influencer trust was found to be medium. Therefore, when a follower's identification with an influencer increases, their level of trust towards that influencer also increases. Further indicating that the Sincerity and Competence dimensions used to strengthen follower-influencer identification can inadvertently be used to also further strengthen the bond with influencer trust. This suggests that when followers identify themselves with influencers who are sincere and competent, they are more likely to strengthen the level of trust towards these influencers. One speculation of such findings is through cognitive processes such as categorizing, people are able to place themselves in like-minded groupings which may then lead to increased trust (Foddy, Platow & Yamagishi, 2009). As identification is a form of self-categorizing (Verkuyten & Nekuee, 1999), so this could explain why influencer identification plays a significant role in strengthening influencer trust. Also, this finding is aligned with Saboo, Kumar, and Ramani's (2016) argument that identification with a brand can have an effect on consumer behavior.

As previously stated, influencers' KPIs are heavily follower reliant, thus follower-influencer relationships are imperative for meeting KPI measurements and justifying their profitability to stakeholders. As brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust have previously been proven to play strong roles in enriching the bond of consumer-brand relationships, their role altogether were of interest. The findings showed that influencer brand personality can positively affect both follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. More specifically, two specific brand personality dimensions, Sincerity and Competence, were proven to play the greatest effect on both variables, which indicates that influencer should focus on emphasizing these dimensions throughout their marketing communications strategies.

6 Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the study and points out its limitations, theoretical and practical implications, as well as presents the areas for further research.

6.1 Research Aims and Objectives

In sum, this research examined the effect of influencer brand personality and its dimensions on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust in order to further understand how influencer brand personality can be used to strengthen follower-influencer relationships. The findings show that follower-influencer identification and influencer trust were both affected by influencer brand personality. Most interestingly, the influencer brand personality dimensions, Sincerity and Competence, yielded statistically significant correlations to follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. This illustrates that followers not only trust influencers who depict Sincere and Competent personality traits but also identify themselves with those dimensions. On the other hand, Excitement, Sophistication, and Ruggedness were statistically insignificant in their effect on follower-influencer identification, but, interestingly enough, did prove to positively correlate to influencer trust. This prompts the notion that followers can still view an influencer as trustworthy regardless of whether they personally identify with them. Furthermore, it was noted that the Sincerity and Competence dimensions used to strengthen follower-influencer identification can inadvertently be used to also further intensify the bond with influencer trust. This suggests that when followers identify themselves with influencers who are sincere and competent, the level of trust that followers feel towards these influencers is strengthened.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study does two important things. First, it establishes a nexus between the streams of brand personality, consumer-brand identification, and brand trust by drawing on the literature of Aaker (1997), Ashforth and Mael (1992), and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) by demonstrating that there is a statistically significant correlation between the three in the social media influencer context. Second, it links this nexus to the topics of human brands and influencer marketing, which have, until now, been underexplored by the academic world. The implications of these two findings

are significant because, taken together, they help to expand our understanding of consumer-brand relationships, which is particularly useful for social media influencers and their relationships with their followers.

Furthermore, the findings of this study were consistent with previous research on consumer behavior in that brand personality can positively affect brand trust and consumer-brand identification. From a theoretical standpoint, the outcomes of this research extended already-existing theories concerning the significant roles of brand personality. Further elaborated, specific brand personality dimensions were shown to have greater influence on brand trust and consumer-brand identification within the social media influencer context. For example, influencer brand personality was found to strengthen both follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. More specifically, the dimensions of Sincerity and Competence were proven to be statistically significant for both follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. In their study, Sung and Kim (2010) found that Sincerity and Competence play a role in influencing brand trust within self-expressive brands. This was also confirmed in the influencer context by the results of our study, which found that Sincerity and Competence positively correlate to brand trust and indicated strong effect sizes. Furthermore, this study has validated Keh and Xie's (2009) assumption of an existing relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand trust in the context of social media influencers as human brands.

Some of our findings were inconsistent with prior research. Our research indicated that Sophistication, Ruggedness, and Excitement were not statistically significantly correlated to follower-influencer identification. The lack of correlation between Excitement and follower-influencer identification is particularly interesting because it cuts against the Aaker (1997) postulation that Excitement is closely related to the 'Big Five' theory used to describe human personality, and thus should reflect similarly in human brands. This finding, however, is in line with other studies (Lin, 2010; Guo, 2003 cited in Lin, 2010) that have also questioned Aaker's (1997) viewpoint on Sincerity, Excitement, and Competence being closely related to Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. This calls for a further examination by future research.

6.3 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective the research findings suggest that influencers should recognize the importance of their brand personality when strengthening follower-influencer identification and influencer trust, which results in enhancing relationships between their followers. It is thereby recommended that influencers focus on emphasizing the brand personality dimensions which correlate positively with both followers' identification and trust. More specifically, as both the Sincerity and Competence dimensions indicated a significant effect on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust, these dimensions should be integrated in the positioning of

influencer's brands and exhibited throughout the content they produce to boost the relationships with their followers. Hence by developing marketing communication activities that emphasize Sincerity and Competence, influencers and their marketing practitioners can directly increase their follower-influencer identification and influencer trust. And because our research has shown a statistically significant correlation between follower-influencer identification and influencer trust, it follows that influencers can also indirectly bolster their influencer trust through Sincerity and Competence.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study reported some important findings, this research has a number of limitations. One of the limitations presented is that this study applied the original 15 facets version of Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale instead of the full 42 personality attributes. Therefore, an analysis of all 42 personality attributes may reveal different findings from our study. Moreover, as the research exclusively focuses on American social media followers, the applicability of the results on other populations is limited. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that the findings may not be generalizable to other nationalities. In addition, to gain a holistic view of influencers as a general category, nine top influencers were selected, however this raises the question of if the results would be transferable to specific categories or influencers with smaller followings, such as micro-influencers. Interrelatedly, as this study analyzed social media influencers as a broad category, this presents the issue of its applicability within specific social media platforms. In regards to the sampling applied to this study, a convenience sample was used which is therefore less representative of the general population.

Due to the presented limitations, this leaves plenty of room for future research. For example, to establish cross-cultural generalizability, the links analyzed in the current study should be replicated in various cultural contexts. Similarly, the replication of the study with the use of a probability sample instead of a non-probability convenience sample would generate more representative findings and yield higher external validity. Notably, the Cronbach's Alpha demonstrated low values for the sophistication and ruggedness dimensions. This raises the question of whether the indicated dimensions can be applied to the social media influencer context. Therefore, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) would be useful to further analyze the applicability of these two dimensions in this context. Lastly, as the findings of this study revealed the effects of influencer brand personality on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust, it may be beneficial for future research to further establish insights on the deeper motives of why followers trust and identify with influencers, through the application of qualitative methods.

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Appendix A

Section 1: Demographic Questions

For this research, we will be examining the relationship of social media influencers' brand personality on follower-influencer identification and influencer trust in the US. We are looking to sample Americans, between the ages of 18-33, who follow influencers on social media.

1. Are you from the US?

- Yes
- No

2. Do you use social media?

- Yes
- No

3. Do you follow any social media influencers?

In this study, the term social media influencer is defined as:

"An influencer is a social media content creator who has established a large audience, and has the ability to influence the behavior of their followers, including the buying habits of products and services by promoting or recommending items on their social media channels."

- Yes
- No

4. What is your gender?

- female
- male
- other

5. What is your age?

- 18 to 21 years old
- 22 to 25 years old
- 26 to 29 years old
- 30 to 33 years old

6. What is your current occupation?

- Student
- Employed
- Unemployed/seeking employment
- Other

7. What is your highest achieved educational degree?

- High school diploma
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree
- Professional degree
- Other degree

8. What is the social media platform that you use the most?

- Facebook
- Instagram
- LinkedIn
- Snapchat
- Twitter
- YouTube

9. How many hours do you spend on social media daily?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1 to 2 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- 3 to 4 hours
- 4 to 5 hours
- More than 6 hours

Section 2: Influencer Selection

Please go over the following list of influencers, and select one that you are familiar with*.

*It is not necessary that you follow this influencer but should have general knowledge on who they are.

Kayla Itsines
@kayla_itsines

Jeffree Star
@jeffreestar

PewDiePie
@pewdiepie

Amber Fillerup
@amberfillerup

Luis Cole
@funforlouis

Rosanna Pansino
@rosannapansino

Julia Engel
@juliaengel

King Bach
@kingbach

Gary Vaynerchuk
@garyvee

Section 3: Influencer Brand Personality

In reference to the influencer you previously selected, please gauge to which degree you believe each adjective accurately describe them.

As this study is analyzing an existing scale, some statements may seem misplaced, we ask that you to answer to the best of your ability and go with your gut feeling.

This influencer is...

	completely disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	completely agree
...wholesome.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...reliable.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...up-to-date.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...imaginative.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...outdoorsy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...cheerful.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...successful.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...charming.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...spirited.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...darling.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...down-to-earth.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...honest.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...upper class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...intelligent.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...tough.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section 4: Influencer Trust

In reference to the influencer you previously selected, please gauge to which degree you agree or disagree with the following statements.

As this study is analyzing an existing scale, some statements may seem misplaced, we ask that you to answer to the best of your ability and go with your gut feeling.

	completely disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	completely agree
I trust this influencer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I rely on this influencer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This influencer is honest.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This influencer is a safe choice to follow.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section 5: Follower-influencer Identification

In reference to the influencer you previously selected, please gauge your opinion on the following statements.

As this study is analyzing an existing scale, some statements may seem misplaced, we ask that you to answer to the best of your ability and go with your gut feeling.

	completely disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	completely agree
When someone criticizes this influencer, it feels like a personal insult.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am very interested in what others think about this influencer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I talk about this influencer, I usually say “we” rather than “they”.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This influencer’s successes are my successes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When someone praises this influencer, it feels like a personal compliment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If a story in the media criticized the influencer, I would feel embarrassed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix B

Age Group	Percentage
18-21	13%
22-25	18%
26-29	53%
30-33	16%

The Most Used Social Media Platform	Percentage
Facebook	15%
Instagram	67%
LinkedIn	-
Snapchat	6%
Twitter	6%
YouTube	6%

The Highest Achieved Educational Degree	Percentage
High school diploma	14%
Associate degree	7%
Bachelor's degree	53%
Master's degree	20%
Doctoral degree	4%
Professional degree	1%
Other degree	1%

Occupation	Percentage
Student	22%
Employed	74%
Unemployed/seeking employment	2%
Other	2%

Hours Spent on Social Media Per Day	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	9%
1 to 2 hours	39%
2 to 3 hours	32%
3 to 4 hours	14%
4 to 5 hours	2%
More than 6 hours	2%

Gender	Percentage
Male	18%
Female	82%
Other	-

Appendix C

Correlations

		BP_full_index_2	sincerity_2	excitement_2	competence_2	sophistication_2	ruggedness_2	identification_2	trust_2
BP_full_index_2	Pearson Correlation	1	,877**	,716**	,790**	,620**	,543**	,233*	,670**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,020	,000
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
sincerity_2	Pearson Correlation	,877**	1	,603**	,686**	,431**	,385**	,309**	,693**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000	,002	,000
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
excitement_2	Pearson Correlation	,716**	,603**	1	,569**	,418**	,074	,132	,530**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000		,000	,000	,464	,192	,000
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
competence_2	Pearson Correlation	,790**	,686**	,569**	1	,322**	,274**	,227*	,717**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000		,001	,006	,023	,000
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
sophistication_2	Pearson Correlation	,620**	,431**	,418**	,322**	1	,047	,017	,270**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,001		,644	,865	,007
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
ruggedness_2	Pearson Correlation	,543**	,385**	,074	,274**	,047	1	,133	,203*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,464	,006	,644		,187	,043
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
identification_2	Pearson Correlation	,233*	,309**	,132	,227*	,017	,133	1	,426**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,020	,002	,192	,023	,865	,187		,000
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
trust_2	Pearson Correlation	,670**	,693**	,530**	,717**	,270**	,203*	,426**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,007	,043	,000	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Nonparametric Correlations

		Correlations								
		BP_full_index_2	sincerity_2	excitement_2	competence_2	sophistication_2	ruggedness_2	identification_2	trust_2	
Spearman's rho	BP_full_index_2	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,838**	,655**	,785**	,576**	,571**	,225*	,661**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,025	,000
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	sincerity_2	Correlation Coefficient	,838**	1,000	,530**	,654**	,371**	,424**	,290**	,686**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.	,000	,000	,000	,000	,003	,000
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	excitement_2	Correlation Coefficient	,655**	,530**	1,000	,512**	,408**	,079	,101	,441**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	.	,000	,000	,434	,318	,000
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	competence_2	Correlation Coefficient	,785**	,654**	,512**	1,000	,301**	,298**	,218*	,714**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	.	,002	,003	,030	,000
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	sophistication_2	Correlation Coefficient	,576**	,371**	,408**	,301**	1,000	,035	,007	,201*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,002	.	,733	,949	,045
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	ruggedness_2	Correlation Coefficient	,571**	,424**	,079	,298**	,035	1,000	,182	,290**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,434	,003	,733	.	,070	,003
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	identification_2	Correlation Coefficient	,225*	,290**	,101	,218*	,007	,182	1,000	,412**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,025	,003	,318	,030	,949	,070	.	,000
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	trust_2	Correlation Coefficient	,661**	,686**	,441**	,714**	,201*	,290**	,412**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,045	,003	,000	.
		N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).