# HOW AUTHENTIC IS AUTHENTICITY ON INSTAGRAM: A SWEDISH SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER AND SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWER PERSPECTIVE

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# Abstract

**How authentic is authenticity on Instagram: A Swedish social media influencer and social media follower perspective**

Companies are spending more money on the SMI marketing strategy than ever. Research does however show that SMIs are viewed as sellouts doing collaborations for personal profit. Hence it is questionable for how authenticity (the number one thing people look for before making a purchase) is perceived and communicated. One does simply not understand how authenticity is perceived, as SMIs themselves are perceived as sellouts and the influencer market value still is increasing. Hence, the aim of this research is to understand the concept of authenticity within the SMI and follower relationship within SMI marketing. The empirical material has been conducted through 15 in depth interviews with both SMIs and followers. The interviews were conducted with both SMIs and their followers in order to compare the two and thereof get an understanding of the relationship. Moreover, the empirical material was conducted from a social constructivism perspective and the analysis shows diversified results. The findings of this research do in fact show that authenticity within the SMI and follower relationship can be built upon the source models. However, as it is understood that one is the most authentic when being oneself, one can in fact argue for that one can simply not have a strategy for how to be authentic. Hence, the SMI marketing strategy can be understood to not find a fully developed strategy where one can simply work towards being authentic.

*Keywords*: Social media influencer marketing, Social media influencer (SMI), Social media follower, Authenticity, Paid collaborations, Strategic communication, Marketing, Branding

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# Acknowledgements

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# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Background & Problem

6.5 billion US dollars! That is the amount that the worldwide market spent on social media influencers in 2019. That is an increase of 3.5 billion US dollars, since 2017 (Statista, 2020), which is more than a doubled market value within just two years. Social media influencers, or SMIs as they also are called, are "*individuals who are in a consumer's social graph and have a direct impact on the behavior of that consumer*" (Ge & Gretzel, 2018, p. 1273). Bruhn, Schoenmueller, and Schäfer (2012) does in fact point out that SMIs can be viewed as brands themselves as most create their own creative content. In fact, this is called self-branding. The idea behind self-branding is the same as the idea behind branding a company or a product, but that it in this case is regarding a person (Bruhn et al., 2012). However, in situations where SMI marketing is implemented, where companies and influencers collaborate, the influencers can be viewed as third party (Borchers, 2019). They are namely the ones communicating the company's message to their followers and hence also possible consumers of the company, while being paid by the company to do so.

Even though SMIs do collaborations and hence commercialize their social media channel, there is a variation of commercialized and personal content. However, along with both of these types of content, it is crucial for SMIs to signal convenience, opportunity, presence and relatedness, but most importantly authenticity (Raun, 2018). Even though authenticity is important in both commercialized and personal content it is especially important when doing collaborations due to it being the number one thing that the majority of people look for before making a decision whether to purchase a product or not (Raun, 2018). According to Beverland and Farrelly (2010) the concept of authenticity is regarded as something true, genuine and real. Hence being true, genuine and real are important characteristics before making a purchase.

The SMI marketing strategy is in fact implemented by companies based on the fact that they want more sales (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). In fact, the recent increase of the influencer worldwide market value (Statista, 2020) shows the vast continued development of the influencer marketing strategy. However, this vast increase is complex as previous research shows that the SMI marketing strategy is met by followers in contradictory ways to the reason for why companies do them (Dehghani, Niaki, Ramezani & Sali, 2016). In fact, the followers are often said to express frustration and anger as well as annoyance and confusion about the fact that SMIs post content of sponsored character (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). As the initial reason for people to follow certain SMIs are for other reasons than commercial (Dehghani et al., 2016) the SMIs are often perceived as 'sellouts' (Luoma-aho, Pirttimäki, Maity, Munnukka & Reinikainen, 2019). In fact, influencer fraud is of increasing concern to followers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Hence, SMIs authenticity is put under threat (Colucci & Cho, 2014) where the SMIs can be understood to not be as true, genuine or real as they might portray themselves to be.

Even though there is a growing research attention on people's perception of authenticity, previous research (Lu, Gursoy & Yirong Lu, 2015; Luoma-aho et al. 2019; Morhart, Malär, Guévremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015; Pöyrya, Pelkonenb, Naumanenb & Laaksonen, 2019;), has to my best knowledge, not focused on simply just the perception of authenticity regarding paid collaborations, in regards to the SMI-follower relationship. But they have focused on SMIs and followers apart but not simply looked into the relationship between followers and the SMIs of which they have a relationship to. Hence, I would indeed argue for the fact that one still does not understand how authenticity is established or later on managed within the relationship between SMIs and their followers. Especially, as the SMI market value still is increasing despite the fact that followers are not always delivered something authentic, which is the most important thing behind their purchase (Raun, 2018). As SMIs can be viewed as brands themselves (Bruhn et al., 2012) and the fact that their collaborations can affect their self-brand negatively (Luoma-aho et al., 2019), makes this is an important view to take and hence the relationship between SMIs and followers are just as important to look closer into.

## 1.2 Aim & Research Questions

As authenticity is understood to be of importance within the SMI-follower relationship (Raun, 2018), what is lacking is rather an understanding of how authenticity is established and later on managed within this relationship. As previous research express that it is of importance to explore authenticity in a wider variety of contexts (Luoma-aho et al., 2019), *this research aims to bring more understanding to the concept of authenticity within marketing communication by investigating the relationship between SMIs and their followers.* I draw upon previous research regarding authenticity as well as the influencer-follower relationship in order to acquire an understanding of how authenticity is comprehended when SMIs do activities where they in fact are perceived as sellouts and frauds.

In order to reach the aim of this research I will investigate a certain environment. The research environment will be chosen by country and social media channel. As Sweden is a country with a developed influencer society and where the Swedish influencer market value increased from 205 million SEK in 2014 to 660 million SEK in 2017 (IRM, 2018) it is of my interest to comply this research on the Swedish market. The country did in fact in accordance to the growing SMI-marketing on social media develop a law in order to make social media users aware of what is and what is not sponsored content. The law entails that the SMI must clearly state, through written or spoken communication, when they perform any type of marketing activity on social media (Konsumentverket, 2019), whether it is sponsored or paid collaboration.

One of the world's most popular social media channels on the other hand is Instagram and it is in fact the most popular in Sweden out of all European countries, where five out of ten citizens use it (Statista, 2018). It is also understood to be part of 90% of all influencers marketing mix (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Hence Instagram will be the social media channel taken into consideration in this research.

Based on the aim and with regards to the research environment, the following research questions has been developed:

- How are Swedish SMIs communicating their authenticity to their followers on Instagram, when the posted content is sponsored?

- How are Swedish SMIs authenticity perceived by social media followers on Instagram, when the posted content is sponsored?

## 1.3 Relevance & Contribution

As the media landscape as well as the SMI marketing strategy is in further development and the fact that the influencer market value more than doubled itself within two years (IRM, 2018; Statista, 2020) makes it both a crucial and interesting aspect to look closer into. Hence, this research will give new and fresh understanding to the research area of SMI marketing. SMI marketing can in fact be seen as a practice taking part of the discipline of marketing communication, which in turn is part of the bigger discipline of strategic communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). As social media continues to become more important in a world of communication (Heggde & Shainesh, 2018), it is in fact of higher interest to look at the stakeholders complying the highly important communication. Hence, for this research I will focus on the SMI-follower relationship.

As previous research express that it is of importance to explore authenticity in a wider variety of contexts (Luoma-aho et al., 2019) and the fact that it is crucial for SMIs to signal authenticity (Raun, 2018), this research will contribute to strategic communication in the discipline of marketing communication. It is contributing to this discipline as it is developing and deepening the understanding of SMI authenticity from a SMI and follower perspective. The contribution within SMI authenticity is based on the relationship between influencers and followers as that relationship focus, to my best knowledge, is missing. But also due to the fact that it is of higher interest to look at the stakeholders actually complying the highly important communication. This research will also contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the subject by taking on a qualitative approach, especially as most research prior to this, investigating people's perception of authenticity (Lu et. al., 2015; Luoma-aho et.al., 2019; Morhart et. al., 2015; Pöyrya et. al., 2019) has used a quantitative approach.

## 1.4 Disposition

The disposition of the coming chapters of this thesis will follow the layout of this model:

**2. Literature Review**

Chapter 2 presents literature and previous research that form the basis for this research. Hence it will include aspects and concept such as; social media influencer marketing, the social media influencer as well as the source models; the source attractiveness model, and, the source credibility model.

**3. Theoretical Framework**

Chapter 3 presents the chosen theory of authenticity. In this research authenticity will be looked at from the sociology perspective and hence that is the perspective discussed here. Along with this, this chapter will include previous research regarding SMI authenticity and consumer/follower authenticity.

**4. Methodology**

Chapter 4 starts of by presenting what perspective this research takes on the world and how knowledge can be generated within it. This chapter then moves into the descriptive of how the data will be generated and collected in order to get the SMI and follower perspective of authenticity.

**5. Analysis**

Chapter 5 presents the results from the 15 interviews conducted with both SMIs and their followers, along with previous research and theories. The analysis is divided into 3 themes; Inspiration and Motivation, Image and Text, and, Self-reflection and Responsibility.

**6. Discussion & Conclusion**

Chapter 6 concludes this research by including a final discussion focusing on giving answers to this researches questions and aim. The chapter is ending with conclusion and contributions as well as suggestions for future research.
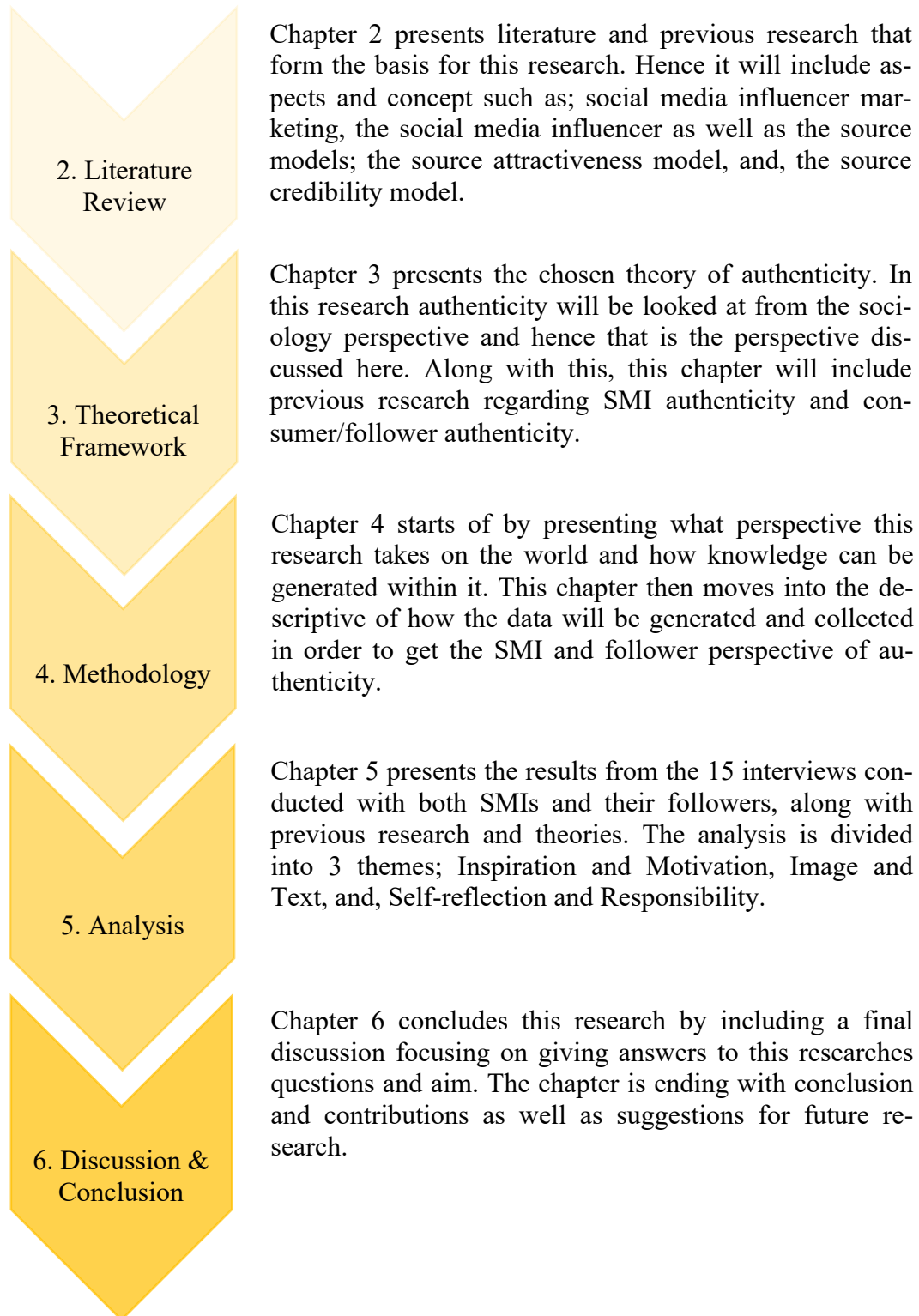
*Figure 1: Disposition of the research*

# 2.0 Literature Review

Within this chapter I will look closer at previous research and their findings within relevant areas for this study. Hence, I will look into the aspects and concepts of social media influencer marketing, the social media influencer, as well as concepts within the Source Models, that can bring more understanding to the social media influencer - follower relationship.

## 2.1 Social Media Influencer Marketing

Social media in itself is used more and more on a daily basis by all different kinds of people. As more people are online, they are available for more information. Hence social media marketing is an updated version of the traditional way of marketing but has in fact still been around for quite some time (Anderson, 2010). However, when compared to traditional marketing, social media marketing is seen as modern and advanced, as it has given marketers brand new ways of advertising and brand-new media platforms to market through (Anderson, 2010). Hence, social media marketing has restructured the way one communicates and reaches out to one another (Heggde & Shainesh, 2018). It does in fact create more interaction between stakeholders as all who experience this marketing are online and hence have their own social media accounts (Heggde & Shainesh, 2018). Hence, it gives people the opportunity to be in direct contact with the company or person that performs the marketing (Heggde & Shainesh, 2018). Companies do however not only market themselves on social media (Anderson, 2010), but they use SMIs to speak for them, as a hope of enabling more influence - this is social media influencer marketing.

Social media influencer marketing can as a matter of fact be expressed as of which an influencer advertises information about a product or brand to potential consumers, which aims to promote increased buying intent, while getting paid and rewarded for it (Uzunoglu & Kip 2014). As SMI marketing is communication on social media from SMIs to their followers, one can in fact see the close connec-

tion to the communication of electronic word of mouth, which in fact will be further explained below.

### 2.1.1 Electronic Word of Mouth

Electronic word of mouth, or eWoM as it also is called, is an online development of the original word of mouth, or WoM. WoM is in fact communication between two individuals regarding a company, a brand, a product or a service (Daugherty & Hoffman, 2013) and is in fact said to be the ultimate enabler of influence (Anderson, 2010). Hence eWoM is of great importance within SMI marketing. It is also seen as an important way to communicate due to that it is occurring between individuals and hence viewed as more trustworthy than communication through traditional media (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). It is more trustworthy due to the fact that it is objective and not for profit (Daugherty & Hoffman, 2013). However, as Fill (2013) express that companies in fact do pay and reward people with products, eWoM communication can in fact be viewed as having profit, which is to the contrary to what Daugherty and Hoffman (2013) expressed. As companies believe that this way of communicating has major impact in what consumers do (Huete-Alcocer, 2017) and as companies both want and need profit, this way of communicating is of great interest and value for them. The companies are simply not the ones taking part of the eWoM however they are the ones initiating it and hence letting the SMI know what the message is.

## 2.2 The Social Media Influencer

The social media influencer, or SMI, is a recently developed concept, however, there have been similar concepts that have been used prior to the SMI, an example of that is the celebrity endorser. As one clearly hears on the name however, social media influencers influences people on social media. Celebrities on the other hand most often uses social media in addition to whatever their main focus is (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Influencers are also said to be more relatable than normal celebrities (Raun, 2018). One reason for that might be due to the fact that they create their own content and hence can decide what to say and in what way to say it. Celebrities on the other hand are more controlled by the companies as the companies are the ones editing the content (Bruhn et al., 2012). Due to that SMIs cre-

ate their own content they are also in more creative freedom than celebrities, hence making the influencer more relatable as previously stated.

As most SMIs create their own creative content (Bruhn et al., 2012) whether it is through, text, picture or video, they are branding themselves through what they post. Hence one can view influencers as brands themselves (Bruhn et al., 2012). In fact, this is called self-branding. The idea behind self-branding is the same as the idea behind branding a company or product, but that it in this case is regarding a person (Bruhn et al., 2012). Branding, in today's society does in fact go beyond the simple business model where brands are a story told to the consumers and "*when the story is successful, it surpasses simple identification with just a tangible product; it becomes a story that is familiar, intimate, personal, a story with a unique history.*" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.4). Banet-Weiser (2012) does in fact argue for the fact that people not only want, but more importantly needs to believe that there are parts of our lives compelled by "*genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange.*" (p.5). Hence, people need to believe influencers based on more than just their words, simply on a deeper level than just the consumer or follower perspective, in order for the influencer and the SMI marketing to be successful.

However, since these people work as influencers there is in fact a competition between them, as in any other marketplace. This has in fact changed social media in the sense that influencers along with the normal users of social media mainly focus on creating content of their "perfect" life, that sell their self-brand (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). The reason for why they want to sell their self-brand is due to the fact that it generates more followers and hence more profit, both for them but also companies if they do collaborations (Khamis et al., 2017). Self-branding is due to this understood to be a complex concept and has in fact received critique due to that people adjust and adapt their reality (Khamis et al., 2017). This does in fact put self-branding influencers at risk of being "sellouts" (Luoma-aho et. al., 2019) and that is of course something that influencers want to stay away from since that could ruin their self-brand.

### 2.2.1 Concepts of the SMI-follower relationship

As the SMI marketing strategy and the way that the e-WoM has developed, there is no longer a one-way communication, but influencers are interacting more with their followers and their followers are interacting more with the influencers. This way of interacting with each other can in fact be measured through their par-asocial interaction, also called PSI (Rubin, 1985). The influencer and follower PSI are namely the relationship between SMIs and their followers building upon their interaction with each other. As their relational interaction can be viewed as friends talking and communicating with each other, rather than simply distant idolization and admiration (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011) it is best for all parties included if the PSI is measured high. Rubin (1985) does in fact express that a high PSI can enhance the consumers feelings and opinions about a brand and hence also contribute and affect the purchase intent. High PSI is also said to take away consumers and followers' uncertainty about what is communicated and in fact be of the same characterization of authentic recommendations from family members and friends (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011). As a high PSI can be understood to be of importance within the SMI-follower relationship, I will in the next section look closer into the specific characteristics of importance within the SMI-follower interaction.

## 2.3 Characteristics of importance within the SMI-follower Interaction

As research has investigated the SMI marketing strategy there are already concepts and characteristics that are viewed to be of greater importance than others in order for the interaction between SMIs and their followers to be high. However, the most relevant model found regarding these characteristics is the 'Source Models' created by Ohanian (1990). However, this model has taken the celebrity endorser into consideration and not the SMI. As the celebrity endorser and the SMI previously were explained to be somewhat different from each other (Evans et al., 2017) one could argue for the fact that their strategies are different as well. However, it is rather the source of information, namely the role of the SMI and the role of the celebrity endorser, that plays a role in this and hence not the strategy of how they perform collaborations. Hence, as characteristics have been found to be

similar between the strategy of celebrity endorsers and the SMIs I would argue that the model taking the celebrity endorser into consideration in fact also can be applied to the SMI.

The 'Source Models' created by Ohanian (1990) consist of two separate models, namely; the source attractiveness model, and the source credibility model (Erdogan, 1999). The source attractiveness model has one dimension which is simply called attractiveness, where the source credibility model on the other hand have two dimensions, namely; expertise and trustworthiness. The two models along with their dimensions will be further explained below and at the same time be connected to more recent research regarding SMIs and their followers, showing the relevance between the models and the chosen subject of interest within this research.

### 2.3.1 The Source Attractiveness Model

The source attractiveness model is based on the perception of the communication, namely the communication of the main message (Erdogan, 1999). In fact, the performance and efficiency of the message is understood to be based on similarity, familiarity and likability (Crano & Prislin, 2008). **Similarity** is understood as the connection between the person sending the message and the person receiving the message (Crano & Prislin, 2008). **Familiarity** on the other hand can be understood to be the knowledge and awareness of the source, from the perspective and with the perception of the receiver (Crano & Prislin, 2008). Lastly, **likability**, is understood as the perception of the source, as a result of its substantial appearance and behavior, both in regard to the liking of the product and the endorser (Crano & Prislin, 2008). Attractiveness is however, according to Crano and Prislin, (2008) more complex than simply similarity, familiarity and likability, where more characteristics builds on attractiveness. Crano and Prislin (2008) does in fact point out that **intellectual skills**, **personality properties** and **lifestyle** are other contributing characteristics to the perception of attractiveness.

As a matter of fact, Abidin and Ots (2016) express the importance of the SMI having a clear connection between the self and the product. Along with this, Liu and Suh (2017) express that people do not ask for advice from anyone, but only from people who they know personally or have other strong connections to. They do in fact further state that people often share their opinions and views and

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also agree with statements with people who share their way of living. The interaction between the two, hence the influencer and the follower, can in fact be said to build upon the general relationship concepts of **intimacy** and **genuineness** (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Intimacy, in this case, means that the followers feel like they are getting to know, or that they know the influencer. This feeling of intimacy can in fact create a feeling of genuineness as the influencers can influence their followers if the bond between them are strong in the sense of them having similar lives and interests (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011).

### *2.3.2 The Source Credibility Model*

The source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990) include concepts such as **expertise** and **trustworthiness**. According to Erdogan (1999) this is a model where followers, or people in general, will perceive the celebrity endorsers, hence also arguable influencers, differently due to the fact that they are influenced by their own beliefs, opinions, attitudes and behavior, and hence look at trustworthiness from different perspectives. Erdogan (1999) does in fact extend the explanation of the model by adding to the term expertise, that endorser possession of **knowledge**, **experience** and **skills** are reflected to the receiver. The endorsers' possession will in fact impact the perception of the quality of the product.

As a matter of fact, Abidin and Ots (2016) express the importance of the SMI having knowledge, expertise and experience of the product they promote, especially as it often creates follower trust in a SMIs message when marketing is implemented (Sarathy & Patro, 2013). Dholakia and Sternthal (1977) refers to expertise as the perception of the knowledge from the messenger, and trustworthiness as whether the messenger's opinion regarding the product or service are unbiased. Sarathy and Patro (2013) further expresses how crucial it is for SMIs to create trust based on experience as this trust, built on credibility, often results in more purchases.

Credibility in itself, is as a matter of fact another characteristic of importance in order for the SMI marketing strategy to be successful (Bonson, Torres, Royo and Flores, 2012). Bonson et al. (2012) does in fact relate credibility with honesty. They do, based on the importance of credibility and honesty, express that a consumer needs to be delivered and offered what the brand say they will deliver and offer. If this is not followed through, the influencer can in fact be viewed as

dishonest and the consumer might in fact be lost. According to Borcher (2019) *loyalty* is important characteristic where one builds loyalty through *honesty* and *trust*. Not many consumers would be loyal towards a brand if the brand was not to be loyal towards the consumer or follower (Borcher, 2019). *Trust* is hence crucial for companies in order for consumers to rely on them and hence be loyal (Borcher, 2019). However, if a brand is losing people's loyalty, people are more likely to no longer trust them, and hence, their relationship with these people often goes downhill (Bougoure, Russell-Bennett, Fazal-eHasan, & Mortimer, 2016). However, as Bonson et al. (2012) express that it is of great importance to also be honest about troublesome facts as that express clearness and hence also opens up for credibility, the honesty can save a consumer loss in the way that it also can build on the credibility.

## 2.4 Synthesis

To conclude this chapter, it can be understood to be a gap in the empirical research regarding the SMI-follower relationship, where one does not understand how this relationship is created and later on managed. In fact, empirical research in this field is rather taking on a perspective of either SMIs, or just followers. It can be understood that the relationship is crucial for reasons of characteristics based on the marketing strategy, however one does not quite understand how important these strategies are as SMIs fail to deliver an authentic feeling to their followers. However, even though the SMIs fail to deliver a strong feeling of their authentic self-brand the SMI marketing strategy is used more than ever where companies gain on it. Hence, previous research has not made it clear on authenticity is established or later on managed in the SMI-follower relationship. Hence, the following chapter will demonstrate the authenticity perspective and hence understand it within the SMI-follower relationship.

# 3.0 Theoretical Framework

In order to truly get an understanding of the characteristic of authenticity this chapter will include a broader understanding of the concept of authenticity, but also include previous research regarding SMI authenticity and consumer/follower authenticity. As this research tries to understand people's perceptions, I will also look at authenticity from the sociology perspective.

## 3.1 Authenticity

New technologies and digital techniques undermine the traditional marketing process that started to face many challenges in a world where consumers demand authenticity and their need for something real to be delivered to them by someone genuine (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Hence, the search for authenticity in a society of media presentation and mass commodities has become a crucial factor for the creation of meaningful exchanges and experiences sought both by consumers and business entities (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

The concept of authenticity is in today's society often regarded as something true, genuine or real (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). In despite of this definition, which might seem clear, the concept is very broad and has in fact many more definitions which is dependent on the perspective one takes. One thing that previous research can agree upon regarding authenticity is however the fact that it is used to describe a range of different objects and behaviors (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014). However, as it is still expressed to have different meanings by researchers it is of importance to understand the authenticity concept from the perspective of communication and marketing research as that is closely related to the SMI-follower relationship and hence also this research. Therefore, I will in this research take on the sociologist perspective of the concept. The sociologist perspective is in fact the study of human social relationships, and hence is the greatest fit for this research.

Authenticity can, from the sociology perspective be expressed with features such as sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness and originality (Molleda, 2010). These features can indeed be associated to the communication of authenticity of self-presentation, which in fact are of importance and of interest within research such as communication, marketing and advertising (Molleda & Roberts, 2008). Within these areas of study authenticity has as a matter of fact been shown to be of great importance, where it among other things enhances message receptivity (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011), improves anticipated quality (Moulard, Raggio & Folse., 2016) and increases purchase intention (Napoli et al., 2014).

As a matter of fact, within sociology, the concept of authenticity is a disclosure of one's self-presentation, meaning that it is the sensation, awareness and accuracy of being true to oneself or others (Vannini & Williams, 2016). However, questions have arisen regarding authenticity and the self, and according to Taylor (1991) ones' self is shown in two ways, namely; as a private and unique individual and as a public self which one shows to everyone one else. As a matter of fact, Gilmore and Pine (2007) emphasizes the importance of consistency when talking about brand authenticity, arguing how there are two broad meanings of it; internal and external consistency. The former implies the extent to which a brand stays true to itself, maintaining its essential core, while the latter entails the extent to which a brand is what it appears to be. However, Banet-Weiser (2012) explained authenticity as: *"... a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives."* (p.5). She further continued by saying that *"... if we discard as false a simple opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic, we still must reckon with the power of authenticity - of the self, of experience, of relationships."* (p.5). Hence the sociologist perspective of authenticity takes oneself into consideration, however one can still reckon somewhat of a reality of it by understanding some of the perspectives. It is in fact of important to keep in mind that this research will not stand for everyone's perception, and everyone's reality will in fact not be represented.

### 3.1.1 The self-determination theory

The self-determination theory, SDT, is a theory based on motivation and personality which addresses three universal, inherited and cognitive needs, that is; compe-

tence, autonomy and psychological relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Authenticity is in fact from this perspective understood to include people's commitment in per se the stimulated behaviors, indicating what emerges from a person's ingrained and inherited wants and needs. These behaviors do in fact draw upon the constant obligations of effort that one finds appealing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The opposite to authentic is inauthentic and that can be understood to include people's commitment in the sense of stimulated behavior guided by outer pressure, usually driven by other people, both individuals and people in groups (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As the behaviors created for inauthenticity are through other people's pressure and not by aspirations from within, the behaviors can be understood to not be naturally fulfilling and enjoyable (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Looking at the SDT theory from the context of branding Moulard et al. (2016) expresses authenticity to be regarded as the degree to which consumers perceive brands and to what intensity they are truly motivating oneself. In this context the brands are both of the individual character, hence influencers, but also brands of products and services, hence companies (Moulard et al, 2016). Authentic brands are therefore they who seem to be committed with what they do as that is generating positive feelings and a sensation of gratification (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink et al, 2008). Hence, in this context inauthentic brands are they who seem to be committed to simply an increase in profit, influence and fame through higher sales. They are based on this, simply seen as inauthentic as they are selling themselves in order to grow their brand (Holt, 2002; Spiggle, Nguyen & Caravella, 2012). It is hence understood that brands must appear to be an invention of actors driven by their inherent values in order to not be perceived as actors who possess no ulterior motives than financial gains or organizational objectives. This is in fact the part of the SMI marketing strategy that is not so well received from the followers as the SMIs often are perceived as wanting financial gain and hence perceived as sellouts to their followers (Luoma-aho et al. 2019). Hence this is of interest and of relevance when understanding the SMI perspective in this research.

## 3.2 SMI authenticity

Most research regarding SMI marketing has not taken the perspective of influencers themselves but rather what followers or consumers think of influencers or how they view them. However, as influencers and other online producers' main activity is regarded self-expression (Audrezeta, de Kervilerb & Guidry Moulard, 2018). SMIs can in fact be argued of wanting authenticity as their self-expression and their self is of importance. Due to this, one can also argue for the fact that their actual content, which in one or the other way have to be linked to their self-expression, is from their perspective of their liking and hence that is the reason for why they post about it (Audrezeta et al., 2018). It does as a matter of fact show in the way that they share and create their content, but also in the way that they communicate and discuss it with their followers (Marwick, 2013). SMIs and their way of marketing may thereof not be simply to charm and entertain their followers in order to gain profit or compensation in return, but it might in fact be to fulfill the inner liking for what they do. Audrezeta et al. (2018) does in fact express that *"Self-oriented producers follow a production orientation, place more value on authenticity for themselves, and produce market offerings they enjoy, rather than market-oriented offerings that are financially successful"* (p.3).

Along with this it is understood that SMIs in fact appreciate when their content gives them feelings of such characteristics as self-improvement, enjoyment, pleasure and emotional management (Marwick, 2013). As a matter of fact, SMIs motivation to publish is said to be of reasons such as having it as a creative outlet, where they can talk to people and also publish about their daily life, and less as a tool to gain money (Audrezeta et al., 2018). In fact, making money is on fourth place on what builds SMIs motivation to post, which is below the motivation of using it as a creative outlet (Audrezeta et al., 2018). However, when an SMI is marketing for a brand, where they no longer stand for the creative outlet all on their own, it could create a brand "intrusion", where the company make the SMI adjust to the message and hence their authenticity can be compromised (Audrezeta et al., 2018). Hence, one can also argue for the fact that SMIs can in fact reach tension, where the brand and their inner self is not in complete agreement and hence the self is less satisfied, which in turn leads to less authentic character from the SMI perspective itself.

## 3.3 Consumer and Follower Authenticity

The consumer perspective of authenticity is according to Arnould and Price (2003) consisting of two dimensions, namely; authenticating acts and authoritative performances. These dimensions can be seen as key contributions to the under-standing of people's search for authenticity. The first dimension, the authenticating acts, are based on one's own observation of the self and hence permeates the understanding of what is of one's own authentic importance as a consumer. Products are in fact used based on one's own individual consumption and is hence a construct of significance of one's own life narrative (Arnould & Price, 2003). The second dimension, the authoritative performances, are on the other hand regarding activities that entertain group values and offer convenience to merge with others (Arnould & Price, 2003). From these dimensions' authenticity can be viewed as a socially constructed practice of people, through their acts and performances, and not viewed from the perspectives of simply an object, product or experience (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). As a consequence, to this, it is clear that authenticity differs between people and their individual lives and goals, hence, individuals themselves make up what is authentic to them (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

However, regarding the aspect of social media and authenticity, research has found that an authentic act that can be seen throughout are the images themselves and its self-representation (Gannon & Prothero, 2016). Images of casual characteristics and with "snapshot aesthetics", meaning that the photos are taken spontaneously and quickly without much effort and thought, are often viewed as more authentic than images and photos taken from a journalistic and artistic perspective (Gannon & Prothero, 2016). Banks (2012) does also mean that images can show expressive authenticity, meaning that the image shows the true picture of what a brand or influencer stand for or who they are. That is, if the perceived connection between content and brand is good, it is attaining "expressive authenticity". In addition, authenticity is said to be closely linked to consumers' trust in the brand, with consumers viewing brand authenticity as an indication that the brand is becoming more transparent, and that the values of the consumers are aligned with those of the brand (Holt, 2002).

## 3.4 Reflection of Theory

The aim with this chapter was to present the concept of authenticity, in fact the sociologist perspective of the concept, in order to clarify the meaning of it in order to understand the SMI-follower relationship from the authentic perspective. I do in fact argue that it is important to take on this perspective of authenticity as it enables me to understand the underlying perspectives of SMIs and their followers. As the sociologist perspective of authenticity is expressed to be a disclosure of one's self-presentation, meaning that it is the sensation, awareness and accuracy of being true to oneself or others (Vannini & Williams, 2016) this will help to understand the self-presentation of SMIs and followers. By using this perspective, it is in fact more manageable to relate the complexity of what it means to be authentic to both SMIs and their followers as well as understand the complex situation of the SMI marketing strategy in itself.

# 4.0 Methodology

In alignment with the literature and theories discussed in previous chapters the research structure is based upon the framework of social constructivism. As the research aims to understand both SMIs and follower's perspective of authenticity the research method will be of qualitative character and hence qualitative interviews has been made. This chapter will address this and also include a closer look at the interview execution and process.

## 4.1 Social Constructivism, the study of knowledge

The study of knowledge and what it really is, is called epistemology. Epistemology refers to the relationship between the knowledge-seeking and the subject, for example the researcher and the reality he seeks knowledge of (Danermark, 2013). As this research has its aim of understanding people's perspectives, the study of knowledge within this research, is the epistemology of social constructivism. Social constructivism is, according to Burr (2015), knowledge constructed and preserved through social means. It means that our development and our knowledge is based on our social situation, which is assembled through communication and interplay with others. As the SMI marketing strategy is assembled through communication between companies, influencers and followers/consumers the social constructivism seems like the appropriate study of knowledge. Based on what Burr (2015) expressed one can say that everyone understands reality in different ways and hence, it is of importance to investigate more than simply one of the actors within the SMI marketing strategy.

Falkheimer and Heide (2006) express the crucial aspect of language and social interaction as it plays a crucial part of one's reality. According to Danermark, (2013), people do in fact have the ability to alternate their understanding of the world in order to readjust and construct a new reality. Hence, within the social constructivism, reality is based on one's social situation where one can construct a new reality if the social situation in itself changes. As the influencer market value

has increased a lot in the last couple of years along with the fact that the social media world is in constant change, the social situations change along with it and hence new social realities might have occurred. As a matter of fact, change is comprehensible and sometimes expected within a socially constructed situation (Johansson & Heide, 2008). As an outcome of this research, a new reality is anticipated. Hence the social constructivism is understood to be of relevance when understanding the reality of knowledge for this research.

## 4.2 Qualitative Interviews

The most common strategies for how researchers go about their work are the quantitative and the qualitative strategies (Bryman, 2011; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). What strategy one chooses as a researcher is based and guided by the purpose and aim of one's research (Bryman, 2011). As I within this research is trying to understand people's perceptions, both SMIs and their followers, of authenticity, this research is conducted with a qualitative methodology with interviews as the empirical material. According to Bryman (2011) the qualitative research is in fact based on empirical material where the individual's perceptions and experiences are centered, hence it is of relevance to use this methodology as a way to gather the empirical material. The process of interviewing is in fact the most common qualitative way of gathering empirical material (Bryman, 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patel & Davidson, 2011). However, that is not the reason for why it was chosen for this research. But it was rather chosen due to the fact that the process of interviewing gathers information regarding other people's views of certain questions (Dalen, 2015). It is in fact a well fitted method when one wishes to gain insight as well as greater understanding of people's thoughts, experiences and realities (Dalen, 2015). As this is part of the aim of this research, interviewing seemed like the best way for collecting the empirical material and hence reaching peoples thoughts, experiences and realities regarding the studied subject.

The interviews in this research is of semi-structured in-depth character. In-depth interviews are as a matter of fact a qualitative research technique that regards conducting thorough one-on-one interviews in order to understand people's perspective on certain beliefs and situations (Dalen, 2015). As this research aims

to understand SMIs and follower's perspective the in-depth interviews are of great relevance. The main types of interviewing are however of open or structured character. The open interview is characterized by the interviewer opening up for discussion using themes rather than predetermined questions (Lantz, 2013). The structured interview on the other hand is in fact characterized by the interviewer by using predetermined questions (Lantz, 2013). The difference between these counterpoints is that the open interview provides a deeper understanding of the area of investigation, while the structured interview provides a more comprehensive explanation (Dalen, 2015). Between these, are subcategories of interview types, namely; unstructured, semi-structured and structured (Lantz, 2013). The semi-structured interview provides both understanding and explanations to the phenomenon of study as it has characteristics of both the open and structured interviewing (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It can as a matter of fact be said to have predetermined questions based on themes with open-ended character, where participants have the opportunity to communicate directly with the researcher and discuss any possible issues within the guidelines (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The semi-structured interview is relevant for this research as certain themes has been developed in the theory chapter. Regarding these themes and the base of the research, some questions are of greater importance and are hence more critical for the participants to answer. As the study of knowledge within this research is the epistemology of social constructivism one can expect the interviewees to have different realities and hence there is a need to listen to them carefully as follow-up questions might be needed. Every interview will as a matter of fact look different based on the interviewee, but the main idea is to still get the interviewee to talk about certain areas which is of importance for the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The predetermined questions and themes are therefore of importance for the interview process.

## 4.3 Reasoning of Method

According to Danermark (2013), the conclusion is about how the researcher can generalize and explain universally valid conditions based on his empirical results. There are several different ways of concluding in scientific work, the ones that are mainly discussed are; deduction, induction and abduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg,

2008; Patel & Davidson, 2011). What sets these apart is how the researcher and the research relate to the relationship between theory and empiricism.

As the empiricism and theory for this research were not given at the beginning of the study, and the fact that it had to be developed in correlation with each other during the course of the work (Bryman, 2011), the suggested approach is the abductive one. According to Patel and Davidson (2011), the abductive approach is when the researcher starts from empirics and then switches between empirics and theory to create a holistic picture of the research area. Danermark (2013) argues similarly that a researcher with an abductive approach gains in-depth insight *"through a commute between a theoretical understanding and concrete empirical observations"* (p. 41). Hence the abductive approach seems like the best fitted approach for this research. The empirics will in fact be compared and analyzed together with the literature review and theory to gain deeper understanding of authenticity in the area of SMI marketing and the SMI-follower relationship.

## 4.4 Sample of the research

As mentioned in the introduction chapter the research environment for this study is the Swedish influencer market as well as the social media platform Instagram. However, the sample of people being part of the study are both SMIs and their followers. SMIs were interviewed so that the SMI perspective could be understood, that is to say, understand how they think about their sponsored posts and hence how they think and work around authenticity. Followers were interviewed in order to get their perspective and hence understand, on a deeper level, what they perceive as authentic from SMIs paid collaborations on Instagram. Interviewing both SMIs and their followers will give a greater understanding of the whole image and hence their relationship.

The goal was to do 15 interviews, five with SMIs and ten with followers. The reason behind the idea of doing 15 interviews was based on Brinkmann and Kvales' (2015) sample collection where they say that 15 people is a great number of participants one should aim for in a qualitative research.

### 4.4.1 Sampling: Social Media Influencers

As this research, partly, aims at understanding how SMIs communicate their authenticity to their followers, the influencers Instagram-category is of no interest. It hence does not matter who the SMI is and who he or she is portraying him or herself to be. It is rather about understanding the thought behind, and the reason for, why he or she chooses to portray him or herself in that way. Hence, the categorial perspective has not been taken into consideration when sampling SMIs.

In fact, the way I chose to go about the sampling of SMIs for this research was to look at Medieakademins maktbarometer, which is a Swedish platform that measures the power of SMIs in the largest Swedish digital channels. It is measured by three things, namely; the amount of Swedish people that follow the account, the number of Swedish likes and the amount of Swedish comments (Medieakademin, 2019). As Instagram is the social media platform of interest in this research, that is the statistics of the measures that I used. Hence this gave me a great starting point to reach out to SMIs. I contacted the top 20 influencers within the list of Medieakademin (2019). However, I did not get any response from them. I was in fact aware that it might be difficult to get a response from these SMIs as they have the largest interaction in Sweden and might not have the time to respond to me. However, as I viewed this as a starting point of my sampling, I simply continued with the technique of snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling is as a matter of fact a sampling technique of which people recruit other participants, often when potential participants are hard to find (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Hence, I used the top 20 SMIs of high interaction, from the measures of Medieakademin (2019) to recruit other participants for my research. I simply went to their Instagram profiles (the top 20 SMIs) and contacted influencers which they followed. I contacted the five first influencers on each and everyone's Instagram page, of those first 20 influencers, until I had received five SMIs that wanted to be part of the interview. The way that I did contact all SMIs was by email and their email was found through their Instagram profile. The email sent can be found in Appendix 1.

### 4.4.2 Sampling: Social Media Followers

As this research, partly, aims at understanding how SMIs authenticity is perceived by social media followers, I had to reach out to followers as well. As I, with this

research more precisely, want to understand the relationship between SMIs and their followers I found it crucial to interview followers that in fact followed one of the SMIs that I interviewed. In fact, I wanted to have two follower-interviews for each SMI interview. In order to accomplish this, I used the technique of snowball sampling, the same technique used to reach out to the SMIs. However, this time I went on to the SMIs Instagram profile, the five SMIs of which I already interviewed, to find their followers.

However, before sending a message to some of the followers I had to make sure that they could take part of the interview. I hence limited the follower sampling to where they needed to fulfill three specific aspects. They needed to be over the age of 18, they needed to follow at least five SMIs and they needed to have an open profile. I wanted them to be over the age of 18 since that is the legal age of making one's own decisions and hence making the decision whether to be part of the interview or not. I wanted them to follow at least 5 SMIs as I wanted them to be aware of the SMI situation and hence being able to answer the questions that I was going to ask. Lastly, I needed them to have an open Instagram profile as that would allow me to send them a message on Instagram where I could ask them to be part of the interview. Hence all the people that were under the age of 18, followed less than five SMIs and also had closed profiles, was of my consideration not appropriate participants and a message to them was not sent out.

When finding followers that fulfilled the rules to participate, I started sending out direct messages to their accounts. I contacted the ten first followers of appropriate character, for each and every one of those five SMIs interviewed prior, until I had received ten final followers that wanted to be part of the interview. The way that I did contact all SMIs was by a direct message on their Instagram. The message sent can be found in Appendix 1.

## 4.5 The interviews and its themes

Thematizing is according to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) a clarification of the theory where one points out themes which can further be investigated. Further Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) explain that the themes can be investigated in the form of interview questions. Thematizing has hence been used for this research as the interviews are of big importance. Based on theories and previous research re-

garding the topic, relevant themes have been found and the interview questions, both for the SMIs and the followers, have been built. The interview guide (Appendix 2) does in fact consider themes such as: Motivation; Knowledge and Experience; Execution, as well as Honesty, Trust and Credibility. The themes are the same apart from the fact that the followers have another theme regarding the specific SMI of which they follow.

## 4.6 Preparing for the interviews

Qualitative research contexts are often used as an interview guide (Bryman, 2011; Dalen, 2015). Hence, the questions that I previously discussed as being of semi-structured in-depth character has been formulated and structured in an interview guide. An interview guide ensures that the researcher stays within the framework of the study (Dalen, 2015). Hence, the questions within the interview guide in this research is simply a guideline, however more questions might have to be added depending on the interviewee's answers and openness. As there are two perspectives within this research, namely SMIs and followers, the questions asked are different and build upon who is going to answer it. Hence two interview guides have been developed. Both guides can be found in Appendix 2.

### 4.6.1 Comfortable interviewing

As interviews are of unnatural behavior, in the sense that one talks to a person one does not know, this is a situation where one might not feel comfortable. If not comfortable, the participant might hold back on their answers which would lead to the result of the research being limited (Brinkmann, & Kvale, 2015). Hence it is of crucial importance for the participants to feel comfortable and that the information they get ahead of the interview as well as at the interview seems to be of their interest and safety (O'reilly, 2012). In order to create a good setting for the interviews I made sure to tell everyone about their rights to safety and personal data and hence I gave them the choice to sign a contract where it said that they would be kept anonymous and that the personal information that could be connected to them where only going to be handled by me personally. As the SMIs are of higher risk of feeling uncomfortable based on the fact that they talk about their collaborations and companies and hence put themselves at a risk of future collabo-

rations, they might feel a pressure where they feel like they cannot be totally honest in case something they said would be leaked. However, I made it especially clear to them that they and the companies they have ever been in collaboration with or still are, will be kept anonymous. They were also told that their Instagram categories one might put them in, as fashion influencer etc. would not be included. As this research simply aims at understanding the SMI-follower relationship regarding authenticity the influencers category is in fact of no interest. I specifically reminded them of this and the fact that we could sign a contract if they preferred. However, no one, neither of the SMIs nor the followers wanted to do that.

In order to create an open climate and thereby open up for discussion, Dalen (2015) and Lantz (2013) believe that the initial part of the interview is of great importance. They advocate that the researcher asks simpler background questions early in the interview as this will affect how the remaining part of the interview is experienced and progressed. Hence this is what I did as part of each interview. I asked general questions as a plan to get a broader start with a sense of warming up to each other where one can get to know each other more. As a result of this I believe the interviewees discussion was of great character even from the start.

After the introduction questions it is understood from Patel and Davidson (2011) that it is crucial to ask questions with a so-called funnel technology, which means that the initial questions that are asked are open and broad in nature and then move on to more specific and detailed questions. This way of constructing an interview highlights the useful way of motivating and encouraging the interviewee to express their thoughts and ideas in words (Dalen, 2015). The way in which this was developed into the questions of this research was by asking questions of open-ended character, namely by starting off with words such as; what, why and how. The goal was then to get the interviewee into a discussion and hence not only answer yes or no. If there ever was a question asked with an answer of yes or no, I made sure to follow that up with another open-ended question in order to still get an understanding of their; what, why and how.

### 4.6.2 Pre-study

When the outline of the interviews had been created, I conducted two pre-studies, one with a SMI and one with a follower. Bryman (2011), Dalen (2015) and Lantz (2013) does in fact express the importance of a pre-study as that ensures that the

interview guide is clearly designed and contains relevant and valid questions, of relevance to the subject of investigation (Bryman, 2011; Dalen, 2015; Lantz, 2013). To obtain relevant constructive criticism of the pre-study, it should be conducted with individuals who in some way represent the actual sample, without, for that matter, being part of the sample population (Bryman, 2011; Patel & Davidson, 2011). Hence, I included one SMI and one follower, apart from the sample size.

After the pre-study, a discussion should be held with the study subjects on possible problems regarding the subject (Dalen, 2015). This gives researchers a chance to reformulate and revise irrelevant or unclear questions (Dalen, 2015). The pre-study of this research was of relevance as some questions were not understood by the individuals taking part of the pre-study. Hence with clarification together with them I could rephrase the questions and hence the pre-study was of importance as that clarified the questions for the real interview process as no one seemed to have a problem of understanding the questions then.

### 4.6.3 Reaching out to the participants

When the pre-study had been done it was time for me to execute the interviews, but before I could do that, I had to contact the people that I wanted to interview. Hence, at this moment I started to contact SMIs. I used the process of sampling the SMIs as explained in section 4.4.1.

In total I received responses from 10 SMIs, however, three of them said that they could not take part of the interview due to them having a lot of things going on and two of them responded but suddenly stopped to respond and hence had to be disregarded. Hence, when I had collected the 5 interviews, from the SMI perspective, I had emailed and asked a total of 90 SMIs. Hence, a total of 90 SMIs were contacted, 10 answered me and 5 were interviewed.

As for the followers the same process of sampling was made as explained in section 4.4.2. Many followers did not respond; however, some answered and gave a short explanation of that they could not participate, or they simply stopped answering in the middle of a conversation. I, hence, had to send out the interview request to more followers than firstly planned. In total I sent the message to 70 people. I chose to interview the first ten followers that showed interest as I be-

lieved all followers were of equal interest to include in the research. However, still, 2 followers were found for each SMI interviewed.

As this research has been carried out during the worlds Covid 19 Epidemic I was aware of the fact that my research could be affected. As a matter of fact, I got some responses from a couple of SMIs that said that they did not have time for an interview in these times as they had a lot more to do. One SMI did in fact say that *"For me right now it is more or less chaos with 3 accounts to run, collaborations that change and are postponed as well as having the kids at home more than usual. I am really sorry, but I simply do not have the time right now. Had it been another time I would not have hesitated to participate."*

Despite this situation, I got the total of 15 respondents as planned. However, the process of reaching out to both SMIs and their followers were simply longer than expected and due to the Covid 19 Epidemic I hence also might have missed the opportunity to talk to certain SMIs that would have given the research a difference in opinion. However, the situation of the Covid 19 Epidemic was taken into consideration throughout the process of the interviewing and hence the best possible solutions were made. As emails and messages on Instagram were sent out to SMIs and the followers I made sure to include and specify that the interviews were not going to be face-to-face due to the given circumstances. In Appendix 1 one can find the email sent to the SMIs and the Instagram direct message sent to the followers.

## 4.7 The actual interview execution

The interviews were conducted during approximately three weeks, from the 1st of April to the 22nd of April. The interviews were conducted through phone calls or calls through the messenger app on Facebook. In the email that was sent out to the SMIs and the Instagram message to the followers (Appendix 1), I included that the interview would be held online and that we could perform the interview through a phone call or through any other social media platform where one can call each other. As some people did not want to hand out their phone number they recommended to be interviewed through messenger. Eight out of 15 interviews were made through a normal phone call, the other seven were conducted through a call on messenger. While doing the interviews and hence focusing on what the in-

terviewee says and hence asking the right questions Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) recommends doing some type of recording as that can help with the analysis process. Audio recordings were hence done for each and every interview and permission for that was asked beforehand. I recorded all interviews through my computer as I made the calls on my phone. However, I borrowed another phone and had backup recording in case something would have happened where the recordings for some reason would have been destroyed. I performed the interviews with the SMIs first as I wanted to make sure that I interviewed the followers to the interviewed SMI. The interviews ranged from 32 to 57 minutes. More information regarding each participants interview can be found in Appendix 3 as it is summarized in an information table.

## 4.8 Process of analyzing the interviews

Dalen (2015) emphasizes the importance of the researchers themselves transcribing the interviews conducted to further acquaint themselves with the interviewers' statements and thereby facilitate the continued analysis process. However, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) highlight that there is a risk that researchers rely entirely on transcripts. They suggest that a check on the actual audio files should be made during the analysis process to reflect the interviewers' statements in a truthful way. Following the interviews, transcription should be started as soon as possible in order to be able to reproduce what the interviewee said in the best possible way (Dalen, 2015).

All interviews made in this research have been transcribed in order to further acquaint with the statements. Each transcription was transcribed right after each interview and hence the interview was well remembered by me and hence the transcription can be argued to be of more accuracy that if I would have waited. However, in order to not lose anything from the interviews while analyzing, the audio files will be kept until the research is completely done simply just in case, I have to go back to listen to it again and clarify something.

Another aspect of analyzing that needs to be taken into consideration is language. As the interviews are done in Swedish, due to that all of the interviewees are having Swedish as their native language, quotes used in the research has been translated from Swedish to English by me. However, as I compiled the interviews

and hence have audio recordings where I can go back and listen to the answer once again (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), the translations are to be of most accuracy.

## 4.9 Reflection of Methodology

As a conclusion to the methodology chapter I will reflect upon the quality criteria's that must be established within a qualitative research. However, I hope that my awareness of these criteria permeates this entire chapter as I, through the process of the research, has had it in mind. Nevertheless, within a qualitative research the quality is looked at from the perspective of trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2017), where this trustworthiness, in its turn, is measured by credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Pratt, Kaplan & Whittington, 2019). The way that I have worked towards a trustworthy research and hence also a credible, transparent, dependent and confirmed research, is through being open with the process of how it has been collected. I have in fact specified this process throughout the methodology chapter where I go deeper into the thought, preparation and development of the interviews as well as the process of sampling. However, I will also, in the next chapter of the analysis, in fact show quotes from the interviewed participants, giving the reader a chance to see the findings in its original form, where I have yet to do an analysis of it. The readers of this research will hence be able to make their own interpretations on the participants answers. The findings can in fact be argued to be analyzed with care and consideration, building on this research trustworthiness. I do as a matter of fact, based on this, argue for that this research is of most accuracy, where it meets the quality characteristics of it being trustworthy.

# 5.0 Analysis

In this chapter, the findings will be presented along with previous research and theories mentioned in the literature review and the theoretical framework. Different themes have been created based on the interviewee's answers throughout the interviews, namely; *Inspiration and Motivation*, *Image and Text*, as well as *Self-reflection and Responsibility*. Subsections have been further developed within these themes in order to truly understand the SMI and follower relationship regarding authenticity within the SMI marketing strategy. The chapter ends with a summary of the analysis, with the most relevant findings.

## 5.1 Background to the Analysis

As explained within the methodology chapter, the research findings have been conducted through 15 in depth interviews. Five of the interviews were performed with SMIs and ten were performed with followers. As the people are anonymous in this research, their names will not be used, and instead the SMIs will be referred to as: I1, I2, I3, I4 and I5, where the followers are referred to as: F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, F8, F9 and F10. As the interviews were conducted in Sweden with Swedish speaking people the interviews are also performed in Swedish. Hence, when quotes are used throughout the analysis, they have been translated from Swedish to English by me. More of this information can be found in the methodology chapter. Also, more information about the interviews can be found in Appendix 3.

## 5.2 Inspiration & Motivation

In this section, I will look into the characteristics of inspiration and motivation that, through the interviews, can be understood to be crucial within the SMI-follower relationship and authenticity. Hence, this section includes three subsections, namely; *Similarities in interest and lifestyle, Similarities between lifestyle and product, as well as, Seeing the products being used.*

### 5.2.1 Similarities in Interest and Lifestyle

Throughout the interviews, followers, expressed that they got inspired and motivated by similar interest and lifestyles to SMIs. This inspiration and motivation in itself have in fact also been understood to be of crucial importance when connected to the concept and aspect of authenticity. In fact, when F.1 talked about SMIs she said:

> They need to have an interesting life which I can relate to. It is all about my interest. I see no point in following an account where I get no inspiration in any way. I want to get inspired and most of the time I do follow SMIs just because they do share the same interest as me and hence, they inspire me in that way (F.1)

Inspiration can in fact with this quote be understood to be the main driving force for this follower to follow an SMI. In fact, F.1 express that she simply follows SMIs that, in one or the other way, inspires her based on interest. As a shared interest can create a bond between a SMI and their follower (Liu and Suh, 2017), one can argue for the fact that F.1 feels a bond with I.1 (the SMI that she follows) as she expressed that she follows him because:

> Oh, I think it is based on shared interests. It is a lifestyle that I myself can relate too. He has (…) I have (…). He feels genuine. (F.1)

In fact, she simply has a feeling that he is genuine based on that he shares the same interest as her. Hence, within the SMI-follower relationship one can argue for the fact that inspiration is built upon shared interests and hence shared interests are important due to the fact that it builds on their bond. However, this bond is not as strong for all followers even though one shares an interest with an SMI. In fact, F.6, expresses her reason to follow an SMI to be:

> I would say that it has to do with inspiration and motivation to life in general. Sometimes I get stressed by all the accounts and then I want to follow the once that are calmer. It depends on, very much, where I am currently in my life (F.6)

Hence, F.6 is still driven by inspiration and motivation, however, for her, her inspiration and motivation switch a lot more based on her switch in interests. In fact, I would argue that her current interest is shaping what she is inspired and

motivated by. As F.6 inspiration and motivation change all the time, the difference between F.6 and F.1 can be understood to be personal and not based on a certain level of inspiration or motivation, but more on the interest in itself. As authenticity can be regarded as the degree to which consumers perceive brands and to what intensity they are truly motivating oneself (Moulard et al., 2016) one can understand from the follower participants that authenticity is existing between them and the SMI that they follow, no matter for what the reason is for the following and no matter what the interest is. This can in fact be strengthened by what F.3 expresses as well. In fact, she says that she follows SMIs that she does not trust, but instead:

> I follow them because I think they are funny, but I would never buy anything which they do collaborations about, because I do not trust them based on the fact on how they do their collaborations. (F.3)

Hence, F.3 can even with this quote, I would argue, still base her reason of following an SMI on inspiration and motivation. In fact, I would argue that she, in one or the other way, as she in fact expresses that she thinks the SMIs in this example are funny, is inspired and motivated for personal reasons by their humor. Hence, people do in fact follow SMIs that are inspiring to them, however, I argue for the fact that they do not have to be trusted or authentic within their collaborations, to simply be followed. This also means that, if a SMI have a lot of followers it does not mean that they automatically are trusted and that their collaborations contribute to more purchases.

In fact, when talking about collaborations and purchases, it can be understood to be different. As F.3 puts it that she would never trust certain SMIs that she follows, in regards of their collaborations, because she does not believe that they are honest or real in the way that they do their collaborations. The SMIs can according to F.3 then inspire her to follow them, but not inspire her to purchase products. Hence when taking the authentic perspective into this aspect, one can see it as limited. In fact, one level of authenticity does not meet another level of authenticity. What I mean with this is that an SMI can be authentic to the degree to be followed, but at the same time not authentic enough to make the follower trust their opinion about a product and hence buy it. In fact, similarities

in lifestyle and interest can build a stronger SMI-follower relationship in the sense of it making a follower follow a certain SMI, but similarity in lifestyle and interest does not alone build on authenticity so that they trust them to a degree of actually purchasing any products. In fact, I do argue for the fact that an SMI can be authentic and inauthentic at the same time, from the perspective of one follower.

### 5.2.2 Similarities between Lifestyle and Product

Another aspect within motivation and inspiration that builds upon the authentic characteristic is the similarities between lifestyle and the products which the SMIs do collaborations with and about. In fact, I.4 said:

> (…) I would never give tips about a thing to my followers if I didn't believe in it myself. So, if I, say a makeup brand that I would be like - oh no I would never use these - and then highlight it to my followers where I express that it is amazing. That is nothing that I do. (I.4)

From this it is understood that I.4 does not do any collaboration just to do it, but that she in fact want it to relate to her. Both from the perspective of her lifestyle in itself but also because she does not want to be viewed by her followers in a way that does not represent who she truly is. I.1 express it similarly, namely;

> It's just that it should be interesting to me and have something to do with my life or my niche as well. I would never, for example, receive a brand shirt because it has absolutely nothing to do with me as a person. My Instagram account is about me and (…) and I don't feel like I want to get away from that. (I.1)

In fact, both I.4 and I.1 want the products that they do collaborations with and about should relate to them. They do in fact see no point in doing a collaboration that does not have such a connection to them. They simply express that they do what they believe is interesting. I.1 does in fact also add to that, that he does not want to move away from his portrayed self on his Instagram account. One can based on this comment in fact argue for that he is not truly himself due to the fact that he shows off one part of him, his Instagram self. However, I.4 does in fact answer this to some extent by saying that:

> I am not so private on my Instagram (…). And I do feel like I am having a lot of opinions about certain things but that is nothing that I feel like I have to bring up do discussion. (…)

But I still believe that they get a genuine feeling of who I am, as I still am who I am. It is me on my Instagram. I would never move away from that in any way, then you would lose yourself completely. (I.4)

Based on this it can be understood that SMIs believe that they are authentic in the sense that they still are themselves no matter how much or how little they say about themselves. They simply believe the product should relate to them in the way that it matches their person on their Instagram and hence that is their Instagram self and the one they portray themselves to be. This is in fact understood to be of equal importance from the follower perspective. In fact, F.1 expressed:

(…) it feels like you might be easily bought if you do those collaborations that bring in the most money. (…). I get the feeling that the person or influencer may not have a relation to the product, but they have a relation to what comes into the bank account. (F.1)

What can be understood from this quote is hence that the connection between SMI lifestyle and the product needs to exist in order for it to even be somewhat authentic. In fact, if it does not have a connection it simply does not make any sense, from the SMI or follower perspective. Hence it is understood that without this connection between SMI and product there is no authentic perspective and in fact the SMI is understood by the followers to simply do it based on the money the SMI gets from doing the collaboration. As inauthentic brands are they who seem to be committed to simply an increase in profit, influence and fame through higher sales (Holt, 2002), the inauthentic risk which F.1 talked about is simply if the SMIs do a collaboration because of the money and not because they do like the product. However, as many of the followers in fact brought up the money aspect more into detail, where they expressed that:

The fact that they get paid does not matter, they do put effort into it. (F.6)

If they do it nicely in a good way, of course they deserve a salary. (…) It is a job in today's society. (F.9)

Hence, as many of the followers express that they are aware that the SMIs in today's society earn money because it is a job and that it hence it not something bad in itself one could argue for the fact that the reason behind a collaborations should

not be the money. In fact, if the reason for doing a collaboration is money and not the fact that the product matches the lifestyle it is seen as inauthentic. In fact, what is understood to build upon the relationship between the lifestyle and the product and hence build upon the authentic characteristic is knowledge, experience and expertise.

> Among other things, I think it is experience and knowledge or that they use the product themselves. (…) That person has their Instagram to convey their garden interest and then there are products related to the garden or the garden interest. (…) If something had turned up that was nightclub that this person had had a collaboration with then they had service I would have doubted that person then. Because it does not feel like a person living that life. (F.1)

Hence, experience and knowledge can be understood to play a part in the followers understanding of the connection between SMI and product. In fact, if an SMI can be understood to have knowledge and they do a collaboration regarding a product of which they have knowledge about it is more authentic and hence more trustworthy. Also, as SMIs have knowledge and experience, it most likely also shows that it in fact is part of their interest in one or the other way. F.1 develops her thought by adding to her previous comment by saying (about I.1):

> (…) He uses what he actually promotes. I think. That's what he shows us, and I believe it because I get a genuine feeling from him and his collaborations in that way. It feels like his niche is a big part of his life and that's exactly what the account is about then you see as well that the products are there, both in posts and stories. So, it feels like it's part of everyday life. (I.1)

Hence, I would in fact argue that the stronger connection the SMI have to a specific lifestyle, with a certain type of interest and certain collaborations it is easier to get an authentic feeling from the followers, as the close connection between person and lifestyle often shows some type of knowledge and expertise within that area. Because in fact it is easier for the followers to understand and see the similarities. The SMI does in fact not have to communicate about the message if the message in itself already is clear. However, the SMIs can be explained to simply be themselves, which in fact can be argued to be authentic in itself, however, this authentic picture might not be in agreement to the follower. Hence a totally au-

thentic collaborations according to an SMI might not at all be perceived as authentic to a follower.

### 5.2.3 Seeing the products being used

The last subsection within "inspiration and motivation" is seeing the products being used and hence, this is also building on authenticity. What this is based on is hence the fact that the products that SMIs show and are sponsored by within their collaborations should be shown on the SMIs Instagram, outside the normal ways within the collaboration. I.1 does in fact express that:

> So, say that I usually post on my story a little extra for that product that I know, because basically know two months before what to do (…). Then I can do some stories before that. So, I build up a little before, so that people can see that I do use it. If I take (company) for example I do know six months before about what I am supposed to post. (I.1)

In fact, this is not something that I have found through previous research. That SMIs in fact post before in order to show their followers that they truly use the products and that they like it. So that the followers, when it is time for the collaboration, see the product as more relatable to that SMI. Hence, this can be understood to be a strategy for the SMIs in order to be understood as authentic in their collaborations. In fact, F.1 express how important it is for the SMI of which she follows is credible because:

> Credibility, I would say it's about being able to see the influencer use this product or involve it in their everyday lives. If I can see that connection, then it will be a little more believable. Then, if the person or influencer, has used the product before, it increases credibility. But credibility, I would say, is about my (…) "perception" of the influencer and the product, but maybe more so regarding influencers in combination with the product. (F.1)

One can in fact understand that I.1 simply tries to relate the product to himself in any way, so that it does not come as a surprise for his followers that he suddenly makes a collaboration to simply do it. But preparing and talking about it before can in fact build an authentic picture of him in fact liking the product and simply not be a sellout and hence gain from it. One can argue for the fact that he wants to build a relationship to this product because he wants his followers to relate the product to him and his account. He also relates the product to his lifestyle before

in fact showing that he gets paid for it. This can in fact be understood to be a good strategy as F.1 express that:

> It is in fact more credible and trustworthy I would say, when someone express that they love a product, but that the post then is in no collaboration, but simply express that the product is simply good. However, I am still not sure whether or not that is the truth, because I am not sure whether or not they say that because they are going to do a collaboration about it in any way. (F.1)

Hence, no matter how much the SMIs try to work in the product together with them they still might not be fully trusted. But one can in fact understand that the way of show products outside collaborations build upon an authentic relationship. Where SMIs try to communicate an authentic liking of the product and where the followers in fact see a stronger connection between the SMI and the product if the collaboration is simply not just in the collaboration context, it can be understood to in fact build on the authentic relationship.

### 5.2.4 Synthesis: Inspiration & Motivation

From section 5.2, inspiration and motivation, one can in fact see that inspiration and motivation is created on many levels. It is created through similar lifestyles between the SMI and the follower, similarities between the SMIs lifestyle and the product as well as a good connection between the SMI and the product outside collaborations. However, inspiration and motivation in itself cannot simply alone build an authentic picture between a follower and the SMI that they follow.

As followers are choosing to follow the SMIs based on what motivates them and what has a personal connection to themselves one can understand that the SDT is a theory to be of relevance for the SMI-follower relationship, especially as it is based on motivation and personality (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, as people's thoughts, opinions and lifestyles are different in themselves one can argue for the fact that their view of who is authentic is different. One can in fact connect and relate this to what Beverland and Farrelly (2010) explain authenticity to be, namely different depending on the person where individuals make up what is authentic to them. Hence, as followers have interests on their own one can understand that their motivation and inspiration are different as well. However, based on the interviewees answers I can still argue for the fact that the view of

what authenticity is, is similar, but what differs is who one thinks is authentic based on personal opinion and connection. The majority of the followers do however, today, express that they associate the inspiration and motivation to having similar interests and similarities in one's life with the SMI and not simply based on the number of followers. Hence, I argue for the fact that the number of followers says nothing regarding how authentic an SMI is. In fact, these statements rather show how important it is for followers to relate to the SMI in any way.

## 5.3 Image & Text

In this section, I will look into the concepts of image and text, as that, through the interviews, can be understood to be crucial within the SMI-follower relationship and authenticity. In fact, this section includes three subsections, namely; *Timing and flow: collaboration vs non-collaboration, Where does it belong: story vs feed, as well as, Keep it natural: reality vs fake*.

### 5.3.1 Timing and Flow: Collaboration VS Non-Collaboration

Timing and flow are another aspect within the SMI-follower relationship to be understood to be of importance when understanding the concept of authenticity. In fact, it can be understood that to be of importance to be aware of when to post a collaboration in comparison the other posts that one has. In fact, I.3 explain this as the following:

Not too often, that's probably it, you still try to get it a little continuous so that there are some other pictures in between. (…) I do not want too much collaborations just because you do not want to be, this bought one, that people will think like, she takes everything, everything she just gets. (…) you got to limit yourself (…). I could have had you know a new one every other week and I cannot stand for it like, well, then it must really be the thing that fits in my feed. (I.3)

In fact, another SMI, namely I.1 further states:

I upload about 4 pictures a month. If 3 of them would be in collaboration, the collaborations would take over. And I don't want it to. And what is too much collaboration is hard to tell,

but I think it depends, it depends on whether it is a one-time collaboration or if it is a one-year collaboration. (I.1)

Hence, one can in fact understand, from the SMI perspective, that they do not want their account to include too many collaborations at a time. However, the number of what they believe is a good amount of collaborations differ, but that can be argued to in fact depend on how much they post in general. As I.1 explain that he posts four pictures on his feed he cannot do to many collaborations as he does not want it to take over his account. However, comparing this to another SMI that posts more it can be understood that they can do more collaborations. In fact, this can be understood to be similar to the followers as well. In fact, they say that:

> The majority of the posts should not be collaboration. But I do think it depends a little bit, if there are new products all the time or if the collaboration is new all the time, because that makes me frustrated (F.1)

Hence, one can see similarities between the SMIs and their followers' opinions, however what is hard to tell is if the SMIs in fact have changed their strategies based on what their followers think. However, this way of going about timing and flow of collaborations can in fact be understood to work and in fact bring a more authentic feeling to the post. Because in fact, inauthentic brands are they who simply work for profit (Fill, 2013). But as previously explained, that followers are aware of the fact that SMIs need to earn money, it is in fact part of the authentic relationship to not just do collaborations and hence be viewed as an SMI that simply want profit. But instead, they should be themselves and keep posting normal posts as well.

Along with this, it can be understood, based on what I.1 and F.1 expressed, that is also more authentic to have larger collaborations and simply not a onetime collaboration with different companies and products all the time. In fact, then it is more important that the collaboration is a greater fit with the SMI.

### 5.3.2 Where does it belong: Story VS Feed

As social media is in constant change and development one can understand through the interviews that it is important for the people within these social media channels in fact change along with it. In fact, the Instagram Story is a well talked

about aspect for both SMIs and their followers, but maybe more so the SMIs. They do in fact explain their story to be of importance for them. In fact, some of the SMIs explain it further as:

> So, you try to spread it out a bit, put some pictures on the story and some in the flow (…). (I.3)

> On your story's you can post a little about anything. [...]. In fact, the story has bigger distribution than when posting on the regular feed. [...]. On the story in fact, it is a little, whatever. On your story you can in fact post a little about everything. (I.1)

The Instagram story can hence be understood to be of high interest for SMIs, and as some use it to incorporate some of their collaborations as they believe it is a more natural way of delivering it through. However, I.5 further states that she:

> So, I post a lot of my sponsored posts on my feed. Of course, I post it on my story [...], but I mostly post a little more private stuff there, where I try to interact more with my followers and ask them for tips as well [...]. (I.5)

In fact, as I.5 express it she is using it to show her collaborations sometimes however she simply focuses on connecting with her followers on a more personal level on her story, instead of simply thinking about the collaborations. In fact, this can be understood to be of interest for the followers as it in fact can be argued to make them feel a stronger connection to the SMI as he or she then simply is trying to understand their followers. However, I.4 does look at her collaboration posts on her story and the feed to be very similar and she does not see any difference. In fact, she said:

> Same there, it doesn't matter. My Instagram is my Instagram, it doesn't matter if it is in my story or my flow. I rarely remove my sponsored posts either without them being left behind. After all, in the story they can only stay for 24 hours and I never post them in highlights either. Without them, of course, they disappear. But in the feed, they are still there with the cost of having them there. (I.4)

Hence, she can in fact be understood to see the difference between the story and the feed as she explains the pros and cons of them both in one way. However, as she states that it is her account no matter what, she simply does not care. She be-

lieves that the story and her feed is equally important. In fact, some followers agree to the statement by I.4 where they in fact continued by stating:

> No, but what, it's their account, it doesn't matter where they post it, in my opinion. If they get followers, then they will see how the influencer thinks in the end anyway. (F.10)

> Well, I see it more as, collaboration as collaboration. If you follow someone you will still see everything anyway. (F.5)

Hence, they do in fact believe that the collaboration and the SMI is not affected in any way depending on where the SMI is posting the sponsored content. However, one follower states:

> (…) if it is permanent then, on their feed it can close other doors, if you say that they collaborate with Adidas, and if that collaboration then is on their feed, and Puma contacts the SMI, then the company might not want to work with them in the future, but if it is a story that is only 24h then it disappears and then they can still keep all doors open. So, I think the collaboration is heavier if it's on their feed. (F.3)

In fact, from this follower it can be understood to be a difference in how she perceives a collaboration depending on if it is on an SMIs story or normal feed. In fact, as I.1 express that one can post a little about anything in the story and it goes somewhat unnoticed it can in fact be argued to be noticed by some followers. However, it does not seem to have a huge effect on people no matter what. The difference between a SMIs story and feed is simply that, a difference in where they post. However, the SMIs might in fact have a stronger belief that their story is perceived in a better way than their feed.

Images of casual characteristics and with "snapshot aesthetics", are often viewed as more authentic than images and photos taken from a journalistic and artistic perspective (Gannon & Prothero, 2016). In fact, I.1 does express that he in fact spends more time on the posts within the feed and they require more time as he in fact want more quality for it. However, as the quick post, where natural characteristics are shown it can in fact be argued for that the story is more popular for that reason. Hence the story can be argued to in fact be chosen to be used within collaborations in order to reach out to one's followers in a more natural way. However, I would argue for the fact that it is important to

include collaborations along with non-collaborations in both the feed and the story as that shows a stronger connection between the product and the SMI and hence build on the authenticity.

### 5.3.3 Keep it natural: Reality VS Fake

Within the authentic relationship between SMIs and their followers it can be understood to be of importance to be real. However, it can be argued for that SMIs might be authentic in one way but not as honest to their followers as the followers might want. In fact, the SMIs say:

> (…) when I choose a collaboration then I want it to be as neutral as possible. That I shouldn't have to boast myself or show off (…). That it should just be me. (…). But I do not change my collaborations for my followers, I still think the same way and do what I think is good. (I.1)

> (…) now it may sound a little false when I say it, (…). But you really have to choose your words carefully. Because, it cannot sound too good, that it is the very best you know, even though I in fact might think so. (I.3)

Hence, the SMIs can be understood to be real in the way that they simply are themselves, that they in fact keep their posts natural as it also belongs to who they are. In fact, as I.1 expresses himself, it can be understood that he does not want to show off by his posts and that he hence wants it to be more natural and hence be a mix of the normal posts as well. In fact, I.3 does say that she in fact hold back on her positive words when telling her followers about certain products in which she is doing a collaboration. Because, in fact, she does not want her followers to simply just hear her words and base her words on the product to later on find out that they are disappointed. Because then, it can be understood that I.3 in fact could lose her trust if her followers simply do not like the product of which she talked so good about. Hence it is a fine line from the followers on what is real or fake. Especially as the SMIs in fact express themselves to be themselves, but then they can be understood to adapt to their surroundings to some extent. In fact, followers express their belief that the SMIs should not change their opinions based on their followers as they then can be understood to be more fake, because as F,5 say:

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> (…) but then at the same time I think that like, but why do you even care about my opinion
> if you are yourself and make collaborations as you want and in the ways you want. (F.5)

In fact, the followers move in closer to the realness of the SMIs. Where F.6 and F.9 say:

> I do not like the completely perfectly perfect feeling (…) but it is rather that I think it is
> fake, that it does not come naturally without them having to do their makeup for hours, they
> have filters on the pictures, they have retouched the body and so, but they don't say they
> did. (F.6)

> So fake to show and do collaborations but not use it yourself, then they definitely do it just
> for the money. And there is certainly nothing wrong with it really if they are open with it
> (…). (F.9)

One can based on this understand that what is fake and what is real is depending on the self, hence arguing for the fact that even what is authentic is different dependent on the self. However, as F.6 and F.9 expresses it, it can in fact be based on realness or fakeness as the SMI in fact simply just did not communicate about it. If their communication would be more forward and hence make the followers aware of their process, the authentic characteristics might in fact increase, where an SMI with a different opinion to oneself in fact can be expressed to be authentic.

### 5.3.4 Synthesis: Image & Text

From section 5.3, image and text, one can in fact see that images ant texts are created on many levels. It is created through the balance between collaborations and non-collaborations, through the balance of story's and feed as well as open communication in regards of both realness and fakeness. However, image and text in itself cannot simply alone build an authentic picture between a follow and the SMI of which they follow. However, all parts still, I argue, play an important role of the authentic understanding of the image and text.

## 5.4 Self-reflection & Responsibility

In this section, I will look into the concepts of self-reflection and responsibility that, through the interviews, can be understood to be crucial within the SMI-

follower relationship and authenticity. In fact, these were concepts that I did not anticipate to this degree. Both SMIs and followers had much to say regarding one's self and others self and hence also regarding who has the responsibility if something does not go as planned, or if something is authentic or inauthentic. This section includes two subsections, namely; *Stay true to who you are, as well as, Everything is up to oneself.*

### 5.4.1 Stay true to who you are

One, maybe the most, important thing that can be understood to influence the SMI marketing relationship in an authentic way is the fact that one simply should be true to who you are. This might in fact be more crucial for the SMIs, both from the SMI and follower perspective however, as they in fact are, they whom communicates a message. In fact, some of the SMIs express it as:

> But it is just being myself and continuing to be humble when I still get things. You want to be seen as genuine and do things that you like anyway. (I.1)

> (…) all companies, and some things, some have many requirements, but you try and agree on something that works for both, because otherwise I usually like to say no to that collaboration (…). (I.3)

Hence, no matter if an SMI is doing a collaboration or not they do believe themselves that it is crucial for them to stay true to who they are. Even if they hence do a collaboration where they in fact are supposed to deliver someone else's message they have to share the interest or idea to the company as that according to I.3 can be understood to still be connected to her and herself, in a sense. However, I.4 express the idea of staying true to oneself as:

> Being a copycat does not give you anything. You will get nowhere to be one of those. In fact, "second place, first loser". So, you come nowhere but you have to think for yourself. Then you seek inspiration (…) but you have to change everything you do according to your own stuff. Otherwise you go nowhere, it is immediately apparent whether you are a copycat or not. (I.4)

In fact, as understood by I.4 it is crucial to stay true to oneself as that in fact also makes you stand out as an SMI. It does simply not matter what the trends are, but if one simply likes a trend one can do it, but one should simply not jump on a

trend because of the reason that it is a trend. Some of the follower do in fact agree to the fact that the SMIs should stay true to who they are as F.7 express:

> If an influencer succeeds with something, but then everyone else thinks they should succeed with the same thing or post about the same thing as well as instead of driving on new thinking and doing their own thing and then I think it feels more fake or that those who mimicking or running the same tactics does it because they believe it should lead to more success in some way. (F.7)

Hence, the SMI should stay true to who they are as that can bring the "right" type of followers to them. Which in fact than build upon the authentic feeling. Being a copycat is hence inauthentic as one simply might just do it for the profit. Even though it has been understood in previous chapters that a profit for an SMI is not seen as a problem, it can in fact once again be argued to be authentic if an SMI simply is not driven by the money alone, but more so for the interest, and the self.

### 5.4.2 Everything is up to oneself

What I found that was interesting which in fact can be argued to be different from previous research is the fact that several followers expressed the importance of their self to doublecheck and not trust SMIs to the fully. In fact, SMIs say the same thing, that in fact follower should maybe not trust them.

> You want to be seen as genuine (…). But in the end, it's a decision they have to make, the followers, you know about the fact if they think I am honest or genuine or good you know. (…). They may not get an honest picture of me. With that, I don't think so much about it. Neither in ordinary posts nor collaborations. (…). I still do what I want. (I.1)

> They have nothing to do with it. Not mine, they can follow, or they cannot, but they have nothing to do with how I do things. I choose and that is it. (I.4).

However, within this subsection a very interesting fact is that the followers themselves believe that it is up to themselves if they in fact get inspired by an SMI as they have in fact chosen to follow them. This can be understood by the following quote:

> So, what I can feel is that you should not trust everything either. You should have a little common sense (…). But most importantly, do I need this, do I need these things? After all, it is up to the people themselves who look at it how to interpret it. Because I can interpret a

collaboration in one way while someone else can interpret it in a completely different way. But I think you have to be a little bit critical to collaborations, too. (F.8)

In fact, F.8 continues by stating that:

> Influencers try out new things as well, some things do not suit them and then there will be criticism and then it is up to them whether they want to continue or not. (…). But then as a follower you can be surprised, that like, oh he is doing a collaboration like that, and I might think that it does not fit it (…). But if they continue on the same track then it might become more natural. (F.8)

The followers do in fact express that one has to do research and make oneself aware of the product. As they do not know the SMI personally one cannot trust them to the fully, even though they still believe that they have a certain level of authenticity, trust and credibility. However, one can understand that the followers do in fact get inspiration from the followers and that they trust their opinion to some extent, but that one has to do more research if one should in fact want to purchase the product. F8 does in fact explain that some people might like the product, but some might not, and, we are different people and have different opinions. Hence, one can only trust oneself and blame oneself if one does in fact purchase it and not like it. One can understand this self-understanding to be of importance as F3 in fact explain that she has purchased products based on the opinion of the SMI but when she received it was not as good as she would have thought and hence she does in fact explain that she does not blame the SMI but more herself. She questions herself and her own naive self. As the influencers also express, I2, they are aware that all of their followers will not like all of the products that they collaborate with, but it is up to the individual themselves. It seems like this perspective in fact has changed. In fact, one can in understand that the SMIs believe they stand for their actions and that their actions should be based on what they find of importance. But at the same time the influencers believe they should do what they find is of interest and hence follow the ones that contribute to their life. Hence everything is up to oneself and this felling of 'sellout' which previous research discussed can be understood to maybe still exist, but as people are more aware of it, they do not care as much.

### 5.4.3 Synthesis: Self-reflection & Responsibility

From section 5.4, self-reflection and responsibility, one can understand authenticity to be more of a concept that is managed rather than created. In fact, authenticity can from this perspective be taken as less serious than what previous research might have showed (where authenticity was understood to be the main thing one looked for before making a purchase). In fact, from section 5.4, self-reflection and a critical thinking is building the authentic concept and its idea, and not the other way around. In fact, one simply does not just trust an SMI and his or her opinion in the same way today. As many people have had previous experiences with SMIs they do in fact base their previous experiences on to other SMIs and hence understand that they need to think before trusting and believing that someone or something is authentic.

## 5.5 Summary of Analysis

For this chapter I have dealt with the findings from the interviews and hence connected them and analyzed the findings along with previous research from the literature review and theory from the theoretical framework. From this analysis one can hence answer the questions: *How are Swedish SMIs communicating their authenticity to their followers on Instagram, when the posted content is sponsored? and; How are Swedish SMIs authenticity perceived by social media followers on Instagram, when the posted content is sponsored?*

Even though authenticity can be understood to be different to everyone based on one's self, there are ways that SMIs communicate their authenticity, whether it is through a strategy or not. Hence social media followers are in fact also perceiving SMIs authenticity in certain ways, no matter if the SMI is using a strategy or not. SMIs are simply communicating something and their followers are simply perceiving something.

### 5.5.1 Social Media Influencer: Communicated Authenticity

SMIs can in fact, be explained to communicate their authenticity through actions that are simply actions of their own character. Hence some of their actions one cannot simply put a communicative characteristic on as the SMIs simply explained that they were themselves and did not have a thought on how they per-

formed their communicative actions. However, as authenticity is regarded as something true, genuine or real (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), with features such as sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness and originality (Molleda, 2010), I would in fact argue for the fact that the self-represented actions are more authentic, than the actions being strategically planned to be authentic.

As a matter of fact, as the sociologist perspective of authenticity takes one-self into consideration, it can be understood that every action taken by the SMI apart from the actions of the inner self are less authentic. Throughout the analysis it is in fact established that SMIs act differently and in fact believe different things, however they do not have a clear strategy on how to be perceived as authentic except in fact being themselves.

### *5.5.2 Social Media Followers: Perceived Authenticity*

Social media followers can, as a summary and hence shortly, be explained to perceive authenticity in different ways, where some SMI characteristics however are more crucial than others. However, even the followers believe that they have more responsibility in their choices of following and their actions and behaviors that might be affected by SMIs. As they are aware of the fact that SMIs do collaborations in order to gain something from it, they do not blame the SMI for that as they are aware that it is a job. However, when looking at the characteristics that can be understood to be of importance for followers is in fact similar to the SMIs, in fact that the SMI is themselves, because then, the followers can find SMIs of which they in fact want to follow. However, they perceive SMIs as either authentic or inauthentic, however before in fact coming to such a statement, they judge all actions by the SMIs and hence perceive actions as authentic and inauthentic as well. Hence, there is no clear way of what it is that in fact makes followers perceive SMIs as authentic, even though, motivation and inspiration, collaboration vs non-collaboration, product, lifestyle, story and feed as well as all other aspects play a role within it and in fact build on authenticity.

# 6.0 Discussion & Conclusion

This chapter concludes this research by including a final discussion focusing on returning to the contributions to SMI marketing communication and hence strategic communication. The chapter is ending with a conclusion with contributions and implications, as well as suggestions for future research.

## 6.1 Discussion

As it has been unclear of how SMIs can be authentic with their followers when doing paid collaborations this research aimed to provide knowledge on how authenticity is affected within the SMI marketing strategy. This was done by investigating SMIs and some of their followers. More precisely, looking at how SMIs communicate authenticity and how the followers perceived the authenticity.

Looking at the 'source models' by Ohanian (1990), one can in fact see similarities to what I have come to answered in this research. In fact, similarities can be found in the source attractiveness model, where similarity, familiarity, likability, intellectual skills, personality properties and lifestyle (Ohanian, 1990) all can be understood to build on authenticity within the SMI and follower relationship. Findings within this research can in fact also be connected to the source credibility model, where expertise and trustworthiness, knowledge, experience and skill (Ohanian, 1990) in fact also are found throughout this research. In fact, all of these aspects can be found to be of importance when building authenticity between SMIs and their followers. However, as it is understood that all people base these categories on their own personal life and their realities it is in fact difficult to express clearer guidelines to an authentic SMI marketing strategy.

Hence, I would argue, based on the results within this research, that the perception of authenticity has more to it than simply having these characteristics that needs to be fulfilled in order for a SMI and follower relationship to be truly authentic. Even though I in fact believe that the source models are good to keep in mind for marketing communicators when wanting to build authentic relationships

between SMIs and followers, it might in fact not be something one can build. Because as a fact, as understood from the results within this research, one is simply more authentic when simply being oneself and hence there cannot be a strategy build for being oneself, but one simply just is it.

I would, however, argue for that authenticity is just as important as it always has been and still has the same meaning, but that people are more aware of the fact that SMIs do what they have to do for themselves, and hence are viewed as less authentic. In fact, I would argue that the level of authenticity today does not have to reach the same heights as previously, as what is authentic is measured by the same measurements, but one simply has lower standards of what one can expect to be authentic.

As this research aims at contributing to the SMI marketing communication within the strategic communication I can in fact say that the communication between SMI and followers are of importance, where authenticity plays a role in the sense of in fact building trust, motivation, inspiration, and knowledge, etc. However, all of the characteristics can in fact be limited to a certain degree. Hence, authenticity might not be as important as it has been in the sense that people understand the underlying idea behind collaborations today. Paid collaborations are more common today and the SMI followers do understand that SMIs have to do paid collaborations. In fact, followers trust SMIs with knowledge and they who inspire them, but they do no longer trust them as a friend (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011), but more as a SMI with characteristics of a friend.

In the SMI marketing strategy I would in fact argue that you can be both authentic and inauthentic. As a matter of fact, I would argue for that the level of authenticity is measured and viewed upon differently within the SMI marketing strategy. However, being authentic does not always work as a strategy. As sometimes you simply have to be yourself. Some SMIs can of course be understood to be more or less authentic/inauthentic, however one cannot truly say that this SMI is this or that. I would argue for the fact that the SMI-follower relationship has been stronger than what it is currently and according to the followers they do in fact express that they had a different kind of trust a couple of years ago.

As one might want to argue for the fact that there either is something authentic and/or inauthentic, I would indeed argue for the fact that the SMI-follower relationship is not that simple and complex. As many different aspects, concepts

and characteristics play an important role, it is simply not either this or that that are of importance within the strategy. In fact, it is the picture of all aspects, concepts and characteristics together. Hence, I would argue for the fact that authenticity is of importance within the strategy of marketing communication. However, one will simply never reach a strategy where all aspects are met by all parts to be of authentic character. But still, people can be understood to be authentic.

## 6.2 Conclusion and Contributions

The aim of this research was to understand the concept of authenticity within the SMI and follower relationship within SMI marketing. Hence, this research most meaningful contribution is in fact the authentic perspective of the SMI and follower relationship. Hence as investigating in the relationship the most interesting finding is in fact that authenticity can be understood to be more complex within social studies as one might think. In fact, as one's self is understood to have different opinions about the same thing, namely, different opinions about what is authentic and inauthentic regarding an SMI. As it is understood that authenticity within the SMI and follower relationship is more complex than to simply say that the relationship is authentic or inauthentic, this research contributes to marketing communication and hence also strategic communication as it has investigated and in fact clarified the authentic understanding within the SMI and follower relationship on Instagram. Hence, a contribution to strategic communication is hence that authenticity is broader within communication. In fact, in order to truly understand what authenticity is, one simply has to understand the underlying characteristics and aspects within what is studied.

As one in fact can be understood to be the most authentic when being oneself, one can in fact argue for that one can simply not have a strategy for how to be authentic. Hence, the SMI marketing strategy can be understood to not having a fully developed strategy where one can simply work towards being authentic.

## 6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the fact that this research has been conducted during a limited time frame, I would argue for the fact that research is needed where all actors are taking part and contributing to their view of the SMI marketing strategy. Hence, companies,

influencers and followers are of further interest to investigate in. When all stake-
holders are incorporated, I would in fact also argue for them to be in relation to
each other, simply not just a random company, SMI and follower, but more pre-
cisely actors who all are part of the same SMI marketing strategy.

I would also recommend future research to do interviews along with a mul-
timodal analysis on SMIs posts in order to get the perspective of the SMI outside
the SMI themselves. As I experienced some of the SMIs having a hard time in fact
expressing themselves I believe a multimodal analysis could bring a deeper in-
sight and understanding to the SMI communicative perspective of authenticity.

Along with these suggestions, I would also argue for the fact one should carry
out similar research within different social media channels in order to get a broad-
er understanding of authentic relationship within the SMI marketing strategy. Al-
so, as social media is in constant change I would in fact also argue for the fact that
it is crucial to in fact stay updated on the latest updates and hence, new research is
in constant need within this area of study.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: The e-mail & The message sent to Participants

Appendix 1 shows the email and the Instagram message that was sent out to the SMIs and their followers regarding being part of an interview regarding the subject of this research. As the participants targeted for this research are Swedish the e-mail and the message were sent out in Swedish.

### *The e-mail sent to the SMIs*

"Hej!
Skulle du vara intresserad av att få en inblick i hur följare på Instagram ser på influensers betalda samarbeten?

Jag heter Matilda och skriver just nu en Master-uppsats inom strategisk kommunikation gällande just relationen mellan influensers och deras följare inom ämnet äkthet och samarbeten. Mitt mål är att intervjua både influensers och några av deras följare för att få en inblick i vad de båda parterna tycker och tänker om betalda samarbeten. Därav kontaktar jag dig.

Jag skulle gärna vilja intervju dig angående just detta då jag tycker du har ett intressant konto med mycket interaktioner och intressanta samarbeten. Jag kommer självklart inte använda ditt namn eller namnet på de företag du samarbetar med. Allt sådant kommer vara anonymt, därav ifall du skulle önska, kan vi skriva kontrakt på det. Meningen med intervjun är inte att se om du gör rätt eller fel utan snarare förstå hur du tänker kring dina sponsrade inlägg. Intervjun kommer vara ca 40 minuter men tiden kan självklart anpassas och om du inte vill fortsätta intervjun när vi väl börjat är det självfallet helt okej att avbryta vid vilket tillfälle som helst. Intervjun är planerad att genomföras online någon gång under nästa vecka, men tid och dag kan anpassa efter ditt schema.

Jag hoppas verkligen på att du kommer vilja delta.
Ha en toppendag!

Med bästa hälsningar,

Matilda Matthys
Master student på Lunds Universitet
Program; Strategisk Kommunikation

P.S.
Om du har några funderingar är det bara att du hör av dig.
Helst ser jag att vi gör en intervju online, men om du inte vill vara delaktig via en intervju ser jag inga problem med att maila dig frågorna. "

### The Instagram message sent to the Followers

"Hej!

Jag heter Matilda och skriver just nu en Master-uppsats inom strategisk kommunikation gällande just relationen mellan influensers och deras följare inom ämnet äkthet och samarbeten. Mitt mål är att intervjua både influensers och några av deras följare för att få en inblick i vad de båda parterna tycker och tänker om betalda samarbeten. Därav kontaktar jag dig.

Jag skulle gärna vilja intervju just dig som en av följarna till en influenser.

Jag kommer självklart inte använda ditt namn och du kommer vara anonym under hela processen. Intervjun kommer vara ca 40 minuter men tiden kan självklart anpassas och om du inte vill fortsätta intervjun när vi väl börjat är det självfallet helt okej att avbryta vid vilket tillfälle som helst. Intervjun är planerad att genomföras online någon gång under nästa vecka, men tid och dag kan anpassa efter ditt schema.

Om du har några funderingar är det bara att du hör av dig!

Jag hoppas verkligen på att du kommer vilja delta.


Med bästa hälsningar,
Matilda Matthys"

# Appendix 2: The interview guide

Appendix 2 shows the interview guides - the guide of the questions used during the interviews. As there are two different aspects of the interview process, namely SMIs and followers, there are two different interview guides. The questions within the interview guides are in Swedish as the interviews were conducted in Swedish.

*Interview guide - SMIs*

| Interview Guide: Social Media Influencers | |
|---|---|
| **THEME** | **QUESTIONS** |
| INTRODUCTION | - Varför gör du samarbeten?<br>- Hur väljer du dina samarbeten?<br>- Vad är dina förhoppningar/förväntningar med dina samarbeten?<br>- Vilka krav har du på dina samarbeten? |
| **THEME** | **QUESTIONS** |
| THE SELF<br>*KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE* | - Hur vill du att dina följare ska uppfatta dig genom ditt innehåll? Hur gör du för att dem ska uppfatta dig så?<br>- Hur påverkas dina samarbeten av ditt personliga/offentliga jag?<br>- Vad gör du för att företag inte ska påverka din självpresentation? |
| **THEME** | **QUESTIONS** |
| MOTIVATION | - Vad är din motivation på Instagram?<br>- Vad är viktigt för dig när det kommer till samarbeten? |
| EXECUTION | - Hur väljer du vilket företag eller vilken produkt du ska göra samarbete med?<br>- Hur utför du dina samarbeten?<br>- Hur tänker du kring antalet samarbeten som du gör?<br>- Hur gör du för att det inte ska bli som att du "bara behagar dina följare" så att dina samarbeten ska mottas bättre?<br>- Hur balanserar du din åsikt med åsikten av företaget du är i samarbete med? |
| **THEME** | **QUESTIONS** |
| HONESTY, TRUST &<br>CREDIBILITY | - Hur förmedlar du att du faktiskt gillar den produkt/service som du gör reklam för?<br>- Hur tänker du kring balansen mellan vanliga inlägg och sponsrade inlägg i ditt flöde?<br>- Hur stor påverkan har dina följare/företag på dig, hur du utför dina samarbeten? |
| **THEME** | **QUESTIONS** |
| ENDING | - Är det något specifikt samarbete du tycker har blivit extra bra?<br>- Är det något samarbete som, enligt dig själv, blivit sämre? |

*Interview guide - Followers*

| Interview Guide: Social Media Followers | |
| :---: | :---: |
| **THEMES** | **QUESTIONS** |
| INTRODUCTION | - Vad är en, influenser enligt dig?<br>- Vilken relation har du till de influenserna du följer och vilken betydelse har dem för dig i din vardag? |
| **THEMES** | **QUESTIONS** |
| MOTIVATION | - Vad är det som får dig att följa en, influenser?<br>- Vad är viktigt för dig när det kommer till influensers samarbeten på Instagram? |
| **THEMES** | **QUESTIONS** |
| EXECUTION | - Kan du ge exempel på en, influenser, som du tycker arbetar med samarbeten på ett bra/mindre bra sätt.<br>- Ändras din uppfattning av influencern om samarbetet betyder att personen tjänar på det?<br>- Vad tycker du om att influensers får produkter gratis från företaget de samarbetar med?<br>- Vad tycker du om att influensers använder sig av rabatt-koder?<br>- Vad tycker du om att influensers har tävlingar där du kan vinna produkter? |
| **THEMES** | **QUESTIONS** |
| HONESTY, TRUST & CREDIBILITY | - Vad är det som får dig att uppleva att en, influenser, är ärlig i ett samarbete?<br>- Är det någon specifik typ av samarbete som får dig att se det mer som äkta?<br>- Följer du någon, influenser, som du inte litar på? Vad är det som får dig att följa dem om du inte litar på dem?<br>- Hur är din tillit till en, influenser, som bara pratar posi-tivt om produkter dem är i samarbete med?<br>- Vad gör en, influenser, om den inte är äkta? |
| **THEMES** | **QUESTIONS** |
| KNOWLEDGE & EXPERTISE | - Hur påverkas du av en Influenser?<br>- Vilken påverkan har en influensers kunskap på dig?<br>- Vilken påverkan har en influensers kunskap på dig i ett samarbete? |
| **THEMES** | **QUESTIONS** |
| INFLUENCER X<br>(X=1/2/3/4/5) | - Vad var det som fick dig att börja följa I.X?<br>- Hur tycker du att I.X utför sina samarbeten?<br>- Vad är det som gör att du litar på att I.X säger sanning-en?<br>- Har du någonsin köpt en produkt som I.X har visat på sin Instagram?<br>- Vad tycker du om detta specifika samarbete I.X gjorde? |

## Appendix 3: Participant Interviews, Information Table

Appendix 3 shows details regarding each interview in order to give an understanding of each participant without harming the anonymity of them. Hence within this table one can find information such as; What SMI the followers follow, what number of followers the SMIs have, along with; Age, Gender, Execution, Date and Length of the interviews.

| Participant SMI | Shortening used in text | Gender | Age | Number of followers | Execution | Date | Length of interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Influencer 1 | I.1 | Male | 28 | ≈ 7.000 | Phone | 01/04/20 | 54 minutes |
| Influencer 2 | I.2 | Female | 30 | ≈ 29.500 | Messenger | 03/04/20 | 48 minutes |
| Influencer 3 | I.3 | Female | 43 | ≈ 18.500 | Messenger | 07/04/20 | 37 minutes |
| Influencer 4 | I.4 | Female | 42 | ≈ 110.000 | Phone | 07/04/20 | 32 minutes |
| Influencer 5 | I.5 | Female | 26 | ≈ 37.000 | Messenger | 09/04/20 | 45 minutes |
| | | | | | | | |
| Participant Follower | Shortening used in text | Gender | Age | The SMI of which they follow | Execution | Date | Length of interview |
| Follower 1 | F.1 | Female | 28 | Influencer 1 | Phone | 06/04/20 | 57 minutes |
| Follower 2 | F.2 | Male | 30 | Influencer 1 | Phone | 08/04/20 | 34 minutes |
| Follower 3 | F.3 | Female | 29 | Influencer 2 | Messenger | 08/04/20 | 45 minutes |
| Follower 4 | F.4 | Female | 19 | Influencer 2 | Messenger | 09/04/20 | 37 minutes |
| Follower 5 | F.5 | Female | 32 | Influencer 3 | Messenger | 10/04/20 | 32 minutes |
| Follower 6 | F.6 | Female | 27 | Influencer 3 | Phone | 12/04/20 | 46 minutes |
| Follower 7 | F.7 | Male | 28 | Influencer 4 | Phone | 12/04/20 | 43 minutes |
| Follower 8 | F.8 | Female | 25 | Influencer 4 | Phone | 16/04/20 | 44 minutes |
| Follower 9 | F.9 | Female | 24 | Influencer 5 | Messenger | 22/04/20 | 51 minutes |
| Follower 10 | F.10 | Female | 21 | Influencer 5 | Phone | 17/04/20 | 33 minutes |