



SCHOOL OF  
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# **Virtual Influencers, Friends to Listen to?**

A Qualitative Study About Virtual Influencers Ability to Develop  
Parasocial Relationships and Opinion Leadership

By

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## **Abstract**

<b>Title</b>	Virtual Influencers, Friends to Listen to?
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<b>Supervisor</b>	Ekaterini Drosou
<b>Keywords</b>	Virtual Influencer, Influencer marketing, Influencer, Parasocial Relationship, Opinion Leadership, Source Credibility
<b>Thesis Purpose</b>	The purpose of this study is to explore if virtual influencers can be viewed as capable of developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. This will be researched through the virtual influencers source credibility, perceived by the Swedish audience of Instagram. This is based on previous research that has shown that the two concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership are key for successful, traditional influencer marketing.
<b>Methodology</b>	This is a qualitative study, based on an abductive approach with a relativist ontological position and a constructionist epistemological position. This was chosen in order to allow for the most appropriate and relevant interpretations of the empirical material.
<b>Theoretical Perspective</b>	The theoretical perspective for the study involves the source credibility theory (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953) and the two concepts of parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and opinion leadership (Katz, 1957).
<b>Empirical Data</b>	The empirical data consisted of twelve semi-structured interviews where similar patterns could be identified. This allowed for a thematic sorting process which resulted in five identified themes that were later analyzed.
<b>Findings</b>	The main findings of the study shows difficulties for virtual influencers to be perceived as source credible and the difficulty for them to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. However, the study also shows that it could be possible under certain circumstances that are stated in the thesis.
<b>Practical Implications</b>	This study provides practical implications regarding how to design a virtual influencer and what attributes that are necessary when creating a virtual influencer and managing it to suit the needs of the audience. If practitioners strive to leverage this knowledge, virtual influencers could potentially become an asset when it comes to influencer marketing.

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# **1. Introduction**

The first chapter of the thesis aims to introduce the reader to the topic of influencers, influencer marketing and the new phenomenon of virtual influencers. These sections are followed by a problematization, the purpose of the study and the research question. Lastly, the theoretical and practical contributions of the research are presented.

## **1.1 Opening**

Imagine yourself scrolling through Instagram, checking for your friends and family's latest updates and posts. You might even catch a glimpse of your favourite influencer's lives. You are overwhelmed with all the content there is to take part of. People share happenings from their day, pictures of their food, some are recommending products and sharing other tips and tricks. You are almost done catching up on your Instagram feed, you just need to look through the explore section. You scroll through the mix of images and videos that are posted when you all of a sudden stumble upon Lil Miquela. She seems to be an influencer, but you can sense that there is something odd about her, but you cannot put your finger on what that is? You have not seen her before, so you begin to look through her feed, and once you read the biography of hers, it becomes clear to you what felt odd about her. She is not real. She is a robot, a virtual influencer. You ask yourself, "how is this possible? How can a robot have over three million followers and thousands of likes?". Her feed looks like any other influencers, with posts of her daily life, of her hanging out with virtual and human friends, and even promoting products from several brands. "How can people be following someone who is not real?" you think while scrolling through her feed. The whole concept seems very interesting to you, "maybe I should give her a follow anyway", and you start following her.

## **1.2 Background**

The word "Influencer" is today considered a modern concept (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Nevertheless, it has been established for a long time where for instance, celebrities and brand figures are considered as formerly influencers. However, the field of social media influencers that are present at contemporary platforms such as Instagram, Youtube or Facebook is a late modern phenomenon that has emerged in the last decade (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). A social media influencer is described as someone who has created a sizable social network at social media platforms by attracting a large audience that follows the influencer (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).



During the last decade, social networking online has rapidly increased in popularity due to the entrance of social media (Makrides, Vronti, Christofi & Thrassou, 2020). This has resulted in an emergence of marketing opportunities for businesses in various forms (Suciu, 2020). One fast-growing marketing phenomenon for businesses on social media is influencer marketing, where brands use influencers to endorse their products (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Influencer marketing thus implies that a brand uses an influencer who is present at one or more social media platforms for the influencer to promote the brand's products to its followers. The purpose of this marketing strategy is to persuade followers to purchase the promoted products as well as increase brand awareness among the followers (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). According to Booth and Matic (2011), the usage of social media influencers is one of the marketing strategies that is most successful when promoting products and services. Estimations show that 75% of marketers are using influencers in their marketing strategy (Augure, 2015 cited in De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Moreover, influencer marketing is expected to grow exponentially and become a 15 billion dollar industry before 2022 (Business Insider, 2019). Hence this justifies why it is becoming a prominent strategy for businesses to invest in (Wiltshire, 2018).

As influencer marketing is gaining popularity as a new, modern marketing strategy, the research within this field has expanded. The interests in how to customize a marketing strategy using influencers, and what factors make influencer marketing successful are growing (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). Previous research on this topic points out two significant key constructs for effective and successful influencer marketing that positively impact the outcome of an influencer marketing campaign (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). These are the development of parasocial relationships between an influencer and its followers (Jin & Ryu 2020; Lee & Watkins 2016; Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity & Luoma-Aho, 2020) and influencers ability to act as opinion leaders (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Ki & Kim 2019). The reason for these key constructs being successful for influencer marketing is mainly because parasocial relationships spur relational factors of trust, fondness and social influence power between the influencer and the followers, whereas opinion leadership affects individuals' adoption of new products and ideas due to the influence of opinion leaders (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020).

However, even though this particular marketing strategy of influencer marketing on social media is relatively new, it is facing constant development, not least due to its rapid advancement and increasing popularity (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). One of the latest advancements within the industry is the entrance of virtual influencers, which are fully robotized and controlled by the creator (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Virtual influencers can be described as computer-generated people who have been designed to have human characteristics, personalities, interests, feelings and a human-like appearance (Mosley, n.d.). The virtual influencers are designed by a team of creators who can be individually independent or employed by a company (Kádeková and Holienčinová, 2018). Their task is to design the influencer, develop a personality and an appearance for the influencer as well as portray their lives on social media (Mosley, n.d.).

The first fictional influencer that debuted on Instagram in 2016, created by the AI firm Brud, was “Lil Miquela”, whose profile currently has over 3 million followers (Sokolowski, n.d.). Lil Miquela was nominated in 2018 by Time Magazine to be among the top 25 most influential people on the internet (Staff, 2018). Hence, Lil Miquela and her creators revolutionized and opened up new opportunities within the industry where fictional characters now can be built based on global trends and what followers are responding to and contemporary requests, instead of personal preferences and assumptions (Sokolowski, n.d.).

Since Lil Miquela’s entrance on Instagram, the number of virtual influencers with different purposes are frequently increasing. However, the common idea between them all is that they are created to emulate a global ideal (Sokolowski, n.d.). Among the 15 most popular virtual influencers on Instagram, considered in followers, lifestyle and fashion influencers are overrepresented (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). One of these is Lil Miquela. She posts photos and videos of her daily life in the U.S, where she socializes with friends and family, visits restaurants, goes on vacations and more. Another virtual lifestyle influencer is Lu Do Magalu, with over 5 million followers on Instagram. Both Lu do Magalu, and Lil Miquela advertises and promotes different products and services on their Instagram profiles. Many of their posts have fashion brands tagged in their photos and shoutouts to different brands. Several virtual influencers on Instagram share the same concept of being lifestyle influencers by posting pictures of their daily lives and promoting products and services in the pictures and videos they upload.

However, there are other virtual influencers who do not share the same purpose as well. For instance, the virtual influencer “Bee\_influencer”, with almost 300 000 followers on Instagram, has the appearance of a bee and posts pictures addressing the climate issue and the preservation of bees (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021).

In parallel with the previously emphasized benefits and the success of influencer marketing, a significant amount of criticism and uncertainty is emerging at the same time for this type of marketing strategies. A study from Statista (2019) shows that 86 percent of the internet users in the United States distrust or are sceptical towards human influencers. The major reason for increasing mistrust among consumers might be the uncertainty of whether an influencer is getting paid for promoting products and brands or rather sincere recommendations (Fenwick, 2018). This will thus be a great challenge for the creators behind virtual influencers to meet and manage. Perhaps it will be even harder for them to create credibility and trustworthiness among the consumers to be successful when it comes to influencer marketing (Moustakas, Lamba, Mahmoud & Ranganathan, 2020). Alternatively, the mistrust towards human influencers might even be the key rationale for virtual influencer marketing since they could be created only for a commercial purpose.

### **1.3 Problematization**

According to Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018), influencer marketing has become the strategy within online marketing that has grown the most and is the most effective tool for acquiring customers online. As this strategy has gained attention, scientific research on how to customize an effective influencer marketing strategy has increased and contributed to a greater understanding of the topic (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). Among the literature on influencer marketing, the two concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership have been argued to have a significant impact on the outcome of an influencer marketing strategy (Jin & Ryu 2020; Lee & Watkins 2016; Reinikainen et al. 2020; Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Ki & Kim 2019).

Furthermore, the industry of influencer marketing and social media, like so many others, is facing a potential paradigm shift. An already digitized industry is now facing the advancement of AI technology which has enabled the creation of robot-like, virtual influencers with the opportunity to be controlled entirely (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). As influencer marketing is gaining significance and is becoming a prominent marketing strategy for companies, virtual influencers might get an increased importance in the future as

well. However, several difficulties could arise with this new phenomenon since a replacement of traditional human influencers with virtual ones could imply new challenges and obstacles to manage (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). For instance, Wirtz, Patterson, Kunz, Gruber, Lu, Paluch and Martins (2018) argues for the potential difficulty for consumers to interact and adopt opinions of robots. Since virtual influencers are computer generated and could be referred to as robots (Moustakas et al., 2020), the fact of not being human could complicate the development of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. That is since the development of parasocial relationships requires interactions between the parties (Horton & Wohl, 1956), while the development of opinion leadership requires adoptions of opinions by the audience (Katz, 1957).

Another potential difficulty for virtual influencers to overcome is if people are less likely to form a parasocial relationship with them for not being human. That is, since Labrecque (2014) argues that parasocial interactions are less valuable to people and harder to form if they know that they are interacting with a robot instead of another human being. Since virtual influencers are not human beings, this could affect them as well. Furthermore, virtual influencers could also face the challenge of being perceived as less trustworthy than ordinary human influencers. Since Riedl, Mohr, Kenning, Davis and Heekeren (2014) claim that virtual avatars were perceived as less trustworthy than humans when they were compared. This could be a disadvantage for virtual influencers, since trustworthiness is important within the field of marketing as well as influencer marketing (Bergkvist, Hjalmarson & Mägi, 2016; Jabr & Zheng, 2017). In addition, for the key construct of opinion leadership to be possible, the opinion leader has to appear as trustworthy for the audience to adopt advice and recommendations (Katz, 1957). Hence, if the virtual influencers do not come across as trustworthy, they may not be able to develop opinion leadership (Katz, 1957). This applies to the concept of parasocial relationships as well, since trust between the parties is essential in order for a parasocial relationship to be developed and established (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Consequently, several difficulties could arise for virtual influencers regarding their ability to develop the key constructs of influencer marketing, that is, parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. However, since social media influencers are relatively new phenomena, virtual influencers are of an even newer character (Moustakas et al., 2020), meaning a scant amount of previous studies. The current research is limited and close to non-existing when it comes to virtual influencers in general and their ability to develop parasocial relationships

and opinion leadership in particular. Hence, this leaves a gap in the literature that is of interest to examine that could be of interest for the future of influencer marketing. If the concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership were to be applicable to virtual influencers as well, they could potentially contribute to serve as valuable influencers for businesses in constituting successful influencer marketing in accordance with previous literature (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). This, in combination with the fact that influencer marketing is increasing in popularity makes the topic of contemporary relevance (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). As the industry of influencer marketing is growing, virtual influencers could have the potential to become the next big thing (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). That is because they might provide advantages for brands unlike human influencers, such as the opportunity to own and fully control a virtual influencer that is perfectly matched with the audience's promotional requests, and thus provide an efficient marketing strategy (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018).

However, despite the possible advantages with virtual influencers, it is of importance to consider the potential challenges as well to be able to predict and better understand their potential future and whether they can be of use for influencer marketing or not. One way for virtual influencers to develop the two key concepts of influencer marketing could potentially be from their perceived source credibility. Previous research has shown that parasocial relationship and opinion leadership is dependent on trust and credibility (Chung & Cho, 2017; Katz, 1957). Therefore, the theory of source credibility could serve as an explanation to the development of these constructs since it derives from a source's credibility. Hence, this study aims to contribute to a part of this discussion by examining and filling the academic gap regarding whether virtual influencers have the ability to develop two of the most significant constructs of influencer marketing. That is parasocial relationships and opinion leadership (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020).

#### **1.4 Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore if virtual influencers can be viewed as capable of developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. This will be researched from the virtual influencers source credibility, perceived by the Swedish audience of Instagram. This is based on previous research that has shown that the two concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership are key for successful, traditional influencer marketing.

## **1.5 Research Question**

*How are virtual influencers viewed by the audience of Instagram in being able to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership from their perceived source credibility?*

## **1.6 Contributions of Research**

This study is focused on the age group of 18 to 25 years, as part of Generation Z, since they are most exposed to influencer marketing on Instagram (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen, Welte, 2020). In addition, Swedes within this age group were the most active users on Instagram during 2020, where 90% between the ages of 16 to 25 reported that they were active users of the platform (Statista, 2020). Furthermore, little research regarding virtual influencers has been conducted on the Swedish audience of Instagram. According to Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018), Generation Z is also overrepresented when it comes to actively purchasing the products that influencers promote through Instagram. This makes this age group particularly interesting to study further in the context of virtual influencers as well. For academics, this study will provide theoretical contributions by examining how Swedes in the ages of 18 to 25, as part of Generation Z, view virtual influencers and their ability to develop two key constructs of influencer marketing, that is, parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Since Generation Z is considered as the major target audience for influencer marketing (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018), this study aims to provide valuable theoretical contributions within this topic and for the particular age group 18 to 25 years.

Furthermore, by adding to the current literature gap from a consumer perspective regarding virtual influencers in general and parasocial relationships and opinion leadership in particular, theoretical contributions will be provided for academics. This study aims at contributing to the existing theory of source credibility by applying it to a new phenomenon of virtual influencers. The theory will also be applied in the context of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, which will contribute new theoretical insights and understandings to the theory and the concepts. These theoretical contributions could be valuable for those who are interested in or are studying the topic from a consumer's point of view. The study will also contribute with newly found knowledge regarding virtual influencers in general.

Other than theoretical contributions, this study aims at contributing with practical implications as well. This research should result in several practical implications that will be of use for managers and practitioners within the field of influencer marketing or for those who have an interest in the topic. Newly found theoretical contributions regarding virtual influencers and their ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership will result in practical contributions and insights for creating virtual influencers for Swedish consumers within the age of 18 to 25. The study will contribute valuable practical insights regarding which attributes are to their advantage and disadvantage that will result in a better understanding of how to design them to maximize their potential, especially for the audience of 18 to 25 years of age.

Furthermore, marketing strategies and techniques when designing virtual influencers will be possible to develop from the findings of the research. The insights will guide practitioners in the right direction when designing marketing strategies that could involve the creation of virtual influencers, what purpose they should serve, how they should be presented and managed to match the consumers' views and values of how a virtual influencer should be. This could then result in a greater financial outcome for businesses if the virtual influencer were to have a commercial purpose.

## **1.7 Thesis Outline**

The first chapter of this thesis aims to present the background to the topic of influencer marketing, influencers and virtual influencers. The background is followed by a problematization where the research problem is explained, and problematic aspects and potential possibilities regarding virtual influencers are presented. The problematization leads into the purpose of the research followed by the research question. Finally, the chapter is ended with the contributions of the thesis, both from a theoretical perspective and from a practical perspective.

Following the first chapter, the second chapter consists of a literature review. Previous literature and different perspectives on the topic are presented in this chapter. The third chapter constitutes a theoretical framework where relevant theory and concepts for the thesis are presented. A conceptual framework involving the relevant theory and concepts is also included in the theoretical framework.

The fourth chapter is regarding the methodology. It presents the chosen methods for the thesis and how the research has been conducted. Following the methodology, a fifth chapter of empirical findings from the conducted interviews is presented. The sixth chapter that follows the empirical findings is the analysis where the empirical findings are analyzed from the conceptual framework and previous presented literature, concepts and theory. The final chapter will include a conclusion of the research, a discussion of the result, a revisit of the conceptual framework, theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **1.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has introduced the general topic of the research, that is, the new phenomenon of virtual influencers. The relevant background has been presented and the problematization has highlighted the gaps in previous literature that has generated the research question and shaped the purpose of the study. Lastly, the aimed contributions from a theoretical and practical perspective were presented.



## **2. Literature Review**

The following chapter consists of the literature that is of relevance for this study. The first three sections provide a review of traditional, human influencer marketing, influencer marketing on Instagram and the key concepts of influencer marketing. This is followed by a review on the topic of virtual influencers, where a section of robot acceptance is included as well.

### **2.1 Influencers and Influencer Marketing on Social Media**

A social media influencer is a prominent user who has created an authentic social media persona and has a significant amount of followers at one or more social media platforms (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Casalo', Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Lou, Tan & Chen, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Social media influencers tend to develop deeper physiological relationships with their followers by sharing content from their daily, personal lives and interests (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2018; Ladhari, Massa & Skandrani, 2020). Social media influencers have increased in popularity in the last decade since the entrance of online communities such as the different social media platforms available today. This increased popularity has resulted in influencer marketing becoming a prevalent marketing strategy for businesses, where 80% of marketers stated that they would spend at least 10% of their budget on influencer marketing during 2021 (Makrides, Vrontis & Christofi, 2020; Haenlein et al., 2020). Influencers that are present at social media platforms thus represent a new, modern and effective way of marketing since they have the powerful impact to attract followers and influence their purchasing decisions (Booth & Matic, 2011; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Furthermore, influencer marketing implies that a brand uses an influencer who is present at one or more social media platforms for the influencer to promote the brand's products to its followers. The content that is promoted by the influencer is often seamlessly woven into the influencers daily lives and regular posts on the social media platforms (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). This is considered as a particularly effective marketing strategy for brands as it appears to be more authentic and credible, implying less resistance to the message (de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang 2012). Additionally, in these modern digital times, creating trust with the customers and consumers has turned out to be important for successful marketing and to influence the customers (Jabr & Zheng, 2017). Moreover, the

attitude of the consumers towards the influencer and their content has been shown to be dependent on the influencers perceived trust, their credibility, their expertise and their congruence (Bergkvist, Hjalmarson & Mägi, 2016). According to Goldsmith and Clark (2008), a message from a fellow consumer is perceived as more credible and receptive rather than if the same message were promoted by an advertiser or the brand itself. Previous research has shown that 92% of people would rather trust an unknown individual's recommendations compared to a brand's recommendations (Ketrin & Szilárd, 2020). The procedure of communicating through an influencer is similar to traditional word-of-mouth communication, where the influencer thus is proven to have a strong ability to affect the followers in a desirable manner (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Accordingly, word-of-mouth has also been made possible online (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019) and the electronic communication through an influencer and the followers is referred to as E-word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004). Moreover, recommendations and E-word-of-mouth is dependent on being trustworthy and credible and the influencers have to be able to show these attributes to persuade their followers (Kim, Kandampully & Bilgihan, 2018; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Furthermore, the purpose of influencer marketing is to persuade followers to purchase the promoted products as well as increase awareness of the brand among the followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). The purpose of influencer marketing is thus equivalent to other marketing activities and aims to affect the customers' purchase intention (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). How the source is perceived by the audience has an effect on the influence and persuasiveness it exerts since the perceived credibility of the source has turned out to affect the influence and persuasiveness positively (Goldsmith, Lafferty & Newel, 2000; Seno & Lukas, 2007).

However, despite the success of influencer marketing, and although the industry is expanding sharply, there are certain risks associated with human influencers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). One aspect that cannot be ignored is the fact that they are human beings, meaning that they are uncontrollable with their own personal agendas and personal interests (Moustakas et al., 2018). This might be an uncertainty for brands when collaborating with influencers on social media. When an influencer is doing marketing campaigns together with a brand on social media, there is a chance that he or she gets associated with the brand itself (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). This might be affected by the other actions and

content that the influencer is posting on social media. Consequently, the trustworthiness, genuineness or other important values for a marketing campaign can be affected (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Hence, it is important for marketers and brands to carefully consider the most suitable influencers to collaborate with since the followers' image of an influencer may transfer to the brand itself. Thus, brands need to pair up with influencers who have the desired characteristics and are well-liked by their followers to avoid and minimize these risks (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

### **2.1.1 Influencer Marketing on Instagram**

The content of Instagram is made of videos or images with textual descriptions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). As any other influencer on social media platforms, Instagram influencers are prominent users on Instagram that share their daily lives and interests with their followers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). On Instagram, people have the opportunity to look for like-minded media personas who correspond to their values and beliefs. This allows people to find others who share the same interests as them to interact with, facilitating frequent interactions (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). According to Lou and Yuan (2019), followers tend to follow influencers with whom they can identify.

Furthermore, Instagram influencers are gaining significance and are increasingly emerging as intermediaries between brands and consumers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). According to De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) brands increasingly collaborate with influencers on Instagram to reach their target group. This is considered as one of the most effective strategies since consumers have become too savvy to the traditional marketing strategies and techniques (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). However, by collaborating with Instagram influencers, brands aim to take advantage of, and capitalize on the influencers reputation, credibility and his or her relation to the followers as a favorable marketing strategy (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Moreover, according to De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017), Instagram influencers are considered more likeable if they have a high number of followers since they appear more popular, which in some cases also increases the influencers perceived opinion leadership. Furthermore, influencer marketing on Instagram is particularly important for Generation Z since they are more sceptical towards traditional marketing strategies and advertising. In addition, Generation Z is also the most notable age group on the platform, which makes influencer marketing on Instagram even more suitable for them (Haenlein et al., 2020).

### **2.1.2 Swedish Consumers on Instagram**

As of 2020, it was shown that Swedish consumers from the age of 16 were using social media at least once a day. The usage of social media also increased in Sweden during 2020 and the fastest growing social media is Instagram (Internetstiftelsen, 2020). In 2021, the Instagram usage in Sweden reached 5.1 million users, where the number is expected to increase to 6.8 million users before 2025 (Statista, 2021). Moreover, it has been shown that there is a slight difference between the sexes when it comes to usage, where women tend to use Instagram more than men (Internetstiftelsen, 2020). Furthermore, Instagram is a popular social media for influencers to collaborate with brands and share sponsored content since almost 80 percent of influencers use Instagram as their primary platform for this purpose (Cernev, 2019).

### **2.1.3 Key Concepts of Influencer Marketing**

As influencer marketing is becoming a prevalent marketing strategy for businesses (De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013), the interests of how to create successful and effective marketing strategy through social media and influencers are growing (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). This has resulted in several attempts to investigate and research this topic more to better understand the behavioral intentions between influencers on social media and their followers (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). It is of interest to both businesses and influencers themselves to understand the phenomenon of influencing through social media and to obtain insights to be more persuasive when collaborating through influencer marketing (Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014; Aral, 2011). The previous research within this field has had a lot of focus on two particular divergent streams in order to identify key constructs of influencer marketing (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). The major findings are centered on parasocial relationships (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Ki & Kim, 2019) and opinion leadership (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Reinikainen et al., 2020) as two of the most important factors for successful influencer marketing (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). In addition to these two key concepts, previous research has also emphasized the importance of trust towards the influencer and influencer credibility as two factors that contribute to the effectiveness of influencer marketing (e.g., Colliander & Dahlen 2011; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The key concept of opinion leadership is considered important for influencer marketing in terms of the extent to which an influencer is able to influence followers' opinions, perceptions and behaviors (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot & Scott 2007). Studies of influencer marketing have suggested that influencers are perceived as opinion leaders among their followers due to their accounts being perceived as original as well as the influencer's ability to contribute with expertise and to interact with their followers (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Another characteristic that has shown to be of importance for opinion leaders is the perceived trustworthiness since it affects the influencers persuasiveness (Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack & Zahid, 2018). This can generate a positive effect on the opinion leader's ability to change opinions of the audience (McGinnies & Ward, 1980). Previous literature has supported the fact that opinion leadership affected individuals' adoption of new products due to the influence of opinion leaders. This has also been observed in influencer marketing, where opinion leadership had a positive effect on followers' intentions to interact, follow the advice and recommend accounts and products (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020).

Moreover, since consumers are becoming more sceptical towards traditional marketing techniques, opinion leadership through social media are considered as a particularly effective strategy since followers are more receptive to a message if it is sent by a fellow consumer, as an influencer (Ketrin & Silard, 2020; Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). Thus, opinion leadership is based on the influencers expertise, competence and ability to be a leader among the followers (Koochikamali, Gerhart & Mousavizadeh 2015). According to Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020), the perceived opinion leadership can also be affected by characteristics of an Instagram influencer, such as the influencers perceived uniqueness and originality among the followers. This, in turn, affects the behavioral intentions of the followers (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020).

In addition, previous research also stresses the importance of parasocial relationships for this type of marketing strategies since the relationship between influencers and followers affect the followers' opinions of certain products or brands (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). Social networking platforms positively contribute to the development of parasocial relationships between an influencer and the followers, which in turn also affects the behavioral intentions among the followers (Kim & Kim, 2015; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Consequently, opinion leadership and parasocial relationships constitute two significant aspects of influencer

marketing, as studies show that both of them positively correlate with the followers' purchase intentions when their behavioral intentions are affected (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). In addition, both parasocial relationships and opinion leadership have been shown to influence the followers' opinions, emotions, actions and attitudes (Stehr, Rössler, Leissner & Schönhardt, 2015). Hence, previous studies reveal the importance and effectiveness of the two constructs since the purpose of influencer marketing, in line with other marketing activities, is to persuade followers to purchase the promoted products as well as increase brand awareness among the followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

However, previous studies within this topic have been studying these two concepts in isolation while a recently published study by Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020) yet stresses the importance of both of them in the influencing process. In accordance with Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020), the constructs of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership are significant aspects of influencer marketing, thus the concepts coexist with each other in the influencing process in varying combinations. In the context of today's social media environment, both parasocial relationships and opinion leadership are prominent, however in a varying combination where some influencers are more focused on creating relationships while others rather practice opinion leadership to a broader extent (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). Furthermore, Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020) state that emphasizing one of the constructs without the other may result in an incomplete and biased perspective since it cannot provide the overall assessment of an influencer's effectiveness and features. Hence, the comparative effectiveness of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, and their interactive effects are of importance for practitioners within this area (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). This is also in line with Stehr et al. (2015), who argues for the interactiveness of the constructs' effectiveness and that parasocial relationship partners can influence the audience when it comes to opinion-making decisions.

Furthermore, the findings of Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020) study still shows that parasocial relationships have a more prominent role in social media influencer marketing than opinion leadership. According to Sokolova and Kefi (2019), parasocial relationships also have a strong impact, especially on Generation Z, who are the most present age group on Instagram. Although both of the key constructs are positively correlated with followers' purchase intention, the influencers who managed to establish relationships with their followers are

most successful in influencer marketing. These findings are in line with previous research regarding the impact of word-of-mouth, where information sources such as friends have a more powerful influence on the consumer's decision-making process (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). However, Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020) still suggest that opinion leadership and parasocial relationships should be considered in combination to be able to obtain a holistic view of influencer marketing and the two focal constructs.

## **2.2 Virtual Influencers**

Although there is a lack of research and literature regarding virtual influencers, due to it being a new phenomenon within influencer marketing, a few have conducted research on the topic. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) have published a study where they investigate whether influencers, who promote products, can attract potential customers and encourage them to purchase, as well as find differences between the given consumer generations. They present virtual influencers as a subgenre to ordinary influencers that businesses have recently started to adapt. They argue for their advantages by being controllable, formable, and designed to match the team's desires. They can also create the content necessary without having to be present or to communicate with them (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018).

However, Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) also mention the potential risks of virtual influencers. For instance, a lack of authenticity, credibility, moral principles and transparency could harm the business. Virtual influencers may not appear as trustworthy since they are not real and will not have the same feelings as human beings. This could result in limited adoption of opinions and relatedness to them (Kádeková & Holienčinová 2018). Although there is a risk of involving non-human virtual influencers, human influencers could also bring risks. Since they are not controllable and have their own personal agenda, brands leap the risk of ordinary influencers doing something that is not in line with the businesses' values and agendas (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Virtual influencers could be beneficial in that aspect. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) further argue that there is a challenge for businesses to overcome regarding the mentioned risks, and if they were to be overcome, benefits would follow. Moreover, the authors found that Generation Z was the target group who found virtual influencers to be most attractive and appealing (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018).

Moustakas et al. (2020) are among the few who have conducted research on the topic. The authors conducted a study due to the lack of research on the topic where they interviewed six people who could be considered experts within the area of digital media. They gained insights and perspectives on how virtual influencers could be used in marketing campaigns and their potential benefits and disadvantages. Moustakas et al. (2020) have agreeing views with Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018), where they argue for virtual influencers benefit of being fully controlled. They further argue for the benefit of not being influenced by a personal agenda and that they can be created to suit the creator's purpose. Moustakas et al. (2020) also present an ethical aspect regarding the potential development of parasocial relationships. Whether or not it is ethically correct to let people form relationships with virtual influencers who are not real.

Furthermore, the authors argue for the potential disadvantages that have to do with virtual influencers. Since influencer marketing is dependent on authenticity, transparency, relatability and being trustworthy, which are attributes of both parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, Moustakas et al. (2020) explain how this might be difficult for virtual influencers to achieve because they are robots created by humans. Additionally, they explain that motivation can be a factor to decrease authenticity, relatability and transparency since the virtual influencers purpose and motivation could be commercial. Being trustworthy is also a factor that might be challenging due to not being human (Moustakas et al., 2020). Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) and Moustakas et al. (2020) share several opinions and arguments for the challenges that could follow virtual influencers. They also share a lot of the potential benefits that could follow from a well-implemented virtual influencer strategy.

Moustakas et al. (2020) also presented the perspectives of the considered experts in the field. They believed Generation Z and millennials to be the most suitable and attractive age group for virtual influencers to address. The experts expressed uncertainties against the success of virtual influencers due to monetary concerns, large investments, risk in decreased popularity, and not being authentic. However, they also identified factors that could lead to success. Such as parasocial relationships, a strong creative vision to develop a stronger bond to their human avatar and creating a story for the virtual influencer to humanize it. They could also be cost-effective and more controllable (Moustakas et al., 2020).



## **2.3 The Difficulty of Accepting Robots**

Since the research on how virtual influencers are to be accepted and perceived is limited, literature within other fields could serve as a substitute and provide guidelines for the topic instead. There have been studies conducted that explore how robots are perceived and treated by people. Mori (1970) argues how a robot that is too similar to a human being could be perceived as creepy and unsettling, which will make people less willing to interact with the robot. Duffy (2003) is on the same track as Mori (1970) when arguing that a robot that is too similar to a human will be expected to show more human traits. This could then result in disappointment if not lived up to. Therefore, Duffy (2003) suggested creating robots that were not too similar to humans to avoid the disappointments of expecting too much.

In contrast to robots being similar to humans, Breazeal (2003) has suggested that robots who are not similar to humans could be viewed as more competent. According to Breazeal (2003), it is of greater importance that the robot can pay attention to social norms and display appropriate actions and emotions to be able to interact with humans. However, Huang and Rust (2018) argue for a robot's challenge to interact with people, show emotion and feel empathy since they do not react to human feelings. This could also result in less trust and appreciation for robots by people. On the other hand, Tinwell, Grimshaw, and Williams (2011) claims that the more human-like a robot appears to be, the more trusted it is. Moreover, Labrecque (2014) conducted a study on chatbots and argues that parasocial interactions with robots were perceived as less valuable and harder to form if the participant were aware that they were interacting with a robot.

The debate of robot acceptance, whether a robot should possess human-like attributes or not are somewhat split. As mentioned, some argue for more human-like attributes while some argue that less human attributes could be more beneficial since it lowers the expectations. However, Wirtz et al. (2018) argues that the most important factor for robot acceptance is that a robot has to be able to understand the human, be on their side and sympathize with it. This will increase trust and appear as more believable and credible.

## **2.4 Chapter Summary**

The relevant literature for the study has been presented in this chapter which has primarily been focusing on two specific areas. These were human influencers and influencer marketing, and virtual influencers and robot acceptance.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In the following chapter, the chosen theory of source credibility will be presented, followed by an explanation of the concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. These are later synthesized in a conceptual framework that is presented and discussed in relation to the purpose of the study and how it will help answer the research question. In the conceptual framework, the source credibility theory will be explained as to how it will assist in exploring the consumers' views of virtual influencers and their viewed ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. The presented framework will permeate the study and serve as a lens through which the empirical data and findings will be further analyzed.

#### **3.1 Source Credibility Theory**

The source credibility theory is a well-established theory within the field of communication (Banerjee, Bhattacharyya & Bose, 2017). The theory explains how a communication's persuasiveness is affected by the receiver's perceived credibility of the source (Banerjee, Bhattacharyya & Bose, 2017; Hsieh & Li 2020; Wong, Ng, Lee & Lam, 2020; Hovland & Weiss 1951). Source credibility was first studied by Hovland and Weiss (1951) when they realised that a little-studied factor in communication was the attitude which the audience had towards the communicator. The source credibility theory was then introduced by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953), where they emphasized that for a communicator to have a persuasive effect on the receiver, the communicator has to come off as credible. Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) proposed that the credibility of the communicator was dependent on two factors, the communicator's perceived trustworthiness and expertness. Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which the receiver finds the communicator's intentions to be valid. Also, to which level of acceptance towards the communicator's message (Ohanian, 1990). The factor of trustworthiness is considered to be based on how a receiver perceives the source to be honest, sincere and truthful (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Giffin, 1967). Furthermore, the second factor of expertness refers to how the receiver perceives the communicator's competence in terms of knowledge, skills and experience (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990). The factor of expertness is also related to which extent the communicator can make valid assertions by being perceived as having expertise within certain areas (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian 1990). According to Maddux and Rogers (1980), the perceived expertness has been shown to have a positive impact on the perception of the communicator.

### **3.2 The Concept of Parasocial Relationships**

The concept of parasocial relationships was introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) when they presented their publication “Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance”. A parasocial relationship refers to an imaginary relationship that is formed between an audience and a media persona through mediated encounters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Horton and Strauss (1957) refer to a parasocial relationship to be based on a subjective feeling of being a part of a personal, reciprocal and immediate social interaction with a media persona, although it is one-sided and does not involve any actual interaction. The relationship is most often one-sided, where viewers or listeners tend to imagine the media personas as friends, although they have not met or spoken to them. It has been described as an illusionary experience where the audience interacts with the media personalities as if they were having a mutual relationship (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Furthermore, Horton and Wohl (1956) present three attributes that incuse parasocial relationships. That is friendship, understanding and identification. Friendship refers to a sense of intimacy and liking to the media persona within the developed relationship. Understanding refers to a follower's feelings towards the mediated character and how they develop a special bond to the character by gaining knowledge of the character, understanding their motivations, and sharing their values. Identification refers to how a follower identifies with the media persona and adopts similar traits, interests, behaviour, values and more. Additionally, parasocial relationships are easier to develop if the media persona adapts their language and communication to make the viewers or followers feel noticed (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

A related concept to parasocial relationships is parasocial interactions. It is the duration that separates these two concepts. A parasocial interaction occurs during the actual exposure to a mediated encounter that the audience is experiencing and is limited to that occasion. Parasocial relationships, on the other hand, last for a longer time. They consist of several parasocial interactions (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). The audience tends to develop a sense of friendship, intimacy, as well as identification from the parasocial relationships and these relationships continue to grow as the media persona appears as trustworthy and transparent (Chung & Cho, 2017). Furthermore, the theory of parasocial relationships is dependent on relationships based on trust to be possible for the communicator to maintain the relationship and the influence they possess (Stehr et al., 2015).

### **3.3 The Concept of Opinion Leadership**

The concept of opinion leadership was first introduced by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) when they introduced the two-step flow communication model. The concept of the formulated model stipulated that content from the mass media reaches so-called “opinion leaders” first, then media consumers (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). The opinion leaders are active media users who collect, interpret and diffuse the mass media content and then communicate it to the less active media users who are a part of the public (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). The idea revolves around interpersonal interaction that is performed between the opinion leader and members of the public, that is, followers of this opinion leader (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). People tend to reinforce their opinions before making decisions through consensual validation with “others”. These “others” are individuals who have an unequal amount of influence on the decision of others, they are called “opinion leaders” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944).

The definition of opinion leaders is those individuals from whom others seek advice and information. The information that these opinion leaders possess is usually considered to be insightful and valuable and therefore more likely to be adopted by an audience (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). According to Katz (1957), three main attributes are connected to opinion leadership and the influence they exert; “(1) The personification of certain values (who one is); (2) competence (what one knows); and (3) strategic social location (whom one knows).” (p.73). First, they tend to be self-confident and credible; second, they show interest in learning new things; and third, they are socially active.

### **3.4 Conceptual Framework**

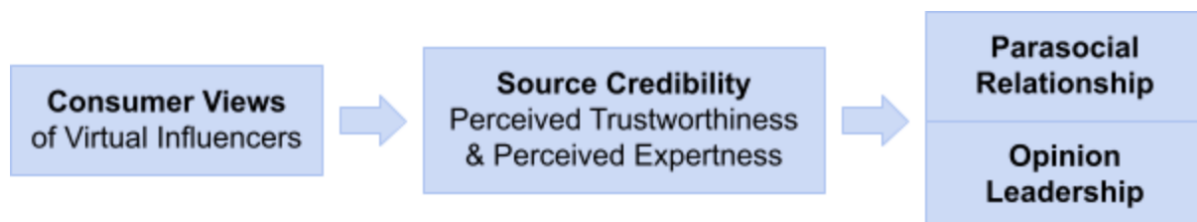
The main underlying insights and concepts that are relevant for the purpose of this study have been synthesised in the framework presented below. The framework will serve as a starting point and serve as a guide for the study, it will also act as a lens through which the empirical data and findings will be analyzed. The framework is based on the presented source credibility theory, which holds that for a communicator to be perceived as credible and have a persuasive effect on the receiver, factors of trustworthiness and expertness has to be applicable to the source and perceived by the receiver (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). The framework also consists of the two concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership as well as previously reviewed literature.

The concepts that have been presented are characterized by different attributes that increase the possibility of developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. These attributes have to be perceived as possible by and applicable to virtual influencers from a consumer perspective, in order to be perceived as capable of developing these concepts. Since previous literature has been arguing for the significance of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership within traditional influencer marketing (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020), the two concepts are of relevance to examine in the context of virtual influencers as well.

The theory of source credibility is used as a guiding tool in order to examine the two concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership in the context of virtual influencers. It could explain virtual influencers ability to develop the concepts and thus, the theory will guide the research accordingly. This is, since the theory could be applicable and suitable to address the two concepts because they are rooted and dependent on credibility and trust (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Chung & Cho, 2017; Stehr et al., 2015; Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). The previously mentioned attributes that constitute parasocial relationships and opinion leadership could be linked to the factors proposed by the source credibility theory. The first factor of trustworthiness could be linked to both parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, since trust and credibility constitutes the foundation of both of the concepts (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Chung & Cho, 2017; Stehr et al., 2015; Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). For parasocial relationships and opinion leadership to be possible to develop, the receiver needs to perceive the source as trustworthy (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Chung & Cho, 2017; Katz, 1957). Furthermore, the second factor of expertness could be linked to the concept of opinion leadership. This is because the theoretical idea of expertness is based on attributes such as competence, knowledge, skills and experience (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990), which are all attributes of significance for opinion leadership to be possible to exert (Katz, 1957; Lazarzfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). However, the other aspect of expertness regarding to which extent the communicator can make valid assertions are of significance for both parasocial relationships and opinion leadership (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Katz, 1957). Hence, this justifies why the source credibility theory could be an explanation for the development of these constructs of influencer marketing and therefore assist in answering the research question. That is since previous studies have shown that parasocial relationships and opinion leadership is dependent on the source, in this case the virtual influencer, to be viewed to have credibility and be trustworthy (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Katz, 1957). Furthermore, it is the views of the

consumers, the Swedish audience of Instagram, that will serve to determine whether or not virtual influencers can be viewed to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Hence, the component in the framework.

By using the theory of source credibility as a tool and theoretical lens to examine if the virtual influencers can be perceived as able to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, a greater understanding of virtual influencers for influencer marketing can be obtained. This is since previous literature emphasizes the significance of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership for successful influencer marketing. Consequently, the theory and the two theoretical concepts have all important roles in the study in order to be able to answer the research question, “*How are virtual influencers viewed by the audience of Instagram in being able to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership from their perceived source credibility?*”. The conceptual framework will thus be used in the study as a starting point and a guiding tool to examine the research problem, however, the empirical material will allow for further development of the framework. Since the theory is used as a guide, the possibilities remain open for the empirical material to show its own interpretations of the problem. Hence, new insights and knowledge about the topic could follow due to the guidance by the conceptual framework and its components.



**Figure 1.** *Conceptual Framework*

The components in the conceptual framework can be explained as follows. Consumer views of virtual influencers regard the general views that the consumers, the Swedish audience of Instagram, has towards virtual influencers. Source credibility, which includes perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertness, can be viewed from a consumer perspective to determine whether these factors of trustworthiness and expertness can be applicable to virtual influencers and, as a result, be viewed as source credible. The consumer views of the potential source credibility and its factors applied to virtual influencers could then result in the potential development of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership by the virtual influencers. That is, since the factors of trustworthiness and expertness involve the attributes

of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Hence, why parasocial relationship and opinion leadership could be outcomes of the consumer's perceived source credibility, i.e., trustworthiness and expertness, of virtual influencers.

### **3.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented and explained the chosen theory and concepts that will be used in the study to research the topic. These were the theory of source credibility and the concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Lastly, the theory and the concepts were synthesized in the conceptual framework, together with previous literature, that will be used as a lens through which the empirical data and findings will be analyzed.

## **4. Method**

The fourth chapter presents the chosen methodology of the research and the chosen philosophical position of the study. In this chapter, the research approach, research design, sample, data collection, data analysis and quality of the research are discussed and presented.

### **4.1 Research Approach**

For this research of virtual influencers' capability of being viewed to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership to be conducted, a qualitative research method was chosen. According to Eisenhardt (1989), a qualitative research approach attempts to explain a particular behaviour and why it exists, in contrast to a quantitative research method that is focusing on explaining what that specific behaviour is. Moreover, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) explain that qualitative research is any research that does not use statistical procedures or other quantification to produce its findings. It depends on interpreting data to discover findings. Hence, the selection of a qualitative research approach since the study is focusing on consumers' different views and opinions on virtual influencers. It will be of interest to interpret consumers' views to explore the topic further to contribute with new insights, knowledge and implications.

Furthermore, an abductive approach will be appropriate for this type of research. Dubois and Gadde (2002) refer to an abductive approach as something in between an inductive and deductive approach. An inductive approach refers to developing theories systematically from data and relying on the chosen theories. A deductive approach refers to an approach where propositions from the theories are developed and made testable. An abductive approach on the other hand inference to the best explanation. It is a constant interplay between theory and initial empirical data and observations (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Additionally, Timmermans and Tavory (2012) claim that an abductive approach will be beneficial for developing new insights and knowledge. Since the topic of virtual influencers is relatively new and there is a limited amount of literature, new insights and knowledge will be sought after and added to the current literature. With an abductive approach, the discovery of unexpected insights and findings will be made possible due to a constant interplay between previous literature, the theory, the concepts, and the empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). That is in contrast to a deductive approach where theories are reproduced to be either validated or refuted, with no room for unexpected findings and discoveries (Nunez Moscoso, 2019).



The choice of an abductive approach is also due to Dubois and Gadde (2002) who argues that an abductive approach allows a central framework to be continuously developed from new empirical findings and theoretical insights. This will be applicable to this study's conceptual framework, where the authors were initially guided by existing literature and theory. The theory of source credibility could explain virtual influencers' viewed ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Hence an abductive approach is suitable (Nunez Moscoso, 2019). Furthermore, an abductive approach allows for development and further explanation of the framework presented in the previous chapter in accordance with Dubois and Gadde (2002).

## **4.2 Research Philosophy**

It is important to consider the different philosophical positions of a research and understand how the philosophical factors can affect the creation of satisfactory outcomes of a research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Two central approaches within research philosophy are ontology and epistemology, where an ontological approach concerns questions about the nature of reality and existence, while epistemology concerns the theory of knowledge (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In the following sections, ontology and epistemology will be discussed further, and how they shape the research design in regards to this particular study.

### **4.2.1 Ontological Position**

Ontology has four different positions; nominalism, relativism, realism and internal realism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The four positions differ in terms of their standpoint towards the truth and the facts, where a realism approach states that there is only one truth and that facts exist and can be revealed, while a nominalism approach rather states that there is no truth and that the facts are all human creations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). For this study, the relativism position has been chosen, with the belief that there are many truths and that the facts depend on the viewpoint of the observer. A relativist ontology thus supports that people experience social entities differently due to their different social contexts and that there is no single reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since this study is based on consumers' subjective views on virtual influencers, a relativistic position is thus most appropriate in accordance with Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015). Hence, the subjects for this study are social actors with their own subjective social

contexts, meaning that their interpretations may differ from each other. This can be explained and fostered by using a relativistic research position for this study.

#### **4.2.2 Epistemological Position**

The epistemological position concerns the theory and nature of knowledge and how to inquire into physical and social worlds differently (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Within epistemology, there are two main contrasting views of how to conduct social science research, that is, positivism and constructionism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). For this research, the epistemological position of constructionism will be used.

Constructionism is based on the idea that people determine societal reality rather than objective and external factors (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Consequently, reality is considered socially constructed by society and is given its meaning by people's daily interactions. When conducting research with a constructionist epistemology, the different constructions and meanings people are thinking and feeling about their experiences are central aspects to consider. Thus, a constructionist position aims to understand and appreciate people's different experiences rather than searching for external factors to explain certain behaviours (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Constructionism can be expressed as either 'normal' constructionism or 'strong' constructionism. According to Ernst (1996 as cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), the difference between the two types of constructionism is based on the idea of knowledge. Regarding 'normal' constructionism, people believe and accept that knowledge can be independent and objective, however, they construct their own subjective knowledge. For 'strong' constructionism, people rather assume that there is no difference between the social knowledge and their individual knowledge (Ernst, 1996 as cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This study will be based on a 'normal' constructionist position assuming that there can be different realities, depending on people's social contexts. Hence, the importance of obtaining and considering multiple perspectives, views and experiences from a diverse sample that matches the limitations for this study. As this research is focused on consumers' views and opinions regarding virtual influencers, a constructionist epistemology is considered appropriate.

### **4.3 Research Design**

The methodology and research design for this study is based on an exploratory, qualitative study where the empirical data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Focus groups were also considered as an alternative or as complementary to the semi-structured interviews at first since it would allow the researchers to gather valuable insights since topics can be discussed in depth in the groups (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). However, due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, it was dismissed. Hence, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for data collection. The study aims to examine whether virtual influencers can be viewed to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership with the audience of Instagram, based on the audience's views and attitudes towards the virtual influencers capabilities of doing so from their source credibility. Since the audience's reasons and opinions behind their views on the topic are requested (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate method.

As mentioned, the study is based on an ontological relativistic approach, meaning that there are many truths and that the facts depend on the viewpoint of the observer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Thus, it is essential to consider and explore the thinking behind the respondents reasoning, which is most appropriately made possible through semi-structured interviews that allow for follow up questions and further discussion, in contrast to structured interviews. A structured approach was not considered appropriate for this study since it would not enable further exploration of the thinking behind the respondents' opinions and reasoning. Hence, semi-structured interviews were considered most suitable for the purpose of this study. Furthermore, the aim of conducting qualitative interviews is to obtain a greater understanding from the interviewees perspective, their viewpoint and their motives behind their viewpoint (King, 2004 as cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This is consistent with the objectives of this study and justifies the choice of conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

## **4.4 Sample**

### **4.4.1 Sample Selection and Criteria**

To conduct the interviews and gather the necessary data, a sample of participants had to be selected. There were certain criteria that the participants had to meet to be selected to participate. The first criterion was that the participant had to be in the age group of 18 to 25. Another criterion was that the participant had to have an Instagram account. They had to follow a human influencer and be familiar with the concept of influencers and influencer marketing. Lastly, the participants had to be non-followers of virtual influencers.

The reasoning behind the chosen criteria was first that the participants had to be within 18 to 25 years old since Generation Z has turned out to be the most attractive target audience for virtual influencers (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Generation Z are those who are born from 1995 to 2015, that is, six years old to 25 years old as of 2021 (Koulopoulos & Keldsen, 2014). The criterion of being 18 to 25 years old in this study was first chosen because the age limit on Instagram is 13 years old. Secondly, the authors wanted to make sure that the participants had a sufficient understanding of the topic of influencer marketing which resulted in the minimum age of 18 years old. Furthermore, the age group of 16 to 25 years is most present on Instagram in Sweden (Statista, 2020), which motivated the choice of having participants within the range of 18 to 25 years as it was considered as the most valuable age group.

Moreover, the criterion of having an Instagram account was based on the fact that the participants had to be familiar with Instagram. If they were to give their views on virtual influencers, they had to be familiar with the concept of influencer marketing and, not least, the platform the study aims to explore. Having an Instagram account and being frequent users of the platform assure that they have sufficient knowledge about the platform and what it is about.

Furthermore, the third criterion of having to follow an influencer. By following an influencer and being able to tell what they are, their purpose as well as explain them, the participants show that they are familiar with the concept of influencers and influencer marketing. That is important since the participants are supposed to give their views of how a virtual influencer could be capable of being perceived as having source credibility and developing parasocial

relationships and opinion leadership as ordinary influencers are capable of. If they would not know about ordinary influencers and influencer marketing, these connections would be difficult to connect and their answers could end up as misleading. Lastly, the participants had to be non-followers of virtual influencers. It is of importance for the study that the interviewees are non-followers since the research aims to explore the attitudes and views of virtual influencers potential in developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. A respondent who was following a virtual influencer would jeopardize the study by providing answers that could be considered biased. Hence, if people were to follow a virtual influencer already, their views of them could be different and already made up compared to non-followers. It could therefore create an incoherent picture of the participants' views.

#### **4.4.1.1 Sampling Method**

When choosing the participants of the interviews, the researchers applied a purposive sampling method in combination with an ad-hoc sampling method. The purposive sampling method aims to identify participants that meet specific criteria that have been defined to be included in the sample (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In this case, the participants had to fulfil the stated criteria since that is directly connected to the underlying topic, which was crucial for answering the research question. Therefore the authors had to choose the purposive sampling method for selecting participants with a certain knowledge of the topic. The purposive sampling method was used in a combination of an ad-hoc sampling method. The participants who the authors knew fulfilled the criteria to participate in the study were selected based on the criteria, the convenience of who was available as well as appropriate at the time for the aim of the study. The authors knew that the participants fulfilled the criteria because of questions that were asked to the participants before being selected. The participants had to give answers that corresponded well to the asked questions that made sure they fulfilled the certain criterias. They were asked whether or not they had an Instagram account, if they were active on Instagram, if they were following an influencer and whether or not they were following a virtual influencer.

A sample of twelve interviewees was made, consisting of six females and six males in the ages of 18 to 25. The authors were aware that they had an adequate amount of experience regarding Instagram to sufficiently be able to answer the questions asked. Furthermore, the authors also knew that they were non-followers of virtual influencers. The sample of twelve interviewees was considered enough since saturation was reached in the answers from the

participants. By the twelfth interview, apparent patterns in the responses among the participants had been expressed, which allowed the researchers to proceed with their research in accordance with the purpose and research question of the study. Thus, additional interviews were considered only to have added on to the current patterns and probably not contributed with any other valuable empirical data. Hence, the selection of twelve participants due to saturation was reached and considered enough to proceed with the study.

**Table 1.** Interviewees

*Name	Age	Gender	Name	Age	Gender
Linnéa	24	Female	Jonathan	24	Male
Louise	18	Female	Marcus	24	Male
Filippa	23	Female	Edwin	23	Male
Hanna	23	Female	Lucas	23	Male
Ellen	25	Female	Gabriel	21	Male
Agnes	25	Female	Daniel	23	Male

\* The participants asked to be anonymous in the study, thus their names are fictional.

## 4.5 Data Collection

### 4.5.1 Pilot Study

Prior to this research, a pilot study was conducted in order to test the method, the interview questions and the feasibility of the research question. The pilot study consisted of three semi-structured interviews, with 20 prepared questions based on the research question and the two theoretical concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. The sample for the pilot study was based on the same age limitations as for this study, i.e. the participants were within the age range of 18 to 25. The participants were also fulfilling the same criteria as the sample for this study.

When the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the questions were analyzed and adjusted to be improved accordingly. With considerations from insights and valuable feedback from supervisors and students, the research questions were modified slightly to be considered relevant and feasible. The sample was also extended compared to the pilot study's

sample. However, the chosen method was still considered appropriate in accordance with the purpose of this study.

#### **4.5.2 Literature Data Collection**

The literature which has been the basis for this study has been gathered from different reputable journals. The authors have made sure only to use and read literature that has been peer-reviewed in order to ensure a more credible and trustworthy literature collection. The fact that the literature had been cited by other scholars was also important for the authors to reach a more trustworthy source of literature. However, since the topic of virtual influencers is relatively new, the literature within this area is limited. Consequently, the authors had to broaden their search for literature to find relevant topics that could be useful for the study and help answer the research question. This implies that the research strategy had to be broadened to not only cover literature about the phenomenon of virtual influencers, but also robots in general, human influencers and human influencer marketing etcetera. Hence, when searching for the literature, keywords and themes such as; virtual influencers, parasocial relationship, opinion leadership, influencer marketing, virtual influencer, robot acceptance and more were used to find appropriate literature and studies to proceed with for this study.

#### **4.5.3 Preparation and Conducting Process of the Interviews**

The respondents were chosen by the researchers and later contacted through social media after ensuring that they met all the criteria for participating. They were then informed about the concept and arrangement of the interviews. When contacted, the respondents were requested to get acquainted with the phenomena of virtual influencers. They were asked to look through and visit the Instagram pages of different virtual influencers. The participants were assigned with a list of some of the most popular virtual influencers on Instagram as of 2021 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021), however, they were free to visit other virtual influencer profiles as well. It was of importance for the participants to go through some of the virtual influencers' Instagram accounts to create their own opinion and view about them in peace before the interviews. Otherwise, they could have had an incomplete picture of the topic and thus not give views and opinions of value to the research. If the profiles would have been shown during the interviews, the participants would not have enough time to reflect on virtual influencers accounts, their content and create an opinion about them.

Before conducting the interviews, practical issues were considered in accordance with Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015). One of these was to decide the location for the interviews to be held. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the authors decided to conduct all the interviews remotely via facilities such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or FaceTime. Yet, this limited the participants' possibilities of expressing themselves through body language and the researchers' ability to interpret the respondents' body language when conducting the interviews. However, it was not considered appropriate to conduct the interviews face to face with regards to the current pandemic situation. Thus, this limitation was inevitable. Furthermore, the interviews were held in Swedish so the respondents would not feel limited by the language when answering the questions. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed and translated into English. Moreover, the interviews followed a semi-structured approach to allow the respondents to have an open discussion with the interviewer about their general views of the topic.

The interviews were based on an interview guide rather than an interview template due to it being a semi-structured interview. The guide consisted of 9 prepared open questions, aimed to address the topic of virtual influencers and human influencers on a general level to capture the interviewees' attitude towards the general topic. Questions 1 to 5 (see Interview Guide in Appendix 1) were asked to get an understanding of the respondents' prior knowledge of human influencers and human influencer marketing. This was important in order to make sure that they had the necessary understanding of the topic and that the respondents were familiar with the concept of influencers and influencer marketing. Also, to act as reference points and for making comparisons to virtual influencers. Questions 6 to 9 were asked to start a discussion about the topic of virtual influencers and in order to understand how the respondents viewed virtual influencers on Instagram. Depending on the respondents answer to the prepared questions, the interviewer could ask follow-up questions to clarify certain things or discuss further something that was considered important or interesting. The follow-up questions could also be in the form of laddering up or laddering down, by asking the respondents to explain why they had a specific opinion, or if they could give an example of something or a situation to clarify their views (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).



After asking the questions regarding human influencers on a general level, an informative video was shown that explained the phenomena of virtual influencers. It described different types of virtual influencers, how they could look, the history of virtual influencers, some of their purposes and other attributes. The video was shown for an informative purpose to enhance the understanding of the concept of virtual influencers for the participants. This was because one of the prerequisites for participating in the study was that they had to be non-followers of virtual influencers. If the video had not been shown, the participants could have approached the questions without having enough knowledge about what a virtual influencer was, and the answers would be misleading. Hence, this justifies why the participants were requested to look through a sample of virtual influencers' accounts before the interviews as well, to create a picture and an opinion about them. At the end of each interview, the respondents were asked to reflect on their answers and to volunteer with additional information they considered relevant for the study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

#### **4.6 Data Analysis**

The basis of the analysis consisted of the empirical material, previous literature and the selected theory and concepts synthesised in the conceptual framework, that through the three processes of sorting, reducing and arguing, constructed and framed the analysis for this study. Since similar patterns could be identified in all twelve interviews, a thematic sorting process was considered beneficial to process the empirical data and be able to sort among the interviews, thus allowing for thematic analysis in accordance with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018).

After the interviews had been transcribed and translated, the sorting process began where the empirical material was reviewed several times, and the interviews were compared. To sort among the answers, colour coding was used to identify and mark the respondents' answers that turned out to be recurring in the interviews (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). When the sorting process was implemented, the empirical material had to be reduced regarding what was considered to be of value for the study in general and of relevance for the purpose of the study in particular (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Nevertheless, it is essential to mention that nothing from the respondents' answers from the interviews were actively removed during the reducing process. However, quotes that were considered not to add any value for

discussion were not covered in the empirical findings, as well as in the further analysis. The reducing process was implemented in order to keep the analysis within the scope of the purpose of the study and to be able to answer the research question *"How are virtual influencers viewed by the audience of Instagram in being able to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership from their perceived source credibility?"* (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

The sorting and reducing process resulted in a narrow empirical material considered to be of interest for further discussion in the study. Based on the interview questions and answers provided by the respondents, five themes were identified. The similarities that constituted the themes were repeatedly recurring in all the interviews, hence the relevance of them being discussed in the analysis. Together with previous literature, the chosen theory of source credibility and the concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, the themes were used as a basis for the analysis and the arguing process.

In regards to the arguing process, the five themes were considered to be of relevance for both the chosen theory and the studied concepts and also for the purpose of this study. The qualitatively derived themes were thus considered to be able to answer the research question and attain the purpose of the study. Consequently, the analysis was divided based on these themes. However, it is important to be aware that the similarities in the interviews that resulted in the five themes might be explained by the limitations and choices made, which resulted in the sample of the study. All respondents are non-followers of virtual influencers and between the ages of 18 to 25. The respondents are also Swedish, which might have an impact on their answers during the interviews. The researchers have had this in mind during the process of the study and it will be discussed later on, in the section regarding the limitations of the research and in the discussion section in chapter 7.

#### **4.7 Quality of Research**

The quality of the research is judged based on where one stands on the continuum of epistemology. As this study has applied the viewpoint of constructionism, the quality of the research will be evaluated based on that. Research quality for epistemological viewpoints can be based upon the validity, reliability and generalizability of the research. It is essential to

judge the study from these viewpoints to ensure the relevance for others interested in reading this study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

#### **4.7.1 Validity**

Validity from a constructivist perspective revolves around whether a sufficient number of perspectives have been included (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since the sample involves different participants with unique thoughts and views, several perspectives have been included. That is since the research has adopted a relativistic philosophy where every participant creates their own truth from their own experiences and ideas. Moreover, previous literature has been presented, and different perspectives on the topic have been included from a literary point of view. The study describes the current situation and what has to be explored further to fulfil the aim of the research. Additionally, appropriate tools, techniques, processes, and data were chosen and gathered to ensure satisfactory validity. These discussed factors generate a more valid and credible result for the study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Moreover, internal validity has been taken into consideration when eliminating sources of potential bias. Semi-structured interviews reduce bias since the answers from the participants are on their initiative. Appropriate literature regarding the topic has also been presented, which mitigate potential bias. That results in true and correct conclusions in accordance with Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015).

#### **4.7.2 Reliability**

According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), reliability refers to whether similar observations will be reached by others from a constructionist perspective and if there is a consistency and transparency throughout the study. The reliability of the study was enhanced due to the transparency of data collection and interpretation. The authors have presented in a detailed and transparent manner how the data has been collected. It describes from where, from who, and why it has been collected, resulting in higher reliability (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The authors have also been transparent in describing how the data will be interpreted and analyzed. Relevant questions have been formed and appropriate methods to the research aim have been developed which increases the credibility (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The fact that suitable people for the research topic have been chosen to participate does add to that as well. Therefore, it should be reliable for people to reach similar observations by adopting the study's research method and design.

### **4.7.3 Generalizability**

From this study, several concepts and constructs derive which can be relevant to other studies. The theories of use can be applied in other scenarios where it is of interest to explore the relationship between parties, as well as to investigate whether one of the parties could develop leadership or a relationship. The observations made could also be applicable to other studies where virtual influencers and influencers in general, are involved. That is because the study provides insights from interviewees that could be relevant and valuable in that topic. However, the primary purpose of this study was to obtain a deeper understanding of the consumers' views of virtual influencers, thus the findings and results may not be generalizable in a bigger context.

Furthermore, since the study is based on a relativistic ontological perspective, the consumers' subjective opinions and experiences are studied, hence the results depend on the viewpoint of the observer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The participants of this study are social actors with their own subjective social context that differs from each other (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), meaning that the results of this study may be less generalizable. That is since qualitative research usually aims at internal generalizability, which means that it can explain research from a specific setting. That is in contrast to quantitative research, which aims at statistical generalizability, which can give inferences beyond the studied topic and setting (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

## **4.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented the chosen method and methodology, philosophical position and sample collection for this study. The research has been based on a relativistic ontological perspective and a constructionist epistemological perspective. Furthermore, the gathered data consisted of twelve semi-structured interviews with Swedes between the ages of 18 to 25. The chapter provided an overview of how the analysis was conducted, with help of a thematic sorting process. Lastly, the quality of the research was discussed based on validity, reliability and generalizability.

## **5. Empirical findings**

In this chapter, the empirical findings from the conducted interviews are presented. The empirical findings will be presented in themes that will be explained further in this chapter.

### **5.1 General Findings**

The twelve conducted interviews that constituted the empirical material for this study indicated recurring similarities that the respondents independently repeated and discussed during the interviews. After sorting and reducing among the empirical data, the similarities from the interviews formed five themes that will be presented as empirical findings and further constitute the analysis. The themes that were found during the interviews were the five following: 1) Human Influencers and Influencer Marketing, 2) The Difficulty of Trusting Virtual Influencers, 3) The Importance of Virtual Influencers Being Knowledgeable and Experienced, 4) Scepticism and Curiosity towards Developing a Relationship With a Virtual Influencer and, 5) The Significant Role of the Creators.

### **5.2 Human Influencers and Influencer Marketing**

During the interviews, a noticeable theme arose, the participants' similar views on human influencers and influencer marketing. The participants gave their views of human influencers that they have been following and their insights and opinions regarding what was essential for them regarding influencers and influencer marketing. It was clear that the participants had similar thoughts of what is referred to as an influencer as well as the concept of influencers and influencer marketing. Throughout the interviews, the participants described an influencer as one who has a large follower base and the possibility to influence people. As one who is present on one or multiple platforms and can serve different purposes, for example, commercial purposes.

*Jonathan argued: Hmm, I think about marketing, about a young person, probably 20-30 and most likely a girl who lives in Stockholm or Gothenburg or some large city who has built a follower base by sharing content of her life. She creates an interest for products and services, a lot of commercial interests. I think that an influencer is more commercial.” - Jonathan*

*Similarly, Louise said: “I am thinking about someone who has many followers on social media, [...]. I am thinking about someone who is working with their social media channels and who are producing content and making money by doing so.” - Louise*

When they were asked what is important for them when it comes to influencers and for them to follow one, a main point that was brought forward by the majority of the participants was that they wanted to follow an influencer who was relatable.

Ellen said: *“I have to be able to relate to them in some way [...] I am following influencers to get advice and to get inspired in areas that I am interested in”*. - Ellen

Another point that was made clear was that the participants would like to identify with them, as shown by Lucas when he mentioned the possibility to identify with a human influencer: *“People can identify with them and relate with them and I think it’s easier to trust an influencer compared to a virtual influencer.”* - Lucas

Moreover, for the participant to relate and identify with an influencer which was shown to be important when following an influencer, they had to have similar interests. A lot of the participants emphasized the importance of sharing the same interests and values to relate and identify with an influencer. For example, Daniel said when asked what is important for him when following an influencer: *“This is a large factor I think. With similar interests, that is very important for me I would say. But it could be a combination with similar interests and someone you are alike, either one of them or both.”* - Daniel

These patterns were recurrent throughout the interviews as it turned out that relatability and the sharing of interests were important to follow an influencer. Another vital aspect for influencers to be followed and accepted by the participants was their ability to be trusted. The majority of the participants expressed the importance of trust and the concern that if they were not trusted, they would not be followed, or their messages and content would not be adopted.

Jonathan said: *“They have to show who they really are, so I can trust them, like trust their content. Some only post pictures to look good. I think that it is important that they show who they really are and post both bad and good sides to make it more relatable and so I can trust them”* - Jonathan

Linnéa expressed similar views when explaining why influencers have to be sincere in order for her to follow them: *“That they don’t do everything just to make money, that they have an interest in being sincere and credible towards their followers so I feel that I can trust them and what they are posting.”* - Linnéa

More than trusting them, relating to them, identifying with them and sharing interests, it was important for the participants to see the complete picture of an influencer. For the influencer to come across as trusted and relatable, the whole picture of an influencer had to be shown. The majority of the participants viewed that as important. That influencers not only post content that shows one side of their life but also shows both positive and negative sides, such as failures or being open with their feelings if they were to feel bad, etcetera.

Filippa said: *“It is important for me that they show their whole life. Not only the good things, to create a fake picture of their life. Like, I want to be able to know that they have rough times as well, not only the perfect life. It makes them more sincere and authentic.”* - Filippa

Daniel's opinion was similar when he said that he wanted to see the complete picture and gave Jay Alvarez as an example of not doing that: *“Jay Alvarez, he is only showing one side of his life, jumping parachutes and so on. When everything is too good all the time, that can’t be the case. I want it to be as real as possible and as trustworthy and credible as possible.”*- Daniel

They were also sharing the opinion that an influencer who is too salesy is not as trustworthy. The participants would less likely follow such an influencer who was guided by money and served an exaggerated commercial purpose. Lucas responded as such when asked what was important when following influencers: *“Ehmm, yeah if they are too salesy, like sellouts. I don’t like that. Some influencers have become so greedy. In every video or post there is a collaboration. It’s just so boring because then you know they are only doing it for the money and don’t really care about other things.”* - Lucas

When asked whether the participants had taken recommendations or been influenced by an influencer, the majority of the respondents confirmed that they had. Not everyone had made a purchase based on a recommendation, but a lot of them had either purchased something, used discount codes or had been influenced to make a purchase or a booking later on.

Ellen said: *“Yes haha, many times. It happens very often. Usually discount codes and when they are promoting things I am interested in, like furniture, clothes, make up.”* - Ellen

### **5.3 The Difficulty of Trusting Virtual Influencers**

When the respondents had shared their views and opinions of human influencers and human influencer marketing, the focus of the interviews shifted to the topic of virtual influencers. One aspect that the respondents particularly emphasized regarding virtual influencers was the importance of trust and credibility. The respondents repeatedly came to the conclusion that trustworthiness was fundamental for virtual influencers, their presence on social media and their ability to influence. The views of virtual influencers being trustworthy turned out to be divided among the respondents, however the vast majority still argued that they did not view virtual influencers as trustworthy after reasoning back and forth.

Gabriel said: *“They are cool, I didn't know about them so it was cool to see. However, I feel that it is hard to trust a virtual influencer since it feels fake [...]”* - Gabriel

Daniel said: *“[...] Also hard to trust them since it is a team with an agenda behind them, so the trust factor is decreased I would say.”* - Daniel

However, some of the respondents still believed that other people might feel that virtual influencers could be trustworthy, even if the respondents themselves did not think so.

Linnéa said: *“[...] I can really imagine people trusting and liking these robots which can give them even more opportunities to grow and become something big and perhaps even something normal in the future.”* - Linnéa

Another notable discussion that emerged during some of the interviews was the difference between the respondents' views on how trustworthy virtual influencers are compared to their views on human influencers and their trustworthiness. This discussion addressed influencers' commercial purpose, where some of the respondents emphasized that regardless of the influencers being robots or humans, they are paid or sponsored by brands to promote them and their products. This aspect turned out to be a disadvantage for human influencers and their perceived trustworthiness, as well as the perceived trustworthiness of virtual influencers, to the same extent.



Hanna said: *“Human influencers are not really that reliable, everyone is affected by what all the other influencers are doing and so on. So the reliability and difference between humans and virtual influencers may not be that big actually. If Bianca Ingrassio or Lil Miquela says that “this product is good”, I probably wouldn’t trust more or less on one or the other. Regardless of whether they are virtual influencers or human influencers, they get paid to say something. So I do not trust 100% humans either because they have been paid to say something. But if a human influencer were to say that “this is not a paid collaboration but only a recommendation”, I would trust it, but with collaborations in particular, there is probably not much difference between virtual influencers and human influencers. “ - Hanna*

When the respondents were talking about the commercial purpose of virtual influencers, and how it affects the trustworthiness and credibility of them, Filippa said: *“It makes them a bit more fake and unrealistic. I can’t really trust what they are posting since it might be commercial only [...] I feel that I would not be able to trust or rely on them or what they are saying. Especially since it feels like they do it for money.” - Filippa*

Jonathan said: *“It feels more fake and commercialized as I said, I do not know if I could trust them or not since it is people behind them [...] It can’t be too commercial, then I would not feel that it was legit and I would not trust it since then it feels like the team only does it for the money. So it has to be a nice mix of content I guess.” - Jonathan*

Furthermore, the perceived trustworthiness of virtual influencers was also affected by their ability to be relatable to the audience and the respondents. Once again, most respondents emphasized that they find it difficult, however not impossible, to relate to virtual influencers.

Gabriel said: *“[...] it is like I can’t relate to them. So I am a bit sceptical of their message and if they were to post an ad, I don’t think I would buy something from them [...] Because they are not real humans. I assume that it is the people behind it who write everything and create everything. So for me as a consumer it becomes more difficult to trust their message.” - Gabriel*

Edwin said: *“I can’t relate to a virtual influencer and not trust it since it feels like they have cheated compared to how it should be. There should be problems and obstacles. There seems to be no problems with virtual influencers. And if you were to fake problems that would be ridiculous [...] Like I would not follow Lil Miquela for what I saw. But if there were someone who was interested in something that I’m interested in, maybe. Like the one who trains, I can relate to that.”* - Edwin

However some of them believed that others could more easily relate to them.

Hanna said: *“I mean everything is taking place through social media anyways so it doesn’t matter if it is a human being or a robot behind the screen. In this world we are living in right now where everything gets digitized I absolutely think it is possible for people to bond with virtual influencers. And I mean people bond with and relate to robot characters in video or computer games, right?”* - Hanna

The majority of the respondents stated that the fact that virtual influencers are robots and not humans was the main reason for the difficulty for them to relate to virtual influencers. All the respondents mentioned that virtual influencers do not have real lives, real emotions and real values, which hindered them from being able to relate to virtual influencers.

Marcus said: *“Difficult to relate to them. I would have a hard time relating to a robot because I know it’s a robot. For example, if I like someone who surfs and if it is a robot that does it, then everything is just fake and then it is difficult to relate to it and think that “Hey, I can also do that one day” and so on [...] if it’s a robot, you do not have that kind of thoughts at all. Then you know that you can not be so yourself.”* - Marcus

Ellen said: *“I think everything with virtual influencers is really weird. It feels unreal and I can absolutely not relate to them. They are made of codes, I don’t like it at all.”* - Ellen

When Louise was asked whether she would trust a human influencer or a virtual influencer more she responded: *“Probably a human influencer, because I can relate to it and trust in another way than I could potentially do with a virtual one.”* - Louise

When Daniel was asked the same question he said: *“A human, since you can feel the person who is behind it more [...] you can identify with that human easier. And it becomes easier to trust that one when you can see who it really is.”* All the other respondents shared the same opinions and responded similarly to this question during the interviews.

#### **5.4 The Importance of Virtual Influencers Being Knowledgeable and Experienced**

Another recurring topic during the interviews was virtual influencers' lack of experience. The lack of experience was present when it came to their viewed ability to influence and promote brands or products. The respondents emphasized that virtual influencers do not go through life as ordinary humans do, that they are fictitious with no history or backstory without any experiences from real life. According to the respondents, the lack of experiences from real life made virtual influencers less persuasive and less able to influence and when it comes to promoting brands or products, influencing opinions or having an impact on the audience's purchase intentions. The respondents seemed to agree with these thoughts.

Filippa said: *“Like, they are made up so they cannot go through the stages in life as I do. So they won't really know and their posts become more fake and less trustable. It is basically the team again that has to build up a life for the virtual influencer”.* - Filippa

Jonathan said: *“How can they experience what I have experienced? Like, it will always be difficult to relate to something that is not real and does not experience the same things as me, it is always someone behind the virtual influencer”.* - Jonathan

Linnéa said: *“There is no experience behind a virtual influencer's recommendations of products or services so I would not trust them [...] like they haven't had a chance to even test a product or anything. How should I know that it works. Then it would have to be the creators who have to give their opinion on if it is good or not, it does not make sense. It can even be that they are forced to say that because of the brand”.* - Linnéa

Furthermore, some of the respondents shared the same thoughts regarding virtual influencers promoting certain products, like make up for instance. This can be represented by Louise and Filippa.

Louise said: *“I would not trust virtual influencers who are models and who show makeup or clothes because everything is edited. You can not relate to a robot because it is not real. Because I know that everything they are showing, like I said clothes or makeup, is not real. It is all edited on a computer so I can't trust that a foundation looks as good on me as on an edited robot, or a color on an eye shadow or so. And it's the same for clothes, it's all edited on the robot.”* - Louise

Filippa said: *I would have a difficult time if it recommended make up for instance. Since there's no way that the virtual influencers can try that on. Then again it would be the team behind but it would feel less legit [...] although the team can try it on, I would not trust it as much, like with the make up. I would like to see it on human skin to identify with it to see if it can match me as well.”* - Filippa

However, in the interview with Hanna, a discussion arose regarding makeup and how edited the pictures of human influencers are and if that makes them less trustworthy, in comparison to virtual influencers.

Hanna said: *“It probably depends on how big the virtual influencer is. I could probably have used a discount code, but if it recommends makeup or something like that, I would not trust it nor buy it. Because then everything is fake. But really, if a virtual influencer or a human influencer promotes make up with only pictures on Instagram for instance, it doesn't really matter if it is a human or a virtual influencer because everything is edited either way. So there is probably no big difference between virtual influencers and humans regarding that aspect.”* - Hanna

Thus, the respondents emphasized the importance of experience behind collaborations and the marketing of products. Some respondents also talked about the importance of virtual influencers being knowledgeable about what they were promoting or posting on social media. In this discussion, the creators behind the virtual influencers were shown to have a significant role, according to the respondents.

Lucas said: *“That would be if the team behind or like the virtual influencer had shown over time that they knew things [...] it would be them (the creators) who have to show that they are knowledgeable about certain things for me to take their advice, otherwise I would never listen haha.”* - Lucas

Filippa said: “[...] *It is the team behind them I guess that has to be knowledgeable within their field.*” - Filippa

Although virtual influencers seem to have difficulties in being perceived as knowledgeable and experienced, some of the respondents still thought they could consider taking advice, recommendations and being influenced by certain collaborations. The respondents mentioned that they could use discount codes that virtual influencers promoted, take advice and recommendations for some services, and trust them in their opinions if they shared the same interest as the virtual influencer. When the respondents were asked whether virtual influencers could influence them, they responded as follows:

Jonathan said: “*Hmm, if they shared the same interests I guess. But then it would have to be something that I really enjoy, like golf. It has to be something that gives me something that I really enjoy and am doing myself. If some virtual influencer would post tips and trick on golf and lessons then I could possibly follow it since it would be relatable and also pretty cool and new [...] maybe if I have gotten to know the virtual influencer and we share the same interest and it is this good mix and good people behind so they have reasonable values. Like they know what they are talking about so I could know that the product is good, like the golf club.*” - Jonathan

Louise said: “*It depends, maybe a service like netflix yes, but makeup or clothes no.*” - Louise

Marcus said: “*Yes maybe. If it is a well-established brand that the virtual influencers are promoting [...] However, I think the whole concept falls if a brand makes its own influencer, then it's like super bias. If Apple or someone else were to make a virtual influencer who only promotes Apple, it would really be biased. It should preferably be someone who advertises for different brands, otherwise it will just be an advert and then you can just as easily go to their website instead.*” - Marcus

Agnes said: “*Yes, maybe discount codes in that case too, but it depends on what brand or company they are promoting.*” - Agnes

Another discussion that arose in some of the interviews was virtual influencers ability to influence certain messages rather than products, services or brands. The opinions regarding this were divided among the respondents.

Marcus said: *“It depends on who is behind the virtual influencer: if, for example, the Swedish government had made a corona influencer and if I had known that Folkhälsomyndigheten was behind it, I would have listened to it. But I think you have to make it clear who is sending the message. For Black Lives Matter, the message is good so it does not matter who says it. But I might have taken it more seriously if it had actually been a real person who said it. I think the message must be very established. I think that if a virtual influencer had sent out new information, it would not have been credible, but if it is well established and current, it would be more credible. Then everyone knows what it is and then it's good. But virtual influencers can probably not invent a new wave of something, but for the purpose of promoting something that already exists, virtual influencers can be good for.”* - Marcus

Edwin said: *“[...] It's like with the Black Lives Matter and Lil Miquela, it feels like she is just riding the wave with that one for PR purposes.”* - Edwin

## **5.5 Scepticism and Curiosity Towards Developing a Relationship With a Virtual Influencer**

There was an obvious theme that occurred, the views on developing a relationship with a virtual influencer. The theme was recurring in the majority of the interviews with similar views and responses. The vast majority of the participants addressed the possibility of developing a relationship with a virtual influencer with scepticism and precaution. Although some of the respondents could picture themselves following one and thereby developing a relationship, others were determined that they could not see themselves following one as of now. When asked whether they could see themselves following a virtual influencer, Gabriel responded as such: *“No, unfortunately not, and that is because of what I have said. I do not think so, I have a hard time trusting these jokers.”* - Gabriel

Daniel responded: *“That would be for the moment, to see what it is about since it is new and exciting. But I could do that by looking at their feed so I would not think so.”* - Daniel

However, there were others who had other views when it came to developing a relationship with a virtual influencer. When asked if he could follow a virtual influencer, Edwin argued: *“It would have been if there was someone who was not that banal. Not someone who is training since I relate it to myself and my limits, but there are no limits with them. Like, I can’t relate to it. A male influencer perhaps could be relatable to me by shape, body, face and so on but if it is fake with a virtual influencer then it will be hard to relate to them. But if it is something that is out of this world then maybe because it is so far from my life, then I don’t care. Then it would be more okay to follow since that is not a real person.”* - Edwin

Filippa also addressed the topic with caution but explained how she could potentially see herself following a virtual influencer under certain conditions: *“Potentially, if they show what I just mentioned. Like with sharing their whole life, creating a story for themselves and who they are, their interests and values. And if I feel that I can connect to that and see through the fact that there is a team behind it all, then potentially yes.”* - Filippa

Hanna’s response was more distinct, she viewed it as possible in developing a relationship and following a virtual influencer, she said: *“Yes! Because it would be entertaining and interesting. It’s a cool thing.”* - Hanna

Although the participants viewed it as difficult to develop a relationship, the majority expressed some positive views regarding virtual influencers and the development of a relationship. The majority of the participants found the phenomena of virtual influencers to be cool, exciting and new. However, although they were viewed as new and cool, they tended to be sceptical towards them.

Linnéa said: *“I do think it is a cool phenomenon and something that is not so unexpected because of technology and so on. But at the same time it is a bit scary I must say.”* - Linnéa

Furthermore, Filippa responded: *“I kind of like the idea of them but at the same time it feels a bit distant. Like I can see why they exist but I’m not sure it would be something for me. Or it depends I guess”*. And when asked what it depends on, she further argued: *“I think I could enjoy following one or two since it's new, it's exciting. So it would spark up my insta flow a bit [...].”* - Filippa

Several participants expressed the limited amount of time for knowing them as an explanation of why they did not view it as likely to develop a relationship with a virtual influencer. Some participants urged for it by arguing that their views could have been different if they had followed the virtual influencer for a while.

Lucas said: *“I must say that I was sceptical at first but maybe, maybe. It’s about the time. Right now I would not but maybe if I get to follow it for a while then I would stay a follower maybe. But they would have to have the same interests as we’ve talked about and also be authentic and true in what they are doing. So that it is not only for the money”*. - Lucas

Filippa said: *“But for me to trust them more, I would need time I think. To get to know their made up personalities, their interests, their personal agenda. Not only tips about clothes and make up. I would like to know about the character and if we have the same interests and they post relevant things about that, maybe I could find them more authentic and trustworthy.”* - Filippa

Edwin argued similarly: *“I would say that, there is no connection. Or it is harder to relate and build a relationship with a virtual figure that is not real. I cannot meet this person in town and have lunch. But maybe if I would have tried to follow a virtual influencer for a month then I could have another view of them. But now I would have a hard time trusting them and the people behind it.”* - Edwin

Some of the respondents also referred to the importance of sharing the same interest to facilitate a relationship. Lucas made it clear from the previous citation that he had to share similar interests with the virtual influencer for him to develop a relationship. So did Jonathan when asked about his views on the possibility of developing a relationship: *“Hmm, maybe, it depends. It could be possible if we share the same interests. Now I’m thinking about golf again. So it would have to be someone that I can relate to and share interests with, and it has to be well presented and made. Like the animations and the messages [...]”* - Jonathan

Moreover, it became clear that the respondents could be hesitant in their views of forming a relationship since the relationship would involve the creator behind the influencer instead of the actual virtual influencer itself.



When Louise gave her views on developing a relationship and following one, she argued: *“Hmm... no, at least not now. Maybe if they are growing even more on social media I could potentially see myself following one in the future. But it all depends on the creators behind and who they are.”* - Louise

Marcus also gave his views on the difficulty of developing a relationship with a virtual influencer due to the fact that there is a team of creators that controls it. He said: *“ It depends on the creators behind it I think and how many they are [...] It feels like it is difficult to have a consistent, genuine personality which might make it harder to relate to them or build a relationship with them. The feeling that you know the virtual influencer. Everything depends on how the creators are portraying the influencer.”* - Marcus

## **5.6 The Significant Role of the Creators**

The topic of the creators behind the virtual influencers was distinguished. All of the participants addressed this topic which made it one of the prominent themes. According to most respondents, the creators behind the virtual influencers play a significant role in how virtual influencers are viewed and affect their opinions. As it turns out, the topic of creators has been present in the other themes as well. It has affected the respondents' views regarding the credibility and trustworthiness of the virtual influencers. When Edwin was asked why he viewed virtual influencers as less trustworthy, he said: *“Since they can do and post whatever they like. Also from a branding aspect. That it is not the real face who chose to collaborate, it is a team behind it. You can't trust the virtual influencer because you don't know who is behind it.”* - Edwin

Edwin further elaborated on why the team behind them made them less trustworthy: *“I can't really trust them since I can't see them [...] you don't know who the creators are. Then you don't have a face on them and you don't know their values and purposes. That creates a mistrust towards them since you don't have a face that represents everything.”* - Edwin

Lucas expressed similar views: *“Yes since they are not human or showing human in real life traits you know, I would not feel that they are trustworthy or real in their posts because I know that there are people behind. And then what kind of purpose they aim to serve depends I guess, but that is a factor that plays a part.”* - Lucas

The team has also affected the respondents views on knowledge and expertise of the virtual influencers. When Filippa was asked about her views on adopting opinions from a virtual influencer, she responded: *"I mean, like, if I have gotten to know it, I know if it is reliable and has knowledge in their field. Say fashion trends, if I can see that it has reasonable fashion trend tips, I could potentially adopt those recommendations. But then I would have to trust their opinion and that they know what they are talking about. So it is the team behind them I guess that has to be knowledgeable within their field."* - Filippa

Lucas had similar opinions on the knowledge of virtual influencers: *"I guess, but that would be if the team behind the virtual influencer had shown over time that they knew things, like about cars or boats as with Jon Olsson. Then it would make me more at ease and I would probably trust them more. But they would have to show me somehow that they know things. Because it is very hard to trust a robot's opinion at first since they are not human and can't really experience things or know things."* - Lucas

It became clear that several of the participants realised the potentials of having a hidden team controlling the virtual influencer. That the team could control it and influence its audience by communicating a positive message with great values and beliefs or for a more negative one depending on which agenda the team possesses.

Louise responded: *"It can be both. If the creators behind have sound values and a good purpose for the virtual influencer it probably improves my opinion about it, but it goes the other way around too, so if the creators are weird, the influencer gets weird too."* - Louise

Daniel said: *"And also that it is a team behind who controls it. And if they have a hidden agenda, then they can do it pretty sneaky. So it gets a bit disturbing when they have an agenda. So you have to be cautious."* - Daniel

The majority of the participants also argued that it is the creators that create the values, the opinions, interests and the life story for the virtual influencer as well as possess the knowledge. And as a result, it is the team you would get to know instead of the virtual influencer. This could then decrease trust and relatability.

When Linnéa was asked about her views on the team behind the virtual influencers, she responded: *“I would say that they make the influencer more human-like, but if you don’t know who is behind the virtual influencer I would say that it makes it more unrelatable or less trustworthy because then it feels a bit shady? However, if you know who the creators are and if you know their agendas it might make the virtual influencer more trustworthy I believe.”* - Linnéa

Filippa also emphasized the fact that when taking advice from a virtual influencer, it would be like taking advice from the team: *“It would be like taking advice from the creators more than the virtual influencer. So it depends on how well I have gotten to know them. [...]”* - Filippa

Furthermore, the team behind it has had an effect in shaping the respondents' views on developing relationships with them. Some of the participants argued that it would have been beneficial for the team to present themselves in order to get to know them. By presenting themselves, it would have been easier to get to know the virtual influencer as well and increase the trust and credibility towards it. Hanna said: *“It kind of improves the credibility of knowing that there are people behind it I think. The knowledge that there are people behind it means that there is a little more credibility, it probably benefits them.”* - Hanna

However, there were participants who did not agree and felt that it would not be necessary to display themselves and that it could only make it worse. Daniel responded as he was asked whether or not it would have changed his view on virtual influencers if the team were to present themselves: *“It could have helped but feels unnecessary to go that extra step and show yourself through a virtual influencer.”* - Daniel

Edwin also explained how he felt that the team showing themselves could have worsened the views towards the virtual influencer: *“Since you can’t see them? If I could see who controlled them, then maybe my picture of Lil Miquela could have changed or even created more unreality, it could have made it worse.”* - Edwin

## **5.7 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented the empirical key findings from the interviews. The findings were presented in five identified themes. The empirical findings will be analyzed and explained in accordance with the presented literature, theory and concepts in the following chapter.

## **6. Analysis**

In this chapter, the empirical findings will be discussed in relation to the existing literature, the source credibility theory and the concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. The five themes identified in the previous section will shape the outline of the analysis and will be discussed in the same chronological order.

### **6.1 Human Influencers and Influencer Marketing**

The participants shared the same views of what an influencer is and what influencer marketing regards. The participants shared their opinion of an influencer as one who has a large follower base with the possibility to influence people. As one who is present on one or multiple platforms and can serve different purposes, for example, commercial purposes. This is in line with current literature about the topic of influencers and influencer marketing, where a social media influencer is a prominent user who has created an authentic social media persona and has a significant amount of followers at one or more social media platforms (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Lou, Tan & Chen, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). It was reassuring that the participants shared the same views of the concept of influencer marketing and influencers since it allowed for a more unified empirical set of data. This was of importance for the participants to show that they had the same reference points when comparing virtual influencers to ordinary, human influencers. If they would not have understood the concept of influencer marketing or influencers, their opinions and views could have been misleading compared to the other participants.

Moreover, the participants expressed several factors and attributes necessary for them to follow an influencer, thus initiating a relationship with an influencer. They would like to follow an influencer that was relatable and shared similar interests with the participants. From the interviews, the participants explained how similar interests, as well as values, would make it easier for them to relate to the influencer and identify with it. Additionally, it was evident that they had to be able to trust the influencer to follow one. Several of the participants explained how their trustworthiness would increase if they were to relate to them and show the whole picture as they put it. By showing the whole picture, the participants meant not only posting pictures displaying one side of their life. They would like to see the ups and downs, not only a perfect life. This is in line with current literature, where Bergkvist,

Hjalmarson and Mägi (2016) argue that the attitude of the consumers towards an influencer is dependent on the perceived credibility, perceived trust, their expertise and their congruence of the influencer. Hence, it shows that the participants are dependent on the perceived credibility and trust to follow an influencer, where they expressed that trust could increase by having similar interests, identifying with them as well as being able to relate to them. Furthermore, this is also in line with the literature about the concept of parasocial relationships, which can be facilitated by attributes such as trustworthiness, relatability, identifying with and sharing the same interests as the influencer (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Hence, this emphasizes the importance of parasocial relationships between the influencer and its followers, and thus in order for successful influencer marketing to be possible in accordance with Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020).

Furthermore, the interviews showed that most participants had taken recommendations from an influencer in some form, whether it being actual recommendations, purchasing something based on a recommendation, or simply using a discount code. That the participants had used an influencer to adopt a recommendation and make a purchase or used the recommendation for commercial purposes agrees with the arguing of de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012), who argues that influencer marketing is an effective marketing strategy due to it being more authentic and credible, hence less resistance to the message. It also shows that influencers can be perceived as opinion leaders by the audience due to the respondents' willingness to take advice and recommendation from them in accordance with Rogers and Cartano (1962). This is consistent with Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020), who argue that opinion leadership is essential for successful influencer marketing.

## **6.2 The Difficulty of Trusting Virtual Influencers**

In these modern and digital times, credibility and creating trust with the customers have shown to be essential for successful influencer marketing and to influence the customers (e.g., Colliander & Dahlen 2011; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Jabr & Zheng, 2017). The attitude towards the influencer and their content has also been shown to be dependent on the influencers perceived trustworthiness and credibility (Bergkvist, Hjalmarson & Mägi, 2016). This was confirmed by the vast majority of the respondents, who emphasized the importance of trust between them and virtual influencers, and furthermore, virtual influencers lack of trustworthiness. All

of the respondents also stated that they trust human influencers more than virtual influencers, and the majority of the respondents showed scepticism towards the virtual influencers, which could be a result of the lacking trustworthiness and hence in line with Riedl, Mohr, Kenning, Davis and Heekeren (2014), Colliander and Dahlén (2011), De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017), Jabr and Zheng (2017) and Bergkvist, Hjalmarson and Mägi (2016) among others. Moreover, a source's credibility, in this case, a virtual influencer's credibility, is built based on trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). The factor of trustworthiness refers to the extent to which the receiver finds the communicator's intentions to be valid and to which level the receiver accepts the communicator's message (Ohanian, 1990). Thus, this could explain the respondents' scepticism towards virtual influencers since they felt that virtual influencers lacked trustworthiness which could have affected their perceived source credibility. Moreover, trustworthiness within source credibility is affected by the virtual influencer being truthful, honest, and sincere (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). The participants also addressed this issue of not finding them trustworthy which could indicate a decreased source credibility of virtual influencers.

Furthermore, according to Moustakas et al. (2020), trustworthiness, in particular, could be a challenge for virtual influencers due to not being humans. These assumptions could thus be considered affirmed for this sample, where the respondents clearly stated the difficulties for virtual influencers to be perceived as credible and trustworthy due to them being robots. Hence, virtual influencers are facing potential challenges when it comes to their perceived source credibility and, furthermore, their abilities to develop parasocial relationships and being perceived as opinion leaders since these theories and concepts are based on trust and credibility (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Chung & Cho, 2017; Stehr et al., 2015; Katz, 1957; Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack & Zahid, 2018). Moreover, the respondents clarified and gave examples of factors that decreased their perceived trustworthiness towards virtual influencers. These were considered as the difficulty to relate to virtual influencers, their purposes and the fact that they were robots and not humans, according to the respondents.

The vast majority of respondents thus emphasized and agreed that relatedness is one important factor that could facilitate and strengthen virtual influencers' perceived trustworthiness and credibility. However, all of the respondents said they did not think they could relate to a virtual influencer themselves. Furthermore, being able to relate to and identify with a virtual influencer is one of the main factors of the development of parasocial

relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Hence, a lack of relatedness could potentially harm the virtual influencers' ability to develop parasocial relationships with their audience due to the difficulty to identify with them and trust them (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, some respondents mentioned that they thought that other people could potentially more easily relate to virtual influencers. This argument was based on the fact that the respondent felt that people have been relating to virtual avatars in computer or video games before. Consequently, the respondents were sceptical about relating to virtual influencers themselves but believed that others could potentially more easily. This means that the development of parasocial relationships might be difficult, however not impossible, according to the respondents' reasoning and attitudes towards virtual influencers.

According to the respondents, one of the primary reasons for not being able to relate to virtual influencers was dependent on the fact that they are robots. Many of the respondents agreed on this and stated that virtual influencers do not have real lives, real emotions and real values, which obstructed them from being able to relate to virtual influencers. This is in line with Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) and Huang and Rust (2018), who argue that virtual influencers may not appear as trustworthy since they are robots without actual feelings as human beings. According to Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018), this could result in limited adoption of opinions and relatedness to them, which have been confirmed in this particular study and for these respondents. Furthermore, Moustakas et al. (2020) argue that virtual influencers face the difficulties of being perceived as relatable and trustworthy because they are robots created by humans. The respondents have also confirmed this in the interviews. Being trustworthy and relatable are, as previously mentioned, significant for source credibility, parasocial relationships and opinion leadership (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Chung & Cho, 2017; Stehr et al., 2015; Katz, 1957; Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack & Zahid, 2018). Hence, this study shows that the development of these concepts from source credibility for virtual influencers is further complicated and difficult in accordance with Moustakas et al. (2020). This also confirms previous studies by Labrecque (2014), who claims that parasocial interactions are less valuable and more difficult for people to develop if they know that they interact with a robot instead of another human being.

Another aspect brought up by the respondents in the discussion about virtual influencers' trustworthiness was their purposes, where many of the respondents stated that virtual influencers are used only for commercial purposes. According to the respondents, the

commercial purpose behind virtual influencers decreased their perceived trustworthiness since they felt that there was a hidden agenda behind the presence of virtual influencers on Instagram. Many respondents also stated that virtual influencers, or their creators, are being paid to say certain things about specific brands, which negatively affected the trustworthiness. This is consistent with Moustakas et al. (2020), who argue that a commercial purpose for virtual influencers could decrease relatability, authenticity and transparency towards them. The decreased trustworthiness due to commercial purposes that was expressed by the participants affects the perceived source credibility since trustworthiness constitutes a major factor in source credibility (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). As a result of the decreased source credibility and trustworthiness, parasocial relationships could also be more difficult to develop since it is dependent on trust as well (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Consequently, the perceived trustworthiness and credibility towards virtual influencers have been proved to be a challenge through this sample and this study. This results in difficulties to be perceived as source credible, and thus, it could be more difficult to develop parasocial relationships and being perceived as an opinion leader by the audience. However, it is important to have in mind that the sample were non-followers, which could potentially have an impact on the perceived trustworthiness. Furthermore, parasocial relationships, for instance, are built by several parasocial interactions and occur over time (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). The limited amount of time for the respondents to get familiar with virtual influencers could, therefore, potentially influence their attitudes towards virtual influencers and their possibilities.

### **6.3 The Importance of Virtual Influencers Being Knowledgeable and Experienced**

One of the themes during the interviews related to the virtual influencers perceived trustworthiness was their perceived knowledge and expertise, where the respondents had somewhat different opinions. However, a consistent pattern in the responses was that most respondents stated that virtual influences do not live a real life and do not have any real feelings or any real life experience. According to the respondents, these statements affected not only the trustworthiness of the virtual influencers but also whether or not the respondents felt that they could consider taking advice or recommendations from a virtual influencer. Moreover, recommendations and E-word-of-mouth through social media, for instance, is



dependent on being trustworthy and credible, and the virtual influencers have to be able to show these attributes to persuade their followers (Kim, Kandampully, & Bilgihan, 2018; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Trustworthiness has already been presented as a significant factor for source credibility, however, it is also one of the factors of great importance for opinion leaders, according to Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack and Zahid (2018). For an opinion leader to be able to be persuasive, it has to be perceived as trustworthy (Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack & Zahid, 2018). Hence, the observed lack of trustworthiness for virtual influencers, and thus their perceived source credibility, directly affects their abilities to be perceived as opinion leaders in accordance with Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack and Zahid (2018). With the participants' perceived lack of trustworthiness and thus persuasiveness of the virtual influencers, their viewed ability to be opinion leaders could seem to decrease. That could, in turn, affect the virtual influencers capability of being an asset in influencer marketing. That is because opinion leadership is essential for influencer marketing since opinion leaders have the ability to influence followers' opinions, perceptions and behaviours in a desirable manner (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot & Scott 2007).

Furthermore, the perceived credibility of the source, in this case, the virtual influencer, positively correlates with persuasiveness (Goldsmith, Lafferty & Newel, 2000; Seno & Lukas, 2007). In this case, with the previously mentioned difficulties for virtual influencers to be perceived as source credible, their persuasiveness might be affected in the opposite direction, e.g. negatively. The interviews showed signs of this link. However, a notable discussion that arose in some of the interviews when talking about virtual influencers persuasiveness and trustworthiness was that some participants stated that regardless of whether it is a human influencer or a virtual influencer, they have been paid by a brand in their sponsored posts to say certain things. According to these respondents, the trustworthiness of both human and virtual influencers decreased because of these facts, and they stated that they could not trust one more than the other.

As mentioned, one of the major aspects that correlate with virtual influencers' perceived persuasiveness is their lack of experiences, according to the respondents. In the interviews, some of the respondents stated that virtual influencers' messages and collaborations with brands felt insincere and untrustworthy since virtual influencers do not have any experiences

behind their statements or promoting of products. This made virtual influencers less persuasive since most respondents did not think they could consider taking advice or recommendations from a virtual influencer based on these facts of lacking experience. According to some of the respondents, the aspects regarding lack of experience were considered as particularly significant for virtual influencers when promoting products such as makeup or clothes. Furthermore, experience is one of the components of expertness in source credibility, meaning, without experiences in any form, virtual influencers face difficulties in being perceived as source credible (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990). This might explain the respondents' resistance and scepticism regarding taking advice and recommendations from virtual influencers and especially when it comes to makeup and clothes, since the virtual influences are unable to test the things they are promoting. Hence, this goes against the basic idea with influencer marketing being an effective marketing strategy due to less resistance to the message, according to de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012). This also goes against the foundation of opinion leadership, which assumes that an opinion leader is one from whom individuals seek advice and information (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). Hence, the decreased source credibility due to a lack of expertness and experience could result in the virtual influencer being viewed as less of an opinion leader.

However, the interviews also showed that some of the respondents were open to taking advice or recommendations from virtual influencers under certain circumstances and regarding certain things. First, the promoted message had to be well-established for the respondents to listen to it. For instance, the respondents mentioned messages as Black Lives Matters. Second, if the virtual influencer promoted a brand, it had to be well-known and preferably some kind of well-known service rather than products. For instance, the respondents mentioned brands such as Apple or a service like Netflix. And third, if the respondents could gain something from the collaboration, they could consider taking advantage of it. This was primarily regarding if the virtual influencer promoted discount codes for well-known brands. According to Rogers and Cartano (1962), an opinion leader provides information that is considered valuable and insightful to the audience and thus more likely to be adopted. Hence, opinion leaders have a positive effect on followers' intentions to interact, follow the advice and recommendations (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2020). This could be the case for these types of recommendations when the respondents are willing to take advice and listen to the virtual influencers regarding certain things and collaborations. However, it could also be independent by the virtual influencer itself and rather imply that the

respondents feel that they can trust recommendations regarding things and brands they already know about since it could be more trustworthy in that case.

Furthermore, some of the respondents emphasized that virtual influencers' perceived knowledge could improve the respondents' perception of them. Some of the respondents mentioned similar interests as something that could improve virtual influencers' perceived knowledge. By sharing similar interests and giving tips and recommendations within that area, some participants explained that the virtual influencer could come across as more knowledgeable and exert expertness. The participants would then have been able to identify and judge their recommendations and evaluate whether the virtual influencer would come across as knowledgeable or not. Being knowledgeable and showing competence within a specific area makes up the factor of expertness within source credibility (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Hence, if the virtual influencer would be knowledgeable within a certain field as explained by the participants, their source credibility could have increased. As could their opinion leadership since that is built on competence within certain areas (Katz, 1957). However, the discussion about the creators behind virtual influencers arose when talking about this topic, and the respondents seemed to have similar views that the creators have a significant impact on virtual influencers' perceived knowledge and their abilities to be perceived as opinion leaders.

#### **6.4 Scepticism and Curiosity towards Developing a Relationship With a Virtual Influencer**

The vast majority of the participants addressed the possibility of developing a relationship with a virtual influencer with scepticism and precaution. Although some of the respondents could picture themselves following one and thus developing a relationship, others were determined that they could not see themselves following one as of now. The participants gave different reasons for whether they could view themselves following a virtual influencer or not. One of the reasons the participants viewed it to be difficult to follow a virtual influencer was the trustworthiness of the virtual influencer. Several of the participants felt that they could not trust the virtual influencer, hence not following one. As Ohanian (1990) argues, trustworthiness is referred to which extent the receiver finds the communicator's intentions to be valid as well as which level of acceptance towards the communicator's message. As a result of the participants viewing the virtual influencers as less trustworthy, the acceptance

towards the message could be decreased and the perceived source credibility of the virtual influencer as well, since trustworthiness constitutes a factor of source credibility (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). By being viewed as less trustworthy, the source credibility was viewed to decrease and also the possibility of developing parasocial relationships. That is, since parasocial relationships tend to develop as the media persona, the virtual influencer appears as trustworthy and transparent (Chung & Cho, 2017). This is in line with Stehr et al. (2015), who also argue that for a parasocial relationship to develop, it has to be based on trust.

Other explanations by the participants for not following a virtual influencer, thus not intending to initiate a relationship, was due to not being human. Some participants expressed their concern that the virtual influencers are not human and did not see why they should follow someone who is not human but a robot. This is in line with Labrecque (2014) research, where the author argues that parasocial interactions with robots were perceived as less valuable and harder to form if the participants were aware that they were interacting with a robot. One of the participants argued for the possibility of following a virtual influencer who did not look like a human since a virtual influencer would not be relatable even though it looked like a human. This concurs with previous research, which suggests that robots that are similar to human beings could be perceived as creepy and unsettling, and therefore people will be less likely to interact with them (Mori, 1970; Duffy, 2003). However, there are studies that argue for the opposite. Tinwell, Grimshaw, and Williams (2011) claim that the more human-like a robot appears to be, the more trusted it is. Although none of the participants viewed the virtual influencers as more trustworthy due to being similar to humans, it could be argued that the most crucial factor for being viewed as trustworthy and credible is dependent on the virtual robot to understand the human. Wirtz et al. (2018) argue for the ability to understand humans, to be on their side and sympathize with it as the most important factor for robot acceptance. This could then, in turn, increase trust, and they could be viewed as more credible and believable. Wirtz et al. (2018) argument is applicable to several of the participants' answers during the interviews where they have expressed the issue of not viewing virtual influencers capable of experiencing things, thus having a hard time relating to them and trusting them. Therefore, Wirtz et al. (2018) argument could explain that.

More than the difficulty to trust them as well as their robot appearance, other participants could not simply see the benefit of following them since they simply did not like them. By not viewing yourself as capable of following and liking a virtual influencer, a parasocial

relationship cannot be developed. That is since parasocial relationships refer to an imaginary relationship that is formed between an audience and a media persona through mediated encounters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These encounters have to repeatedly occur to form a parasocial relationship. Hence, why a single parasocial interaction would not result in a parasocial relationship (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Additionally, a parasocial relationship is built on a perceived friendship that likes the media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956). If the participants do not like them, which has been observed during the interviews, the development of parasocial relationships will be even more difficult.

However, some of the participants could see themselves following a virtual influencer during certain conditions. From the interviews, it was clear that for several of the participants to follow a virtual influencer, they had to share the same interests to make them more relatable, they would also have to express certain values and be transparent. Sharing interests was recurring through several interviews and can be explained by Lou and Yuan (2019), who argue that followers tend to follow those influencers with whom they can identify. By having similar interests, the participants would be able to identify and relate to the virtual influencer easier. Identification is one of the attributes that constitute parasocial relationships and refers to adopting similar traits, interests, behaviour, values and more (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Hence, parasocial relationships are limited because of not showing similar interests but could be facilitated by the virtual influencer showing similar interests, behaviour, values and belief.

Furthermore, similar interests could have increased the perceived source credibility of the virtual influencer since Ohanian (1990) argues that the greater similarity between the communicator and the receiver, the greater will the communicator's credibility be perceived. Additionally, De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) maintain that similarity significantly impacts an influencer's perceived credibility. Therefore, if the virtual influencer were to share interests with its receiver, the credibility could have increased, as could the perceived source credibility, which could facilitate the development of a parasocial relationship.

Several of the participants also explained their views of why they would not see themselves forming a relationship with a virtual influencer as of now. That was because of the limited time they had known the virtual influencer and gotten to get acquainted with them. Their views could have been different towards them if they had gotten more time to adopt the

concept and get to know them better. That is since parasocial relationships are developed from several parasocial interactions and are built over time (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Moreover, they also expressed concerns regarding the relationship not being developed with the influencer but with the team of creators behind it. The participants argued for the decrease of trust due to the team, which in turn could have decreased the source credibility due to not being trustworthy (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). That could, in turn, also affect the development of parasocial relationships since they are built on trust and transparency, as well as opinion leadership (Chung & Cho, 2017; Stehr et al., 2015; Katz, 1957).

Although the majority expressed the development of a relationship as something distant due to the discussed matters, some of the participants explained how they could see themselves following a virtual influencer due to it being a new, cool, and exciting phenomenon. This could then potentially increase the perceived source credibility of the receivers who have the positive attitude of them being trustworthy and knowledgeable (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). According to Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020), the perceived opinion leadership can also be affected by characteristics of an Instagram influencer, such as perceived uniqueness and originality among the followers. This could then be a possibility for virtual influencers in the long run, since some of the respondents are open to becoming a follower of them, and since their accounts could be perceived as unique and original in accordance with Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez, (2020). Hence, more time for the audience to get familiar with virtual influencers could potentially result in facilitating the development of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, which have proven to be key constructs for influencer marketing in accordance with Farivar, Wang and Yuan (2020).

## **6.5 The Significant Role of the Creators**

The team of creators behind the virtual influencers affected the respondents' views of them. The respondents expressed their concern about not knowing who is behind the virtual influencer, who posts the content, who writes the captions and so on. Because of not knowing the creators, their views were affected, and as a result, their viewed credibility and trustworthiness of them was shown to decrease. The respondents explained how it became more difficult to trust the virtual influencer when not knowing who is behind it, how their faces look, what values they have or what purpose they aim to serve. Hence, the interviewees had similar views on virtual influencers being harder to trust due to a lack of transparency. By

being perceived as less trustworthy because of the effects the team of creators have on the respondents, their perceived source credibility could decrease, which then could affect the possibility to develop parasocial relationships. That is since source credibility is built on trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Moreover, according to Chung and Cho (2017), trust and transparency are crucial for sustaining and developing a parasocial relationship. Since the team decreases the perceived trust and transparency, the development of parasocial relationships could also be made more difficult. The fact that they expressed their concern about not knowing the team's purposes and values also complicates the development of parasocial relationships since Horton and Wohl (1956) argues that parasocial relationships are dependent on creating a relation by gathering an understanding of the underlying values and motivations of a person.

The perceived lack of trustworthiness and source credibility due to the team could also affect the possibilities of opinion leadership. Being trustworthy and credible have proven to be of importance when influencing followers and exerting opinion leadership, according to Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack and Zahid (2018). Additionally, Katz (1957) argues that an opinion leader is characterised by certain values and expresses certain values. As the respondents found it difficult to interpret the virtual influencers' purpose and values, it could be difficult to view them as opinion leaders in accordance with Katz (1957) reasoning.

From the interviews, it became clear that the team of creators also affected the respondents' views of the virtual influencers' viewed knowledge and expertise. They explained how it would not be possible for the virtual influencer to have certain expertise. Still, it would have to be the team behind it who possessed the knowledge and expertise regarding different topics. The respondents further explained how it would have to be the team that showed themselves as knowledgeable through the virtual influencer for the message to be adopted. That is since several of the respondents argued that it would be hard to initially trust a robot and its knowledge and expertise. Not trusting a robot is in accordance with Moustakas et al. (2018) reasoning, who argue that robots are more difficult to trust than humans. The team could therefore affect the perceived source credibility of the virtual influencer by their perceived expertness. To be viewed as source credible, the virtual influencer would have to show traits of expertness, that is, be perceived as competent when it comes to knowledge, skills and experience (Hovlan, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990). As well as to which extent the communicator can make valid assertions by being perceived as having expertise

within specific areas (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian 1990). From the interviews, it would have to be the creators that were to express this expertness through the virtual influencer. As of now, the respondents viewed it difficult for them to come across as knowledgeable and expertful but not impossible. A lot due to the lack of experience, as mentioned previously. By being perceived as source credible and by showing expertise, they could then be viewed as opinion leaders where they could show the traits within the expertise that is applicable to opinion leadership. Such as having certain values and showing competence within different areas (Katz, 1957).

Although it would seem difficult as of now for the virtual influencers to be perceived as having expertise, and maybe even impossible since they have not shown expertness due to lack of experience, as discussed earlier. Therefore, being viewed as an opinion leader will be more difficult as well, however, according to the participants, there could be ways to mitigate this concern. The participants stressed that they could potentially adopt recommendations and messages if the team came across as trustworthy, knowledgeable and showing expertise. So, the virtual influencer might be dependent on the team for being perceived as experts and thus source credible by showing their knowledge, expertise and experience through the virtual influencer, which could then facilitate opinion leadership.

## **6.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has analyzed the empirical findings from chapter five in relation to the previously presented literature, theory and concepts in accordance with the conceptual framework. The chapter has contributed to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of virtual influencers and how consumers view them, especially their perceived source credibility and, from that, their potential abilities to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. The chapter has explained how there are challenges for the virtual influencers' perceived source credibility. Hence this could affect their viewed abilities to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Furthermore, the chapter explains how the difficulty of trusting them, their lack of experience, knowledge and expertise have affected the respondents' views. As a result, the development of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership from their perceived source credibility was shown as limited. However, there were indications of the potential possibility of developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, yet only during certain circumstances.



## **7. Conclusions and Discussion**

This chapter aims to discuss and conclude the results of the research and mainly answer the research question of the study. It also presents a discussion of the results and introduces developments of the conceptual framework. The chapter also covers the theoretical as well as the practical implications and lastly discusses the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for future research.

### **7.1 Conclusion**

Based on previous research, opinion leadership and parasocial relationships have been shown to be two central concepts that are of significance for successful influencer marketing. Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine whether the new, modern virtual influencers could be viewed as capable of developing these two concepts from their perceived source credibility. To research the phenomenon of virtual influencers and their viewed abilities to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, a qualitative method was chosen in order to examine the topic in-depth. The data collection consisted of twelve semi-structured interviews with Swedish males and females between the age of 18 to 25. The twelve respondents shared their views and opinions regarding both human and virtual influencers and influencers marketing in general, in order to help answer the research question *“How are virtual influencers viewed by the audience of Instagram in being able to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership from their perceived source credibility?”*. Based on the data collection, the empirical findings indicated five similarities that were recurring during all the interviews. This resulted in the five identified and previously presented themes. The themes further shaped the outline of the analysis where the empirical findings were discussed in relation to the existing literature, the source credibility theory and the concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, synthesized in the conceptual framework.

The findings of the study show that there are major challenges for virtual influencers to overcome regarding their perceived source credibility, as well as their abilities to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. According to the respondents, this was shown to be dependent on the virtual influencers perceived lack of trustworthiness, lack of knowledge and experience, the difficulty to relate to them, the scepticism towards developing a relationship with them, as well as the fact of them being robots and not humans. Accordingly, these factors affected the virtual influencers' perceived source credibility, which

also showed to result in difficulties for them to be viewed to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership with the respondents.

Among these findings, there were two particular factors that were shown to have a greater impact on the consumers' views of virtual influencers. One of them was the common view of virtual influencers' lack of trustworthiness that was recurring and emphasized in all five themes. It was shown that the factor of trustworthiness played a significant role in the respondents' general views on virtual influencers, and many of the respondents justified their statements of virtual influencers' lack of trustworthiness with the fact that they are robots and not humans. In addition, all of the participants expressed that they trusted human influencers more than virtual influencers. Furthermore, the lack of trustworthiness made it difficult for the respondents to be able to relate to virtual influencers and take advice and recommendations from them. The lack of trustworthiness also resulted in an unwillingness to follow virtual influencers for many of the respondents, which accordingly complicated the development of a relationship with virtual influencers and their audience. Consequently, the study shows that the perceived trustworthiness of virtual influencers has been proved to be a major challenge for this sample. This results in difficulties for virtual influencers to be perceived as source credible since one of the attributes for being source credible is by being trustworthy. Furthermore, the lack of trustworthiness and hence source credibility also affects the ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership since being trustworthy is an important attribute for both of these concepts as well.

Another key finding and common view among the respondents that were shown to be crucial for virtual influencers and their perceived abilities to act as opinion leaders was their lack of experience which also affected their perceived knowledge. The respondents particularly emphasized that due to virtual influencers being robots, they do not live a real life and they do not have real feelings or experiences regarding the things they are talking about or are promoting in collaborations with brands. This, in turn, affected the trustworthiness of virtual influencers and hence their perceived source credibility. Since experience constitutes one of the attributes related to expertness in the source credibility theory, this finding further complicates virtual influencers' abilities to be perceived as source credible. It is also a major finding since it directly affects virtual influencers' persuasiveness and their abilities to be perceived as opinion leaders since the respondents showed an unwillingness to take advice and recommendations from virtual influencers due to their lack of experience.

Furthermore, an unexpected finding that turned out to be one of the key findings of this study was the significance of the creators behind virtual influencers that derived from the empirical material. The respondents repeatedly indicated and emphasized that the virtual influencers' perceived source credibility and also their abilities to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership was dependent on the creators behind them. Hence, the creators seemed to potentially enable and increase the perceived source credibility of virtual influencers by showing off the necessary attributes of expertness, especially knowledge and competence, and trustworthiness by being transparent. However, the majority of the respondents stated that they did not know about, or understood the creator's agenda, which decreased virtual influencers perceived trustworthiness. This was also based on the fact that the respondents did not know who the creators are, what values they have and what purpose they aim to serve, hence a lack of transparency. In turn, virtual influencers' perceived source credibility could seem to decrease as a result of this, and thus also their abilities to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership.

Another finding that derived from the empirical material rather than theory was the importance of robot acceptance and the respondents' difficulties in accepting virtual influencers due to them being robots. This was also a key finding that was recurring and crucial for many of the other presented findings. Since it was shown to have an impact on virtual influencers' perceived trustworthiness, relatability and, as previously mentioned, their perceived knowledge and experience. This, in turn, had an impact on the perceived source credibility and further virtual influencers ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, which was shown to be difficult. Moreover, another aspect that was brought up by the respondents during the interviews, rather than an aspect directly linked to the theory, was the limited amount of time for them to get to know the virtual influencers. Some of the respondents mentioned the limited amount of time as a potential factor behind their attitudes towards virtual influencers. Thus, more time could potentially improve their chances of developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership.

To conclude, there are major challenges and difficulties for virtual influencers to overcome regarding their perceived source credibility, as well as their abilities to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership from their source credibility. The key findings for this study and for this particular sample has especially proven difficulties when it comes to virtual influencers' trustworthiness, experience, being accepted as robots and the attitude towards the

creators behind them. This, in turn, has all affected virtual influencers' degree of source credibility. Additionally, the development of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership have also been shown as difficult because of that. Nevertheless, the sample of this study also showed some indications of the potential for virtual influencers to be perceived as capable of possessing the necessary attributes that are required for source credibility and, further, parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Therefore, the development of these could be considered as difficult with challenges to overcome, however not impossible. Hence, this answers the research question and leaves the results with possibilities open for further discussion.

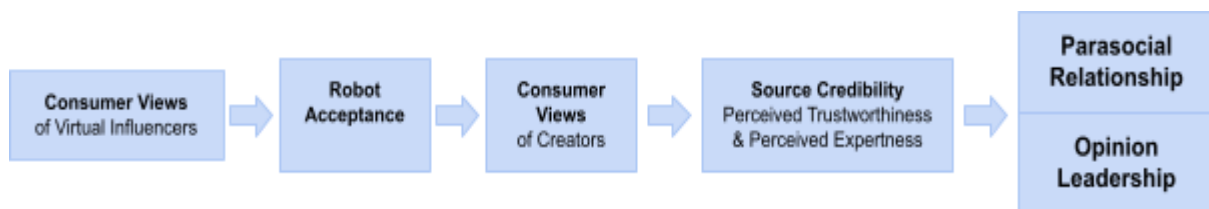
## **7.2 Conceptual Framework Revisited**

The conceptual framework served as a guide for the study and acted as a lens through which the empirical data and findings were analyzed. However, since the theory was used as a guide and an explanation to the phenomena of the study, the empirical material allowed for further development of the framework. The empirical data of this study has shown some major themes and resulted in some major key findings which have had an impact on the initial developed conceptual framework. It was first considered that parasocial relationship and opinion leadership could be outcomes of the perceived source credibility of the virtual influencer. However, from the empirical data, there have been other factors that have affected the virtual influencers' viewed capability of developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership which should be considered in an updated conceptual framework.

The significant role of the creators is such a factor to consider. One of the main findings that emerged from the empirical data was the impact the role of the creators had on the views of the participants. Due to the creators not being transparent and showing themselves and their agenda, the participants viewed virtual influencers as less likely to show attributes to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Hence, the views of the creators of virtual influencers could be added to the framework as a component that has to be explored to further determine the views of virtual influencers since they were depending on the creators.

Another component that could be considered as an addition to the initial framework would be robot acceptance. That is, since the majority of the participants expressed concerns about them being robots and the difficulty of trusting, relating and adopting opinions of robots

affected their further view of virtual influencers and the development of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. From the empirical data, it could be found that the difficulty of accepting them because of being robots was prominent. Hence, robot acceptance could act as a component in the framework. If the participant were not to accept the virtual influencer for being a robot, the participants' views would be affected and also the views of developing parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. Robot acceptance of the participant should therefore be explored before their perceived source credibility since it had a large effect on that factor.



*Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Revisited*

### 7.3 Discussion of the Results

The findings of this study showed that virtual influencers and their creators are facing challenges when it comes to their perceived source credibility, and further their abilities to develop parasocial relationships with the audience and being perceived as an opinion leader by them. However, since this study is only researching the ages of 18 to 25, the results might be affected by this. Hence, by studying another age group, the results might differ from the findings of this thesis. A younger age group that probably has been growing up with social media on a daily basis to a larger extent could perhaps perceive virtual influencers as more attractive, more familiar and have a better attitude towards them. Conversely, an older age group might be more sceptical towards this new technology and hence have a more negative attitude towards virtual influencers. This could, in turn, complicate the development of parasocial relationships and opinion leaderships even more.

Apart from different attitudes towards virtual influencers between different age groups, differences could potentially also be seen when it comes to different nationalities. As this study is researching how the Swedish audience of Instagram perceive virtual influencers ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, the results may not be generalizable for other nationalities. By studying a sample with other nationalities, the

empirical data could perhaps result in other findings. The digitalization in Sweden is moving forward at a high pace, meaning that Swedes potentially could have a different attitude towards new digitized solutions compared to countries that do not have the same development. Also, since there are very few virtual influencers from Sweden, this could have affected the participants' ability to relate to and trust them, which could have affected the result.

Another factor that might have impacted the result of this study is the limited amount of time for the respondents to get familiar with and understand the phenomenon of virtual influencers. Since the sample of this research are non-followers, they have not been exposed to frequent interactions from virtual influencers, which could have impacted their attitudes towards them. Hence, by doing research on the phenomenon using a sample of followers to virtual influencers, the results might have been different with other outcomes. Another noteworthy point of view on this is that the phenomenon still is very new, meaning that many people do not fully understand what virtual influencers are. By doing this kind of research a couple of years from now, the results might also differ even for a sample of non-followers since they would probably be more familiar with the concept of virtual influencers then.

Furthermore, as the respondents showed indications of willingness to adopt and accept the phenomenon of virtual influencers to some extent, there might be a possibility that virtual influencers could grow even more and play a bigger role in influencer marketing in the future. If the creators were to overcome the challenges that virtual influencers are facing right now, potential benefits could follow. The advantages of using virtual influencers are, for instance, that they are controllable, meaning less risk for brands to collaborate with. They are formable and could be designed to match the teams, the brands and the audience's desires and that they can create content without being present (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018; Moustakas et al., 2020). These advantages could also potentially lead to a cost-effective marketing strategy that could be of interest to brands since the benefits could reduce costs that would not be possible when using a human influencer.

## **7.4 Implications**

### **7.4.1 Theoretical Implications**

The study has contributed with theoretical implications. The results of the study give a better understanding of the topic of influencer marketing, virtual influencers and theory and concepts related to the topic. Firstly, these theoretical implications address the current literature gap from a consumer perspective regarding virtual influencers in general and parasocial relationships and opinion leadership in particular. Since there currently is a limited amount of research on virtual influencers, this study extends that literature by presenting consumer views of virtual influencers ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. It has been shown that consumers view it difficult as of now for virtual influencers to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership, however, not impossible. Hence, virtual influencers ability to develop these two constructs of influencer marketing is a new theoretical implication to the current understandings of the theoretical concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. The study also adds to the literature of influencer marketing by researching both of the constructs to get a holistic perspective of virtual influencers capability of serving as a successful influencer marketing strategy tool.

Additionally, the study also contributes to theoretical implications of knowledge when it comes to virtual influencers in general. The findings reveal that virtual influencers can be more difficult to relate to in comparison to humans because of being robots since people found it hard to relate to artificial intelligence. They are also less trustworthy than human influencers. The virtual influencers were also viewed to lack experience in certain fields, which could result in a limitation of adopting messages. A lot of the findings involved a lack of trust, relatability, experience and transparency, which contributes to the theoretical implications of knowledge by emphasizing the importance of these attributes for virtual influencers acceptance.

Moreover, the study adds to the theory of source credibility. It investigates the connection between source credibility, parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. The study shows how the theory of source credibility can serve as a tool to study the two concepts. This could be considered as a new theoretical understanding. Additionally, since earlier studies have mostly applied source credibility theory to celebrity endorsers and others, this study adds new understandings to this theory by applying it to virtual influencers. The study also confirms a

lot of the current literature and theory. It was shown that the participants' views on virtual influencers agreed with the literature as well as the theory in what was important for them when trusting them, adopting messages, developing relationships, viewing them as credible and more. This could be considered as a theoretical implication as well since it contributes to the theoretical understanding by supporting the current literature and theory.

The study was focusing on generation Z, Swedish users of Instagram within the age group of 18 to 25. Hence, this study has contributed to theoretical implications and insights of how this sample views virtual influencers and to which extent they can view their source credibility and, as a result, their ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership.

#### **7.4.2 Practical Implications**

The study resulted in several practical implications that can be of use for different purposes and different users. It could be of use for companies interested in using virtual influencers, for managers, developers of virtual influencers, or those interested in the topic. Since there is a lack of research on virtual influencers, the implications and insights of this study from a consumer's view become more valuable.

The research has shown what is important when creating a virtual influencer for it to be accepted and perceived as source credible and thus potentially develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. As a result, it could serve as a successful influencer marketing strategy. When creating them, they should come across as trustworthy. For them to come across as trustworthy, they have to be relatable to their audience, and the relatability was viewed to increase due to similar interest with the consumer. The virtual influencer also has to overcome the fact of not being human. Although that is difficult, it could be mitigated by sharing interests and values with its audience and showing the complete picture of their created lives. Also, by creating a credible life story since it was shown that a lack of a life story made them less trustworthy. It is also important that the virtual influencer does not simply serve a commercial purpose since that would decrease trust.

Moreover, when creating the virtual influencer, it is important that it comes across as knowledgeable, other than trustworthy, for the audience to adopt their message. The study reveals that it is the team of creators that has to contribute to this knowledge by showing their knowledge through the virtual influencer, emphasizing and making it clear that it is the team that possesses knowledge and expertise as well as experience. In some cases, it could be



helpful for the team to present themselves to appear as more credible and thus adopt the message of the virtual influencer easier. However, there were participants that said the opposite. Hence, the team has to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the particular practical implication.

Since the sample of participants was focused on generation Z, specifically Swedish consumers at the age of 18 to 25, the practical implications could be primarily addressed to that target audience. Hence this study contributes with practical implications to that target audience of virtual influencers. However, a lot of these implications could potentially be applied to serve other audiences as well.

## **7.5 Limitations and Future Research**

There were limitations of the study that involved the methodological aspect. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, only interviews remotely could be performed. The authors were at the initial stage exploring the possibilities of conducting focus groups, but due to the current situation, that was not considered possible. Hence, semi-structured interviews were performed remotely. Future research could have focus groups in mind when conducting similar research to this if the situation allows since it would allow the researchers to gather valuable insights since topics can be discussed in depth in the groups. Another limitation due to the pandemic was that the interviews were held remotely. This limited the participants' possibilities of expressing themselves through body language, which could have added another layer of understanding towards the participant. By interviewing someone in person, a different atmosphere and feeling could have occurred, which could have facilitated a more nuanced discussion. Another limitation could have been the translation when transcribing the interviews. Since they were translated separately by the researchers, different words and sentence building could have been used when transcribing them, and that could potentially have affected the empirical data.

Moreover, another limitation was that the participants were non-followers of virtual influencers. Although the researchers made that an active choice, it could have had an impact on the results since followers of a virtual influencer probably would have had another view of them. This allows for future research where the views of followers could be asked for instead. This would allow for other views on virtual influencers and extend the knowledge of them. The participants were also actively chosen from a certain range of age, 18 to 25. However, this limits the study to that particular age group, and the presented insights are in accordance

with that age group. Therefore, there is an opportunity for future research to study other age groups and their views on virtual influencers. This could potentially result in different views of virtual influencers and add to the current literature about them. Another active choice was that the mentioned participants were from the same country, Sweden. This is also a limitation for the study since there are very few virtual influencers from Sweden, and that makes them less relatable, which could have affected the result of the study. Future research could study how participants from other countries view virtual influencers. This would allow for additional insights to the topic since other nationalities might have other views of them and potentially easier to view them as source credible and thus have a different attitude towards their ability to develop parasocial relationships and opinion leadership.

## **7.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented the conclusions of the study and also discussed the result of the study from other views and perspectives to make it a more nuanced discussion for the reader. The conceptual framework has also been further developed in accordance with the findings. Theoretical and practical implications have also been presented, which can be of use for practitioners, businesses and brands, managers, scholars, or those interested in the topic. Finally, the chapter presented the limitations of the study along with suggestions for future research.

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# Appendix 1

## Interview Guide

- Welcome the participant followed by a presentation of yourself and the purpose of the study.
  - Thank the participant for their will to participate.
  - Ask the participant for their consent to record the interview and to use the data for the study.
  - Ask about whether they would like to be anonymous or not.
  - Begin the interview with the pre-planned questions and use follow-up questions to the participants answer to gain a deeper understanding of the participants views and opinions.
1. What do you think of when you hear the word influencer?
  2. What influencer do you like/dislike?
    - Why?
  3. What is important for you when following an (human) influencer?
  4. Can you think of any pros and cons with human influencers?
  5. Have you ever purchased something based on recommendations from an (human) influencer?

*Show Youtube video about Virtual Influencers*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPp-wb81248>

6. What is your opinion of virtual influencers?
7. Can you think of any pros and cons with virtual influencers?
8. Could you see yourself following a virtual influencer?
9. Would you trust a human or virtual influencer more?