



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# **Influencer marketing: An exploratory study to identify consumer behaviour online**

*A study investigating online behaviour from a millennial perspective*

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# Abstract

**Title:** Influencer marketing: An exploratory study to identify consumer behaviour online

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**Keywords:** Social Media, Influencer Marketing, Impulse Buying Behaviour, Consumer Behaviour

**Thesis purpose:** The purpose of this study is to understand what impact social media influencers have on consumers' online behaviour. We further aim to understand the interrelationship between social media influencers and online impulse buying behaviour.

**Methodology:** This study has utilised a qualitative methodology based on a social constructionist philosophical position. The study has adopted an abductive approach relying on a thematic analysis. To retrieve the insights needed for our research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-two research participants.

**Theoretical perspective:** The two main theoretical perspectives of this study are Hawkins Stern impulse buying theory and consumer behaviour theory. Based on an in-depth review of the existing literature and theory, a conceptual framework has been developed to guide the study.

**Findings:** Key findings reveal that perceived trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, and personalised content of social media influencers are the main attributes that have an impact on perceived credibility and subsequent consumer attitude. Additionally, the study reveals that there are other factors besides the above mentioned social media influencer attributes, that affect the online behaviour of consumers - prior knowledge about the product, the need for the product, intentions when scrolling through social media, exposure to stimuli, emotional appeal, age, and price level.

**Practical implications:** The success of influencer marketing is aligning brand and influencer personalities. From a content perspective, personalised content that is informative and compelling have a significant impact on consumer's purchase intent and willingness to buy. Brands that collaborate with credible social media influencers that are approachable, authentic and deliver personalised content can thus see an increase in revenue, consumer loyalty, user-generated content, and organic growth. Fashion and beauty hauls are proving to be a strong marketing force and discount codes can help marketers prove the effectiveness of their influencer marketing strategies.

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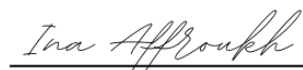
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# 1 Introduction

*In this chapter, an introduction to the research is presented. First, a background is given to the subject of influencer marketing related to online consumer behaviour. Further, the research problem and purpose are defined as well as the intended contributions and delimitations of the study. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a structural outline of the thesis.*

## 1.1 Background<sup>1</sup>

Social media have evolved at an incredible pace, seamlessly connecting with people's lives, and affecting consumption habits to a great extent. In a world where over 4.62 billion people use social media on a regular basis (Chaffey 2022), it today represents one of the most cost-efficient digital marketing methods (Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi & Thrassou, 2021). With the immense rise in our social connections, this has paved the way for social media marketing and the growth of influencers as a means for firms to reach a wide and diverse audience. Social media influencers (SMIs) are users that have established credibility in a specific industry or field (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and “represents a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011, p. 90). SMIs are not only popular but also the most effective strategies for brands to approach their target audiences (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021a). Influencer marketing is a hot trend in the digital era (Chaffey, 2019; Ryan & Jones, 2012) and companies are increasingly approaching SMIs to promote their products and services (Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencer marketing has developed into a fast-growing industry that is expected to be valued at \$16.4 billion by 2022 (Santora, 2022). This growth is attributed to the increasing popularity of short-form video formats on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, and the unfolding of the global pandemic on consumers, which magnified social media consumption. In today's globalised markets, influencer marketing is an effective tool to create awareness and increase purchase intention on social media. This influence is typically the result of SMIs popularity, reputation, or even opinions within their field of expertise.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of 1.1 were also used in BUSR31 and BUSP37, 2022.

According to Experticity (2021) 82% of consumers would not hesitate to purchase a product if promoted by an SMI. The most significant reason behind this is that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) by SMIs is more powerful and compelling than the eWOM created by brands (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Ultimately, SMIs establish trust and credibility among their followers, which in turn affect consumer motivations and purchasing decisions (De Vierman, Cauberghe & Hudderset, 2017).

With the increasing availability of products and services online, impulse buying behaviour has also increased (Chaffey, 2019). While impulse buying is not a new-found phenomenon, it has become a prevalent trend in the current social media landscape. Online impulse buying accounts for over 50 percent of online purchases (Zheng, Men, Yang & Gong, 2019), with consumers spending approximately \$5,400 on impulse purchases annually (O'Brien, 2018). One reason for the increase in online impulse buying is that e-commerce frees consumers from the many limitations of traditional stores such as constrained product availability, restricted opening hours and inaccessible store locations (Eroglu, Machleit & Davis, 2001). Another reason is that social media enables SMI to encourage online impulse buying. Instagram, in particular, is suitable for these activities (Abidin, 2016). With over two billion active users worldwide (Statista, 2022a), Instagram has been rated by 93% of marketers and agencies to be the most suitable social media platform for influencer marketing (Chen, 2022). Consumers further tend to prefer online shopping as opposed to offline shopping since the former is associated with convenience. This convenience motivates consumers to engage in impulse buying when making purchasing decisions (Dawson & Kim, 2009).

According to De Vierman et al. (2017) influencer marketing shows the importance of eWOM, as this rich source of information affects buyers' impression-management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, influence, and purchasing habits (Zhou, Barnes, McCormick & Cano, 2020). As customers are increasingly seeking out the advice of knowledgeable and trustworthy acquaintances who can provide information, give advice, or actually make the buying decision. Marketers consider SMIs a bridge that links brands and audiences. They have the power to transfer their messages not only to their followers but also to their followers' networks. Influencer marketing is becoming an increasingly important marketing channel for many businesses, yet little is known about the factors that drive



success of online brand engagement and how consumers get influenced to engage in impulse buying behaviour (Hughes, Swaminathan & Brooks, 2019).

## 1.2 Problematization<sup>2</sup>

Impulse buying behaviour can be triggered by numerous factors, such as subjective well-being, self-esteem, and/or the emotional state of the consumer at the time (Gogoi & Shillong, 2020). Impulse buys can be stimulated by a sudden desire, by a visual stimulus, a commercial campaign, or by the loss of cognitive control to evaluate the positive and negative consequences of a desired purchase. Unplanned purchases account for up to 60% of all purchases and impulse buys represent between 40% and 80% of purchases depending on product category (Amos, Holmes & Keneson, 2014). Millennials, which include those born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019), are highly comfortable to browse and make purchases online (Riley & Klein, 2021), regardless of being a spontaneous purchase (Loureiro & Breazeale, 2016). According to Lissitsa and Kol (2016) they tend to make fast buying decisions and complete more impulse buys, when compared to other generations. Millennials are further considered materialistic and self-controlled (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013), while they tend to spend their money quickly on fast moving consumer goods and personal services (Xu, 2007). Moreover, they are considered the most emotional and less loyal customers compared to all other generations (Bilgihan, 2016). As their loyalty is inconstant, it changes swiftly due to emerging trends and popularity of specific brands, and they tend to focus more on style and quality rather than price (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016).

The millennial generation are today the largest adult cohort, with 1.8 billion across the world (Neufeld, 2021). This demographic has an extensive influence on the global economy, and as they obtain greater wealth and education, their influence will have many second-order effects. Due to their wide-spread influence, and strong purchasing power, we consider millennials a highly important demographic to study. Although millennials are likely the most studied generation to date, there is a lack of research from the perspective of Swedish millennials in particular. This demographic is important to study for a number of reasons. First, Swedish consumers spent about €14.95 billion on online shopping in 2018 (Ecommerce News, 2019). As of today, almost 70 percent of Swedes have shopped online and 50 percent shop via their mobile phone. Almost five in ten have purchased a product on social media or envisioned it,

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of 1.2 were also used in BUSR31 and BUSP37, 2022.

whilst the pandemic has further accelerated the ongoing shift from physical stores to online (Sandberg, 2021).

The effect of influencer marketing on online behaviour is an important topic in the contemporary world of marketing (Özbölük & Akdoğan, 2022). Some studies have demonstrated that impulse buying is largely dominated by emotions and that hedonic motivation influences consumers to engage in online impulse buying behaviour (Akram, Hui, Khan, Tanveer, Mehmood & Ahmad, 2017; Yu & Bastin, 2010). Additionally, studies have suggested that impulse buying, and hedonic motivation have a positive correlation (Zhang, Hu & Zhao, 2014; Hausman, 2000). A number of studies have further examined the influence on SMIs followers' behavioural intentions (e.g., Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Koay, Teoh & Soh, 2021). Other studies have also investigated online impulse buying on specific social networking platforms (Jin & Phua, 2014; Spry, Pappu & Cornwell, 2011), particularly Instagram.

While previous researchers have proved that SMIs play a significant role in consumers purchasing decisions and online impulse buying behaviour, most of the studies have focused on investigating only one type of SMI and one type of social media platform. Furthermore, neither of this research has focused specifically on millennials but offers findings on the general population. Previous research also only addresses how the purchase decision has been affected due to the influence of SMIs. Furthermore, how SMIs influence consumers purchase decisions, have previously been approached by several authors in quantitative research (e.g., Kim & Johnson, 2015; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). However, consumer behaviour, and specifically impulse buying behaviour, is a complex field. Thus, qualitative research methods are needed to fully explore consumer attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs to get a deep understanding of the phenomenon (Mandolfo & Lamberti, 2021). Hence, this study aims to explore how SMIs impact millennials online behaviour. Millennials are constantly connected; tech savvy and rely on social networks and online review sites as sources of information to help with their purchase decisions. They are further emotional and make decisions at the moment which makes them an interesting choice for our research (Junker, Walcher & Blazek, 2016).

### 1.3 Research purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand what impact SMIs have on consumers' online behaviour. We further aim to extend and advance the understanding of the interrelationship between SMIs and online impulse buying behaviour. This will be done by studying impulse buying behaviour from a consumer perspective, viewed through theoretical perspectives consumer buying behaviour and Hawkins Stern's impulse buying theory. In line with this study's research problem and purpose, we will address the following research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: How do social media influencers impact millennials online behaviour?

RQ 2: What are the main attributes of social media influencers that have an impact on millennials online impulse buying behaviour?

### 1.4 Intended contributions

By exploring the phenomenon of influencer marketing among Swedish millennials, this study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of how SMIs impact millennials online behaviour and impulse buying behaviour. By exploring how Swedish millennials perceive impulse buying via influencer marketing, we are adding to an area that is currently under-researched. Hence, we will develop knowledge of the different ways that influencers can tap into this consumer behaviour. The practical contributions we aim for are providing managerial contributions of best practices and ways of effectively communicating with millennials that ultimately can contribute to stronger trust and relationships between the parties.

### 1.5 Delimitations

With the research purpose in mind, certain delimitations are defined to set the scope of this study. Firstly, we will focus on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, since these are the most effective platforms for influencer marketing (Wise, 2022). Previous studies have primarily focused on investigating only one type of SMI and one type of social media

platform. However, for the purpose of this study, the type of platform is deemed less important. Furthermore, since the objective is to investigate influencer marketing and its impact on online behaviour on the above-mentioned social media platforms, this study will not focus on the perspective of offline behaviour.

This study will focus on millennials who range from young adults to middle-aged adults, aged between 26 to 41 years old. Due to their wide-spread influence, and strong purchasing power, we consider millennials a highly important demographic to study. Therefore, other generations will be excluded. The research will be based in Sweden, and to narrow the extent of social media users the research participants will only consist of Swedish citizens. Further, the study will only refer to influencers' accounts and do not take any other accounts into consideration. Naturally, all individuals follow different influencers, thereby the study will not focus on any specific influencer, nor specific brands. Despite these exclusions from the scope of our study, we consider that answering our proposed research questions within this frame will elicit valuable insights and make it more manageable and relevant.

## 1.6 Thesis outline

This thesis comprises six chapters that follow a structure most suitable to fulfil the research purpose.

**Chapter 1:** Introduction - introduces the research subject including background, problematization, purpose, intended contribution, and delimitations of the study.

**Chapter 2:** Literature review - provides a comprehensive overview of existing literature and defines the conceptual framework, which intends to familiarise the reader with the topic. Since qualitative data need to be understood within context, this chapter provides the reader with a contextualization of carefully selected and relevant literature.

**Chapter 3:** Methodology - explains the underlying research philosophy and its methodological implications, outlines and discusses the research design, data collection method, and data analysis. We further critically reflect on the selected research approach.

**Chapter 4:** Analysis - presents the selected respondents and rigorous analysis from the empirical findings structured according to the themes that emerged out of the coding process. This chapter intends to both achieve the research purpose and answer the research questions.

**Chapter 5:** Discussion - puts the findings into a different context by critically reflecting on them in relation to previous research. We further emphasise any contradictories or analogies with existing literature and highlight new insights the study brings to the field.

**Chapter 6:** Conclusion - concludes the study by revisiting the research questions and purpose. Further, we present the theoretical contributions, managerial implications as well as limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## 2 Literature Review

*The purpose of this chapter is to present findings from existing literature and set the theoretical basis of the thesis. The systematic literature review will cover the topics of social media marketing, electronic word of mouth, influencer marketing and social media influencers, the halo effect of influencer marketing, social impact theory and social influence, consumer buying behaviour, impulse buying behaviour, and consumer emotions. At the end of the chapter, we present the conceptual framework that is based upon the reviewed literature and theory.*

### 2.1 Social media marketing

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) social media is a “group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p.61). Sterne (2010) elaborates and adds that social media is a channel that enhances communication between two or more individuals, and involves several different categories including: social networking, blogging, micro-blogging, media sharing, forums and message boards, reviews, and opinion sites. The first social media platform was invented in 1979, however, the era of social media as we know it today was created about 20 years ago, when the first blog forum was launched (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The increasing availability of high-speed internet access have further allowed for the introduction of many highly popular social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and most recently TikTok (Appel, Grewal, Hadi & Stephen, 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

According to Statista (2022b) the share of Swedish social media users has experienced a steady increase over the period from 2010 to 2020. In 2010, approximately half of the population used social media, whilst the corresponding figures of 2020 were up to 89%. Furthermore, Facebook is the most used social media platform among Swedish millennials, with 88% of the respondents using the app. YouTube has the second highest share of millennial users (79%), followed by Instagram (75%) (Data Reportal, 2021; Statista, 2022c). It should be noted, however, that Snapchat still preserves its popularity among this demographic (Tunca & Anselmsson, 2022). Furthermore, approximately 40-45% of Swedish

millennials follow more than six brands on social media, and demand brands to be active on social media platforms. Additionally, this demographic is highly likely to discover new products and brands via social media and are also very active in engaging with brands online (Tunca & Anselmsson, 2022). Moreover, Swedish millennials prefer to see visual and interactive content, such as images and videos, as opposed to lengthy texts on brands posts. It is estimated that this demographic will have a combined purchasing power of \$8.3 trillion world-wide by 2025 (McKinsey, 2017). Their size combined with their purchasing power make millennials a necessary market segment for the future success of most companies.

Within social media the role of the consumer changes from being a passive receiver of information to being an active creator of information; as a result, consumers become more and more active in the buying process, especially when searching for and using information (Duffett & Wakeham, 2016). According to Najmi, Atefi and Mirbagheri (2012) social media even has the power to shape consumer attitudes towards products, both negatively and positively. From a Swedish millennial perspective, consumers lose interest in a brand, if they experience too much marketing, low quality content, and too many posts (Tunca & Anselmsson, 2022). Therefore, it is increasingly important for businesses to understand consumers' changing behaviours to not only meet their needs, but to also control the sales processes more effectively and consequently establish mutual benefits (Wang, 2017).

Nowadays, the Internet and social media are the main sources of information when individuals are searching for products or brands of interest. The information that individual's access through social media is controlled by search algorithms, where bloggers, among others, can influence purchase decisions through recommendations (Labrecque, Esche, Mathwick, Novak & Hofacker, 2013). The method of exchanging recommendations and other type of information have led to the emergence of a new form of word of mouth: *electronic word-of-mouth* (Pitta & Fowler, 2005)

## 2.2 Electronic word of mouth

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can be defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p.39). According to Cheung and Thadani (2012) blogs, discussion forums, shopping websites, and social media represent the most widely used platforms for the spread of eWOM. Furthermore, social media have added a new aspect to eWOM, by enabling users to communicate within their existing networks. Exchanging opinions and experiences about products or services with friends and relatives through social media has never been easier. Anonymity has been reduced, which has the potential to make eWOM more credible and trustworthy (Chu & Kim, 2011).

According to Sohn (2014) eWOM facilitates the dissemination of information online to an extensively broad and diverse audience; people can also spread and share their opinions further by, for example, sharing the posts they resonate with (Chu & Kim, 2011). Alboqami, Al-Karaghoul, Baeshen, Erkan, Evans and Ghoneim (2015) state that both active and passive consumers use eWOM. For instance, people who intentionally share their recommendations with others online are active consumers, whereas those who only search for recommendations posted by others are passive consumers. Furthermore, users can unintentionally show their preferences by being a fan of a particular brand by, for example, engaging with branded posts (Alboqami et al., 2015).

According to Barnes (2015) millennials typically spread eWOM in the form of reviews, discussion forums, recommendations, and referrals coming through their social networking sites as a basis for their consumption decisions. These inputs significantly impact the decision of which consumers “like” or “follow” brands on social media. eWOM is instrumental in pre-buying decisions as well as in the purchase of certain product categories. Barnes (2015) argues that eWOM not only motivates buying, “but it creates a potential buying environment from which considerable buying occurs” (p.44). From a millennial perspective, eWOM is considered more credible than traditional advertising since it has gone through the evaluation of like-minded individuals - “people like me” (Allsop, Bassett, & Hoskins, 2007, p. 398). Furthermore, this generational group dislikes being an advertising target, and rely heavily on



the opinions of their peers and eWOM when making purchase decisions (Valentine & Powers, 2013).

According to Virtanen, Björk and Sjöström (2017) consumers who are satisfied with a product typically spread positive eWOM; whereas, a dissatisfied consumer does the opposite. However, research demonstrates that the eWOM effect is greater for negative eWOM than for positive, since negative information is perceived as more interesting and attention grabbing, than positive information (Park & Lee, 2009). As a result, companies have a hard time controlling their business content and brand image (Booth & Matic, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As brands use paid eWOM to amplify brand messages through opinion leaders, in the process, it is called *influencer marketing* (Nathaniel, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017).

### 2.3 Influencer marketing and social media influencers

With the ability to reach a large segment of consumers in a relatively short period, as well as its low cost compared to traditional marketing, influencer marketing has become an innovative and trendy way for brands to engage with their consumers online (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017). Unlike traditional media, influencer marketing is more cost-effective and delivers 11 times return on investment over all other forms of digital marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021b). According to Chen and Yuan (2019), 94% of marketers who have implemented influencer marketing consider it a highly effective strategy. Influencer marketing further serves as a powerful way to spread eWOM; as it has been shown to enhance consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). According to Govindan and Alotaibi (2021) SMIs can be divided into four categories based on follower count:

**Mega-influencers:** are “social superstars” who have more than a million followers; these are mainly popular because of their fame in the real world. This fame is therefore used to increase brand awareness.

**Macro-influencers:** with a slightly smaller audience size between 100,000 and 1 million followers, these can leverage their reputation to gain followers on social media. Advantages include increased quality content and willingness to collaborate.

**Micro-influencers:** has between 1000- and 100,000 followers. Although their number of followers is small, their reliability, authenticity and quality are enormously high. Hence, they have a small but loyal follower base, which means they have a high degree of credibility and engagement.

**Nano-influencers:** has less than 1000 followers and possesses immense influence within a particular community. These influencers have the highest engagement rate of any influencer type. Content is hyper-authentic and personalised for the audience and may include a friendly life hack or advice.

While SMIs have the ability to master eWOM, researchers have acknowledged numerous factors that are claimed to be underlying reasons why consumers perceive SMIs as highly influential. Credibility has been found to be the most significant factor (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise are perceived as important factors defining credibility. Furthermore, follower count, and personalised content represents some of the underlying mechanisms that can have a great impact on these factors.

### *Attractiveness*

A consumer's perceptions of a SMI attractiveness are possibly the most powerful factor that can influence SMIs credibility and consumer's attitudes (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014).

Attractiveness not only refers to physical appearance, but also includes factors like intellectual skills, personality dimensions, and athletic or lifestyle prowess (Trivedi, 2018). There is a higher likelihood that SMIs with high attractiveness influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Silvera & Austad, 2004), as these are more likely to grab consumer's attention (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). The attractiveness aspect asserts that the effectiveness of the message increases when the consumer feels attracted towards the SMI (Silvera & Austad, 2004). For those experiencing an attractiveness bias, this may sway their opinions of certain SMIs. It may actually reinforce SMIs ideas of authority and expertise (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016).

### *Expertise*

Expertise is another highly influential factor that impacts whether or not consumers perceive SMIs as credible (Valck, Hoffman, Hennig-Thurau & Spann, 2013). If an SMI is perceived as an expert in his or her field, there is a high likelihood that consumers become persuaded by the information posted. SMIs typically have expert knowledge in a specific area or product category such as beauty, travel, food, fashion, or fitness, rather than just one specific product (Kaptian & Silvera, 2015). This expert knowledge is what makes SMIs credible since they have knowledge, skills, and experience when recommending a product or service. According to Nejad, Sherrell and Babakus (2014) a SMIs level of expertise have a great impact on consumer's attachment to the information, while credibility impacts consumer's interpretation of the information. As the perceived expertise of the SMIs increases, so does consumer's acceptance of the content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Furthermore, knowledge and achievements of a SMI are considered to be the strongest determinants of the level of expertise (Wiedmann & Mettenheim, 2020). From a millennial perspective, credibility and relevance are in fact the basis of many purchasing decisions (Martin, 2015).

### *Trustworthiness*

In the context of influencer marketing, trustworthiness can be defined as the extent to which SMIs are perceived as authentic, dependable, reliable, sincere, and trustworthy by their followers (Chetioui, Benlafqih & Lebdaoui, 2020). According to Trivedi (2018) the perceived honesty, integrity, and believability of a SMIs define the trustworthiness of the SMI.

Trustworthy SMIs are thus assumed to be more influential in provoking positive attitudes, when compared to those who are perceived as less trustworthy. SMIs that endorse products for self-benefits would be committed to self-serving bias, and consequently lead to negative consumer responses (Aw & Chuah, 2021). The credibility of a SMI is therefore high when the audience perceives them as trustworthy. From a millennial perspective, authenticity is the key trait that individuals value, while having a large follower count is less important. According to Morning Consult (2021) 88% of millennials state that it is important for SMIs to be authentic and genuinely care about their interests. In fact, this generation are characterised by the need for reciprocity between themselves and the SMIs in a way that commitment, trust,

sincerity and mutual respect are key factors for satisfaction (Moreno, Lafuente, Carreón & Moreno, 2017).

### *Personalised content*

According to Li, Lee and Lien (2014) SMIs are known to create compelling content that allow followers to step into their personal narratives. This is done in forms of providing advice, reviews, images, videos, testimonials, text, or other content that prompt consumers to purchase a certain product or service (Forbes, 2016). Furthermore, user-generated content created by SMIs has long been acknowledged as inherently more trustworthy when compared to brand-generated content (Valck et al., 2013). SMIs can further add value to their content by personalising it. This in turn can work as a strong persuader since consumers believe that their interests, attitudes, and opinions are similar to the SMI's (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). Personalised content therefore has the power to establish a strong trust towards the SMI, since it is considered non-commercial and thereby more appealing (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013). Furthermore, the content that draws the attention of millennials is the use of high-quality images, personalisation, competitive prices, and low shipping cost (Moreno et al., 2017), and for a message to appeal to them, it must be fast, direct, and honest (Valentine & Powers, 2013).

## 2.4 The halo effect of influencer marketing

The halo effect is a cognitive attribution bias that affects the way individuals interpret information. It refers to a tendency where one trait of a person, brand, or product positively influences the overall judgement of their other related traits (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). From an influencer marketing perspective, the halo effect comes from an alignment between a number of sources including, but not limited to, shared identity, admiration, and respect. If a consumer likes one aspect of an SMI, the consumer may unconsciously form presumptions about the SMIs other attributes such as reliability and credibility of the products they use, even if unrelated (Long-Crowell, 2016; Smith, Lopez-rodriguez & Read, 2010). For instance, if a SMI is considered to be attractive, have a large follower base, and post pictures of beautiful destinations from all over the world, the SMI is judged to be an admirable person. Company's take advantage of the halo effect by collaborating with SMIs that have a positive

halo to establish a likeable association with a specific brand in order to enhance brand equity, image and reputation (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Smith, Lopez-rodriguez & Read, 2010). Individuals trust the SMIs that they follow and do not necessarily think that they take advantage of their power of influence, therefore, their opinion on a particular product or brand is considered credible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). According to Seno and Lukas (2007) consumers even associate SMIs with certain brands which help businesses establish credibility in their field, therefore, SMIs can at times be seen as a sub-brand of certain companies.

The halo effect can be supported by Lou and Yuan (2019) and Wade and DiMaria's (2003) findings which demonstrated that physical attractiveness positively affects followers' trust in SMIs branded posts. According to Wade and DiMaria (2003) and Landy and Sigall (1974) an individual's attractiveness is in fact among the most common characteristics that can influence the halo effect. Furthermore, Stangor, Jhangiani and Tarry (2014) argue that individuals whose opinions one trusts, can even make one alter their own opinions to align with theirs. This trust-based following can make the audience believe that the SMI possesses expert knowledge in their specific field.

## 2.5 Social impact theory and social influence

The theory of social impact is concerned with the behaviours, feelings and attitudes of individuals which can be influenced by the presence of others (Latanté, 1981). This refers to changes in physiological states, subjective feelings, motives, cognitions and beliefs, values and behaviours that occur in an individual due to the real, implied, or imagined presence and actions of others (Latanté, 1981). Latanté (1981) defined it as the "influence" on an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviour exerted by the actions of others. Latané updated the dynamic social impact theory and considered society a self-organised complex system in which individuals integrate and influence each other's perceptions. The influence of an information source, according to the theory of social impact, is a variable of three factors: strength, immediacy, and number (Latanté, 1981), where strength stands for the importance or social attitude of the source, immediacy refers to the time or proximity between the source and the target, and lastly number, which refers to the quantity of sources. These three are

considered to positively impact individuals' attitudes and behaviour in the offline environment (Miller & Brunner, 2008).

The theory states that social influence applies the more critical a group is, the closer the distance between the group and oneself, which is more likely, according to the author, to conform to the normative pressures of the group (Latanté, 1981). This type is called normative social influence, which involves simply conforming to another person's or group's expectations and creating social pressure on people. An example is that an individual may buy a product or service because people who do not use the product or service may be seen as "old-fashioned" regardless of whether the individual prefers the product (Kim & Srivastav, 2007). This normative social influence reflects the individual's attempt to conform to the norm to follow the expectations of others to achieve rewards or avoid punishment (Bearden, Calcich, Netemeyer & Teel, 1986). The most significant normative social influence is mostly referred to in groups such as the family (Bearden et al., 1986). The opposite of normative social influence is called informational social influence, which involves an individual being influenced to accept the information obtained from another (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). This can occur in two ways; individuals can either seek information and knowledge from others or conclude by themselves by observing the behaviour of others (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

When it comes to product judgments in the online environment, according to Beyari and Abareshi (2016), it turns out that the informational social influence is the dominant one. The authors state that this can be considered a learning process in consumer decision making, as the individual observes the experience of, for example, other people who have purchased a product through their social network and decides whether or not to do the same (Kim & Srivastav, 2007). In terms of self-maintenance and compliance, normative social influence is considered, while informational social influence is associated with knowledge (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). An individual's influence is not limited to a group, family, or social media, but it is much broader and more robust (Beyari & Abareshi, 2016).

## 2.6 Consumer buying behaviour

Consumer buying behaviour is the “the decision process and physical activity individuals engage in when evaluating, acquiring, using, or disposing of goods and services” (Sumathi & Saravanavel, 2009, p. 436). Millennials, in particular, represent an attractive market as they have been growing up in an environment where technology is part of everyday life.

Consequently, the buying process for this generational group is a time of enjoyment, where loyalty to the brands they engage with and purchase from is relative (Moreno et al., 2017). The reason for this low loyalty is due to their constant exposure to price promotions. They further look for products and brands that align with their personality, lifestyle, social and community values. Furthermore, millennials have a high tendency to spend money quickly and very often online, especially through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Moreno et al., 2017). Beyond millennials' strong consumption habits, they also tend to spot consumer trends, and have a high influence on domestic purchases, and the purchases of their friends and relatives. When purchasing a product, consumer’s go through a set of sequential steps. According to Bruner and Pomazal (1988), this decision-making process involves five basic steps (see Figure 1).

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Definition</b>
1. Problem recognition	At this first stage, the consumer identifies a particular need or a problem to solve.
2. Information search	During the second stage, the customer gathers all information required to satisfy the needs or wants.
3. Alternative evaluation	At this stage, the customer looks for competitors to compare and determine if the benefit outweighs the cost.
4. Purchase decision	Once reaching this stage, the customer is ready to complete a purchase. Hence, all requirements have been met.
5. Post-purchase evaluation	At this last stage, the customer moves into the retention phase of the customer lifecycle and evaluates the decision.

*Figure 1. Consumer decision-making process*

Furthermore, according to Mohamed and Ramya (2016) and Singh, Dhayal and Shamim (2014) four main factors influence the consumer decision-making process and consequently buying behaviour:

**Cultural:** Consumers are led by culture, subculture, and social class. These factors are often inherent in one's values and decision process.

**Social:** Consumers are influenced by different groups such as reference groups and member groups, family, roles, and status. This describes the external influences on an individual's buying decisions, either directly or indirectly.

**Personal:** Depending on variables such as age, occupation, economic situation, lifestyle (activities, interests, opinions, and demographics), personality and self-concept. These variables may describe why individual's change preferences as the situation changes.

**Psychological:** Motivation (Maslow's hierarchy of needs), perception, learning, beliefs, and attitudes are psychological factors that affect consumer's buying behaviour.

These four factors help consumers develop preferences for certain products, services, or brands. Nevertheless, to fully uncover why individuals prefer one product over another is a complex task. This is because consumers sometimes make buying decisions based on their emotional state which they even themselves are not well aware of (Singh, Dhayal & Shamim, 2014). However, millennials are part of a social group that have been influenced by changes throughout their lives, from childhood to adulthood. Besides being considered the first digital natives, they are defined by several world events and social and economic changes.

Therefore, the culture and similar life experiences have led them to the development of similar attitudes and beliefs (Moreno et al., 2017). Millennial's decision-making process is significantly faster than in previous generations due to their ability to quickly access information online. They are further responsive to social, cultural, economic, and political changes, and their buying behaviour is therefore constantly changing. According to Valentine and Powers (2013) millennials mostly spend their money on clothing, shoes, jewellery, sports equipment, entertainment, health and beauty, and food. And in terms of luxury products, they are more inclined towards goods that show status, wealth, and purchasing power (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016).



## 2.7 Impulse buying behaviour

Impulse buying refers to the unplanned, spontaneous, and often immediate purchase that is based on irrational thinking. According to Burton, Gollins, McNeely and Walls (2018), impulse purchases happen when there is an unexpected and strong emotional desire, which emerges from a reactive behaviour that is characterised by low cognitive control. The tendency to complete an impulse purchase can be described by the instantaneous satisfaction it offers to the individual concerned (Pradhan, Israel & Jena, 2018). According to Stern (1962) impulse buying can be divided into four types which are pure impulse buying, reminder impulse buying, suggested impulse buying, and planned impulse buying.

**Pure impulse buying:** When a consumer completes a “novelty or escape purchase which breaks a normal buying pattern" (Stern, 1962, p.59). Consumers typically act emotionally and purchase, although the purchase would be out of their normal buying behaviour.

**Reminder impulse buying:** When a customer completes a purchase based on reminding. This occurs when the shopper is reminded of the need to purchase an item upon seeing it in-store or online. Although the consumer had no plan to buy the item, the product placement triggered a feeling to stock up.

**Suggested impulse buying:** When a consumer sees a product and visualises a need for it. Hence, the shopper has no prior knowledge of the item to assist in the purchase. This refers to rational products, whereby the consumer is making an impulse purchase based on a reason or need, not an emotion.

**Planned impulse buying:** When a consumer is triggered to buy a product due to a promotional offer. Hence, the consumer ends up purchasing an item that is not needed. For example, adding an item to a shopping cart for the sole purpose of getting a free shipping threshold.

The factors that influence impulse buying behaviour are divided into two main categories which are external and internal factors (Ganawati, Suadarmini & Sariyani, 2018; Ling & Yazdanifard, 2015). External stimuli refer to product characteristics and environmental characteristics, whereas internal stimuli refer to psychological factors, situational factors,

demographic factors, and socio-economic factors (Karbasivar & Yarahmadi, 2011; Ling & Yazdanifard, 2015; Muruganantham & Bhakat, 2013; Tinne, 2010). The internal factors include age, gender, culture, and socio-economic states. According to Saarela, Stoorvogel and Zinkweg (2008), females are more inclined to purchase low involvement goods such as beauty and clothing items, whereas males are more interested in purchasing electronic equipment impulsively. Furthermore, as millennials are the most emotional and less loyal customers compared to all other generations, they have a greater tendency to purchase impulsively (Bilgihan, 2016; Saarela et al., 2008).

Another internal stimulus that affects impulse buying is psychological factors which include personality traits, emotional states, interests, and cognitive processes (Mesiranta, 2009; Chen & Lee, 2015; Chen, 2011; Liu, Li & Hu, 2013). Individuals that are prone to be unreflective, emotional, and impulsive, have a greater tendency to complete impulse purchases (Chen, 2011). When it comes to millennials, they typically value new experiences and are curious about new things, they are open and adaptive to change, and possess intuitive knowledge of technology. As they have been using technology since childhood, technology has a great impact on their cognitive, affective, and social outcomes in their everyday lives (Purani, Kumar & Sahadev, 2019).

Furthermore, an individual's emotional state plays a significant role in the influence of impulse purchases. According to Verhagen and Dolen (2011), Youn and Faber (2000) and Mesiranta (2009), emotional factors can be divided into positive (excitement/pleasure) and negative (anxiety/guilt) affective states. Research suggests that positive affective states can increase impulse buying behaviour, as these individuals are prone to spend more time browsing, thus increasing the likelihood of impulse purchase (Jeffrey & Hodge, 2007; Verhagen & Dolen, 2011). Research demonstrates that millennials have the highest reported screen time compared to other generations and spend an average 211 minutes accessing apps or the internet via smartphone on a daily basis (Johnsson, 2021). Millennials further make purchases more frequently and more impulsively when compared to other generations (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016).

Situational factors which refer to either internal or external factors occur during the actual purchase and include time, payment method, and presence of others (Tinne, 2010; Karbasivar & Yarahmadi, 2011). Research suggests that the use of an online bank or credit card is one of

the most influential factors that prompt individuals to engage in impulse buying behaviour. Karbasivar and Yarahmadi (2011) argues that credit card holders are prone to overspend since they do not pay instantly, whilst also being less conscious of the price. The presence of others is another way to promote impulsive purchases. This is especially true in an in-store environment (Madhavaram & Laverie, 2004; as cited in Jeffrey & Hodge, 2007). Nevertheless, a study conducted by Zang, Hu and Zhao (2014) suggested that reviews and source credibility are influential factors that promote online impulse buying behaviour. Though, there is a consensus that the price of the item is the main factor that encourages individuals to purchase impulsively (Haryanto, Wiyono & Hastjarja, 2019; Karbasivar & Yarahmadi, 2011; Mesiranta, 2009). From a millennial perspective, credibility and relevance are the basis for many purchasing decisions (Martin, 2015), and peers, social media, and reviews are continually used to determine the merit of a product (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, research demonstrates that 49% of millennials overspend as a result of social media (Schwab, 2019).

## 2.8 Consumer emotions

According to Weinberg and Gottwald (1982) impulse buying behaviour encompasses “purchases with high emotional activation, low cognitive control, and a largely reactive behavior” (p. 43). In psychology, emotions are mental states that encompass subjective, behavioural, and physiological elements. In its simplest terms, emotions refer to the reactions and feelings deriving from a certain relationship, mood, or circumstance which can exert a powerful influence on consumers' judgement, behaviour and attitude. There is no consensus on the exact number of emotions. According to Plutchik (1962) eight basic emotions exist: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy. Ekman (1972) identified seven primary emotions: fear, anger, joy, sadness, contempt, disgust, and surprise. Though, there is a consensus that emotions can be broadly categorised as positive or negative (Solomon, 1989; Fredrickson, 2013; Russell, 1980).

According to Youn and Faber (2000) consumers typically engage in impulse buying behaviour to release negative feelings of stress, sadness, and disgust. During the purchase process, consumers encounter a considerable mood change toward positive affective states (Dittmar, 2005; Rook & Fisher, 1995). According to Rook (1987) consumers negative

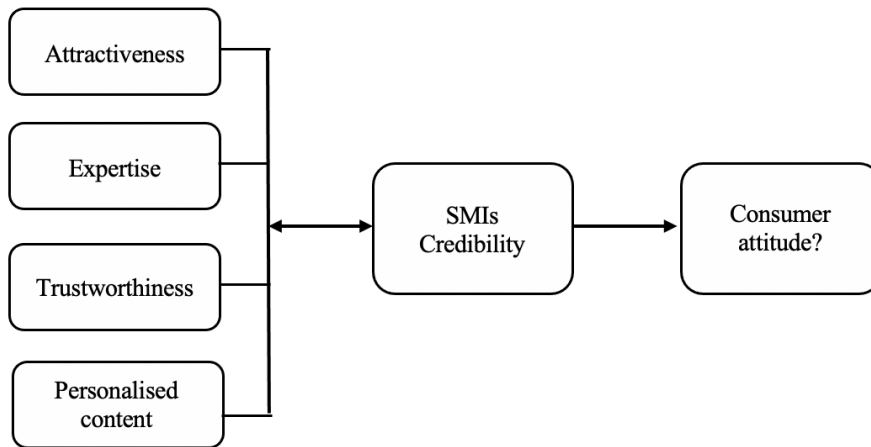
emotions motivate their impulse buying, whilst the positive maintains their purchase behaviour. Emotions are what truly drive purchasing behaviour, and also, decision-making in general. However, emotions are not constant, a consumer's mental state may fluctuate from positive to negative or the opposite during a purchase decision, which signifies a dynamic process (Mano & Oliver, 1993).

Impulse buying behaviour relates to positive emotions and feelings. Accordingly, various studies demonstrate that self-gifting is a type of retail therapy that helps customers manage their moods. Retail therapy is not a new-found phenomenon; the term originated in the 1980s by Mary T. Schmich and refers to shopping that is motivated by distress (Rick, Pereira & Burson, 2014). As such, consumers purchase items for the sole purpose of improving mood, boosting self-confidence, or disposition. According to Tighe (2021) 52.4% of millennials shop on the sole purpose of improving mood, they are emotional and make decisions at the moment, while they require uniqueness and self-determination of their purchasing power (Junker et al., 2016).

## 2.9 Conceptual framework

The purpose of this study is to understand what impact SMIs have on consumers' online behaviour and to explore the interrelationship between SMIs and online impulse buying. After reviewing the literature stream of social media marketing and SMIs, the current study explores four SMIs attributes to identify the perceived credibility of SMIs, that is, perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and personalised content. Perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness are widely recognized constructs to examine consumers' perception of SMIs credibility. However, the decision to include personalised content is motivated by the fact that current research defines this factor to be of high importance from a millennial perspective. It should be noted that one SMIs attribute could result from another, and all attributes may not be needed for perceived credibility. This illustration visualises how we, at the start of data collection, view the relationship between these concepts and can be helpful to get an overall picture of the whole chain and the connection between the previously presented literature.

**SMI's attributes**



\*SMI (social media influencer)

*Figure 2. Conceptual framework*

## 3 Methodology

*In this chapter, we will present the methodology of this study. The chapter starts with the underlying research philosophy, followed by research approach. The next sections cover the method of data collection and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the reliability, validity, and ethical considerations of the research.*

### 3.1 Research philosophy

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) research philosophy “refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge” (p.124). In this section we will elaborate on the two philosophical perspectives ontology and epistemology which will clarify our stand and set the basis of the methodological choices.

#### 3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology, as a branch of philosophy, deals with the nature of being. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson and Jaspersen (2021) ontology is situated on a continuum of four positions: realism, internal realism, relativism, and nominalism. For the purpose of this research, we consider the relativist position most relevant. This because the study rests upon the different perspectives presented by consumers. Furthermore, the relativist position enables the research participants to reflect on their individual experiences of online behaviour, as opposed to forcing them in a truth or no truth duality. Hence, it allows for the possibility to understand and evaluate the empirical material from a point of view where individuals have their own, unique experiences and perceptions of reality and existence. Ultimately, our purpose as researchers with a relativist perspective is to grasp the subjective perception of individuals' diverse realities (Levers, 2013). We believe this is of utmost importance in our study since there is no unique, singular mindset as to how individuals perceive the influence of SMIs.

### 3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology, as a branch of philosophy, is the study of knowledge. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) epistemology can be divided into two contrasting views: positivism and social constructionism. Based on our relativist position, this study builds on the social constructionist world view, due to it concerning experiences, emotions, as well as diverse views connected to different consumer perspectives. Furthermore, the sample size of this study is rather limited and selected purposively which are connected to the social constructionist view and qualitative studies. In addition, we would argue that this study aligns with the stronger version of the social constructionist perspective due to the reflexive approach of collecting and analysing the empirical data.

## 3.2 Research approach

The purpose of this study is to understand what impact SMIs have on consumers' online behaviour. To understand and illustrate such consumer behaviour, a qualitative research approach is deemed most appropriate. Qualitative research is generally concerned with studying human elements in social and natural science and provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). This approach aligns with our research questions, since we aim to understand individuals' underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations of online behaviour. As opposed to a quantitative approach, qualitative research is especially advantageous for understanding the why's and how's of human behaviour and the dynamic process underlying a phenomenon via non-numerical means (Eisenhardt, 1989). Furthermore, a qualitative research approach is generally more flexible throughout the research process and allows for greater adaptation of the interaction between the researcher and the study participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Hence, we deemed it to be the most appropriate research method for this study.

In the field of business research, the two most widely used logics of inquiry are induction and deduction (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). However, recently, a third way of reasoning has grown in popularity, abductive reasoning. According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) “abduction is proposed as a way of overcoming the limitations associated with deductive and inductive positions” (p.24). For our study, the abductive approach is most suitable given the nature of the research purpose. In contrast to deductive and inductive reasoning, the

abductive approach will enable us to explain, develop, and change the theoretical framework prior to, during and after the research process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This stems from the fact that abductive research moves reciprocally between inductive research settings to the more deductive endeavours to validate hypotheses. Furthermore, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) stress the importance of having an ongoing dialogue between a researcher's prior understanding of a subject and the empirical material. In our study, we will adhere to this position and be open-minded to enable the data to surprise us, as opposed to just confirming presumptions. Accordingly, the abductive approach is most appropriate for answering our research questions, as it will enable us to contribute to and enhance existing theory, rather than coming up with generalisable conclusions.

### 3.3 Data collection

This section introduces the framework that will be used to collect the data. Throughout this section, we will elaborate on how the qualitative interviews were conducted, the method of sampling, our interview guide and how we transcribed our interviews.

#### 3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup>

With the purpose of examining millennials online behaviour, it was critical to gather different perspectives and subjective experiences from multiple sources. According to Mandolfo and Lambert (2021) qualitative interviews, as opposed to focus groups, provide a significant contribution in assessing the cognitive externalisations of behaviour. Since impulse buying behaviour, in particular, is often linked to unfavourable consequences or pure irrationality, respondents in a focus group might be prone to answer in a socially desirable manner (Mandolfo & Lambert, 2021). In order to avoid this, we consider interviews the most appropriate primary data collection method as it allows us to explore consumer's subjective perspectives and beliefs (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). There are many different types of qualitative interviews, and at its most fundamental level, interviews differentiate according to their level of structuration (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Since we aim to investigate online behaviour and impulse buying behaviour, we found semi-structured interviews the most suitable since they provide insights into broader factors related to individual meanings associated with the phenomenon. It allowed for a certain degree of flexibility and gave

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<sup>3</sup> Parts of 3.3.1 were also used in BUSR31 and BUSP37, 2022.



interviewees more opportunities to fully express themselves which allowed us to extrapolate factors such as post-purchase dissonance or the connection between unplanned and impulsive purchases.

The interviews were conducted conversationally with one participant at the time, and we employed a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, accompanied by follow-up *why* and *how* questions (Adams, 2015). Furthermore, we created an agenda for the interview guide, an outline of the planned topics and questions to be discussed, arranged in a logical order. The interview guide was organised into three different sections: opening questions, questions around key topics, and closing questions (see Appendix A). This allowed us to keep focus on key topics while still being flexible to respond to the answers given to ensure an unbroken discussion while following interesting lines of inquiry (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

Furthermore, Qu and Dumay (2011) argue that semi-structured interviews can reveal central, and sometimes even hidden, facets of human behaviour. This aspect was specifically valuable since we seek to understand the respondents' individual and subjective perspectives of online behaviour. To conduct interviews was further in conformity with our philosophical standpoint since the researchers should be involved in the research process to guide and develop it (Carson, Gillmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001).

Due to COVID-19 restraints, we conducted mediated interviews as opposed to the more traditional face-to-face interviewing (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Remote interviews were further the most appropriate from a time management perspective since it came without the obligation to meet at a certain time in a faraway place or other inaccessible settings. Although it lacked the immediate contextualization, and non-verbal communication of a face-to-face interview, using computer-mediated communication allowed us to record the audio and video calls instantly. We conducted the interviews at the participant's preferred convenience whilst also choosing their preferred video conferencing platform, which we believe facilitated a comfortable environment for the participants to express their opinions about the sensitive topic of this study.

Whilst conducting the mediated interviews, we employed the technique of *laddering up* in order to reveal the participants' value base by asking 'why' questions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This technique was valuable in order to help the respondents move upwards from descriptive facts. Furthermore, the *critical incident technique* was used for teasing out

information and identifying online behaviour in particular situations in their lives, and to explain specific actions and motives with regards to those circumstances (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Lastly, we ended the data collection process after having conducted twenty-two interviews. The data collection process lasted for 14 days, ranging from 10th of April to the 24th of April 2022. We conducted interviews with 7 males between the ages of 27 to 41 years old, the remaining 15 interviews were being held with females between the ages of 26 to 37 years old. The majority of the research participants were working professionals while some of them combined full time studies and work. The interview duration ranged between 16 minutes to 37 minutes. Further practicalities of the interview process can be found in the Appendix A and B.

### 3.3.2 Sampling<sup>4</sup>

Sampling is fundamental to the practice of qualitative methods (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In this study, we will follow Robinson's (2014) four-point approach to sampling: (1) define a sample universe; (2) decide upon a sample size; (3) select a sample strategy; and (4) sample sourcing. Throughout this section, we will elaborate on our choices and the reasons behind them.

#### *Sampling universe*

The first step in the four-point approach is defining the sample universe, or target population, which is based on the researchers' established criteria of inclusion and exclusion. The more criteria that are used to establish a sample universe, the more homogeneous the sample universe becomes (Robinson, 2014). In our study, we decided to keep geographical and demographic homogeneity by selecting Swedish participants within the millennial generation only. However, we did not limit ourselves to one gender, which increased the level of heterogeneity in our sample population. Ultimately, we believe this will contribute to the validity and reliability of the study since the findings are not solely the preserve of a particular group or gender.

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<sup>4</sup> Parts of 3.4 were also used in BUSR31, 2022.

### *Sample size*

The second step refers to deciding on a sample size. According to Robinson (2014) the size of a sample is shaped by both theoretical and practical considerations. However, for the purpose of this study, we have an idiographic aim and seek a sample size that is satisfactorily small for the interviewees to maintain a locatable voice. Robinson (2014) states that it is of great importance to have a provisional number to work with, and to reach a certain complexity of the data collected, a sample between 3-16 participants should be sourced. We ended the data collection process after having conducted twenty-two interviews, since theoretical saturation was reached. We are confident that this number is appropriate for the scope of this study since further data collection would not bring incremental benefit to the theory development process (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). This sample size will allow for the opportunity to develop cross-case generalities, whilst the participants maintain a clear identity, as opposed to being subsumed into an anonymous larger whole. Nevertheless, due to the limited sample size, the internal and external validity of the study may affect the generalisability of the results (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Robinson, 2014).

### *Sampling strategy*

The third step refers to deciding on the sample strategy. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, non-probability sampling was deemed most appropriate when identifying research participants. We considered this to be the optimal choice, as opposed to probability sampling which would offer a too random selection, thus resulting in a shortage of relevant data. Furthermore, Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2015) argue that non-probability sampling strategies are favoured when the research takes a subjective standpoint, which is clearly aligned with our research approach. There are several types of non-probability sampling techniques, and we decided on a purposive sampling strategy (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Thus, we selected participants based on certain characteristics in order to fulfil the study. The respondents were therefore well-informed in the subject matter and could provide in-depth information about the phenomenon under investigation. We selected the sample population based on four predetermined criteria of importance:

1. Active social media user

2. Follow one or more influencers
3. Millennial (born between 1981 and 1996)
4. Swedish citizen

### *Sample sourcing*

Once we had decided on the sample universe, sample size, and sample strategy, the fourth and final step refers to sample sourcing (Robinson, 2014). At this step, we adhered to ethical standards and sensitivity. We informed the interviewees of the study's aim, of what participation entails, of its voluntary nature, and that anonymity is protected at all times. When sourcing participants, our own network played a big role, we decided to reach out to participants via email communication, and the social media platforms LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. One preferred selection criteria was that the participants were confident with the English language, for the benefit of both. However, since English was in many cases not the participants native language, many of the interviews were still conducted in Swedish.

Furthermore, Robinson (2014) highlights one disadvantage of this non-probability sampling strategy, namely, self-selection bias, which refers to issues of sampling representativeness and generalisability (Braver & Bay, 1992). Whether a bias is present rests upon how well the sample represents the target population, and it is important to be aware of this possibility. Although the evaluation of self-selection bias can be extremely complex (Braver & Bay, 1992), we attempted to avoid this by contacting several potential participants and only providing them with a general overview of the study, ensuring they could participate irrespective of their opinion on the subject.

### 3.3.3 Interview guide

According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) an interview guide is particularly beneficial when conducting semi-structured interviews since it ensures that all topics are being covered, whilst still allowing the respondents a certain degree of flexibility in their response. We used our literature review and conceptual framework to assist in the identification of themes under which we categorised the interview questions. These themes and questions were chosen to

cover interesting topics and areas, in order to answer the research questions. All themes focused on different perspectives of SMIs, online behaviour and impulse buying behaviour from a consumer perspective. The themes that followed from our interview guide are: social media consumption, influencer awareness, purchase behaviour, and impulse buying behaviour. In order to avoid derailing the interview process by asking lengthy, closed, vague, or leading questions, we followed the Interview Protocol Refinement Framework (IPR) during the preparation phase of the guide (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The goal when coming up with interview questions was to develop open and broad questions that could capture a detailed story of the participants' perception of their online behaviour. Therefore, we included a list of main questions directly related to the research question, and potential follow up questions. Furthermore, in order to capture impulse buying behaviour, direct questions were used to determine the essence of the purchase. We initiated the interviews by asking the respondents some introductory questions on their social media usage, and influencer awareness. After the introductory questions, the character of the questions altered between being direct, probing and specifying. This, in order to get as nuanced and profound answers as possible, in order to facilitate our analysis (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). The interview guide used can be found in Appendix A.

### 3.3.4 Transcription

All interviews were recorded either through audio or video in order to always maintain easy access to the empirical material. By video recording the interviews, we further had the ability to observe important behaviour such as facial expressions that played a key role in the analysis. Furthermore, the interviews were transcribed the same day they were being held to capture the sense of the interviews while still being top of mind. According to Bryman and Bell (2019) when conducting interviews, it is of great importance to not only capture what is being said, but also *how* the participants are saying it. The recording and transcribing process was thus highly beneficial as it allowed us to carefully go through the interviews on several occasions. Transcriptions were conducted of each interview and written verbatim, to not waste valuable information. To have exactly the same words as were used originally was advantageous when analysing the material since it allowed us to explore unique experiences of the participants. However, Bryman and Bell (2019) states that individuals can be prone to provide dishonest answers if knowing that they are being recorded. To avoid this, we initiated

each interview by asking for consent to record the interview and informed that we would use pseudonyms to give anonymity to the individuals when referring to their statements in the analysis.

Furthermore, since this study takes a Swedish perspective, and required the participants to be Swedish citizens, the majority of the interviews was being held in the native language. This because we wanted to ensure unambiguous communication and eliminate any language barriers. Transcription was further carried out in Swedish, whilst quotes that were to be used in the analysis were translated individually. However, as some words and phrases in Swedish do not have an exact equivalent meaning in English, translating the interview data was complex at times. Suh (2008) suggests two ways of dealing with this complexity: a different language can either borrow/integrate or adapt/paraphrase words and phrases. For the purpose of this study, we attempted our best to interpret and paraphrase the true and valid translation word-by-word. By carefully listening, observing, and transcribing the interviews verbatim, we are confident that the translation of quotes is considered trustworthy.

### 3.4 Data analysis<sup>5</sup>

For the analysis of our empirical data, we adopted the method by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). Accordingly, we divided the analysis into three phases: sorting, reducing, and arguing. During the sorting process, it was vital for us to get ‘intimate’ with the data, by reading and engaging with the material on numerous occasions and identify similarities as well as discrepancies between the answers of the respondents before categorising it. After transcribing the interviews, we therefore read the text cautiously and colour coded content that, based on our prior knowledge, deemed relevant for the four themes that we based our interviews on: social media consumption, influencer awareness, purchase behaviour and impulse buying behaviour. Furthermore, we reviewed each other’s work and discussed modifications where required. Consequently, meaningful data was organised, and repeated content was turned into codes, indicating a relevant topic.

After sorting and coding all relevant material, the reducing phase commenced, and we dealt with the problem of representation (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). Therefore, it was crucial

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<sup>5</sup> Parts of 3.6 were also used in BUSR31 and BUSP37, 2022.

to reduce and contextualise the material to establish a clear focus. This was done through organising the established codes and allocating them into relevant themes. Here, we focused on the most interesting themes as opposed to the most frequent in order to accurately answer our research questions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). During this stage, we acknowledged the importance of not only searching for novel discoveries and thus stay away from the research bias neophilia (Chambers, 2017). Throughout the analysis, we constantly went back to the conceptual framework to reduce data, which assisted in achieving an equilibrium between searching for interesting patterns and staying within the topic of this study.

During the final phase, arguing, the data was interpreted in the specific context to discuss and analyse the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). At this stage, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify logical arguments relating to both the literature review, conceptual framework and the research questions to confirm the validity of the study. We identified, analysed, and interpreted common themes, which ranged from repetitions, analogies, parallelisms and differences in the respondents' answers. The thematic analysis allowed us to follow a flexible approach to analysing our empirical data as opposed to imposing clear procedures. By arguing through excerpt-commentary units, we further formed points from the created themes to make a clear contribution. At this stage, we further acknowledged our abductive approach by going back and forth between the literature and the findings in order to bring forward coherent and logical arguments.

### 3.5 Research quality<sup>6</sup>

When assessing research quality, many factors need to be taken into consideration (Morse, 2015). According to Easterby-Smith et al. “one of the key justifications for doing research is that it yields results that are more accurate and believable than common everyday observations” (2021, p.134). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the research conducted is of high quality. In business research, the technical language that is commonly used to examine quality includes terms such as validity, reliability, and generalizability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Depending on the philosophical standpoint and research design, these terms can mean different things. In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba

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<sup>6</sup> Parts of 1.2 were also used in BUSR31, 2022.

(1985) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989) argue that quality refers to trustworthiness and states that it can be attained through assessing four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility refers to the ability to determine whether findings are truthful (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). To ensure the credibility of our study, all interviews were of semi-structured character whilst the interview guide followed a coherent structure which allowed us to compare the empirical data collected through each interview. Within the collection of primary data, we did not limit ourselves to one gender, to generate as many perspectives as possible. Hence, the findings are not solely the preserve of a particular group or gender. To enhance credibility, we further practised respondent validation to confirm that we understood the answers of the respondents correctly. Data was thus returned to interviewees to check for accuracy and resonance with their experience. Since this study adopts a social constructionist view, we believe that reality is constructed by how individuals interpret and draw meaning from their life and experiences. By having interviews as our primary data collection method, we acquired a deep understanding about the participants' experiences and perceptions. Therefore, we further consider the empirical data to be adequate and believable representation of the reality we aim to study.

Transferability refers to whether the findings are applicable within other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). This research has limitations connected to transferability since we only study Swedish citizens within the millennial generation. However, in our study, an idiographic approach was adopted. We focused on the individual and put emphasis on personal experience in each interview. In accordance with the idiographic approach, the study took the contexts into consideration. Therefore, it should be noted that conclusions are only applicable in a similar situational context.

Dependability measures to which extent the findings are consistent and likely to appear at other times (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Since we acquired data that referred to participants' memories and prior experiences of online behaviour, we believe the time and change processes of the findings established a certain degree of trustworthiness in this study. Furthermore, to allow the possibility for an auditor to



examine or other researchers to repeat our study, the data has been recorded and transcribed. Thus, a chain of clarification has been maintained throughout the study. We aim to be as transparent as possible by meeting the criteria for dependability, though strictly enforcing GDPR guidelines.

Conformability refers to the degree to which the researchers have allowed their own values to interfere in the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). To ensure conformability, the interview guide consists of a mix between open-ended and closed-ended questions. Furthermore, we demonstrate conformability by showing reflexivity throughout the research process. Although complete objectivity is impracticable, all interviews were conducted with an open and unbiased approach, in an effort to produce new and complementary knowledge to existing literature. We will elaborate on the ethical considerations of this study in the following section.

### 3.6 Research ethics

When conducting business research, various perspectives linked to politics, power, and ethics should be taken into careful consideration (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Throughout this research project, we constantly paid great attention to our influence over the participants involved, along with mitigating potential risks through various means.

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) argues that a fundamental aspect to consider when conducting business research are politics of access, which refers to how researchers gain access to the participants they aim to study. When conducting our interviews, we were transparent about our motivation for this project. We emphasised that the data gathered, and their involvement was voluntary and strictly to be used for research purposes.

Furthermore, in order to maintain a high ethical standard throughout this study, we followed Diener and Candall's (1978) four critical areas of focus: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception. In this study, we carefully considered all four areas and applied relevant measures to follow these. The first area, harm to participants can involve various perspectives, including physical, psychological, harm to their development, career, or self-esteem (Diener & Crandell, 1978). Since we conducted mediated

interviews, there was no risk of physical harm neither in relation to their career or employment. Pseudonymisation was a fundamental technique we used to mitigate the risk of social embarrassment and stigmatisation. Moreover, we ensured confidentiality of the recordings and transcriptions and handled the material carefully. Although participation in transcript review is voluntary (Hagens, Dobrow & Chafe, 2009), we gave the option to send finished transcriptions for approval to empower the participants to control the way that they are portrayed in the research (Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

The second area refers to the participants being fully informed about the study's purpose prior to the interview, in order for them to make an informed decision on whether or not to participate (Diener & Crandell, 1978). This principle was adhered to during the sampling sourcing stage of our study. When we reached out to potential participants via social media and email communication, we clearly communicated the study's aim, of what participation entails, and of its voluntary nature. Therefore, we allowed full freedom to make an informed decision before participating in this study.

The third area of importance refers to invasion of privacy (Diener & Crandell, 1978). This has a strong connection to the aforementioned area of 'informed consent' and means that researchers are obligated to respect and protect the participants' privacy throughout the research process (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As previously stated, we ensured that the participants' answers were only used for academic purposes and that their identity and personal information was treated as confidential and not provided to third parties.

The last area, deception, refers to a situation where the researcher presents the study as something that in reality it is not (Diener & Crandell, 1978). This can be in the form of intentionally misleading participants regarding the purpose of the study or indirectly by which the researcher does not fully inform about the research goals (Anderson & Corneli, 2018). However, as previously mentioned, our communication and transparency with the participants prior to the data collection eliminated this risk.

Conclusively, we consider that our methodological approach in relation to the participants guarantees the ethical standards of business research are met in this study.

## 4 Analysis

*In this chapter, we will present the empirical findings of how the research participants perceive and experience the impact of social media influencers. The empirical findings are analysed and will be presented in four themes: price-consciousness, trustworthiness, emotional value, and relevancy. The chapter starts with a brief overview of the research participants, followed by their social media consumption and SMI awareness to create a comprehensive understanding of the analysis.*

### 4.1 Analysis of research participants

In order to get a brief overview of the research participants, some general background information about each of the 22 interviewees have been gathered and compiled. Out of the 22 interviewees, 7 were males between the ages of 27 to 41 years old. The remaining 15 interviews included females between the ages of 26 to 37 years old. 15 were working full time, whereas 5 combined full-time studies and work. The monthly income ranged between 12.000 SEK to 50.000 SEK, and the most common industries to work in were education, government, finance, and marketing. The majority of participants lived in Skane, also known as Scania, which is located in the south of Sweden. The most common personal interests were to travel, spend time with friends and family, fashion, and different kinds of sports related activities. Further information about gender, age, employment, income, and personal interests can be found in Appendix C.

#### 4.1.1 Social media consumption and social media influencer awareness

In order to understand what impact social media has on Swedish millennials everyday life, an important question was to what extent they use social media on a daily basis. We further wanted to get a picture of what they generally do on social media and what platforms are deemed most popular. As millennials represent a broad generational group, we further wanted to investigate whether there is a difference between younger and older millennials, and from a female and male perspective.

According to our findings, all participants used social media on a daily basis. The most popular platforms for females were Instagram, while Facebook and Youtube were dominated among men. Given that we had an unequal number of female and male participants in our study, it became difficult to conclude large differences, but this data still gives a glimpse of how preferred platforms differ between genders. Furthermore, the participants used social media mainly to find inspiration, to keep in touch with friends and family, to scroll through the feed, or to look at images and videos. This can be linked to the finding of McKinsey (2017) which states that Swedish millennials prefer to see visual content such as images and videos. Swedish millennials further turn to social media when they want to search for new trends, obtain information or news about what is happening around the world, and only one respondent used it for business purposes.

The above reasoning is further consistent with the survey done by Data Reportal (2021) for global internet users aged 16 to 64. The main reasons why people use social media is to stay up-to-date with news and current events, find funny and entertaining content, research products to buy, and stay in touch with friends and family. However, to follow celebrities and celebrity news was ranked as one of the least important reasons for using social media (Data Reportal, 2021). The average social media use of the participants was about 3.9 hours per day. This is approximately one hour more than the global millennial social media user, which according to Letter.ly (2021), is about 2 hours and 38 minutes.

Regardless of gender or age, the participants followed at least 10 SMIs on various social media platforms, with the most popular being Instagram. However, females generally followed more SMIs than males. Females followed an average of 84 SMIs whereas males followed an average of 36 SMIs. Although all participants belonged to the millennial generation, it was evident that the majority of the participants aged over 33 followed less SMIs than those between the ages of 26-32 years old. A female at the age of 35 stated the following:

*“The reason why I have stopped following influencers is because I feel bad when I see their ‘picture-perfect photos’. I also decided to unfollow all influencers except three a while ago since I believe they had a negative impact on my shopping behaviour.”*

Furthermore, for females, fashion and beauty were the most popular SMIs categories, followed by food and interior design. The reason why they followed these SMIs was to get inspiration, and to keep up to date with the latest trends and products. For males, there was a clear preference of sports SMIs, but also TV-celebrities and food. The main reason why they followed these SMIs was to follow their everyday lives, but also to get inspiration and obtain the latest news. This can be seen in the quote below:

*“I truly enjoy waking up every morning, scrolling through Instagram and Facebook to see what I may have missed overnight. I also like to stay up-to-date with news and current events nearby, and to get fashion or outfit inspiration for what to wear during the day.”*

It was evident that the participants had different reasons why they followed SMIs. Although most agreed that they follow SMIs as a source of inspiration; to explore the latest trends, obtain the latest news, and various forms of recommendations.

#### 4.1.2 Online buying behaviour

When analysing the online buying behaviour of the participants, the majority stated that they tend to buy impulsively online. Furthermore, two females at the age of 34 and 36 stated that they bought impulsively when they were younger but have become more aware of their shopping behaviour once becoming older. This is consistent with previous research (Karbasivar & Yarahmadi, 2011; Ling & Yazdanifard, 2015; Muruganantham & Bhakat, 2013; Tinne, 2010) which suggest that internal factors including age can have a great impact on impulse buying behaviour. The below quotes focus on this aspect:

*“Nowadays, I typically don’t buy things impulsively [...] I always try to plan my purchases. However, when I was younger, like 18-19 years old, I had less control and bought impulsively more often.”*

*“When Instagram was new, and I was younger, I trusted influencers and bought more after their recommendations. But as I am getting older, I am now more aware of that*

*and don't impulse buy just because an influencer post something on Instagram. It takes more than that."*

For females, the most popular category to buy impulsively was makeup and clothes. This is consistent with the findings of Saarela et al. (2008) which suggest that females are more inclined to buy low involvement goods impulsively. For males, sport related products such as clothes, equipment and shoes were the most popular.

Out of the total 22 respondents, ten declared that they have bought a product just because an SMIs promotes or has it. Although less than half of the respondents stated that they have never bought a product just because an SMIs has it, there was a consensus that SMIs have influenced their consumption habits and increased their likelihood of impulse buying either directly or indirectly. This can be linked to findings of Smith (2011) which argues that millennials use social media and reviews continuously to determine the merit of a product (Smith, 2011). The below quotes focus on this aspect:

*"Indirectly yes, the reason why I follow influencers is because I want to keep myself up-to-date with new trends. When I then, for example, buy new clothes, I follow the new trends that perhaps were initiated by an influencer."*

*"Absolutely, I believe influencers are the ones that populate trends and get people to talk about products. But as I've never bought a product just because an influencer has it, I believe they have more of an indirect impact on my consumption habits."*

*"Influencers has undoubtedly changed my consumption habits both directly and indirectly [...] especially when it comes to supplements, clothes, and beauty products"*

Another question related to the respondents' online buying behaviour was - 'If you see an influencer that has a product you want, how long will you typically think about it before buying it?'. This question was asked to find out what type of impulse buying behaviour the participants were most prone to engage in. The below quotes focus on this aspect:

*"If I have a need for that specific product, an influencer may somehow influence my decision-making process. For example, if I'm looking for a new foundation, and an*

*influencer suddenly recommends a foundation, I may consider buying it. However, if I have no need for a product, I will most likely not buy anything. Also, although I may need a product an influencer promotes, it also comes down to price and my own brand recognition.”*

*“It can take a long time, if you would have asked me four years ago I would probably have bought it instantly, however, since I’ve been growing older, I think two or even three times before buying something which means it can take a while. It may take weeks or even months depending on the product, need, and price.”*

*“Is it a product that I really need, then I would normally search for it online in order to find out price and specific ingredients for example before ordering. But I always search online before buying a product.”*

One of the recurring statements of all respondents was that it was dependent on their particular need. This can be linked to the findings of Loroz and Helgeson (2013) which argues that millennials are considered materialistic and self-controlled. But it also became evident that the price tag was a determinant factor for impulse buying. Low involvement products were typically bought impulsively as a result of SMIs; as the price was lower, they did not think twice before purchasing. This is consistent with the findings of Xu (2007) which states that millennials tend to spend their income money quickly on fast moving consumer goods and personal services. However, overall, the tendency to impulse buy was not very high, though, we found a clear predisposition of the behaviour when analysing the interviews.

## 4.2 Price-consciousness

### 4.2.1 Price as a strong determinant for online impulse buying

Price was considered to be one of the most influential factors for online impulse buying behaviour. The participants were thus less likely to purchase a product impulsively if being expensive. This finding is supported by Haryanto, Wiyono and Hastjarja (2019) which states that the more consumers perceive the price to be reasonable, the stronger the urge to impulse buy. This also ties back into the idea of consumer emotions, because receiving a good deal,

and saving money establish feelings of excitement, pleasure, happiness, and other positive outcomes (Rick, Pereira & Burson, 2014). The participants explained that a good deal actually changed the way they think and feel. When they received a good deal, they experienced less stress, while feeling satisfied and happier. This can be linked to the findings of Tighe (2021) which argues that millennials typically shop on the sole purpose of improving mood, whilst also being emotional and making decisions at the moment. The below quotes focus on this aspect:

*"...it depends on whether I need the product and whether the price allows me to buy it. If the price is reasonable and I need it, I typically order it immediately."*

*"...it depends on the price of the product. If it's a cheap product promoted by a credible influencer, I would buy it immediately. However, if the product is expensive I would think about it for a longer period of time, perhaps a few weeks before making a final purchase decision. I would typically also look online for reviews before making a final purchase, regardless of price."*

However, the importance of price is not supported by the results of Lissitsa and Kol (2016) which states that millennials focus more on style and quality rather than price. Though, from a Swedish millennial perspective, price represents a key element in the buying process. This is further supported by Moreno et al. (2017) which argue that competitive prices typically draw the attention of millennials.

## 4.3 Trustworthiness

### 4.3.1 Micro-influencers powerful impact on consumer attitudes and purchasing habits

SIMs have audiences of varying sizes, and mega-influencers or celebrities were brought up several times during the interviews. Both male and female participants declared how these SIMs differed from macro-, micro-, and nano-influencers. The latter has established their personal brands through many years of relevant consistent content and earned their audiences in a more genuine and authentic way than celebrities, who often are known for something



else rather than their status as an SMIs (Govindan & Alotaibi, 2021). Most participants agreed that they were not responsive to, nor trusted the information or recommendations brought forward by mega-influencers. The main reason for this was because celebrities have more resources and that they often hire individuals to keep their social media accounts interesting, engaging, and well-updated. The participants claimed that their content was inauthentic; sometimes written and posted by someone else, and therefore had limited trust towards their recommendations. This can be seen in the quotes below:

*“I trust everyday influencers over celebrity influencers. Whether it’s friends, family or peers, the influencers that share everyday content, products and places that they find a genuine interest in, without any particular agenda to promote and earn money are more trustworthy in my opinion.”*

*“I don’t trust influencers with large follower counts because they typically portray an unrealistic and ‘perfect’ lifestyle.”*

*“I like to follow celebrities, although I do not embrace the products that they recommend. I only like their photos because many of them have been role models since I was younger, nothing more. This is because it feels like they are not the one who sits behind their mobile phone and posts their own pictures. But I know that influencers run their own social media accounts and post their own content.”*

Micro-influencers were instead perceived to be the most credible. The participants felt a strong personal connection to these and perceived their content to be more relevant, interesting, and authentic. The participants viewed these SMIs as close friends or even family members, and therefore trusted their recommendations, although they never met them in real life. The fact that they see SMIs as friends, although they have never been in contact with them, could be connected to the statement of Li et al. (2014), about how a consumer’s good associations and perceptions of a SMI can increase a consumer’s willingness to adopt a particular product promoted by SMIs. The tight-knit relationship in particular gave them a great deal of influence over the participants. The fact that micro-influencers do not have ‘celebrity status’, gave their recommendations more weight and was more likely to affect their consumption habits. The below quotes focus on this aspect:

*“I believe influencers with smaller follower counts are more credible and authentic. I have been following a few influencers for a considerable amount of time, and I’m invested in their life in a similar way to how I would be curious about a product recommendation from a close friend. It also feels like these influencers really value their audience and don’t promote products just for the sake of it, or to earn money.”*

*“I have more trust in influencers with small follower counts since normally I feel a stronger connection and can relate to their lives. They feel more like ‘me’. It comes down to the art of making me feel ordinary.”*

Ultimately, all participants, regardless of gender or age perceived micro-influencers to be more relatable and trustworthy, and their recommendations were perceived to be more authentic and genuine, when compared to any other SMIs category. As micro-influencers were perceived to be more trustworthy and attractive to the participants, purchase intent typically increase as a result (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016).

It was however noted that the participants were well aware of the fact that all SMIs are paid to promote products, but they still considered macro-, micro-, and nano-influencers to be more authentic than mega-influencers, or celebrities. This was explained by the fact that the former was more relatable since they create more personalised content. For the participants, such content included relevant topics, issues, needs, or interests. This fact was later declared to be the main reason as to why the participants adopted products recommended by SMIs, which could be connected to trust. According to Hsu, Lin and Chiang (2013) personalised content has the power to establish a strong trust towards the SMI, since it is considered non-commercial and thereby more appealing. Furthermore, Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) and Park and Lee (2009) state that when SMIs personalise their content, consumers can feel that the content is directed towards them personally and can work as a strong persuader since consumers believe that their interests, attitudes, and opinions are similar to the SMI’s (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). Consequently, this might justify why the participants could relate more easily to these SMIs, since they allow for the opportunity to step into their personal narratives (Forbes, 2016).

Furthermore, it was evident that the participants had different reasons why they followed SMIs. However, most agreed that they follow SMIs as a source of inspiration; to explore the

latest trends, to obtain the latest news, and/or attain different kinds of recommendations. Since they follow SMIs to get inspired for individual reasons, it could be interpreted that the content is of high importance for the participants. Some participants explained that they scroll through their social media platforms multiple times per day, in hope that SMIs had posted new content that they would find relevant and inspiring. This is in line with Moreno et al. (2017) and Valentine and Powers (2013) findings which suggested that in order to capture the attention of millennials, SMIs must post high-quality images and personalise their content, while the message also must be fast, direct and honest in order to intrigue them. Additionally, the fact that the participants follow SMIs everyday lives (Forbes, 2016) could further explain why they find SMIs content engaging, inspiring and of high value to them (Li et al., 2014). The below quotes focus on this aspect:

*“I follow them because they are very influential and they are very good at what they’re doing. I also like their personalities. I truly enjoy the ability to follow their everyday lives and what they’re up to.”*

*“Whenever I have some spare time over, I typically open Instagram to see what friends and influencers have been up to. I follow influencers from all over the world and it’s very interesting to see the different lifestyles in the US or Australia for example, as opposed to Sweden.”*

## 4.4 Emotional value

### 4.4.1 Social media influencers strong impact on consumer emotion and subsequent purchase intent

Although the degree of emotional influence could not be accurately measured, the participants' explanations and facial expressions imply that such impact usually involves positive outcomes. For instance, most of the participants explained that their awareness of new trends, especially fashion trends, was based on their social media consumption. Furthermore, when an SMIs appears to be genuine and trustworthy, consumers form an emotional response towards the SMI (Youn & Faber, 2000). Based on trust, there is a higher

likelihood that SMIs break the barriers of communication, which consequently affects consumer emotions. The findings of the interviews justify that consumers' first form emotions, thereby generating feelings, and based on feelings, make a purchase decision. Furthermore, it was evident that even the most sensitive participants could not neglect being influenced by SMIs recommendations. This was mostly due to choice overload, where the recommendation of SMIs have become an important factor that influence their decision making process:

*“Influencers don't impact my purchasing behaviour and that's probably because I work within marketing myself. I believe that's the main reason why I'm sceptical and don't 'fall for that'. However, if I have a need for a certain product, and an influencer promotes it, the purchase might happen faster. Thus, I believe influencers impact my consumption habits indirectly.”*

A few participants explained that SMIs have become a key source of information before purchasing new products. Not only to hear their opinion, but to also take advantage of their discount codes. Typically, discount codes are valid for 24 hours or longer depending on the collaboration. However, codes that were valid for 24 hours or less were said to increase purchase intent due to the fear of missing out. The participants perceived the discount codes as an encouragement for purchasing the promoted products and was explained to be an aspect that gets them intrigued to purchase impulsively. This can be seen in the quote below:

*“...I truly enjoy when I'm looking at a try-on haul and I find items that I'm interested in. Before thinking more about it, the haul is over, and there's a discount code at the end of the collaboration. To me this works as an encouragement for purchasing the products and it is highly effective as I've bought multiple products through influencer codes over the years. I also never buy a product without searching for it on Instagram. Quite often I do find influencers that I don't follow or even know about, but through a search I can still take advantage of their code.”*

The fact that some participants expressed that they were intrigued to buy a product due to a promotional offer or discount code, this can be linked to planned impulse buying since they may end up purchasing products that may not be needed (Stern, 1962). Furthermore, since SMIs often have expertise in specific fields such as fashion, travel, food, or fitness, they can

quickly become opinion leaders through their first-hand experiences and unique insights (Nathaniel et al., 2017). When they post content about products consistent with their field of expertise, the participants consider their opinion more credible when compared to any other form of advertising. This is consistent with previous research (Govindan & Alotaibi, 2021; De Vierman et al., 2017; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014) which demonstrate that eWOM by SMIs is more powerful and compelling than eWOM created by brands. SMIs expertise further stipulated a desire or interest to purchase a product and facilitated respondent's decision-making process. This can be linked to the statement of De Vierman et al. (2017) about how SMIs establish trust and credibility among their followers, which in turn affect consumer motivations and purchasing decisions.

The reason why the participants preferred online shopping as opposed to traditional shopping was since the former frees them from large crowds and queues, while it was argued that websites often had more exclusive sales and discounts than in physical stores. Furthermore, shopping through social media saved them a considerable amount of time when compared to offline shopping. This is consistent with the findings of previous research (Dawson & Kim, 2009; Ergolu et al., 2001) who states that e-commerce frees consumers from the many limitations of traditional stores such as constrained product availability, restricted opening hours and inaccessible store locations. Additionally, the participants typically impulse buy products that made them 'feel good', or things that had an emotional value. The fact that they purchase products to feel better or temporarily dampen unhappy thoughts, can be linked to the concept of retail therapy, as they make impulse purchases to elevate unpleasant mood states (Rick, Pereira & Burson, 2014)

Furthermore, when the respondents were introduced to a new product, or when having a large number of products to choose from, SMIs recommendations become particularly valuable and sometimes even their first choice of information. Therefore, the less awareness consumers' have about a particular product, the more influential the SMIs become. Moreover, since social media platforms allow for the opportunity to search for content with keywords, rather than being limited to hashtags, the respondents could easily understand the evaluation of products from different SMIs as explained below:

*"...with the overabundance of products today, I often turn to social media to hear influencers' opinions on products of interest. [...] I typically start on Instagram and*

*search for the desired product or category, once finding a product I normally go to YouTube to watch full product demonstration videos. Lastly I typically search online to read reviews and if I'm lucky I find a discount code along the way."*

For females, Instagram was considered the most popular platform since it provides the unique opportunity for SMIs to add product tags in posts. When a prospect clicks on the product tag, they receive detailed information about the product through a detail page on Instagram and can then purchase the product directly through the app or through the brand's website. The fact that Instagram allows for a seamless shopping experience dramatically impacted the respondent's impulse buying behaviour and not least facilitated their decision-making process. This can be seen in the quote below:

*"Since Instagram introduced the feature where people can add product tags to their images, I constantly find myself tapping on images whenever I find someone with an attractive style and want to find out where they got their clothes from."*

Overall, if SMIs attain expertise knowledge, are attractive, trustworthy and maintain personalised content related to their field of expertise, they will positively affect consumer emotions, and such positive emotions will enhance consumers purchase intent and willingness to buy (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016).

## 4.5 Relevancy

### 4.5.1 Synergy between brand and social media influencer

Brands and SMIs are increasingly collaborating for mutual benefits, however, whether or not brands collaborate with the right SMIs affects the effectiveness of the message (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017). The respondents emphasised that in order to trust SMIs they must collaborate with brands that align with their personal brand, values and history. Only in that way, the collaboration seemed authentic and relevant for the participants. Liu et al. (2013) also stress the importance of selecting the right SMI to resonate with their audiences, as SMIs with a great amount of trust and expertise are highly favoured by consumers. Therefore, advertising

of products that was of no interest to the participants was ignored, and more attention was placed on posts that were relevant to their identified need. Whenever the participants paid attention to a sponsored post, it was typically because they had a need for that particular product or because they perceived the product to be appealing by other means. This behaviour can be linked to suggested impulse buying since the participants became interested in products not because they needed it, but because they visualised a need for it (Stern, 1962). This can be seen in the quote below:

*“I certainly believe some influencers are more trustworthy than others. To me, it comes down to their personal brand and history. If someone posts something, whether that's a paid collaboration or other types of products, that I know they normally don't post or promote, then I assume it's just 'fake' - they only do it for the money.”*

Furthermore, another common finding was that the participants often turned to other sources online, such as Google, YouTube, or Trustpilot to search for additional information and reviews before making a final purchase decision. This finding is supported by Zang, Hu and Zhao (2014) who argues that reviews and source credibility are influential factors that promote online impulse buying behaviour. However, most of the participants still favoured the content of SMIs over online reviews. This was due to the fact that SMIs often have worked hard to gain a follower base and reputation, and therefore would not give a dishonest opinion about a 'bad' product. This can be further linked to trust, where Nejad et al. (2014) argue that the level of trust impacts how much consumers believe in the information provided by SMIs. This aspect is expressed by a participant below:

*“...a while ago I was looking for a facial self-tanner that didn't smell or leave colour on clothes and bed sheets. I first searched on Instagram and found a specific product that due to several influencers grabbed my attention. After looking on Instagram I went straight to YouTube to search for the product and get a full product review. After watching a few videos on YouTube I bought the product via an influencer discount code and received 25% off.”*

However, a few participants were very sceptical towards influencer marketing and SMIs in general and stated that they do it for their own benefit and not for their followers, as can be seen in the quotes below:

*“I’m very sceptical towards social media in general, mostly due to the rise in disinformation and false advertising online. However, the influencers I have been following for a few years I do trust, because they feel more like my friends.”*

*“I believe the main reason why I don’t trust influencers is due to their lack of clarity and transparency when they are paid to promote products.”*

Nejad et al. (2014) argues that when there is little or no trust towards an SMI, consumers will not believe in the information behind the post. This was expressed by a few respondents who stated that they could easily spot when SMIs provided dishonest opinions, especially if they recommended products that they do not use themselves on a continuous basis. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants agreed that SMIs rarely collaborate with brands outside their area of knowledge. This could be further linked to expertise, which relates to the participants perceptions of the SMIs ability to create authentic and genuine content (Nejad et al., 2014). Some of the participants further mentioned that SMIs that collaborated with a brand multiple times were seen as more credible. Especially if the participants had followed them for a considerable time and thus knew that they used similar products before gaining a large follower base. This can further be related to the trust that the participants have towards these SMIs. Therefore, whenever a SMI recommended a product that they have no connection to, or have never recommended before, the participants' perception of the SMI was negatively affected. Consequently, the purchase intent decreased, and the SMI trustworthiness lessened. This was also prevalent whenever SMIs recommended products that they did not use themselves.

## 4.6 Attractiveness

### 4.6.1 The importance of physical appearance and content

It was discovered that the participants' perceptions of SMIs attractiveness played a key role in their decision-making process. According to Li, Lee and Lien (2014) a consumer’s impression of a SMI attractiveness is likely the most powerful factor that can influence SMIs credibility and consumer’s attitudes. In fact, several respondents stated that the physical appearance of a SMI influences their purchase intent. This was also highlighted in Lou and



Yuan's (2019) study which found that physical appearance can have an impact on SMIs influence on consumers. Both male and female participants agreed that physical attractiveness was one aspect that encouraged them to engage with SMIs content. But it was also a factor that could inspire them more intrinsically if they appeal to SMIs on a physical level. Below quotes focus on this aspect:

*"I would never follow an influencer, nor become influenced by someone on social media that I don't find attractive. Although physical appearance plays a part, attractiveness to me also refers to other aspects such as if the influencer is positive, responsive, and creative."*

*"In my opinion, it is just not enough to appear beautiful or good looking on social media, but it is a plus if you can post content that is interesting, unique, funny and so on I suppose."*

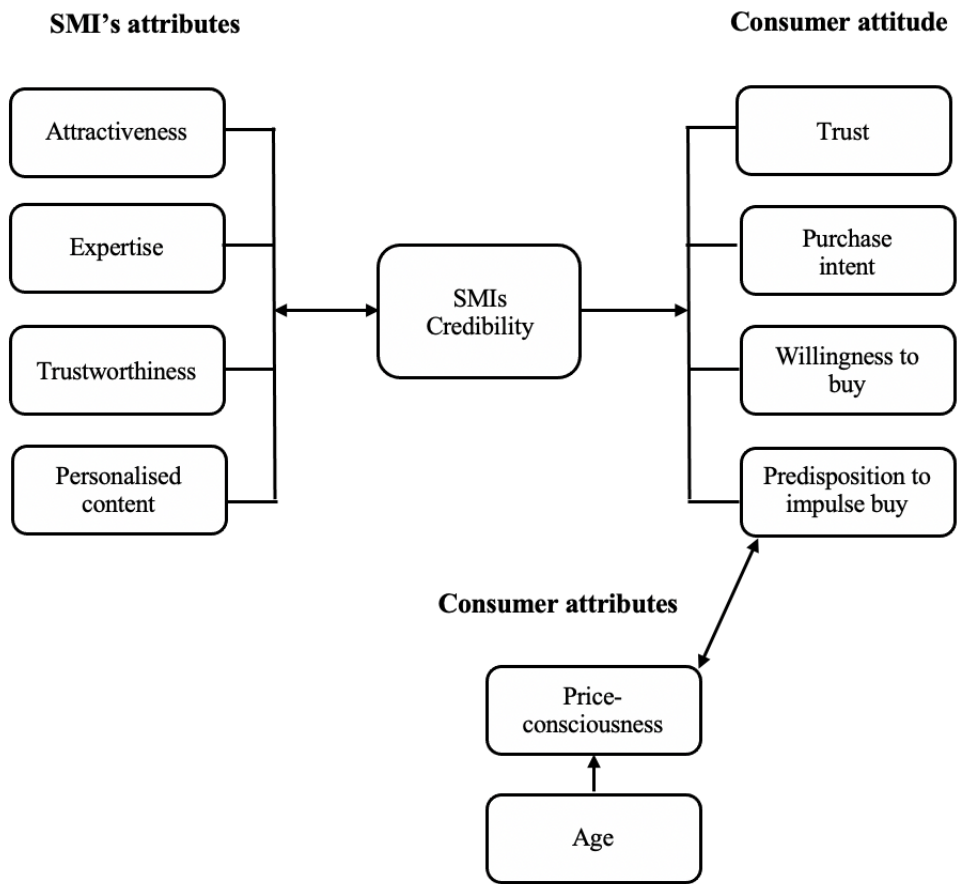
However, attractiveness not only refers to physical appearance but also includes factors like intellectual skills, personality dimensions, and athletic or lifestyle prowess (Trivedi, 2018). Therefore, from a content perspective, the participants perceived interactive content such as images and videos to be more appealing, as opposed to lengthy text. Two female respondents stated that SMIs that do something more than just talking about a product in a video are more appealing. 'Hauls', which refers to a video where people demonstrate and discuss items they recently purchased, was considered highly intriguing. Try-on hauls was specifically popular since the process is interactive when compared to looking at 2D models online or physical catalogues. Hence, these were argued to provide a compelling demonstration of products. Try-on hauls were further beneficial for purchase decisions since they allowed the participants to see items on an actual person and given accurate information and suggestions regarding sizing, fitting, and styling. One female participant explains:

*"...try-on hauls are very inspiring and engaging. Bianca Ingrosso, for example, have done several hauls where she has provided great recommendations that have helped me build a trendy wardrobe full of outfits without spending a huge budget due to her discount codes."*

Since the participants were intrigued to buy products after looking at haul videos, this can be linked to suggested-, and planned impulse buying (Stern, 1962). The above participants have through hauls bought several products, without necessarily having a particular need for it. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the participants saw a product and consequently visualised a need for it. From the statement, it can further be assumed that the purchase(s) was triggered due to the discount code. Furthermore, the fact that the participants followed SMIs that they found physically attractive and attained similar styles occasionally meant that they were eager to adopt SMIs recommendations. This is in line with Kaptian and Silvera (2015) findings which stated that when a consumer sees a product advertisement made by a familiar or attractive SMI, attention is typically drawn to that particular product which could result in a purchase. Forbes (2016) further claims that consumers are more willing to adopt products recommended by SMIs that the consumer finds likeable and attractive.

#### 4.7 Final framework of analysis

To conclude the findings from the analysis, the conceptual framework shown in figure 2 that was used to conduct the study, has to be restructured. As it was found from the analysis, Swedish millennials did perceive the influence of SMIs according to the four attributes: expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness and personalised content. What remains from the conceptual framework is therefore the four SMIs attributes to the left, which leads to perceived SMI credibility. Whenever consumers perceive SMIs to be credible, they form an attitude towards the SMI and subsequent trust, purchase intent, and willingness to buy increases. Based on our analysis, specific consumer attributes also play a role, and price and age were considered to be strong determinants for online behaviour. Therefore, we have incorporated two new connectors: consumer attitude and consumer attributes. It became evident that pure, and reminder impulse buying never happens as a result of influencer marketing, therefore, only a predisposition of impulse buying behaviour was found. We have thus restructured the conceptual framework to include the findings of this thesis and to visualise the relationship between them (figure 3). It is important to note that one SMIs attribute could result from another, and all attributes are not required in order for SMI credibility. Furthermore, the framework should not be seen as a holistic model. Depending on cultural, social, personal and psychological factors, all connectors may not play a part in the bigger picture.



\*SMI (social media influencer)

Figure 3. Final framework of analysis

## 5 Discussion

*This chapter is dedicated to discussing the underlying key findings of this study. We put our results in an overarching context by critically reflecting on them in relation to the earlier presented literature. Thereby, the main emphasis is to highlight findings that agree with contemporary literature, what is contradictory, and which new insights our study revealed that complement existing theory.*

### 5.1 Social media influencer attributes

This research advances our understanding of how SMIs impact millennials online behaviour. The findings indicate that trustworthy and attractive SMIs that attain expert knowledge in a particular field and maintain personalised content have a strong impact on their perceived credibility, which consequently leads to increased consumer trust, purchase intent and willingness to buy.

Consistent with the source credibility model (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953), trustworthiness was perceived to be an important attribute of SMIs credibility from a millennial perspective. The content of SMIs was also perceived to be an important attribute that increased their level of credibility similar to the findings of previous research (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Forbes, 2016; Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013). To attract and maintain their followers on social media, SMIs create and post compelling, relevant, and informative content on a regular basis, therefore the informative value of the content influences consumers' trust, purchase intent and willingness to buy. Furthermore, the attractiveness of SMIs had a great impact on their perceived credibility and consequent consumer attitude. This finding supports some previous research (Landy & Sigall, 1974; Li, Lee & Lien; Lou & Yuan, 2019) which demonstrates that attractiveness positively affects followers' trust in SMIs branded posts and is among the most common characteristics that can influence the halo effect. This means that one trait of a SMI can have the power to positively influence the overall judgement of their other related traits (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Additionally, the perceived credibility of the SMIs had a strong impact on consumers' consequent attitude which is consistent with the results of previous studies (Chen & Yuan, 2019; Martin, 2015; Jin & Phua, 2014; Zang, Hu & Zhao, 2014). However, contrary to

existing literature, SMIs level of expertise was overall found to be slightly less important for perceived credibility. Though, all attributes were found to be highly valued in millennials decision-making process and online behaviour, although expertise was perceived to be slightly less important for SMI credibility.

## 5.2 Consumer behaviour

It was found that SMIs have the greatest impact in the problem recognition and information search stages of the consumer decision-making process as they create awareness and position the brand in the minds of consumers. However, it also helps in evaluating alternatives and is effective in purchase decisions. An interesting aspect was that both male and female respondents claimed to turn to social media and SMI after already having identified a need. However, as the interviews evolved it became evident that SMIs had on several occasions developed a need among the participants just through looking at their informative and attractive content. Another interesting finding was that millennials seemed to think that they have a personal connection or relationship with certain SMIs. Even though they never met face-to-face, it was evident that they trusted their recommendations and consequently purchased products. Forbes (2016) argues that consumers typically perceive SMIs as role models and therefore identify with them. This could explain why the participants considered SMIs to be friends, as they were often well-informed about their personal lives.

Among the participants, there was a clear preference for micro-influencers, who attain a relatively limited follower count. As micro-influencers had the greatest impact on consumer attitude and purchase intent, trustworthiness represents the most significant SMIs attribute from a Swedish millennial perspective. It can be argued that mega-influencers and celebrities often maintain expertise in certain professions, yet their recommendations do not have a great influence on millennials. This is consistent with the findings of Govindan and Alotaibi (2021) who argue that micro-influencers have established their credibility in a genuine and authentic way when compared to celebrities who have a large number of fan-following from being generally known from the media. This is further consistent with the findings of Data Reportal (2021) which suggest that celebrities and celebrity news was ranked as one of the least important reasons for using social media.

The findings of this study demonstrate that SMIs influence or even change millennials' consumption habits. Some participants would subconsciously interact with product testimonials, search for discount codes, or refer to SMIs recommendations for inspiration. This subconscious behaviour proves that millennials are influenced by SMIs to gain positive emotions. Thus, the recommendations directly and/or indirectly attract consumers' emotional states, needs and desire to resonate. It was found that millennials strongly rely on emotions when making purchase decisions, meaning, they choose products based on their emotional response to the SMIs without necessarily bearing product attributes in mind. This finding supports the notion that millennials generally shop on the sole purpose of improving mood, they are emotional and make decisions at the moment, while they require uniqueness and self-determination of their purchasing power (Junker et al., 2016; Tighe, 2021). Such emotional response is persuasive, strong, and impulsive, which increases the likelihood to purchase impulsively (Burton et al., 2018). Due to the perceived credibility of SMIs, millennials feel thrilled and joyful, and the arousal raised by products and SMIs was found to have a strong impact on their online behaviour. Ultimately, social media makes it easy for millennials to browse, consider, and ultimately spend more, without pressures of external factors.

### 5.3 Consumption habits and impulse buying behaviour

This study found that millennials' consumption habits have both directly and indirectly been affected due to the presence of SMIs. This confirms that SMIs can directly influence millennials' purchase intentions and indirectly induce customers to consume due to the intermediary effect of other attributes. These findings echo previous research that customers are more likely to engage in impulse buying behaviour if customers beliefs are similar to SMIs (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). Compared with impulse buying behaviour in physical stores, social media platforms, and Instagram in particular put millennials in front of various temptations and sensory stimuli more rapidly (Moreno et al., 2017). It was found that several participants had made impulse purchases, either planned or suggested due to the influence of SMIs. This is consistent with the findings of Workman and Studak (2005) who argue that products often are advertised in a way that stimulates consumers' psychological needs. This means that they incite consumers to feel like they need to buy that particular product just because an SMIs has it. Nevertheless, a few participants stated that they never make impulse

purchases due to the recommendations of SMIs. This was primarily due to their age, which meant that they have become more resistant to follow SMIs recommendations and that they are more aware of their financials and therefore thought through their purchases more thoroughly before finalising a purchase. Price was further considered to be one of the most influential factors for online impulse buying behaviour. This finding is supported by Haryanto, Wiyono and Hastjarja (2019) which states that the more consumers perceive the price to be reasonable, the stronger the urge to impulse buy. This finding is further supported by (Karbasivar & Yarahmadi, 2011; Mesiranta, 2009).

This study demonstrated that millennials typically engage in suggested-, and, planned impulse buying behaviour as a result of SMIs. However, pure-, and reminder impulse buying was not found in this study. An important contribution of Stern's model is the categorization of impulse buying behaviour. The model suggests four kinds of impulse buying; however, at the time Stern proposed the model, online shopping was not as popular as it is today. Most of the factors identified were also applied in the context of traditional brick-and-mortar stores (Stern, 1962). However, consumer behaviour and characteristics have developed over the years. This includes change in demographics, spending patterns, and an increase in millennials overall participation in buying decisions (Bilgihan, 2016; Junker, Walcher & Blazek, 2016; Lissitsa & Kol, 2016). Therefore, all categories were not found to be relevant in this study. Planned impulse buying was applicable due to many participants declaring that purchases were completed on the basis of different sales promotions and discount codes. Suggestion impulse buying was also relevant since it was found that millennials buy products on the basis of self-suggestion but without any prior experience. These findings echo previous studies that noted that this demographic is highly comfortable to browse and make purchases online (Riley & Klein, 2021), regardless of being a spontaneous purchase (Loureiro & Breazeale, 2016). However, via influencer marketing, pure and reminder impulse buying did not happen. Therefore, this study reveals that the impulse buying is dependent on the consumer's prior knowledge about the product, intentions when scrolling through social media, their need, exposure to stimuli, emotional appeal, age, and price level.

## 6 Conclusion

*This final chapter will conclude our study and investigate if the intended purpose is fulfilled, and the research questions answered. We will also discuss the theoretical and managerial contributions and reflect upon limitations as well as present suggestions for further research.*

### 6.1 Research purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand what impact SMIs have on consumers' online behaviour. We further aimed to extend and advance the understanding of the interrelationship between SMIs and online impulse buying behaviour. In line with the research purpose, several theories about the influence of SMIs and the consumer buying behaviour have been combined and applied throughout the study to explore the following research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: How does social media influencer impact millennials online behaviour?

RQ 2: What are the main attributes of social media influencers that have an impact on millennials online impulse buying behaviour?

To retrieve the insights needed for our research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-two participants. Key findings reveal that perceived trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, and personalised content are the main attributes of SMIs that have an impact on consumer attitude and consequently purchase intent and willingness to buy. Additionally, the study reveals that there are other factors besides the above mentioned SMIs attributes, that affect the online behaviour of millennials - prior knowledge about the product, intentions when scrolling through social media, need, exposure to stimuli, emotional appeal, age, and price level.

### 6.2 Theoretical contributions

The findings of this study contribute to the existing research on SMIs. While we acknowledge that there is prior research on the connection between SMIs and online



behaviour, we believe this study makes a valuable contribution to the field. It develops a new theoretical framework to interpret how Swedish millennials perceive and experience SMIs and how they impact their online behaviour. By clarifying the role of SMIs on online behaviour, we can understand how influencer marketing affects consumer's purchase intent, and willingness to buy. That is, SMIs influence millennials through the attributes of trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, and personalised content. By sharing their personal narratives, together with having similar attitudes, backgrounds, values and appearance on their social media platforms, millennials perceive SMIs to be credible. Whenever millennials perceive SMIs to be credible, they form an attitude towards the SMI and subsequent trust, purchase intent, and willingness to buy increases.

This theoretical framework expands previous research on SMIs and online behaviour. It integrates SMIs attributes, consumer attitudes, and consumer attributes and provides a bridge for studying influencer marketing through online behaviour. The inclusion of several types of SMI and multiple social media platforms, has also contributed to a more detailed description of how different SMIs and social media platforms impact online behaviour. Significantly, it introduces impulse buying behaviour to influencer marketing and helps accelerate the development of impulse buying theory and influencer marketing.

### 6.3 Managerial contributions

Despite the widespread use of influencer marketing, this study demonstrates that it can still provide a competitive advantage. For the many businesses that are implementing influencer marketing and want to create a powerful strategy across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or TikTok, this research provides valuable implications. Influencer marketing has developed into a fast-growing industry, and it is important to note that different consumer segments will respond differently to the type of SMIs a company chooses to engage with. From a millennial perspective, the success of influencer marketing is aligning brand and influencer personalities. Businesses must also acknowledge that influencer marketing does not automatically mean individuals trust in the quality of the product. Our findings revealed that a large proportion of consumers think that SMIs agree to promote products just because they get paid for it. Therefore, an attractive SMIs is not enough, and the success of the product is primarily up to consumers themselves. For a successful influencer marketing campaign, a

combination of these two factors is therefore important: the quality of a product and a credible SMI that aligns with their audience.

The findings also demonstrated that the promotion of some products through SMIs may be more beneficial than others. For females, beauty, clothing, and interior design was the most popular, and for males, sports related products such as clothes, equipment and shoes were the most popular. Brands focusing in these areas should thus strongly consider leveraging influencer marketing. From a content perspective, informative, compelling, and personalised content was found to have a strong impact on consumer's purchase intention and willingness to buy. Brands that collaborate with credible SMIs that are approachable, authentic and deliver personalised content can thus see an increase in revenue, consumer loyalty, user-generated content, and organic growth. Brands should therefore leverage personalisation and influencer marketing to guide their prospects down the funnel from the information search stage to the purchase decision stage.

Furthermore, we found that fashion and beauty hauls were effective for brand awareness and sales. Therefore, haul videos are proving to be a strong marketing force from a Swedish millennial perspective. Discount codes were further perceived as an encouragement for purchasing products and was explained to be an aspect that gets them intrigued to purchase impulsively. Promotions and discount codes can therefore help marketers prove the effectiveness of their influencer marketing strategies. However, businesses must adhere to the four SMIs attributes: trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, and personalised content when collaborating with SMIs. Swedish millennial's value authentic and genuine SMIs over those having large follower counts, thus choosing SMIs that align with their opinions and values will create long-term financial benefits. For millennials, influencer marketing has in fact become an ultimate recommendation source that they trust immensely and cross-check with before making a purchase decision.

Furthermore, our findings are valuable for the SMIs themselves. SMIs operate their accounts to accumulate followers on various platforms which brings them not only popularity and social influence, but also financial benefits. However, with the rise in disinformation and false advertising online, some respondents declared that they were sceptical towards influencer marketing and SMIs in general. Therefore, SMIs should strengthen their abilities and professional knowledge, as well as using their attractiveness to promote products, and

post positive inspiring content. Adapting their approach to better display that they are authentic, trustworthy, credible, having expertise, and are legitimate and honest might further be advantageous for themselves. Especially from a long-term perspective, when their popularity grows, staying true to these values will be beneficial. SMIs should pay attention to similar characteristics within their audiences, especially when attempting to attract potential customers who share similar attitudes, personal backgrounds, and values.

## 6.4 Limitations and further research

Several inherent limitations exist in this study. First, given the qualitative nature of the study, the findings cannot be generalised. On the one hand, the study's respondents were all Swedish millennials, and future research in other countries and generations is required; on the other hand, the attributes have different effects on different SMIs and customers, so the SMIs and customers could be segmented. Second, the validity of the study is limited by the sampling strategy (purposive) and the small sample size. In addition, the sample was largely made up of women, which biases the analysis and interpretation of results. As a consequence, this investigation can be considered as merely exploratory. Given these limitations, future research should use large, representative samples, using probabilistic sampling methods, to confirm or refute our findings. Future research could further investigate the correlation between the different SMIs attributes and online behaviour.

Furthermore, since impulse buying sometimes occurs subconsciously, the respondents may not fully comprehend their reasoning or desire to engage in this behaviour. We could only analyse from the respondent's verbal and non-verbal communication, and from this determine whether they tend to engage in impulse buying behaviour. Therefore, future research can be extended to fieldwork observations to observe consumers' buying behaviour, thus giving the findings a higher practical value. Furthermore, the research was conducted from the consumer's perspective, hence, the perspective of SMIs or brands are not included. In the future, a more comprehensive analysis can be obtained by understanding SMIs and brands that use influencer marketing. Another interesting finding that creates new areas for future research is how SMIs should develop creative, informative, and compelling content to continue capturing their audiences in the future.

Future research could further examine whether there is a difference in perceptions of influence of SMIs in specific groups, by focusing on factors such as gender or age. Lastly, studying the influence of SMIs on social media platforms that are less popular than the chosen ones in this study could also be of interest to see whether the choice of platform has a clear impact on the consumer decision-making process and online behaviour.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview guide

### **Personal information:**

- Age, gender, working (or) student?
- Brief self-introduction, what is your approximate monthly income?

### **Social media consumption:**

- What is your frequency of social media use? What is your daily usage time?
- What do you typically do on social media? What social media platform(s) do you use and why?
- If you were to choose just one social media platform, which one would it be and why?

### **Social media influencer awareness:**

- How many influencers do you follow?
- What type of influencers do you follow? Why do you follow them?
- When you look at an influencers' account, what information do you pay attention to? Please be specific.
- Do you trust influencers? And why?
- Do you think there are differences in the credibility of different influencers who post the same product/service? And why?
- If you have to select one characteristic that an influencer has to have in order for you to follow/trust/engage with them. What would that be? And why?
- Is attractiveness an attribute that impacts whether or not you follow an influencer? Why or why not?

### **Purchase behaviour:**

- If you see an influencer has a product you want, how long will you typically think about it before you buy it?
- Do you prefer to shop in physical stores or online? Why or why not?
- What type of product(s) would be easier for you to purchase without any closer consideration?

- Have you ever purchased a product just because an influencer has it? Why or why not?
- Have you ever purchased a product on the sole purpose of improving mood?

**Impulse buying behaviour:**

- Can you share one experience when an influencer made you make an impulse buy.
- Do you tend to buy impulsively often? Has impulse buying been carried out? If not, why?
- Please describe in detail your most recent impulse buying experience. Are you satisfied with this product/service after buying it?
- How do you feel when you buy impulsively, any specific emotions/feelings that you can recall?
- Do you think influencer marketing has influenced your consumption habits? Why or why not?
- Do you think influencer marketing increases your likelihood of impulse buying? Why or why not?



## Appendix B: Research participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Duration</b>
A	Female	14/4/2022	26	Working	21 minutes
B	Female	24/4/2022	27	Working/student	31 minutes
C	Male	10/4/2022	27	Working	25 minutes
D	Male	24/4/2022	28	Working/student	28 minutes
E	Female	11/4/2022	28	Working/student	18 minutes
F	Female	13/4/2022	29	Working	37 minutes
G	Male	11/4/2022	29	Working	26 minutes
H	Female	10/4/2022	30	Working	20 minutes
I	Male	15/4/2022	31	Working	25 minutes
J	Female	12/4/2022	31	Working	21 minutes
K	Male	14/4/2022	32	Working	16 minutes
L	Male	15/4/2022	33	Working	18 minutes
M	Female	11/4/2022	34	Working	20 minutes
N	Female	15/4/2022	35	Working	23 minutes
O	Female	15/4/2022	35	Working	28 minutes
P	Female	16/4/2022	35	Working	23 minutes
Q	Female	15/4/2022	36	Working	25 minutes
R	Female	12/4/2022	36	Working	22 minutes
S	Female	13/4/2022	37	Working/student	25 minutes
T	Female	11/4/2022	37	Working	20 minutes
U	Female	19/4/2022	37	Working/student	23 minutes
V	Male	19/4/2022	41	Working	19 minutes

## Appendix C: Background information of research participants

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Work/study</b>	<b>Monthly income range</b>	<b>Personal interest</b>
Female	26 years	Guidance counsellor	-	Friends, movies, and gym
Female	27 years	Marketing (student)	15.000 SEK	Family, friends, padel, beauty, fashion and travelling
Male	27 years	Architect	35.000 SEK	Fitness and friends
Male	28 years	Health care (student)	12.000 SEK	Padel, golf, pc-games, and cooking
Female	28 years	Teacher (student)	-	Family and friends
Male	29 years	Market analyst	30.000 SEK	Family and friends
Female	29 years	Marketing	36.000 SEK	Padel, fitness and friends
Female	30 years	Government	33.000 SEK	Family, swimming, and pottery
Male	31 years	Finance	50.000 SEK	Travel, fitness, padel, family and friends
Female	31 years	Government	29.100 SEK	Family, friends and fashion
Male	32 years	Police officer	36.000 SEK	Travelling, family and friends
Male	33 years	Finance	45.000 SEK	Family, Friends, Travel
Female	34 years	Government	32.000 SEK	Movies, dogs, beauty, and skincare
Female	35 years	Project coordinator	-	Shopping, food, fitness and travelling
Female	35 years	Teacher	34.000 SEK	Family, outdoor activities, and shopping
Female	36 years	Salesman	26.000 SEK	Travel, food, and friends

Female	36 years	Insurance adviser	29.000 SEK	Travel, food, and friends
Female	36 years	Own business	-	Family and social media
Female	37 years	Finance	39.000 SEK	Family and friends
Female	37 years	Government	-	Family, friends, books, sketch, travelling, and food
Female	37 years	Government (student)	32.500 SEK	Family, friends, and gardening
Male	41 years	Government	34.000 SEK	Travelling, family, sport, football, friends, and movies