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How Women's Consumer Identity is Shaped by Social Media and Influencers in the Beauty and Lifestyle Industry?

BUSN39 - Degree Project in Global Marketing

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Abstract

Recently, the growth of social media has become an essential element in consumers' daily lives. The widespread use of social media allows users to experience different kinds of content online and also be exposed to influencers-generated content. Moreover, social media allows influencers and consumers to share their opinions and interact as well as create communities through digital platforms.

This research aims to deepen the understanding of how women's consumer identity is shaped by social media and influencers. As women are academically less explored and a main target to beauty and lifestyle industries they were chosen as the target group for the study. To be more specific, 14 young women between the ages of 18-30 from Nordic countries were chosen.

The study is conducted on three main literature streams which are Consumer Identity, Gender in Consumer Research and Social Media. The study also aims to contribute to these streams of literature.

A qualitative research method was chosen with semi-structured interviews. The theoretical lenses taken to analyse the findings are Butler's Gender Performativity (Butler, 1993), Goffmann's Performativity (Belk, 2013) and Goffmann's theories on 'self' and 'extended self' (Belk, 1988).

The findings of the study illustrate that female consumers tend to shape their identities in three ways which are Body image (Ideal body and Gendered body), Aesthetic inspirations (Self-expression and Aspiration), and Affect and Emotion (Happiness and a Sense of Belonging). The study also underlines the relationship between influencers and their audiences to explore social media engagement. To conclude, the study provides a better understanding of women's identity construction from the perspectives of gender and social media.

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Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	2
1. Introduction.....	5
1.1 Background.....	5
1.1.1 Social Media and Influencers.....	5
1.1.2 Identity Construction and Social Media Usage.....	5
1.1.3 The Role of Beauty Standards.....	6
1.2 Problem Formulation.....	6
1.3 Research Context.....	7
1.4 Research Motivation.....	8
1.5 Aimed Theoretical Contribution.....	9
1.6 Thesis Outline.....	9
2. Review of Previous Literature.....	11
2.1 Consumer Identity.....	11
2.1.1 Life Themes and Life Projects.....	11
2.1.2 Identity in the digital world.....	11
2.1.3 Individual and Collective identity.....	12
2.2 Gender in Consumer Research.....	13
2.2.1 Gender and Advertising.....	13
2.2.2 Feminism.....	13
2.2.3 Gender and Bodies.....	14
2.3 Social Media.....	16
2.4 Identity, Gender and Social Media.....	18
3. Theoretical Underpinning.....	19
3.1 Extended Self.....	19
3.2 Performance.....	20
3.2.1 Goffman's Performativity.....	20
3.2.2 Gender Performativity.....	20
4. Research Methodology.....	22
4.1 Research Approach.....	22
4.2 Qualitative Methods.....	22
4.3 Method of Data Collection.....	23
4.4 Data Analysis Method.....	25
4.5 Ethical Consideration.....	27
4.6 Research Quality.....	27
5. Findings and Data Analysis.....	28
5.1 Body Image.....	29
5.1.1 Body Ideals.....	29
5.1.2 Gendered Body.....	33
5.2 Aesthetic Inspiration.....	36
5.2.1 Self-expression.....	36
5.2.2 Aspiration.....	37
5.3 Affect and Emotion.....	39

5.3.1 Happiness.....	39
5.3.2 Sense of belonging.....	41
6.Discussion.....	43
6.1 Consumer Identity.....	43
6.2 Gender.....	44
6.3 Social Media.....	45
7.Conclusion.....	47
7.1 Theoretical Contribution.....	47
7. 2 Practical Implication.....	48
7.3 Future Research.....	49
7.4 Limitations.....	49
References.....	50
Appendices.....	60
Appendix 1 - Qualitative interview questions.....	60

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Social Media and Influencers

Social media has become a major part of consumers daily life with an increasing number of users in various online platforms, which continuously impacts consumption (Guarda et al., 2021). The rapid growth of social media platforms has significantly expanded consumer connectivity, which contributes to the diversity of preferences and perspectives on products and services (Levy, 2021). In 2024, The United Nations World Population illustrates the data of the world total population is 8.08 billion worldwide while 5.04 billion people out of the overall are actively social media users, which is considered 62.3% of the total population (Kemp, 2024). Gunduz (2017) defines social media as “platforms where all virtual users with internet access can share content, express opinions about a topic and where communication and interaction processes intensely take place without any time or place limitation” (Gunduz, 2017. p.85).

With the social media expansions, there are communication professionals called influencers who pursue continuous conversation and engagement between their audiences and brands (Booth and Matic, 2011). With the popularity of influencer marketing, the number of influencers has increased in the global market size from 1.7 billion U.S. dollars in 2016 to 24 billion U.S. dollars in 2024 (Dencheva, 2024). In recent years, influencer marketing has flourished as a novel approach with the increase of interactions between influencers and followers on social media to build communities through social media (De Veirmen et al., 2017). In social media platforms, influencers utilise images, videos, captions, and other social features as communication forms to connect with their audiences with their identities via online platforms (Khamis et al., 2017). Social media influencers are also known as KOLs which stands for Key Opinion Leaders who share their opinions on brands, products, and services through social media platforms with their specific communities and networking (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Brands recognize that consumer socialisation via online platforms is crucial to implement and combine in marketing strategies, especially in targeting young consumers (Dotson & Hayatt, 2005). The audiences who are also known in social media as followers have a significant role in creating social interactions since they follow influencers and interact to support their social media communities, which could consequently create a social environment between influencers and followers (Fariwa & Wang, 2022).

1.1.2 Identity Construction and Social Media Usage

With the increase in social media usage, consumers tend to construct their identities in certain ways by building identities on social media and consuming online content for personal purposes (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). Particularly, in the context of social media shaping consumers' identity, individuals tend to enhance their performance and lives by mastering the

use of products in the ways from social media influencers' suggestions (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). With social media engagements, consumers are more likely to discover the meanings attached to the products or material objects (Arsel and Bean, 2013). The social connections are formed via online platforms (Gannon and Prothero, 2018). Additionally, individuals develop a sense of being self, learning, growing, and changing from social media usage (Akaka and Schau, 2019, p. 500). Holt (1995) also states that when consumers fully engage with social media, they tend to adopt ways of thinking and acting similarly to the influencers as well as express their personalities while engaging. From how consumers construct their identities and adjust their ways of life, we can see that social media plays a significant role in how consumers shape their identities, particularly via online platforms.

1.1.3 The Role of Beauty Standards

Lately, social media has broadened globally and influenced various industries including the beauty industry, particularly on Western beauty standards and how social media influences appearance and body ideals (Ando et al., 2021). "Feminist consumerism" is utilised in a concept where consumers are related to feminist ideals to disrupt gender norms by empowering women (Johnston and Tylor, 2008). There are some challenges in gender perspectives especially in consumption, social media is considered a space for individuals to share their content and interact to challenge the beauty standard and encourage body positivity with the acceptance of appearance (Rodgers, Meyer, & McCaig, 2020). In social media, consumers' perceptions of beauty and lifestyle have a significant impact on their concerns of appearance and body image. Many social media users post their pictures when they feel good and confident about their appearance (Sari, et al., 2022). The beauty and lifestyle industries have leveraged this phenomenon by promoting certain standards of beauty and ideals as well as influencing female consumers through social media platforms. Thus, in this research, we will study the consumer identities of women shaped by social media influencers in the beauty and lifestyle industry.

1.2 Problem Formulation

With the social media expansion, scholars have explored various dimensions of social media with influencers including the impacts of social media consumption in daily life (Booth and Matic, 2011; Levy, 2021; Guarda et al., 2021), social media interactions (Syrdal and Briggs, 2018; O'Brien, 2011), social media influencers (Booth and Matic, 2011; Veirman et al., 2019), influencers marketing (Arora et al., 2019; Montag and Elhai, 2023), users' motivation on social media (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016; Al-Menayes, 2015).

Within Consumer Identity literature, scholars have researched the social identity theory (Ellemers et al., 2022), the concepts of life themes and life projects (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie, 1979), "me" and "we" identities (Kleine, Kleine and Allen, 1995), consumer's ideal

values (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989), innovative self-presentation strategies (Schau and Gilly, 2003), affiliative identities (Arnould and Price, 2000).

In the field of gender literature the themes explored have been idealised body types (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, and Welsh, 2020; Guerreri & Drenten, 2019) the relationship between identity and body image (Cash, 1990; Goodman, 1996) and the body consumed (Falk, 1994; Askegaard, 2002).

Although previous research has explored social media influencers extensively (Gunduz, 2017; Booth and Matic, 2011) and consumer identity is shaped by social media (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017; Akaka and Schau, 2019, p. 500), particularly women's identity construction literature have received relatively less attention. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how women's consumer identity is shaped by social media and influencers, especially in the beauty and lifestyle industry. The three main literature streams will be presented in the review of the previous literature chapter, which consists of consumer identity, gender, and the relationship between social media and influencers.

1.3 Research Context

Social media has been prominent, especially among the younger generation with a short video-sharing feature that could get people's attention with creative videos and more engagement between users (Shutsko, 2020). Therefore, we will examine the formation of consumer identity that is shaped by social media content and social interactions within the platform. The research will be focused on Nordic countries particularly Sweden and Finland due to the high concentration of active users on social media which will be provided below. The statistic shows that Nordic countries pose over 80% of their population to be active on social media (Dixon, 2024).

This study will be conducted in the beauty and lifestyle industries with the high growth in the industry. The global beauty and personal care market is estimated to reach a revenue of US\$646.20 billion by 2024 with an annual rate of 3.33% (Statista, 2024). According to the same source, a projection of online sales will be 19.2% of total revenue contribution, particularly in the Beauty & Personal Care market by 2024 (Statista, 2024).

In the Nordics, the beauty and personal care industry is projected to be US\$7.46 billion units of revenue by 2024 (Statista, 2024). Sweden is well-known among consumers and markets as a sustainable lifestyle industry with a market size that reached €51.83 million in 2022 and will be projected to achieve €79.04 million by 2027 with an annual growth rate of 9.51% (Statista, 2023). During this time, the value of the lifestyle market in Finland reached US\$17.92 million in 2022 and is projected to reach a market value of US\$29.33 million by 2027 (Statista, 2023). Even though there is an increase in men's grooming products, the majority of target audience is women (Shaw, 2023). Consequently, the study will specifically

focus on young female consumers within the beauty and lifestyle industry, aiming to explore the impact of influencers on consumer identity formation particularly on the beauty and lifestyle industry.

1.4 Research Motivation

Women have been underrepresented particularly in academic research, prompting the motivation of this study to emphasise especially on women's experiences and perspectives on social media influencers phenomena. Moreover, the beauty and lifestyle industry has emerged as a relevant area of study which is given its inherent gender targets towards women and significantly influences women's lives. By examining this phenomenon in depth, we aim to contribute to exploring a better understanding of how women's consumer identities have been shaped by social media and influencers, particularly in the scope of the beauty and lifestyle industry.

The motivation for this research is fulfilled by various related factors. Firstly, the Nordic beauty industry is achieving notable growth with an annual growth rate of 2.46% (Statista, 2024) as well as the market growth of the European cosmetics market (Petruzzi, 2024). Additionally, in the Nordic countries, especially Sweden and Finland, active online users illustrate how Swedish and Finnish people are connected via online platforms and consequently shape their identities via social media platforms (Dixon, 2024). Moreover, research has been conducted in the beauty industry since it has grown worldwide, the results show that the beauty & personal care market is projected to generate US\$646.20bn of revenue by 2024 (Statista Market Insights, 2024). The European cosmetics market has been raised in recent years and is projected to value around 131 billion US\$ in 2026 (Petruzzi, 2024). These stats on market growth motivate us to study and explore more on this industry to be beneficial for related businesses and organisations.

Secondly, an increase in active social media usage particularly within Nordic countries is motivating this research. Strong social media connections are expanding and impactful connections among individuals are formed which potentially influence consumers' identity formation (Dixon, 2024). Over 81.4 percent of active users on social media represent the Finnish population followed by Sweden with active users at 80.1 percent (Dixon, 2024). Moreover, more than 8.5 million users are on social media in Sweden while Finland the number is slightly smaller (Dixon, 2024). This growth represents the opportunities and challenges for businesses and consumers by focusing on a better understanding of consumers' perspectives and behaviours.

The highlights above are the main reasons for the motivation of this research. We would like to seek a better understanding of consumer identity formation by exploring the research gap in the literature review within the beauty and lifestyle industry. By shedding light on this

study, we aim to provide in-depth insights with valuable understandings while focusing on women's empowerment and gender equality in consumer culture.

1.5 Aimed Theoretical Contribution

Through this research, we aim to extend the literature on consumer identity by improving the understanding of women's identities from the lens of social media and influencers. In the research findings three areas of theoretical contributions are taken which are consumer identity, gender, and the consolidation of social media and influencer marketing. Regarding consumer identity, the research aim is to gain a better understanding of how female consumer identities are shaped by social media and influencers, particularly in the beauty and lifestyle industry. Building on the concept of consumer procession their core identities influence personal goals (Belk, 2013). Kozinets et al. (2004) also state that individuals tend to adapt their performance depending on social context and roles. Therefore, this study aims to explore how consumers are influenced and shape their identities through social media influencers by improving the understanding of consumer identity literature.

Moreover, this study contributes to gender literature by uncovering how consumers perform and view gender performativity (Butler, 1993). According to Butler's theory, gender is perceived as an obligatory performance that is normally shaped by social norms (Butler, 1993). By applying this concept of gender performativity, the research aims to understand how female consumers behave and navigate their identities through digital platforms. Thus, this study will examine these opportunities to express gender identities, particularly in the beauty and lifestyle industries to study the complexities of gender performance.

Therefore, the study will contribute to not only the consumer identity literature but also to gender perspectives. We aimed to illuminate the complex dynamics of consumer identity, gender, and social media influencers while offering valuable insights and theoretical contributions that could benefit future research for professionals in marketing, firms, consumers, and society with the purpose of gender equality and women empowerment.

1.6 Thesis Outline

The study focuses on how female consumers shape their identities through social media in Nordic countries, particularly in Sweden and Finland. As identity construction is a complex process, especially taking digital platforms into consideration, a more comprehensive understanding of experiences and perspectives is crucial to develop this field of research. Therefore, the interviews conducted aimed to gain a deeper understanding through the interview topics which were: general perception on social media and influencers, decision-making, feelings and emotions, authenticity, beauty standards, identity impacts and gender perspectives to gather in-depth information based on women's experiences and to

manage time optimization as much as possible. Young women are considered the main target of the study as they are considered a core audience to the beauty and lifestyle industry (Shaw, 2023). The research is conducted with participants who are between 18 - 30 years old and living in Nordic countries. In the findings and analysis section, the research findings are presented along with a theoretical interpretation on how social media and influencers shape women's consumer identity.

The research on exploring consumer identity constructions from social media and influencers will delve into the dimension of identity formation through a comprehensive examination of both individual and collective perspectives as well as gender identity. The theoretical frameworks such as impression management, core self, and gender performativity are applied to analyse consumer perceptions and engagement on social media platforms. There are three main literature streams that we focus on which are Consumer Identity, Gender, and Social Media & Influencers, which will allow us to understand consumers particularly women with various perspectives on identity formation. To uncover consumer insights, interviews, and thematic exploration are research methods that assist researchers in gaining deeper insights into the complexity of consumer identity formation. Qualitative coding with a thematic method will enhance our thesis to be more credible with data coding processes.

By shedding light on this study, the three main literature streams will be presented: consumer identity, gender, and social media with influencers. This will be followed by the theoretical underpinning session which involves the concepts of the Extended Self (Belk, 1988), Impression Management (Goffman, 1959), and Gender Performativity (Butler, 1993). Consequently, this thesis will summarise the findings and discussions while introducing the new framework of women's identity construction to explore and enhance the understanding of consumer identity formation particularly through digital platforms.

2. Review of Previous Literature

2.1 Consumer Identity

2.1.1 Life Themes and Life Projects

Earlier research has studied identity through the concepts of life themes and life projects. Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979) defined the term life theme which stands for existential concerns that an individual addresses consciously or unconsciously in daily life. Furthermore, human experience and behaviour are seen as motivated and anticipatory rather than reactive. Life themes are moulded by sociocultural background and transformational experiences, for instance, financial background and relationships in one's family, traumatic events in early childhood, and educational background (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

An individual's literature interpretation is deeply connected with life (identity) themes, formed of sense-making tendencies, fantasies, and defence mechanisms (Holland, 1973, 1985-1986). Life themes not only enable but also define reading experiences, making text meaning less about the text and more about the reader (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

On the contrary to life themes, life projects are in constant fluidity. McCracken (1987) described life projects as personal development, refinement, and discarding specific concepts. Life projects are not only concerning meanings related to self but also extended self (Beld 1988) such as private self, family, career, community, and nationality (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

2.1.2 Identity in the digital world

Schau and Gilly define consumption as a self-defining and self-expressive behaviour. Consumers often select products and brands that are self-relevant and convey a given identity. Moreover, consumption serves the consumer to construct a desired self through the images and styles granted through one's belongings. By associating oneself with material objects and places consumers can make their identities tangible. Furthermore, in the age of technology, computer-mediated environments (CMEs) have emerged, making virtual worlds willingly or forcibly part of consumers' daily lives. CMEs create an opportunity for consumers to present themselves through digital references (Schau and Gilly, 2003). As in this study women's identity formation is explored through social media CMEs are seen as an important factor for identity formation.

Nowadays, only limited by creativity and digital access, consumers may create multiple identities in the digital environment. These digital selves may but do not need to relate to each other or the consumer's identity in real life. Furthermore, this allows consumers access to new and innovative self-presentation strategies (Schau and Gilly, 2003).

2.1.3 Individual and Collective identity

When discussing identity, Kleine, Kleine and Allen (1995) point out that there is a tension between how a person defines themselves as an individual versus how they connect to others and social groups. Furthermore, they define individual identity to describe “me” and affiliative identity to establish “we”. Consumers utilise signs and symbols to express both “me” and “we” identities, for instance, wearing unique vintage or second-hand clothing could enhance the individual identity. On the contrary, wearing merchandise to support a sports club reflects the desired affiliative identity. Arnould and Price (2000, p.140) explained me/individual and we/affiliative identities to be the “two primary drivers of consumer behavior”. According to Schau and Gilly (2003), it can be assumed such drivers will also affect communications on personal websites (Schau and Gilly 2003).

Continuously, Wiley (1994) explained identities as representatives of two kinds of values: operating or ideal. He described operating values as those that are practised by a given person or social group. Moreover, these values are seen in everyday behaviour, for instance, wearing a watch and being on time for appointments or having a mobile phone with you and texting or phoning to arrange social engagements. Alternatively, ideal values are those for which a person or a social group aspires to have but in reality may not be maintained in everyday life. For example, ideal values include consumers who engage in religion (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989) or take part in fantasy-based consumption communities (Kozinets, 1997). Nevertheless, Schau and Gilly assume that consumer’s ideal values are likely to be expressed more clearly in personal web space rather than in real life (Schau and Gilly 2003).

Through the research conducted on identity, less academic research could be found on the construction of identity within newer social media platforms such as Tiktok. Moreover, the participation in online communities through social media platforms and the effect it has on a consumer’s identity have been less explored.

2.2 Gender in Consumer Research

In the contemporary world, gendered challenges can be found not only in society but also in various marketing activities. The relationship between marketing, gender, and feminism remains an area of significance in consumer research in the 21st century (Dobscha & Ostberg, 2021).

2.2.1 Gender and Advertising

In the study conducted in 2008 Nassif and Gunter found that in UK advertising, women would appear more often in domestic roles and environments and less often in leisure or occupational roles and settings. Moreover, women were way more often promoting body care along with household cleaning products compared to men. Furthermore, Buysse and Ebser-Herbert found in their study in 2004 differences in the advertising media in the field of sports. Gender differentiation between male and female athletes was visible as women were less likely to be shown as active participants in sports and more likely to be portrayed as passive and in traditionally feminine poses (Bettany, Dobscha, and O'Malley, 2010).

To continue, the advertisements in the medical field researched by Curry and O'Brian (2006) seemed to follow the Victorian discourse where the female body needed control. Further, depression has been linked as a female disorder with the promotion of antidepressants and mood-enhancing prescription drugs enhancing that ideology. Luke (1997) points out that advertisements of products related to menstruation and other natural bodily functions tend to highlight the public duty to hide them (Bettany, Dobscha, and O'Malley, 2010).

2.2.2 Feminism

When exploring feminism in relation to marketing it is important to start by defining the historically relevant four waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism began in the 1850s and at that time marketing was viewed as a positive and assisting force for the campaigns and publicity of the movement (Scott, 2005). For instance, Suffragettes who were leading the feminist movement frequently organised gatherings in department stores and acknowledged these stores as women's worlds (McBride, 1978) where it was socially acceptable for Victorian women to meet and socialise without the presence of a man (Maclaran, 2015).

The second wave of feminism took place in the 1960s-1980s when critiques of the patriarchal market and its manipulateness towards women's bodies emerged. Moreover, as women were mainly portrayed in marketing taking stereotypical domestic roles such as wives and mothers, the second wave of feminism started to introduce more sophisticated representations of women's empowerment (Maclaran, 2015).

In the 1990s the third wave of feminism changed the movement once again. Led by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) the recognition of intersectional feminism and the complex relations between race, gender, class ability, and ethnicity shaped a renewed ideology. The third wave of feminism foreshadowed identity politics and binary understanding of men and women. Butler's theory of gender performativity, which will be later discussed in detail, aimed to gain an understanding of the relationship between discourse and the materiality of the body and fluidity of gender and sexuality (Maclaran, 2015).

Furthermore, during the same period, capitalism disguised as postmodern marketing paved the way for many new market opportunities through the exploration of identities. The marketplace started selling identities through consumption such as female empowerment alongside lifestyles surrounding masculinity and femininity. Later on, postfeminism became a part of popular culture (Munford & Waters, 2014) with the collateral idea that women had all the same choices available as men, pushing issues of inequality as a distant past (Maclaran, 2015).

Fourth and the most recent wave of feminism takes place among young activists online. Much like the second wave, the fourth wave seeks change in the field of politics, and social and economic structures. What sets the fourth wave of feminism apart from the previous ones is the power of the internet and social media. Popular forms of expression are different blogs, campaigns, and websites which have become a major force in challenging gender inequality. Furthermore, corporations have also made changes after being affected by feminist campaigns online, such as Facebook being forced to shut down offensive pages due to the impact of the #FBrape campaign. Moreover, brands associated with advertisements on the offensive Facebook pages were also affected (Maclaran, 2015).

2.2.3 Gender and Bodies

Maclaran points out that marketers and media do have responsibility over commoditized identities along with stereotyping women. However, she states that marketers can also facilitate recognition for previously marginalised groups and the expanded recognition may result in the disruption of granted gender norms (Maclaran, 2015).

In Ferguson, Brace-Govan, and Welsh (2020) *Complex Contradictions in a Contemporary Idealised Feminine Body project* the contemporary version of the idealised female body is examined in a critical light. Furthermore, the contemporary idealised female body is very athletic but also skinny and curvy at the same time. Ferguson describes the characteristics as toned abdominals, thin waistline, well-rounded buttocks, and very low body fat as one would see in big celebrities like Kim Kardashian or Beyoncé (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, and Welsh, 2020). Moreover, the study acknowledges the impact of social media on making this specific body type important in the lives of today's society. Karlyn (2010, p.7) states that "popular culture infuses the world in which today's young women live."

Social media plays a drastic role in the idealisation of certain body types. Ferguson introduces the visual nature of Instagram along with its influencers and how this creates a bridge between the marketplace and aspirational body images. The impact of the internet and social media is constantly growing among young consumers, with it becoming the most dominant source of inspiration, learning, and information (Guerreri & Drenten, 2019, p.101). Guerreri and Drenten also introduce the use of different hashtags on social media which promote different lifestyles, often called “aesthetics” among younger generations active online. Moreover, the researchers describe the phenomenon “Fitspiration” also known as “Fitspo” which allegedly promotes healthy and active lifestyles (Guerreri & Drenten, 2019, p.107). The hashtag #fitspo on Instagram presents images and videos of thin and athletic women superimposed with motivational quotes such as “never give up” or “strong is the new skinny”, colonising the “athletic ideal” as an empowered choice and an inspiration to live a healthy life and exercise regularly (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, and Welsh, 2020).

On the contrary, Gurrieri and Drenten mention that “fitspo” emerged as a response to another social media-based phenomenon or aesthetic known as #thinspiration or thinspo which can be classified as a pro-eating disorder online community. However, despite the seemingly promoted health and fitness on the #fitspo movement claims to be better than the #thinspo movement, the athletic ideal requires very low body fat, usually below 20%, which makes the body shape extremely problematic for women to maintain for any length of time (Carrotte et al, 2017).

Furthermore, the hashtagable group identities on social media such as the ones formed around a specific body type and the lifestyle around it create consumer group identities (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, Welsh, 2020). Gurrieri and Drenten state that a research gap between the relationship between gendered body image expectations and social networks has surfaced along with the emerging context of social media is underexplored (Guerreri & Drenten, 2019, p.107). The growing importance of contemporary consumer marketplace interactions should be explored further with the mediating role of social media influencers and the developing experiences consumers have with them in everyday life. The phenomena should also be explored further from the viewpoint of how these marketplace resources that play a huge part in social media support gender-specific body ideals (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, Martin, 2018).

When researching the relationship between identity and body image Cash (1990) points out self-images are highly malleable and socially conditioned. In addition, he states that it has been demonstrated that attractiveness enhances social roles along with self-estimation. Moreover, he also enhances the cultural dimensions that play into self-estimation (Cash, 1990). The Western culture enhances the concentration on an individual's body and especially its flaws. (Pruzinsky and Edgerton, 1990). Moreover, the cultural and social construction of body images has also been highly influenced by the mass media-promoted representations of beauty especially regarding the feminine self-imagery (Goodman, 1996).

To dive deeper into the gendered body literature, postmodern body images were found to be linked to ideas about sexuality and fantasies of romanticism which both are key features in modern marketing (Brown, Doherty & Clarke, 1998). Using marketing aspects in physical appearance as an advantage in social relationships portrayed the idea of a marketed self (Askegaard, 2002). In contemporary identity formation, the marketed self suggests that possessions could be a part of an extended self. Moreover, a loss of these possessions, such as youth, a certain body type, and attaining a beauty standard, would lead to a loss of selfhood (Askegaard, 2002). In other words, rather than the self extended to possessions, the contemporary body image is formed by possessions extended to the self, the body functions as a means of expression. Additionally, this projects to increased use of the symbolic consumption of bodily appearances. The consuming body of Falk (1994) becomes the body consumed.

2.3 Social Media

The final literature stream is the relationship between social media and influencers has been framed to uncover the relationship between consumer identity formation and social media with influencers. The literature streams have explored how consumers form their identity as individuals with different interpretations of objects and situations, as well as the role of gender to shape consumer preference and consumption. Subsequently, this academic research gains more attention, particularly in the background of consumer identity and gender perspectives. Therefore, this part of the literature stream will be focused on the interrelated themes of social media phenomena, influencers approach, and the emerging interaction between influencers and their audiences.

The power of connection via online platforms has become a major part of consumers since social media has been rapidly developed to be more advanced in order to provide new kinds of features to create different preferences and allow users to exchange opinions (Levy, 2021). The increase of social media users have impacted on consumption in consumer's daily life (Guarda et al., 2021). In recent years, social media contents have become more varied due to the internet expanding to individuals with the goals to make other users "liking" and "sharing" their content on social media platforms (Syrdal and Briggs, 2018). Moreover, not only the brands that can publish the content as they planned on marketing strategies, but also consumers can not generate their own content which is called UGC or User Generated Content (O'Brien, 2011). According to the earlier source, this form of content is typically produced by users who are not businesses that professionally are related to the social media platforms in creating content as a brand communication (O'Brien, 2011).

With social media proliferation, influencers are acknowledged professionals who are able to convince other social media users with continuous conversation and engagement among their audiences or followers (Booth and Matic, 2011). Influencer marketing attracts businesses to include social media influencers as another marketing communication tool with more creative

marketing strategy to promote their brands with a wider audience of their followers (Veirman et al., 2019). In terms of users' motivation on social media, gaining knowledge, enjoyment, and social interaction are the primary reasons why social media users start following other users on online platforms (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). As social media influencers drive more adoration among online consumers, the quality of posts, use of aesthetic elements on images and active participation could cohesively contribute to the popularity of influencer marketing (Arora et al., 2019). By emphasising on the influencers' characteristics, content, social interaction with followers, the influencer community is considered as an important part of audiences who exchange experiences, attitudes, messages and recommendations on products that followers are interested in.

Social media platforms aim to persuade users to stay in an immersive online environment by spending as much time as possible, so they can observe users' digital footprints (Montag and Elhai, 2023). According to the same source, the design elements on social media have a high impact on the psyche and behaviour of users by ordering like and interactive buttons to an endless scrolling platform (Montag and Elhai, 2023). Social media is a place for people to create creative content through short videos up to one minute allowing consumers to experience creativity and self-expression, which potentially impact on consumption and preferences accordingly (Guarda et al., 2021). Additionally, social media algorithms also impact on users responses in various ways, the For You Page algorithm on TikTok has a connection between socialisation and individual's preferences in order to serve the relatable content to the audiences accordingly depending on their personal identity (Karizat et., 2021).

The relationship of social media marketing and influencers allows us to examine how influencer marketing shapes the consumer identity. On social media, there are reflections in different dimensions in regards to one's position in virtual as well as physical life, in the social and individual setting identity (Gunduz, 2017) Individuals can describe themselves as a self conception of community and group members due to their social self from the social identity theory (Ellemers et al., 2022). Since individuals are likely to participate in various social groups, they might be able to form their multiple identities in their communities, which are the reasons why people tend to be in the group rather than being outside of the group (Markus and Wurf, 1987).

In conclusion, despite the wide uses of influencer marketing and consumer identity, the literature still lacks in-depth aspects in the formation of women's consumer identity; therefore, this research endeavour aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of how consumer identity has been shaped by social media and influencers. Influencers have been popular recently in customer's attention with creative content and their opinions on products especially in the beauty and lifestyle industry, making them an interesting subject to study. Accordingly, this study has shed light on how consumers shape their identity through the consumption of social media and influencers in the beauty and lifestyle industry by exploring particularly on women perspectives.

2.4 Identity, Gender and Social Media

Hirschman and Stern (2000) conducted a study on how cultural representations influence gender identities mainly focusing on the portrayal of women in the past 50 years on television. Moreover, postmodern image culture, scenes, and stories structure an individual's identity. The imagery, nowadays also videos online, projects role and gender models, appropriate and inappropriate forms of behaviour, style, and fashion, and enhances collective understanding of what subjects individuals should identify with and what to avoid (Kellner, 1991, p.177). Postmodern theorists claim that women are subjected to choose their identities from the variety of female images available at the time, constructing their identity on the pool of female representations (Culler, 1982; Derrida, 1974). Furthermore, the collection of images women must use to choose their identities to build on is bound and limited to the culturally available selection of a given point in time. In addition, not only women's identities but also their goals, desires, and motives are directed by the representations available during a certain historical period (Hirschman & Stern, 2000).

The intersection of the three literature streams: Consumer Identity, Gender and Social Media makes the conduction of this study important in today's society, since it has been less explored. Findings and contributions within the intersection will enhance the knowledge on the contemporary understanding of each field of research but gains even more value when the three of them are combined.

3. Theoretical Underpinning

3.1 Extended Self

Applying the knowledge concept of the identity is crucial in various fields including sociological aspects of the phenomenon. The identity concept is associated with a subjective context, in which “sameness” is playing a major part in an individual (Erikson, 1968, p.19). Symbolic interactionism is presented as a sociological aspect of identity by providing various lenses of identity perspectives. According to Goffman (1959), the core idea of symbolic interactionism is focused on identity as a performance, in which humans try to engage their interaction between each other by having “impression management” in order to shape individual identities depending on their social context that they are being in. The situations, lived experience, and individual roles in the society have impacts on individual identity as well. As the perspectives are highlighted on the contextual and sociological constructors as the nature of identity. Moreover, the individuals tend to actively adjust and reshape their identities via interactions, behaviours and actions with other people in different contexts of society. Therefore, by applying the concept of identity could explain more aspects of how consumers react to TikTok influencers phenomena.

The metaphor of “core self” is drawing the attention to support this research to explain how an individual's personality is constructed with their aims and resources in order to be coherent in daily lives. Since the study is to examine the interrelation between influencer marketing and consumer identity, focusing on “self” and “extended self” could expand the knowledge in possession and consumable objects (Belk, 1988). In the other words, people try to explore other personalities in more than just one dimension to adopt and be a part of a community. Additionally, Belk (1988) also states that the “self” coherence is applied to consumer context when consumers are associated with others while actively engaging and culturally selecting from an established alternative; for instance, authenticity, femininity, masculinity, and cosmopolitanism.

The perception of authenticity is associated with the sense of being “real” and “genuine” exposure by connecting with the self, membership, practices, objects, and brands (Beverland and Farrell, 2010). Being authentic is crucial for consumers with the percé of “true self” and “authenticating acts” which are engaged with consumer sensation in “true self” (Arnould and Price, 2000). Therefore, since the sensation of being real is essential for both consumer and brands, the scope of knowledge in authenticity should be focused to study on how consumer perception is impacted by social media content that could explain the authenticity in various ways of self expression. Belk (1988) mentions that consumers are aware and could integrate possessions in order to extend their “self” by controlling, creating, and knowing the diversity of meanings in their daily lives. After applying and adapting to extended self, the concept of “new self” has been developed to be their goals in life (Belk et al., 2003). Life elements are heightened the consumption of daily life and their identity construction (Mick and Buhl, 1992).

3.2 Performance

3.2.1 Goffman's Performativity

Consumers are assumed to possess a core identity that determines their inner identity goals that they pursue (Belk, 2013). Individuals attain different social roles as they live and perform in various contexts and their success in achieving their identity goals relies on their performance self-monitoring adaptations and the reaction of others in their social setting (Kozinets et al., 2004). Material goods also play a part in the performance and enhance the credibility to both the individual and the collective (Belk 2013). CCT has addressed that interactions between consumers and service providers, called marketplace performances, enable consumers to engage in creative models of self-expression and expansion of their social circle, especially online (Arnould and Price, 2000). These interactions also let consumers incorporate cultural meanings along with historical ideals into their performed identity (Chronis et al 2012).

The theory of a consumer as a performer, as an example Harley-riding weekend warrior who is an office-bound accountant turned into a Harley-driving rebel during the weekend, performing his desired identity through consumption but returning back to his weekly identity in the office on Monday (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Another example could be a nursing student turning into a gender-bending Vampire Goth at the Whitby Goth festival. (Goulding and Saren, 2009). CCT researchers have gathered that such market-mediated social performances can become so well-rehearsed or even fully internalised that they incorporate themselves into the consumer's core selves (Celsi et al, 1993).

3.2.2 Gender Performativity

Butler's Gender Performativity Theory outlines the way in which gender is produced and regulated in a system of structural relations (Butler, 1998).

"Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in a sense that it constitutes as an effect of the very subject it appears to express. It is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions" (Butler, 1993, p. 313-15).

Furthermore, Butler explains gender performativity to begin from the first social initiation of a child into a heteronormative matrix. From the moment a doctor pronounces "it's a girl!" the child is shifted from an "it" to a "she". The child is therefore "girled" and brought into the society through the interpretation of gender, starting right there in the language. Nevertheless, the girl continues through various authorities to reinforce the label. Femininity, according to Butler, is not a product of choice but a forced citation of a societal norm which is historically related to discipline, regulation and punishment (Butler, 1993, p. 235).

Gender discourses culturally and institutionally cage bodies in gender norms, social classifications and expectations and taboos. Further, the gendered body becomes a key in power relations that construct gender distinctions and heteronormative binaries. Butler describes this as the exteriorization of gender performativity which is the heteronormative system of communication, rules, institutional practices and cultural categories (Thompson, Ustuner, 2015).

Gender discourses also become materially constructed in bodies through behavioural tendencies, emotional predispositions and social schemas. As dominant cultural norms are continually repeated they became the habitus. Due to these embodied tendencies, a man or a woman will often act to their habituated gender patterns even in social contexts where the over-socialized norms are not being strictly enforced. For instance, a reserved and self-possessed man who shies away from the expressiveness of a dance floor (Thompson, Ustuner, 2015).

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Approach

A general inductive approach is taken to explore insights and complexity of this study by coding the raw data from ground up (Thomas, 2006). The assumptions are described and detailed with qualitative data analysis for the purpose of (1) condensing the data into a summary format; (2) establishing connections between research findings from the raw data and (3) creating a structured framework of data processes (Thomas, 2006). A general inductive approach provides a convenient approach of analysing qualitative data than other traditional approaches for various research advantages. Firstly, Thomas states that the inductive approach in qualitative research is considered as trustworthy of findings by minimising biases to enhance the credibility of this study (Thomas, 2006). Consequently, researchers are able to gain the contextual and deep insights by emerging the patterns from raw data collection to understand the phenomenon in depth; therefore, we could capture the complexity of consumer experiences in order to provide rich insights for this study (Azungah, 2018). According to the same source, the inductive research allows us to adjust the patterns and themes emerging from the raw data (Azungah, 2018). Lastly, the systematic structure of data coding would allow researchers to explore the similarities and differences between each sub-groups (Elliott & Gillie, 1998, p. 331). With the numerous benefits of an inductive approach for qualitative methodology, researchers can foster right insights directly from empirical data in order to build up new theories by uncovering the complexity of human insights and experiences (Elliott & Gillie, 1998, p. 331). In essence, the inductive approach is not only an effective tool for qualitative data analysis methods but also makes sure that the voices and thoughts of respondents are delivered at the primary of these research findings. Consequently, the inductive approach is effective and well suited with this thesis to capture the complex insights of consumer identity formation.

4.2 Qualitative Methods

According to Kahlke (2014), a qualitative research method is applied to gather the non numerical data in order to understand insightful opinions and experiences of consumers. This method is used to uncover the motivations and underlying reason with the deep understanding of how consumers view their identities and meanings that are related to them. Furthermore, a qualitative research method is reasonable to focus on this study due to the flexible structures with interpretation (Kahlke, 2014). Qualitative methods provide us with various advantages of research explorations including deeply understanding the context of participants' experiences, motivation, and opinions on the social media phenomena (Kahlke, 2014). Additionally, since the qualitative method focuses on non numerical data, the tone of voice, facial expression, and emotions are observed during the data collection processes, which means that the participants' expressions are involved and prioritised to the research findings (Kahlke, 2014). Consequently, we will receive rich and detailed descriptions since these narratives from participants' experiences are powerful for qualitative research findings. Even though the qualitative research method allows us to gain consumers' insights on this phenomena; however, there are some limitations on qualitative research methods such as the volume of data analysis and interpretation time consuming (Anderson, 2010). Since the qualitative method emphasises on human experiences and perspectives, this could require

lengthy processes of data collection and analysis due to the intensive data source. Additionally, the complexity of data analysis could be challenging since we have to explore and capture participants' detailed narratives, which the lack structured method of data collection could make it difficult when drawing a conclusion (Anderson, 2010). Even though there are some limitations, we addressed challenges and applied suitable strategies to improve the reliability and credibility by developing the structured data collection and focusing on a main data source to maximise the time efficiency.

There are various types of qualitative research methods including interviews, focus groups, observations and all come with their own benefits and challenges (Moriarty, 2011). With the interviewing method, in-depth exploration of participants' experiences can be gained; however, a concern for this method is the fact that it's time consuming (Anderson, 2010). On the other hand, focus groups allow the researchers to gain rich data through groups of participants within a short period of time, but the group analysis could be challenging due to the groups' dynamics and interactions (Moriarty, 2011). Lastly, observations are also effective for a qualitative research method to study participants' interactions and behaviours in a given context of environments; however, this method of data collection could be difficult since participants' behaviours might change when knowing that they are observed (Adair, 1984). These qualitative methods are leveraged for specific research purposes while offering unique insights and distinct challenges.

4.3 Method of Data Collection

For this study the interview method was selected as the preferred form of data collection to explore consumer identity formation that is shaped by social media and influencers. The interviews are constructed in a semi-structured format; therefore, we could ask open-ended questions from the participants by allowing them to share their experiences and perspectives in detail (Tenny et al., 2022). According to the same source, having the semi-structured questions allows the researchers to adjust the questions regarding the interviewee's responses in order to achieve details in all aspects of their experiences (Tenny et al., 2022). This technique is appropriate to gain insights from interviewees for sensitive topics with an in depth explanation (Adair, 1984). With the open-ended questions, participants answer the questions with detailed narratives while interviewers could observe the non-verbal cues and tone of voice (Adair, 1984). Even though there are various advantages of interviews particularly with semi-structured questions, interviews are also facing some limitations in the process of data collection methods.

Since the interviews were conducted one on one with open ended questions, subjective interpretation could be one of the limitations from conducting interviews because of the interviewer's tones of voice, demeanour, and non-verbal cues (Opdenakker, 2006). Moreover, conducting interviews might consume time and resources that is the reason why time consuming could be one of the disadvantages from interviewing (Opdenakker, 2006). The interview will be conducted by utilising semi-structured interviews in order to explore the complex connections between social media and consumers' identity formation. The semi-unstructured interviews will allow the researchers to acquire and understand the consumers' perspectives with flexibility, open-ended questions, and the balance between structure and flexibility (Omolola, 2021). With the benefits and limitations, we would like to conduct the interviews with the semi-unstructured interview via Zoom platform to be more

convenient in terms of time and travelling as well as reduce interfering environments.

The theme of interview questions will be divided by five main sections which are perception on social media and influencer marketing, online engagement, identity formation, gender perspectives, and storytelling to gather information in depth and based on human experiences in order to manage time optimization as much as possible. The research questions will be conducted with the structure of open-ended interviews with participants in order to gain the customer insights of their perceptions toward social media influence, particularly in the beauty and cosmetic industry. The types of questions will emphasise on emotional and sociological aspects of participants. Moreover, storytelling is another significant part of the interview sessions since it aims to gain a deeper understanding of the individual's experiences and feelings when interacting online.

The interview questions are designed to explore and capture the consumers' perspectives on social media, influencers, gender and consumer identity especially in beauty and lifestyle industries. The participants were asked about the recalled videos on social media that are relatable and interesting to them particularly beauty content and provided insights on content consumption. The questions also delve into the celebrities and influencers' content in shaping consumer identity that participants have watched and share some opinions openly. Additionally, the interviewers investigated participants' motivations and reasons for unfollowing and disengaging from social media influencers whether they experienced a change in their personal personal value or the influencers content. Lastly, participants were allowed to share their stories and experiences on misrepresentation on influencer marketing relating to their gender identity as well as the feelings about their own gender perspectives. These questions mainly explore the complexity of consumers' identity formation that influence in the realm of social media and influencers.

For the flow of the discussion guide, we initially commenced with casual conversation to allow participants to feel relaxed and comfortable to dive into the main discussion. Following, the interviews transit the discussion to gather the information about participants' social media interactions and opinion on social media in general. The main purpose of the sessions is to understand the interviewee's behaviours on social media and engagements with influencers. Finally, the conversation moved into story sharing sessions by allowing participants to provide detailed narratives relating to the formation of their identities and genders. With personal insights, we seeked to understand how social media and influencers have shaped consumer identity regarding these perspectives of their lives.

For the target group of interviewees, since the motivation of this study is to explore the knowledge in the fields of identity formation from influencer marketing within Nordic countries particularly in beauty and lifestyle industries due to the high growth of demand and market share that has been increased year on year (Statista, 2024). Additionally, female audiences especially the younger generation who are considered as a core audience of the beauty and lifestyle industry (Shaw, 2023). Therefore, the research will be conducted with audiences who are female and aged between 18 - 30 years old living in Nordic countries for geographic data collection. The aim of this research is to present how consumer identity is shaped by social media and influencers shape the formation of consumer identity. The participants' information is detailed in Figure 1 below with confidentiality ensured of all participants.

Figure 1: Interviewee demographics

	Code Name	Gender	Age	Country	Occupation	Discipline	Date
1	Rosalia	Female	21	Finland	Student	Business	26.2.2024
2	Katarina	Female	24	Denmark	Student	Marketing	29.2.2024
3	Isabel	Female	27	Sweden	Student	Marketing	26.2.2024
4	Cassandra	Female	25	Finland	Working	Tourism	2.4.2024
5	Aleksandra	Female	30	Sweden	Student	Marketing	5.4.2024
6	Aurora	Female	20	Sweden	Student	Law	5.4.2024
7	Moona	Female	18	Finland	Working	Waitress	18.4.2024
8	Elsa	Female	27	Finland	Student	Marketing	21.4.2024
9	Alison	Female	24	Finland	Student	English	22.4.2024
10	Fiona	Female	22	Finland	Student	Political Science	22.4.2024
11	Flora	Female	24	Finland	Student	Economics	22.4.2024
12	Sabrina	Female	26	Finland	Working	Hospitality	24.4.2024
13	Diana	Female	20	Sweden	Student	Political Science	8.5.2024
14	Helmi	Female	26	Finland	Student	Law	9.5.2024

4.4 Data Analysis Method

In this study, the qualitative data coding is utilised to conduct and gather the information by interviewing, recoding, transforming to transcripts, and analysing through the theoretical lens of Goffman (1959), Belk (1988) and Butler (1993). Qualitative coding is used to organise the information systematically with different layers of themes which consist of first-order stage, second-order stage, and Aggregate (Saldana, 2009). The exploration of how female consumer identities are shaped by social media and influencers, the study will employ analytical work with three main activities which are sorting, reducing, and arguing (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). To explain, after collecting numerous information from the interviews, the details that are irrelevant should be organised by eliminating in order to categorise and

construct arguments based on the data. Spiggle (1994) states that the two fundamental activities of qualitative research are analysis and interpretation. For the analysis part, the information should be categorised, compared, integrated, and represented in various dimensions while interpretation is to identify the patterns of different meanings and present how they are related to each other (Spiggle, 1994).

To analyse the consumer insights from the interviews, qualitative coding used as the method for this research, which is the technique to systematically organise the data by identifying themes and patterns (Saldana, 2009). According to the same source, qualitative coding will allow the researchers to transform the semi-structured interview data from the transcripts into organised patterns for analysis (Saldana, 2009). This approach will enhance the study to uncover consumer insights more accurately and transparently by coding our qualitative data from interview transcript as row data excerpts and organised themes to analyse further.

There are several advantages of qualitative coding in the research process to analyse data with the validity of analysis, transparent data, and bias reduction with presentation of structured data (Saldana, 2009). This method will ensure that diversity of perspectives from respondents will be reflected and analysed within the samples which enable other researchers to examine the analysis process more transparently and systematically. On the other hand, complexity of analysis could be considered a disadvantage of qualitative coding since this method requires other researchers to synchronise the information (Ribeiro et al., 2016). Additionally, a time-intensive process is potentially to be a challenge because large datasets will be managed to make sense of the data; therefore, researchers should dedicate efforts and time to code and analyse data which could delay the process of analysing. Even though there are some benefits and limitations, qualitative coding would enhance the study to be more credible and transparent with structured data analysis.

In the research, audio recordings are utilised as the primary activity in data collecting methods. By using the audio recording method, we could conduct the in-depth interviews while capturing rich information with tones and emotion in order to enhance accuracy, analysis, and engagement with the respondents (Berazneva, 2014). After gathering the rich data from audio recordings in interview content, a comprehensive transcript is crucial for analysing and making sense of data effectively. There are various methods to create transcripts, which Verbatim transcription is used in our study to capture all details in every word to gain rich data with high validity and accuracy (Medium, 2018). By transforming the audio files into text transcripts, Rev Ai is a program to transform media files by utilising artificial intelligence to create accurate speech recognitions (Rev.ai. (n.d.)). Therefore, we apply the human transcription tool to transform and generate the highest level of accuracy in creating transcripts with English language in order to reduce word error and bias in genders or ethnic accents (Rev.ai., n.d.).

After conducting the interviews, the data across all respondents was analysed through the lens of Goffman (1959) to understand the identity formation processes with “impression management”. Additionally, the knowledge of possession and consumable objects by

focusing on “self” and “extended self” in consumer identity (Belk, 1988). Lastly, the sense of being “real” and “genuine” exposure are utilised to analyse the research findings since the authenticating acts are crucial for consumers with the sensation of true self (Arnould and Price, 2000). Moreover, to understand the gender perspective, Butler’s (1993) Gender Performativity theory was used. These data analysis methods collectively provide a comprehensive framework ensuring to uncover the complexity of consumers’ identity formation from social media and influencers.

4.5 Ethical Consideration

To ensure that ethical consideration is paramount in this study to explore consumer identity formation from social media. Firstly, receiving the consent from respondents is essential; therefore, we inform all participants about the thesis topic to allow them to understand the purpose of interviews with the voluntary nature of their participation (Cowburn, 2005). They are also aware that the data will be utilised for this thesis only with the confidentiality to protect participants; privacy by limiting access to personal information that is involved in the research process. To respect all the interviewees, we protect their privacy by naming the interviews with code names instead of their actual names, as names are considered as authorised personal information (Borbasi et al., 2005). The study will be emphasising female participants due to less academic research being conducted on women and women being the main target group in beauty and lifestyle industries. Young women are also known to be active on social media. The discussion about gender perspectives could be sensitive for participants and affect them mentally from interviewing (Ellsberg et al., 2001). Therefore, the conversation will be conveyed with an open mindset to respect their perspectives and avoid conflicts from sensitive information. Lastly, since we will interview the participants who are living in Nordic countries, as cultural identity is crucial to consider which requires researchers to navigate conversation with cultural norms and practices respectfully (Davies et al., 1998). By encouraging these ethical considerations, the trustworthiness and integrity of sensitive aspects are upheld to deliver thoughtful research while respecting the rights and well-being of interviewees.

4.6 Research Quality

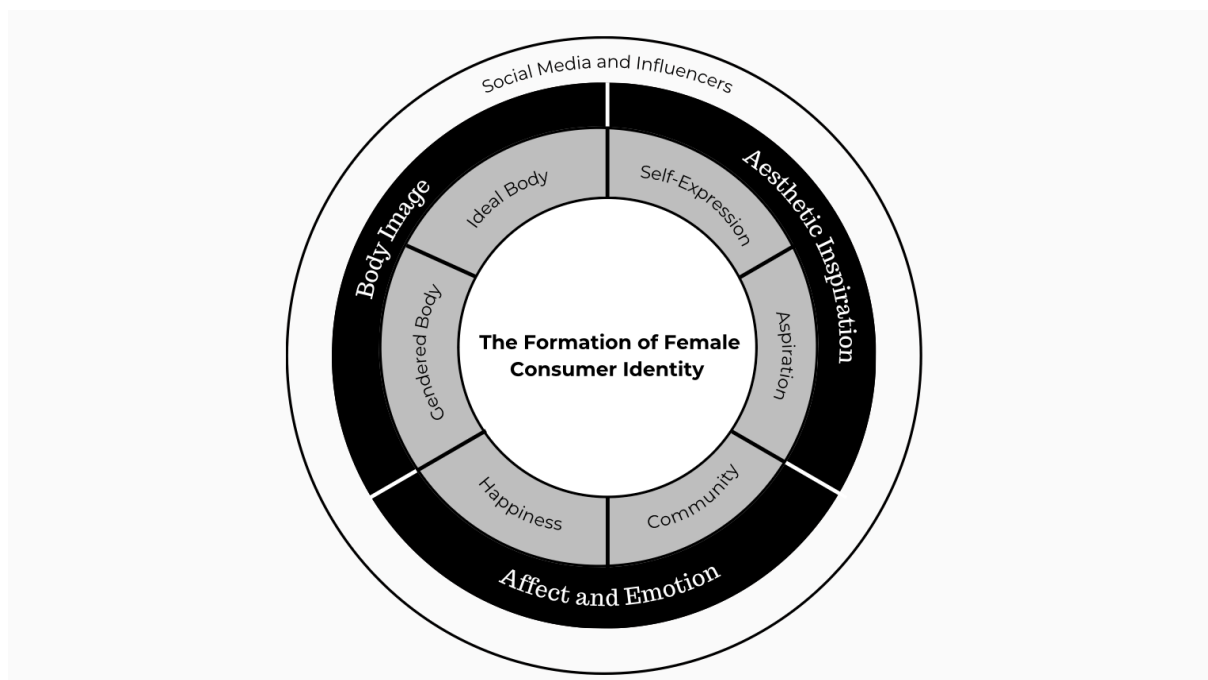
We have attempted to ensure the quality of this study by adhering to the four evaluations that are proposed by (Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba, 2007) Lincoln and Guba (1985), which have been adopted in many researches by scholars including Hirschman (1986) and Holt (1991). The first criteria is credibility by making sure that the research findings are credible and believable through techniques such as details checking and lengthening interactions. Following this, the second criteria is transparency by providing adequate information for contextual interviews and research findings. Thirdly, dependability is crucial in evaluative criteria to ensure that the research findings are logical, documentable, and traceable

particularly on audio recordings. Lastly, confirmability is significant for the study that ensures the research findings are made into conclusion because of participants' responses without interviewers bias. As a result, these evaluative criterias allow us to achieve research goals while enhancing the trustworthiness and credibility of research findings.

5. Findings and Data Analysis

In the Findings and Data Analysis section the insights collected during the research process are analysed and interpreted through the theoretical lenses. The findings are divided into three main categories which are Body Image, Aesthetic Inspiration, and Affects & Emotions, each of which have two sub-categories. Body Image is explored through the Ideal Body and Gendered Body. Aesthetic Inspiration is divided into Self-Expression and Aspiration. And lastly, Affect & Emotion are divided into Happiness and Community. The categories are illustrated in Figure 2. This is how the study interprets female consumers identity formation through the usage and exposure to social media and influencers. The analysis of the research findings will be conducted with the theories of Belk's Extended Self (1988), Goffman's Impression Management (1959) and Butler's Gender Performativity (1993).

Figure 2: Social Media shapes Female Identity Construction in three ways



5.1 Body Image

5.1.1 Body Ideals

Social media significantly influences the idealisation of specific body types. Ferguson highlights the visual appeal of Instagram and its influencers, explaining how they connect the marketplace with aspirational body images. The influence of the internet and social media is continually expanding among young consumers, making it the leading source of inspiration, education, and information (Guerreri & Drenten, 2019, p.101).

Diving into findings about women's gender identity formation, Fiona (interview, 22nd of April 2024) mentioned that influencers often make her feel small and inferior because the societal beauty standard set online was unreachable.

"I feel like I can never be as beautiful and I can never have as many beautiful clothes as they do. And while they give me inspiration, they also like, make me feel small, giving me this feeling of inferiority."

Furthermore, Fiona described experiencing body dysmorphia in her teenage years due to actively engaging online with Victoria's Secret models who strongly promoted the *thinspo* and *fitspo* movements. She described her experience as:

"I looked at their pictures daily wondering like, oh, I think it would be wonderful to be like them. I would be so happy if I was that skinny. Like, you know, that ideology that being skinny gives you instant happiness. Which is something that I a hundred percent believed in when I was 15 or 16. But then at some point, maybe when I was nearing my twenties, I realised that following these Victoria's Secret angels actually gave me anxiety, and it actually gave me body dysmorphia, and it gave me loads of negative feelings that I really didn't need in my life. So I unfollowed them all. And after that I kind of had the same feeling of clarity and liberation".

"Nowadays I don't follow any influencers, I think, or if I do like just a couple. And when I think about my identity I tend to relate more to intellectual stuff. My idols are not Victoria's Secret angels anymore. They're authors, scientists and history researchers. Now I think I have a much healthier image of idols and who to look up to. "

Fiona's experiences support the literature on the impact of social media making specific body types important in today's society along with the claim that popular culture infuses the world in which today's young women live in (Karlyn, 2010, p.7). It also enhances the societal classifications and expectations of women (Butler, 1998) as the society makes women believe that they are expected to have the perfect skinny and fit body and shames them for not having it. Fiona's description of the societal expectations for young women's bodies to be alike to the Victoria's Secret Models bodies also tells about the cultural caging of bodies into gender norms. (Thompson, Ustuner, 2015)

The Western culture is known for enhancing the concentration on an individual's body and especially its flaws (Pruzinsky and Edgerton, 1990). The research between body image and identity states that self-images are highly malleable and socially conditioned (Cash, 1990). This affects young women who actively use social media where they often get even more self-conscious and unhappy with their own bodies, just like Fiona. When a body type such as the Victoria's Secret supermodels have is trending online, it is natural for young women to want to be a part of this consumer group identity formed around a specific body type. (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, Welsh, 2020). Like Fiona tells she used to fully believe that when she would be a part of the group, maybe by doing a specific workout routine or eating certain foods and finally reaching the ideal body type, she would finally feel happy.

Continuing, multiple interviewees mentioned a drastic change in their views on how influencers portray societal beauty standards on social media and how they react to it now in their twenties versus in their teenage years. Also all of the interviewers mentioned that they were worried of the younger generations growing up online and how the beauty and lifestyle content is influencing their self esteem and body image.

"I do experience some pressure from the societal beauty standards online, but I feel like maybe as you get older it may lessen a bit. You're not as insecure as you were when you were younger. "

- Alison (interview 22nd of April 2024)

Interviewer: I know you spend a lot of time with younger people in the dance studio. Do you see how social media would affect them? Like with the beauty standards?

Moona: Yes, a lot. One day my friend just came to me and was like, how can I not be this pretty and why don't I look like this when I do this? And she was talking about this kind of makeup.

Interviewer: How old was this person?

Moona: She is in seventh grade.

Interviewer: So she's like 13 years old. Do you see this a lot or not that much?

Moona: A lot.

Interviewer: A lot? Okay. Would you say how many percent of the dance studio kids have said something like that?

Moona: Probably like 90%. The girls will complain that they don't look a certain way.

Interviewer: Do you feel that way personally?

Moona: Well, sometimes of course I feel like it could be pretty nice to look a certain way, but still I'm like, I don't care so much. When I get older I'm just kind of getting it, that I just can't look like someone else and that I have to accept it the way I look. When you're younger you're maybe a little easier to influence on certain things like appearances.

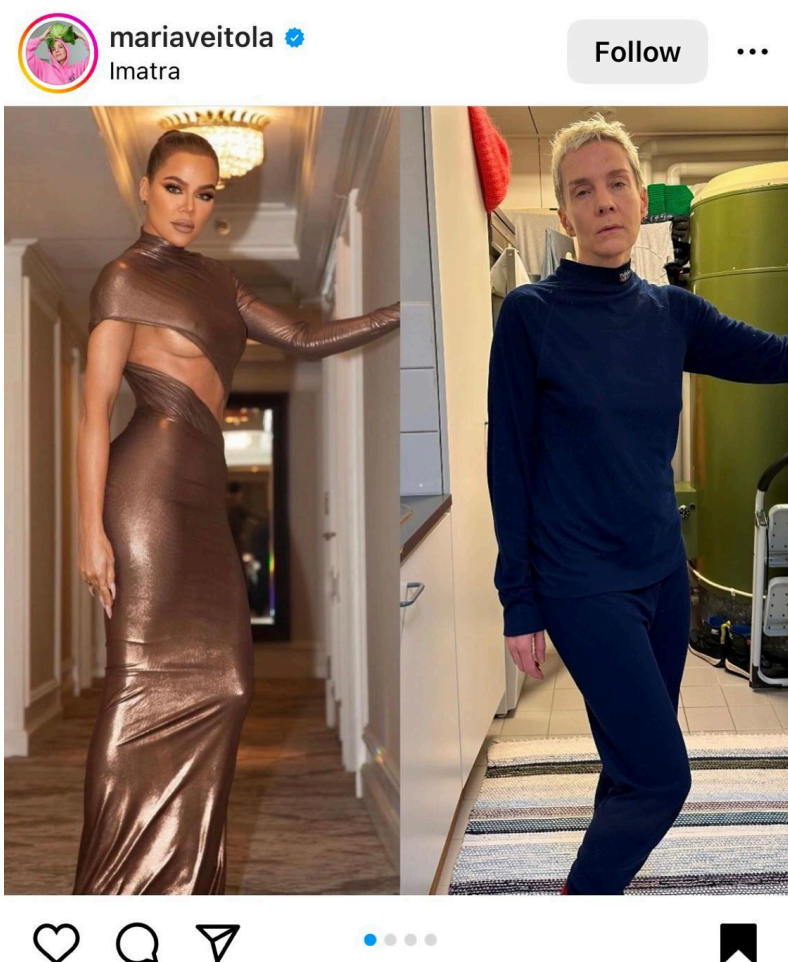
- Moona (interview, 18th of April 2024)

Furthermore, as the key opinion leaders, influencers, set certain standards for how femininity is expressed online, for instance a specific makeup look or a skincare routine, youngsters seem to be struggling to reach these societal norms created on social media (Butler, 1993). Moreover, consumers drive meaning into their lives from various consumption rituals and activities (McCracken 1986) and can integrate possessions into their extended self by giving them various meanings (Belk 1988). This could also be interpreted as influencers creating this never-ending loop of unrealistic beauty standards that consumers are constantly exposed to online. In addition, they promote different products such as makeup and skincare that when purchased are supposed to give consumers meaning in their lives and potentially raise their societal status in a consumption society. However, all Fiona, Alison and Moona's testimonials seem to suggest that the younger the consumer is, the easier they are to manipulate into believing all the narratives they see online. All of them stated that as they got older they have found other narratives to build their identity on rather than appearances.

However, nowadays influencers who also challenge societal beauty standards have emerged in the online platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok. A Finnish radio and television journalist Maria Veitola was brought up regarding her thought-provoking Instagram posts where she imitates the Kardashians, and at the same time challenges the unachievable body images they present online. Furthermore, most of the interviewees said they have seen both creators contributing and challenging beauty standards online.

"I was just watching her show yesterday (Yökylässä Maria Veitola) and she does these kinds of comparison pictures on Instagram where the Kardashians are doing something and then she's doing the same thing and how she looks while she's doing them. Because she's not looking perfect and beautiful. She's looking like a normal person. And that's one person that comes to my mind when I think of people who are trying to challenge societal beauty standards."

- Fiona (interview, 22nd of April 2024)



25 358 likes

mariaveitola Hei oon unohtanut jakaa mun... more

January 9, 2023 · See translation

Image 1. Screenshot from Maria Veitola’s Instagram profile (Maria Veitola, 2023).

“I think the mega influencers contribute to societal beauty standards. They're really just setting this standard that is unattainable for a normal person. And then I think smaller influencers sometimes at least try to challenge them. For example, on TikTok, I've seen a lot of people show their real skin and take off the filters and just show that it's okay. Like everyone doesn't really look that perfect.”

- Alison (interview 22nd of April 2024)

“I do think that if somebody's trying to be relatable and not so perfect that they can also have a very positive impact and break some images of perfection.”

- Sabrina (interview 24th of April 2024)

Alison, Sabrina and Fiona's statements suggest gender norms have started to get somewhat challenged in social media. Furthermore, Maria Veitola can be seen breaking expectations and taboos of women's body ideals (Butler, 1993) as she challenges them by comparing her very realistic holiday look in a Finnish lake house compared to the perfectly polished and edited images of the Kardashians. Thousands of Finnish women have commented on Veitola's Instagram post showing her support for starting to break these unattainable beauty standards through humour. Butler (1998) states that femininity is not a product of choice but a forced citation of a societal norm which is historically related to discipline, regulation and punishment. However, as we acknowledge that many influencers do contribute to the societal beauty standards it is evident that the social media world has been starting to gain a different, more liberated perspective that has been able to break at least a few of these norms and expectations that are posed on women.

5.1.2 Gendered Body

Butler's Gender Performativity explains that femininity is not a product of choice but a forced citation of a societal norm which is based on individuals. (Butler, 1998) Furthermore, the expectations of femininity and how a woman's body should be are posed to women online through different interactions.

When discussing current beauty trends and standards the wide effect that TikTok has on Nordic society came to the surface. The interviewees mentioned seeing many Tik Tok trends, also known as aesthetics, in real life. As most of the interviewees were in their mid-twenties or in their late twenties they rated themselves knowing how to look at these emerging trends critically. However, many of them felt worried to the younger generations who nowadays grow up online and how they most likely can't comprehend the complexity of these beauty standards and internet trends.

A recent phenomena that has emerged on Tiktok where consumers imitate certain styles through "Tiktok aesthetics" which are essentially a pattern of behaviour and expression of self through clothing, makeup and activities. Consumers perform these tasks and post themselves doing them on social media to fit a certain mould and can claim that they fit that "TikTok aesthetic". Fitting a certain aesthetic can also bring the consumer social status and feelings of belonging. Nowadays, the aesthetics are setting the societal beauty standards online for the younger generations and aim to build consumer's marketplace identity. The researchers asked the interviewees to describe the most popular aesthetics they had seen online.

Aurora: So to achieve the clean girl aesthetic you want to look as clean as possible. Like you need to have smooth skin, clean, nice, voluminous hair. And you're drinking smoothies, eating clean, eating healthy stuff. You're working out. The most clean girl workout vibe thing is

pilates and you need to be dressed in cute clothes. Your activities should also be soft, not fighting, like, not karate. Like you just sit there and you do pilates.

Interviewer: What are the top three products that this clean girl would have?

Aurora: The Stanley mug in a pastel colour, a pilates membership and a good morning routine.

- Aurora (interview 5th of April 2024)

Diana: A lot of people know the clean girl aesthetic. I'm very much influenced by that. On Pinterest for example people would do these clean girl boards and they'll have all these photos and words. And I think on every single board that I've seen it's all like this amount of calories, the clean girl eats vegetables every day, doesn't eat sugar. Stuff that is very much healthy on paper. But in reality could spiral into something very, very unhealthy.

And I think that's the case probably with any aesthetic, like the whole point of the aesthetic is that it's superficial, it's not supposed to work in reality. So the whole clean girl aesthetic. Of course you can't be a clean girl all the time. You can't just eat green salads every single meal. And then whenever you don't do that you think, oh, like I failed. Or like, I'm not a clean girl aesthetic anymore. Like, I'm not healthy just because you didn't fit the mould once.

I think they usually just say 3000 calories a day. Like that the standard on like the MD website online that's like for women you should have this much calories. It's very much like they've, with that aesthetic, it's taken, like the very literal textbook definition of healthy. And put it into some sort of curation. Like this is what you need to do to look like this.

Interviewer: You said for women. So these are usually targeted towards women? Have you seen any for men's aesthetics or are they all for women?

Diana: I don't think I have. Sometimes you'll see like the old money aesthetic has popped up quite a bit. It's about men having very expensive styles and old money, you know traditional looks and activities.

Interviewer: When you see these men with the old money aesthetic, do they have any eating requirements or body type requirements? Or is it only on women's aesthetics?

Diana: No, that's very interesting. It's all very oriented towards money and cars and houses and style. I don't think anything about food or anything about skincare or about the colour of your hair. Like nothing about that.

But that's actually quite interesting because every single girl aesthetic thing I've seen, it's very much like she has clear skin, she works out all the time. She's a size, blah, blah, blah, all of that. Has most likely blonde hair, white teeth, always like, very well groomed, she always

plucks her eyebrows, she always shaves, she waxes regularly, once a week she does everything shower.

So yeah the women's clean girl aesthetic is more about appearance and your habits. And then the males' old money aesthetic would be more about like your wealth and your belongings in a sense. What you own essentially. Success is probably a word that comes up quite a lot. But with the girl's ones I've never seen the end goal. It's all about what you should do on a daily basis, but it's never like reaching up to this point of being happy.

- Diana (interview 8th of May 2024)

The clean girl aesthetic can be interpreted with Mary Douglas's theory from her book *Purity and Danger* (1966). In the book Douglas defines dirt as something that is out of place in society. For instance, when a single-use coffee cup is on the table, it is clean but when it ends up on the floor, it is dirty. The object does not change, but its location defines it as pure and clean or dirty. Douglas (1996) also explains that things that cross boundaries are seen as dangerous to society. Furthermore, the lines get more blurred when more abstract subjects such as femininity and masculinity are discussed. In the case of the clean girl aesthetic when a woman fits these societal beauty standards she fits "in the box". Moreover, when women spend an extensive amount of time caring about their looks and constantly trying to fix things that the society and internet compels are wrong with them, they are seen as less dangerous since their attention goes to superficial things instead of trying to break out of the mould.

As Aurora (interview 5th of April 2024) mentioned, the preferred activities for "clean girls" are not dangerous like karate. According to Douglas (1996) that would challenge what is classically seemed to fit a feminine role in society as only a few decades ago it was not appropriate for women to participate in such activities. Women performing karate can not only be seen as breaking societal norms if one is trying to fit the mould of the "clean girl aesthetic" but also dangerous regarding Douglas's definition since the individual would be blurring the lines of the defined boxes of the masculine and feminine roles.

The clean girl aesthetic can also be interpreted from the point of view of Butler's *Gender Performativity* (1993). As Butler defines femininity as a forced citation of societal norms which is performed, the multiple steps and instructions to reach the clean girl aesthetic such as having a clear skin and a skincare routine, doing extensive showers to be as clean as possible, eating only green salads and working out daily lead to a performance that has to be done to reach the clean girl aesthetic which is a representation of femininity in the digital world of 2024.

Further, gendered bodies such as the clean girl ideal of femininity are a key in power relations that construct gender distinctions and heteronormative binaries (Thompson & Ustuner, 2015). As Diana described the "old money aesthetic" she has mainly seen promoted to men had more beneficial and reachable goals attached to it. Despite being very materialistic, the old money aesthetic is not designed to shame male bodies, however, it might shame their material success. The two aesthetics on Tiktok even further increase the gender inequality between

women and men by enhancing and complicating the performance of femininity that was already complex enough before the emergence of these trends.

5.2 Aesthetic Inspiration

5.2.1 Self-expression

Consumers utilise aesthetic inspiration as an approach to formulate their identities on social media through the process of self-expression. By exploring consumer inspiration, often defined as a motivational concept of stimulation to do or feel on objectives that are typically creative and imaginative (Hein, 1961). Hein also proposed that Aesthetic inspiration is the creative influence and stimulation divided from visual or sensory experiences that could evoke the sense of beauty and emotional connection (Hein, 1961). After interviewing participants on how social media and influencers have been shaping their own identities particularly on self-expression, most of them stated that social media has inspired them to behave in better ways of living by consuming different kinds of videos such as makeup tutorials, clothes, get ready with me, etc.

They draw inspiration from social media influencers and trendsetters in order to adopt their own ways of expression. Elsa (interview, 21 April 2024) said that

“For fashion, I look at people on Instagram, I like to see their outfits and get inspiration on Instagram and Pinterest. The main thing I look for is either jewellery or fashion so I have my own style folder and own jewellery folder.”

“I’ve been trying to find a denim shirt and then a Ralph Lauren red jumper because I saw this one outfit on Pinterest that just looked really nice. So I’ve been trying to find that secondhand to see if I can find it cheaper so I can have my own personal outfits.”

- Elsa (interview, 21 April 2024)

The statements show that Elsa seeks for inspiration from social media and personally manages her own folders to see as inspiration to create her own outfits in categories on jewellery and fashion. By consuming social media content, the variety of content allows consumers to perceive differently and express themselves in certain ways. According to Goffman (1959), having “impression management” is to shape individual identities depending on their social context which could be built into the symbolic interactionism. Including the knowledge in possession and consumable objects by applying the theory of “extended self” could explain more about the interrelation between influencer marketing and consumer identity (Belk, 1988).

By consuming social media content, consumers are more likely to express their identities in various ways. Elsa (interview, 21 April 2024) stated that:

“I posted that picture on Instagram cause I really liked the vintage dress. It was a really nice secondhand dress a few years ago and then I wore it for midsummer I think in 2022 or 2021. And I think it's a beautiful vintage and secondhand dress.”

“It's just like a nice inspiration and I feel like when you find something secondhand, it feels like a victory. It does definitely make me feel unique, and it's a nice feeling.”

- Elsa (interview, 21 April 2024)

This information illustrates that Elsa expresses herself on social media with vintage fashion style by posting pictures with a secondhand dress which made her feel happy and unique because it is not a mass product made for the general public. From these insights, the researchers found that consumers are aware of their identities and present them through social media differently depending on their lifestyles and values. Additionally, people create and understand their “self” with the diversity of meanings in their daily lives by integrating possessions and objects (Belk, 1988). Even though people have their own identities differently, they present those identities differently by adjusting to specific situations and contact in order to present himself to others with “impression” (Goffman, 1959).

5.2.2 Aspiration

In the process of consumer identity formation consumers utilise aesthetic inspiration to shape their identity through aspiration. Aurora (interview, 5 April 2024) mentioned that:

“I like videos that give me some inspiration, like aesthetic inspiration and that motivates me to do stuff. Study videos, work out videos and these videos that make me feel like, I want to do this.”

- Aurora, (interview, 5 April 2024).

“ It enhances my individual sense of style”

- Alison, (interview, 22 April 2024).

This statement shows that the video with aesthetic inspiration particularly involving study, exercise, and productivity related content could motivate her in igniting her goals to take actions further in life. To expand the knowledge on inspiration, Thrash and Elliot (2004) proposed that inspiration consists of two distinctive processes which are being inspired by and being inspired to. “Being inspired by” means the awakening of intrinsic value of stimulus objects, people, actions, or situations. On the other hand, “being inspired to” defines the drive to manifest or expand upon the attributes in objects or goals (Thrash and Elliot, 2004). Therefore, Aurora (interview, 5 April 2024) was inspired to take actions in studying and working out from the video with aesthetic inspiration related content, which could drive her motivation on pursuing her life goals in the future.

Consumer identities can be developed in various ways particularly by consuming social media content and influencers. Isabel (interview, 26 Feb 2024) mentioned that

“Whenever they say, oh look at my skin. Like, show an example of their skin and I'm like, okay, that's a really good example, I want my face to be like that”

- Isabel (interview, 26 Feb 2024)

This insight illustrates that Isabel consumes social media content and adopts to develop her own lifestyle by providing aesthetic inspiration from social media influencers. Social media encourages consumers to create new identities, people start developing their “new self” as another dimension of life. the concept of “new self” is created to be consumers' goals in lives (Belk et al., 2003). Moreover, social media platforms allow users to create more than one account to express their identities freely (Gunduz, 2017).

For an authenticity perspective, the interviewees are aware of their true selves from real scenarios compared to online platforms where people can generate their new identities and express themselves freely (Gunduz, 2017). When asked about their perceptions towards the authenticity of influencers, most of them are aware especially Isabel (interview, 26 February 2024) stated she can recognise the authenticity from influencers who deliver the genuine content or not.

“To be honest, it's kind of hard to have a perception as said in words. when I do watch it just comes so naturally. I think about authentic people, having a personality, seeing relatable content perhaps, and the authenticity is definitely there. Like if she is acting fake or he's acting fake and I'm like I know.”

- Isabel (interview, 26 February 2024)

With the variety of social media influencers consumers start to select the authentic people who they can relate to and trust as Alison (interview, 22 April 2024) mentions that the number of followers influences their perceptions on being real and genuine.

“I trust smaller creators more. I feel like they're more real, like they don't have a team behind them and I feel like they will actually use the product”

- Alison (interview, 22 April 2024)

After discussing with all participants, the sensation of being real is crucial for them, the concept of “true self” and “authenticating acts” are highlighted in this research to explore consumer perception (Arnould and Price, 2000). Furthermore, the authenticity of social media influencers have different effects on consumers’ perception of credibility (Wang and Weng, 2024). From the insightful interviews, the authenticity of influencers is essential to gain their followers’ trustworthiness and credibility.

5.3 Affect and Emotion

5.3.1 Happiness

By consuming online content from influencers, consumers experience their identity transformation that is driven by affect and emotion. Helmi (interview, 9 May 2024) mentioned that when she watches videos and content posted by social media influencers she has an emotional connection with them.

“It makes me feel really good with the recommendations” “The comments make me feel like my friends are happy for me.”

- Helmi (interview, 9 May 2024)

From this statement, when female consumers watch beauty and lifestyle content, they feel good and happy because of useful advice from influencers and also from others in the comment sections. Martin et al. (2014) stated that consumers are more likely to share their sentiments and feel favourable when receiving genuine comments on social media.

Isabel (interview, 26 Feb 2024) mentioned that she felt good when consuming the beauty and particularly skincare content by influencers because she was satisfied by the results of the skincare treatments. Additionally, she also mentioned that the feedback and recommended opinions from the comments of the posts made her feel good because the supportive comments from others bring more confidence to do the skincare routine and make potential purchase decisions.

“That's really good after having that skincare routine and I want my face to be like that”

- Isabel, (interview, 26 Feb 2024).

“It seems like a good product and actually the most thing I rely on is the comment section. Like where people are like, oh yeah, definitely I should have bought this colour. Or I like this one. Or you should try this. Like, a lot of the comments”

- Isabel, (interview, 26 Feb 2024).

Women tend to have happy emotions towards social media influencers who have a similar appearance to themselves. Aurora, (interview, 5 April 2024) states that she follows mostly blonde girls and prefers beauty content from those influencers, comparing others due to the similarity in terms of appearances and beauty routines.

“I tend to watch more blonde people, since when they do makeup, it fits me better. If I am looking at different products, they use products that can fit me too, since I have light skin and

light hair. For example, brunettes, maybe use different makeup than I, other colours that won't suit me personally”

- Aurora, (interview, 5 April 2024).

“I really like her. She's very minimalistic, very Swedish. I feel like I follow a lot of people with blonde hair”

- Aurora, (interview, 5 April 2024).

From these insights, we found that women are more likely to follow social media influencers who are relatable in various ways such as appearances and skincare products. They recognized that individuals have their own certain patterns of beauty routines especially skincare products; therefore they are more confident in people who have similar skin types and more relatable to themselves (Scholz, 2021). Also supported by the concept of identity that individuals are associated with a subjective context in sameness (Erikson, 1968). With the sense of similarity, we found that the influencers' recommendations of more relevant content and products to their audiences are more likely to create the feeling of happiness and value.

However, negative emotions are also very heavily associated with social media. Diana (interview 8th of May 2024) describes her feelings as:

“I've had acne before. Now there's this trend where in the same video they'll put that clear skin filter on and then they'll show their face without the acne or without the filter. They're like real skin, blah, blah. But the fact is that there still is that filter. I don't even think you could even see it now if you have the filter on.

I think I get quite upset or angry sometimes that there are these videos that kind of trick you. I don't have issues with my skin as much as I used to when I was younger. But I used to watch those videos and be like, oh my gosh, I wish I looked like that. I wish I had this. And then they're selling these things like this will make your skin look like this. And then you realise that they don't even look like that and they've sold me all of this rubbish that it's not gonna do anything because that's not actually what they even look like, it's the filters. I feel upset for other people that are probably very likely to believe them. And I guess just a bit irritated because it just, like everything on social media essentially is not real.”

The finding supports the theory of authenticity being associated with being “real” and “genuine” (Beverlanf & Farrel, 2010). As Diana does not trust the influencers in question to be genuine about their skin, they lose the authenticity factor which are engaged with consumer's sensations of “true self” (Arnould and Price, 2000). This will not only lead to distrust but also to Diana looking for other places to construct her identity, for instance, other communities online. To conclude, if the consumer does not find an online creator or community authentic and associate it with negative feelings it does not correlate with the

formation of “true self”. Therefore, the “authenticating acts” are important to consumer’s identity formation online (Arnould and Price, 2000).

5.3.2 Sense of belonging

Additionally, when asking about their social media engagement how they feel and interact on online platforms. Isabel (interview, 26 February 2024) stated that she actively engaged with social media influencers and commented by sharing stories about herself to the communities.

“I share a story or sometimes I also show supportive reactions. Like Yeah. You go, yeah, I love this!”

“Just looking at the comments when people agree and people are happy about it, I'm so popular, I feel like I'm contributing to this community”

After interviewing, the researchers found that consumers have a sense of belonging from consuming social media content particularly the engagement among users and influencers. Additionally, they feel valued and favoured when other social media users interact on her story sharing in the comment session. Diana (interview, 8th of May 2024) said that she joined the group that discussed the menstrual cycle. Even though it is generally considered as a sensitive topic, people are willing to share and interact in the group.

“It was very comforting and I feel very safe and welcome because everyone there just wants to know about it. So I commented and liked a few things on the page.”

These insights show that when consumers feel comfortable to express and interact with each other, they are more likely to build the social connections and create the community. The community structures are attracted a similar interest in order to build social tasks and relationships (Radicchi et al., 2004). Helmi (interview, 9 May 2024) stated that people who have interests in horses are her friends and this community encourages her to express herself on social media.

“I post horse related stuff. For example, I am riding a horse or I'm something that is related to that”

“My friends also have the same interest and have horses. They like and engage with my posts immediately, which makes me feel good about expressing myself through the posts.”

This finding indicates that having similar interests could enhance more social media interactions and make individuals feel comfortable to share even about sensitive topics such as the menstrual cycle. This can be explained further with the “We” identity concept which refers to a collective sense of belonging in the society by having shared identity among their

communities (Taylor and Dube, 1986). Since social media interaction allows consumers to have a sense of belonging especially in online platforms, comments on social media posts significantly influences how consumers think and feel. Isabel (interview, 26th of February 2024) mentioned that she checked on comments to see how people think in majority before making any decision.

“I watch comments all the time. So what I think and feel depends a lot on what people write in the comments.”

The insights from interviewees indicate that consumers tend to have a greater trust reflecting from social media comments. Consumers have different levels of trust in social media contents which are mainly influenced by engagements across consumers, influencers, and brands (Matin et al., 2020). People are more likely to rely on the opinions of other consumers to make purchasing decisions particularly on digital platforms (Martin et al., 2014). With the social media interactions from both influencers and others, women consumers tend to have a sense of belonging because they feel valuable from engaging and contributing to the community on social media.

6. Discussion

6.1 Consumer Identity

Consumption is defined as a self-defining and a self-expressive behaviour (Schau and Gilly, 2003) that in the digital world also takes place online. The consumption of online material is therefore detrimental for identity formation in today's digital society. Furthermore, consumers may create multiple identities in the digital environment and these digital selves are not tied down to relate to the consumer's identity in real-life. This allows consumers to express themselves in new and innovative ways (Schau and Gilly, 2003).

In this study, women's identity formation was explored through social media. One of the key findings was identity construction through aesthetic inspiration they see online. Young women tend to seek aspirational videos online, usually related to their preferred activities or goals they already pursue or would like to pursue. Seeing the inspirational videos gives women motivation to pursue their goals further in life and keep working on them.

However, young women tend to also see effects on their gender identity through social media. Influencers were described to give inspiration but at the same time give the feeling of inferiority and not being enough. Social media is found to enhance the societal classification and expectations on women (Butler, 1998).

Social media also gives women a platform to build collective identity, one of the academic terms to define it is "we" identity (Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995). According to Schau and Gilly (2003) "we" identity is also a driver of communication in digital spaces. The findings of this study support the literature on "we" identity being an important factor for consumers online. Moreover, having similar interests was found to enhance digital interactions and make individuals feel comfortable, even to share their own experiences online about socially sensitive topics such as the menstrual cycle.

Furthermore, the comments online were found to contribute to "we" identity. Many of the women interviewed looked for social proof in the comments such as how to think and feel about a certain creator. It was found that the comment section was a place where women went to look for validation, confirm authenticity and make decisions about trust or distrust regarding a certain influencer or a product. In other terms, if an influencer was recommending something online, women tend to verify the validity of the recommendation by looking at the public response on the comment section. The same goes about if an influencer would be considered authentic and trustworthy. Moreover, sharing personal stories on the comment section gave individuals feelings of validation and popularity. If the comment got more interaction, the interviewees felt like they were contributing to the community and to the "we" identity.

6.2 Gender

The study contributes to gender literature in a few different aspects. To begin, the new “aesthetics” on Tiktok and other social media such as the “clean girl aesthetic” contribute to the literature of gender. Furthermore, these kinds of phenomena contribute to new ways of Gender Performativity (Butler, 1988). Social media has formed new ways for gender classifications, expectations and taboos that construct gender distinctions and heteronormative binaries (Thompson & Ustuner, 2015) and the “clean girl aesthetic” with its unrealistic beauty expectations for young women is a great example of that.

Moreover, the “clean girl aesthetic” demonstrates the admired behavioural tendencies, emotional predispositions and social schemas that play into dominant western cultural norms through social media (Thompson & Ustuner, 2015). As more and more of these “aesthetics” appear, young women face conscious and unconscious expectations to fit the gendered expectations on how they should be and appear as women in today’s society.

To tie in Douglas’s literature *Purity and Danger* (1996) these online aesthetics have become vessels in society on what is considered “dirt” another way of describing something that is out of place in society. The study contributes to the discussion of modern femininity and what is seen as in or out of place in online platforms through the eyes of young women. Again, the observations of the “clean girl aesthetic” describe the unrealistic and unreachable beauty ideals that are posed to young women on social media.

To continue, the study also contributes to the literature of the idealised female body. The contemporary idealised female body is defined as athletic but skinny but also curvy at the same time (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, Welsh, 2020) heavily infused by the popular culture of the Western society (Karlyn, 2010). Social media has been admitted to play to the idealisation of certain body types (Guerreri and Drenten, 2019). Our findings regarding body ideals fully support the previous literature on many aspects. For instance, Victoria’s Secret Models were told to contribute to interviewees self esteem and views about their own body. Furthermore, our study found that the younger the women are, the easier they are affected by social media. Several interviewees such as Fiona, Alison and Moona told their experiences how they felt insecure due to the exposure of the perfect bodies on social media when they were younger, but that these pressures lessen as they have reached their twenties. In addition, findings of influencers, especially smaller ones, were found to challenge beauty standards. One example is Finnish radio and television journalist Maria Veitola who tackles these societal issues through humour. Veitola posts images of herself on Instagram next to the Kardashians, showing a very perfect, ideal and edited body next to her realistic body. The interviewees mentioned that they saw her as a challenger of the societal beauty standards posed on women. Our finding was that the expectations and taboos of women’s bodies have slowly been started to question but there is still plenty of work to be done especially on social media platforms.

6.3 Social Media

This study aims to enhance the understanding of consumer identity formation that is shaped by social media and influencers. With the rapid growth of social media, consumers experience a variety of content for entertainment and consumption while influencers who have credibility convince their audiences to take certain actions with online interactions (Booth and Matic, 2011). Among online consumers, aesthetic image and active engagements are essential for contributing to the popularity of influencer marketing (Arora et al., 2019). The study aimed to expand knowledge on young Nordic women's identity building processes through the effects of social media with the methodological approach of semi-structured interviews. The findings made were that aesthetic inspiration, emotions and a sense of belonging shape individual consumer identities in various ways. Individuals develop a variety of social identities via their online interaction and networking activities on social media (Fariwa & Wang, 2022). The shared identity within a community allows individuals to attach and the sense of community is formed ((Fariwa & Wang, 2022). Following the diversity of identity meanings with "self" (Belk, 1988), this research aims to extend the knowledge on consumer identity formation from social media and influencers from particularly women's perspective who live in Nordic countries which could be presented by thematic methods. The empirical results from 14 respondents who are actively engaged with social media and influencers indicate that they have shaped their identities in three ways which are body image, aesthetic inspiration, and emotions. The suggested framework for identifying consumer identity formation could contribute to social media management since the study gains insightful information on individuals particularly on aesthetic inspiration and emotions as well as a sense of belonging.

For emotions, this refers to a complexity of psychological feelings that consumers have subjectively when consuming social media content especially from influencers (Anderson, 2013). When consumers experience online content that can be characterised by specific feelings such as happiness and joy they are more likely to express their identities by involving both internal and external components (Anderson, 2013). While influencers express with observable expression of emotions such as facial expression, tone of voices, and gestures in order to communicate with their audiences and build social interaction leading to community which is essential in online networking. The consumption of information reflects who consumers interact on social media with various motivations such as entertainment, social connection, and information (Heinonen, 2011). Consumers support social interactions by commenting and liking which leads to fostering a sense of community and social participation (Heinonen, 2011). Consumers tend to follow the opinions that are agreed by the majority to build a stronger community with shared ideas (Rouault et al., 2020).

Emotional marketing has an important role since it arouses emotions in consumers to engage and take certain actions on particular products or services (Consil, 2010). The study indicates that participants are happy and satisfied when consuming relatable content with authentic gestures of influencers. Consumers are able to identify the authenticity of social media

platforms, they are aware of their true selves compared to other people that there could be various identities in online platforms (Gunduz, 2017).

With the community building from shared identities, consumers are more likely to react to favourable information from the group that could identify more than other groups that they do not identify with (Rouault et al., 2020). The majority of respondents perceive that influencers who they can relate with in terms of lifestyle and personality can be called as their friends which allow them to have a sense of community (Farivar and Wang, 2022). Moreover, consumers tend to follow influencers who look more similar and appealing to themselves would make them feel trusted because they can relate and pay a greater attention (Chan, 2022). Regarding the feelings, some of the respondents said that social media content from influencers bring negative feelings when they are associated with the beauty standard, and consumers start to compare themselves to others. The reason is that people's brains automatically pay attention closely to the information about ourselves and are more likely to compare with what other people think in order to fit in the society (Rouault et al., 2020). In terms of social media. The number of likes and comments from social media feeds could be defined as a powerful reward, which has a significant opportunity to escalate the comparisons between individuals (Rouault et al., 2020). With these insights, consumers tend to interact with influencers not only through comments but also share their own stories actively in order to become a part of the community and have a sense of belonging. In terms of trustworthiness, consumers tend to gravitate towards social media influencers who are perceived as relatable with authentic acts. The insightful interviews become evident of having the sense of authority is essential for them as the followers. Therefore, the concept of true self and authentic acts could emphasise on this research findings (Arnould and Price, 2000). Additionally, Wang and Weng (2024) mentioned that social media influencers' authenticity have impacts on the credibility and trustworthiness among female consumers. As a result, the popularity of social media content and influencers has an impact on consumers' identity, narratives, and social interactions (Fujita et al., 2018).

7. Conclusion

7.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes insightful information into the formation of female consumers' identity that is shaped by social media and influencers, especially about women who are living in Nordic countries since they were the target group of the study. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the research expands the knowledge of the identity, gender and social media literature in various approaches.

Firstly, this research expands the knowledge of social identity in order to contribute to influencer marketing research (Ellemers et al., 2002). From consumer identity literature, the findings provide a better understanding on how consumer identity formation with influencer and social media usages particularly in women perspectives. The literature emphasises on how consumers are affected by digital footprints and social media algorithms (Montag and Elhai, 2023), the study indicates that consumers' responses and interactions in social media can influence how consumers shape their own identities after consuming online content. By offering the insights of women consumers' identity formation that performs by aesthetic inspiration, emotions, and happiness as the expresses sentiments.

Secondly, the findings could be beneficial to expand the knowledge of the collective environment and social interaction, especially social media platforms (De Veirman, 2017). On the other hand, the previous research on influencer marketing (Gunduz, 2017) has not addressed a strong sense of online community, our study takes consumer identity formation to illustrate how consumers have shaped their identities to become a part of communities and how they perceive influencer networking. Additionally, the insights of authenticity in social media influencers emerges the main concerns of enhancing trustworthiness and credibility among followers particularly women.

Lastly, the study improves the understanding of women's gender identities regarding social media and influencers. The findings were interpreted by adding value to the knowledge of Butler's Gender Performativity theory (Butler, 1993). The study highlights findings on Body Image and the Gendered Body adding value to the gender perspectives along with social media and identity in today's society. Therefore, this study will enrich the gender literature by providing the complexities of gender representation on social media and consumer identity formation in certain ways to advance the gender dynamic.

7. 2 Practical Implication

The findings provide insights of consumers' identity formation that could be beneficial for both firms, social media influencers, individuals, and society particularly in gender inequality. The respondents provide insightful information about how their identities and behaviours have been developed from social media and influencers in three main ways which are body image, aesthetic inspiration, and emotions. The companies that are considering implementing influencers into their marketing campaigns, should pay attention to interpersonal communication between influencers and their followers in order to create a cohesive community among consumers. The powerful relationship of influencers communities would create a strong sense of belonging to individuals and benefit for the long term business goals when launching new products and services.

Influencers should create a strong networking within their online community where people are able to connect closely and engage actively. Enhancing a strong sense of belonging and closeness are essential among their followers. To build a cohesive community, influencers should allow their audiences to share and engage freely and pay attention to sensitive topics. The variety of content is also significant to get consumer's attention and maintain them to be a part of the community. Having a sense of friends is important for followers who perceive and think in similar ways as their influencers; therefore, influencers who can provide a space of sharing moments or similar interest would have more advantages to create a strong sense of belonging. Lastly, influencers should be authentic and present their content more realistic approaches appropriately since consumers are aware and can recognize their authenticity. Storytelling is also attractive and encourages their followers to connect and interact more by sharing personal stories of themselves with clear delivered messages to build strong connections and create trust among their followers.

Individuals could benefit from the findings since the insights allow them to understand how and why their identities are shaped in specific ways of living, so they are aware and could manage social media behaviour properly. With body images, they could recognize between social media and reality, which could benefit when they start transforming their identities. The study would allow them to understand their self-awareness and self recognition to gain their own identities and enhance them to become mindful in online behaviours. The knowledge of consumer identity could encourage individuals to evaluate and enable them to make informed decisions on online activities.

This study also provides the catalysing change in the society particularly in the realms of gender inequality, and social justice from facing the harmful stereotypes prevalent on social media. The exploration of female consumers' identity formation on digital spaces could empower the women while eliminating the pervasive stereotypes. By shedding the light on women's perspectives, this study not only explores the diversity of perspectives but also promotes social equality particularly in the digital landscape.

7.3 Future Research

For future implications more research could be done on how societal beauty standards and encouraged habits for young women are hidden in online aesthetics such as the clean girl aesthetic. Even though these online phenomena seem harmless, more research of their implications especially on the younger generations who are growing up together with the constantly evolving social media platforms would be beneficial.

7.4 Limitations

The limitations of the study are theoretical as well as methodological. To begin, the 3 month time-limitation to conduct could possibly cause some important insights to be overlooked. Moreover, most of the interviewees were from Finland and Sweden but to wholly understand the Nordic perspective on the topic women from Denmark and Norway should also be interviewed. Also analytical limitations could be found since none of the interviewees speak English as their first language so the language used could also limit what they were trying to share about their lived experience with social media.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Qualitative interview questions

Introduction:

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
- How often do you use social media?
- What apps do you use?
- What type of content do you typically engage with?
- Do you watch a lot of beauty and lifestyle related videos?

General Perception:

- What comes to your mind when you think about beauty influencers on social media?
- What comes to your mind about influencer marketing in general?
- How influential do you find beauty influencers in shaping beauty standards?

Personal Engagement:

- Do you follow any influencers? If so, who are your favourites and why?
- Is there any particular influencer that you like? Why do you follow them?
- How are they different from others in the industry?
- How do they make you feel?
- How has social media influenced your daily routines (beauty, skincare, wellness), if at all?

Feelings / Emotional state

- How do you feel about influencer marketing?
- Can you describe a time when it made you feel a positive emotion?
- Can you describe a time when it made you feel a negative emotion?

Trust and Authenticity:

- In what ways or by what qualities can an influencer create trust in you?
- Can you describe a situation where you have trusted an influencer?
- How about creating distrust?
- How much trust do you place in the recommendations and product endorsements made by influencers on social media?
- What factors contribute to your perception of an influencer as authentic?
- What type of content gives you an authentic feeling, can you give an example of a situation?

Beauty Standards:

- In your opinion, do beauty influencers contribute to or challenge societal beauty standards? How?
- Can you give an example when this has happened and you have seen it in real life?
- How does that make you feel?
- Have your perceptions of beauty been changed by beauty content and influencers?

“Me” and “We” identity:

Explain this shortly to the interviewee: Consumers utilise signs and symbols to express both “me” and “we” identities, for instance, wearing unique vintage or second hand clothing could enhance the individual identity. On the contrary, wearing merchandise to support a sports club reflects the desired affiliative identity.

- How have you expressed your “me” identity online?
- How have you expressed your “we” identity online?
- How have you seen other people / influencers express their “me” identity online?
- How have you seen other people / influencers express their “we” identity online?

Consumer Identity and social media:

- How do you perceive the relationship between social media usage and personal identity formation?
- In what ways do you believe social media platforms influence how individuals perceive themselves?
- Can you provide examples of how social media has impacted your consumer behaviour and identity in recent years?
- What role do influencers and celebrities play in shaping consumer identity through social media platforms?
- How do you think a social media influencer shapes what you think about your own self?

Gender:

- Do you follow or watch content from a specific gender - female, male, nonbinary influencers?
 - If you specified a specific gender why is that?
 - Let’s imagine that an influencer of this specific gender is giving advice or recommending a product. Would you trust this person more due to their gender?
 - How about when the opposite gender is giving advice or recommending a product?
- Can you discuss any instances where you felt excluded or misrepresented by influencers due to your gender identity?
- How do you think beauty-related videos online shape beauty ideals and norms for you as a woman? How has this changed over time?

Storytelling:

- Have you ever unfollowed an influencer or stopped engaging with them because they changed their content / values OR you changed your interests / values?
- Can you describe a time when an influencer's content online made you feel particularly inspired or empowered? What was it about their content that had this effect on you?
- Have you ever felt negatively impacted by content from an influencer online?
- How important do you think authenticity is when it comes to beauty influencers online? Do you prefer influencers who share their real experiences and struggles, or do you prefer more polished and curated content?
- Have you ever experienced pressure to conform to certain beauty or lifestyle standards promoted by influencers? How did this make you feel, and how did you respond?
- Do you ever compare yourself to the beauty standards portrayed by influencers online? How does this comparison affect your self-esteem or confidence?
- Can you describe a time when you felt a strong sense of connection or community online?
- How do you navigate the balance between enjoying beauty and lifestyle content online and maintaining a healthy sense of self-esteem and self-worth? What strategies do you use to protect your mental and emotional well-being while engaging in social media?
- Has the beauty community online ever made you feel pressured to purchase something or look a certain way? If yes, could you give an example of that?