



**SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT**

BUSN39 - Degree Project in Global Marketing - Master Level

## **An Ethical Dilemma in Influencer Marketing:**

*Discovering Social Media Influencers' Justifications  
for Promoting Aesthetic Surgery*

by

Pia Kauffmann

Selestina Vaičiūnaitė

Word count: 21343

May 2024

Master's programme in International Marketing and Brand Management

Supervisor: Jon Bertilsson

Examiner: Hossain Shahriar

## Abstract

**Title:** An Ethical Dilemma in Influencer Marketing: Discovering Social Media Influencers' Justifications for Promoting Aesthetic Surgery

**Course:** BUSN39 - Degree Project in Global Marketing

**Authors:** Pia Kauffmann and Selestina Vaičiūnaitė

**Background:** The rise of influencer marketing, fuelled by globalisation and social media popularity, has led to an increased ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery by influencers. Existing research has primarily focused on consumers, leaving the influencer perspective and their ethical justifications largely unexplored.

**Purpose:** To explore the ethical justifications of social media influencers in promoting aesthetic surgery, advancing understanding of influencer marketing ethics.

**Methodology:** Netnography, followed by a qualitative content analysis of 25 social media influencers on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

**Theoretical perspective:** Ethics, Boltanski and Thévenot's Theory of Justification (2006), Mills' Vocabularies of Motive (1940), and Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values (2012).

**Findings:** Two main themes in influencers' ethical justifications were identified: authenticity, and empowerment and self-actualisation. Authenticity prioritises openness and sincerity, building trust with audiences. Empowerment and self-actualisation reveal influencers' justification for personal growth, focusing on improvement and fulfilment. Improvement reflects efforts to enhance self-esteem, while fulfilment portrays surgery promotion as a route to satisfaction and validation.

**Practical Implications:** Based on the findings of this thesis, influencers can make more informed content decisions, agencies can provide better guidance, clinics can align collaborations with ethical principles in mind, policymakers can shape regulations, and the public can engage more critically with influencer content for a more responsible digital media landscape.

**Keywords:** *Influencer marketing; Influencers; Aesthetic surgery; Ethics; Justification*

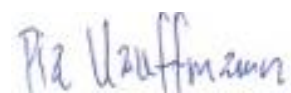
## Acknowledgments

As we have reached the end of our thesis writing journey, we cannot help but to look back and feel eternally grateful for this experience. First and foremost, we would like to thank our supervisor Jon Bertilsson for guiding us through, providing incredible insights, and many sources along the way – our thesis would not have turned out the same without his supervision. It has been a privilege to work together and learn so many things throughout this research process.

Secondly, we would like to thank both of our families for continuous encouragement and always being there for us. Having such wonderful support systems inspired us to get through the past year and motivated us to always aim for higher.

Last but not least, we want to thank each other for an incredible partnership and collaboration on this thesis. It has been a joy working together, playing into our strengths and at the same time challenging each other to try out new things. We will both look back on this time with profound gratitude and the lessons learned will stay with us for the years to come.

Lund University, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2024



Pia Kauffmann



Selestina Vaičiūnaitė

# Table of Contents

|          |                                                               |           |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Introduction .....</b>                                     | <b>6</b>  |
| 1.1      | <i>Background .....</i>                                       | 6         |
| 1.2      | <i>Research Problem .....</i>                                 | 8         |
| 1.3      | <i>Research Purpose .....</i>                                 | 10        |
| 1.4      | <i>Contributions .....</i>                                    | 11        |
| 1.5      | <i>Outline of the Thesis .....</i>                            | 12        |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Literature Review .....</b>                                | <b>12</b> |
| 2.1      | <i>Influencer Marketing Work .....</i>                        | 12        |
| 2.1.1    | <i>Social Media Influencers .....</i>                         | 14        |
| 2.1.2    | <i>Influencer Criteria .....</i>                              | 15        |
| 2.1.3    | <i>Risks of Influencer Marketing .....</i>                    | 16        |
| 2.2      | <i>Influencer Marketing Ethics .....</i>                      | 17        |
| 2.3      | <i>Aesthetic Surgery .....</i>                                | 18        |
| 2.3.1    | <i>Social Media Marketing in Aesthetic Surgery .....</i>      | 19        |
| 2.3.2    | <i>Impact of Aesthetic Surgery Promotion .....</i>            | 19        |
| 2.4      | <i>Critique of Prior Research .....</i>                       | 21        |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Theoretical Frames .....</b>                               | <b>22</b> |
| 3.1      | <i>Ethics .....</i>                                           | 22        |
| 3.2      | <i>Boltanski and Thévenot's Theory of Justification .....</i> | 23        |
| 3.3      | <i>Mills' Vocabularies of Motive .....</i>                    | 25        |
| 3.4      | <i>Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values .....</i>          | 26        |
| 3.5      | <i>Conceptual Framework .....</i>                             | 28        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Methodology .....</b>                                      | <b>31</b> |
| 4.1      | <i>Research Philosophy .....</i>                              | 31        |
| 4.2      | <i>Research Design .....</i>                                  | 33        |
| 4.3      | <i>Data Collection Method .....</i>                           | 34        |
| 4.4      | <i>Sampling .....</i>                                         | 36        |
| 4.5      | <i>Empirical Analysis .....</i>                               | 38        |
| 4.6      | <i>Quality of Study .....</i>                                 | 40        |
| 4.7      | <i>Transferability of Findings .....</i>                      | 41        |
| 4.8      | <i>Ethics of Netnography .....</i>                            | 42        |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Justifications of Aesthetic Surgery Promotion .....</b>    | <b>43</b> |
| 5.1      | <i>Authenticity .....</i>                                     | 44        |
| 5.1.1    | <i>Openness .....</i>                                         | 44        |
| 5.1.2    | <i>Sincerity .....</i>                                        | 47        |
| 5.2      | <i>Empowerment and Self-actualisation .....</i>               | 49        |
| 5.2.1    | <i>Improvement .....</i>                                      | 50        |
| 5.2.2    | <i>Fulfilment .....</i>                                       | 51        |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Discussion .....</b>                                       | <b>54</b> |

|                                           |           |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 6.1 Contributions to Prior Research ..... | 58        |
| <b>7 Conclusion .....</b>                 | <b>61</b> |
| 7.1 Theoretical Contributions .....       | 62        |
| 7.2 Practical Implications .....          | 63        |
| 7.3 Limitations and Future Research ..... | 64        |
| <b>References .....</b>                   | <b>66</b> |
| <b>Appendix .....</b>                     | <b>77</b> |
| Appendix 1 List of Influencers .....      | 77        |
| Appendix 2 Influencer Content .....       | 79        |
| Appendix 3 Vocabularies of Motive .....   | 91        |
| Appendix 4 Justification .....            | 92        |
| Appendix 5 Values .....                   | 92        |
| Appendix 6 Codebook .....                 | 93        |

## Table of Figures

|                                                                                                                               |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1 Boltanski and Thévenot's Framework - Overview of seven orders of worth (Patriotta, 2010) .....                       | 24 |
| Figure 2 Theoretical Framework illustrating the relationships between ten types of motivational values (Schwartz, 2012) ..... | 27 |
| Figure 3 Conceptual Framework of Influencers Ethical Justifications .....                                                     | 31 |

## List of Tables

|                                                             |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Table 1 Justifications of Aesthetic Surgery Promotion ..... | 54 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----|

# **1 Introduction**

In this chapter we introduce the background and context of our research study on influencer marketing ethics, explaining the relevance of the topic in the context of aesthetic surgery promotion, and the research problem. Additionally, the purpose and contributions will be presented. Lastly, the structure of this study will be outlined.

## **1.1 Background**

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in social media marketing, specifically a proliferation of influencer marketing (Joshi et al. 2023). This development can be explained by globalization, a hyperconnected environment and extensive usage of social media by both consumers and marketers (Swaminathan et al. 2020). Additionally, previous research has acknowledged the persuasive power of social media influencers and the high impact of their produced content on consumers (Rach, 2021; Walker et al. 2021). In this work, influencer marketing is the compensation of individuals for posting about a product or service on social media (Heeris Christensen, 2022). Compensation may be in the form of money or free products and services. The focus is on social media influencers who are content creators sharing their personal experiences and opinions on social networking platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Due to their high influential power and reach, influencer marketing has become relevant for marketing practices in various industries.

In the medical industry the social media influencer has become a powerful tool of marketing for plastic surgery which will provide the context for this research study (Gupta et al. 2020; Shauly et al. 2023). According to Shauly et al. (2023), roughly half of the patients undergoing cosmetic procedures report being influenced by social media to consider undergoing such procedures indicating the high relevancy of using influencers in the growing aesthetic surgery industry. In this research we focus on aesthetic surgery content promoted by influencers on social media channels. Other terminologies of aesthetic surgery include “cosmetic surgery” and “plastic surgery” which will be used interchangeably to describe a wide range of beauty procedures such as rhinoplasty, abdominoplasty, Botox, lip fillers, implants, facelift, and liposuction. These are the most common aesthetic surgery procedures viewed by millions of TikTok users (Rach, 2021). It is important to note that medically relevant surgery will be excluded from the scope of this research, shifting the focus to invasive procedures with purely aesthetic purposes. The promotion of such aesthetic procedures which carry inherent risks

drives discussions on ethical considerations and potential negative impact on consumers. Additionally, general ethics in influencer marketing have not been clearly established.

According to Heeris Christensen (2022), digital ethics in the recently established creative work practice of influencer marketing are rather new and are still debated, as social media leaves influencers to work outside regulated ethical codes. Therefore, influencers manage their own moral constructs and must form ethical and moral standards for themselves through self-management in their influencer marketing work. Ethics, within the realm of philosophy, pertains to the moral guidelines dictating human conduct, directing both individuals and communities towards notions of what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable (White, 2017). We adopt the definition of marketing ethics by Eagle et al. (2020) to influencer marketing: *'Influencer marketing ethics is the systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions and behaviours of social media influencers and related institutions'*. More recent focus has been on transparent, trustworthy, and responsible marketing actions towards stakeholders (Eagle et al. 2020). Therefore, it is relevant for this research to discover how influencers are justifying the acceptability of their content, and which moral standards are their underlying guidance in their decision-making.

Previous research revolving around ethics and transparency in influencer marketing has been scarce, solely addressing a lack of transparency and the role of advertising disclosures (Hudders & Lou, 2022). For example, researchers have found that influencers are hesitant to disclose their sponsored content as it increases advertising recognition and may evoke resistance among followers making them feel that the influencer's content is less authentic and genuine. However, disclosures could lead to higher trustworthiness if the follower feels similar to the influencer (Hudders & Lou, 2022). Consequently, ethical principles guiding the production of sponsored content on social media platforms are not well understood. According to Gupta et al. (2020), research on influencer marketing is not well developed specifically in the context of social media sponsorship and paid promotion for aesthetic surgery posing a new ethical dilemma (Gupta et al. 2020). The consideration of ethics has previously been excluded from studies proving the impact of surgery related content on social media users' self-perception and purchase intention (Rach, 2021), indicating a need to address the research gap of influencer marketing ethics particularly in the context of aesthetic surgery.

The authors' conducted pilot study on women's experiences with aesthetic surgery promotion by social media influencers shed light on consumer's concerns of promoting aesthetic surgery from an ethical standpoint. Additionally, researchers have discovered that the normalisation of surgical enhancement through consistent advertising and consumer persuasion creates unhealthy cultural pressure to undergo invasive and risky procedures in the name of beauty providing arguments for the consideration and implementation of ethical guidelines (Griffiths & Mullock, 2017).

Furthermore, the influencer perspective is underexposed in current literature, as the main interest has been in the consumer behaviour perspective (Joshi et al. 2023; Hudders & Lou, 2022). Although studies have considered the effect of social media on influencers' wellbeing, they have not thoroughly explored the ethical decisions and trade-offs social media generates for the influencers (Heeris Christensen, 2022). Consequently, more in-depth research is needed on various moral dilemmas faced by social media influencers (Grgurić Čop et al. 2024).

Resulting from the limited research on ethical reasonings of aesthetic surgery promotion and sponsorship as well as a lack of knowledge on how influencers take ethical responsibility in consideration in their decision-making, the relevancy of this research topic is established. Our research will look at ethical justifications in influencer marketing and will take an influencer perspective to gain an in-depth understanding of the influencers' reasonings and justifications for the promotion of aesthetic surgery.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

While influencer marketing may seem like a harmless marketing technique, there are several ethical considerations that surround influencers advertising to prospective aesthetic surgery patients. Potential misconduct in the form of sharing false information or even addressing an audience that is not suitable could harm the consumer, brand, and influencer, setting multiple relationships at risk. Additionally, the normalization of cosmetic surgeries to keep up with unrealistic beauty standards and its influence on youth and children frames influencer marketing in the context of aesthetic surgery as an ethically contested issue and a significant research problem.

Most importantly, the health and safety of both the influencer and her followers are critical and exemplify why an ethical lens should be applied on influencer marketing. Cosmetic surgeries involve multiple health risks, and the procedures can lead to serious complications. In previous incidents young women have passed away as a result of cosmetic surgeries. A recent example is the Brazilian influencer Luana Andrade who died at age twenty-nine in November 2023 from a pulmonary embolism during knee liposuction surgery. She was a well-known reality show star with about half a million followers on Instagram (Hatcher, 2023). Another example is Kim Kardashian lookalike Christina Ashten Gourkani who suffered from cardiac arrest as a post plastic surgery complication (Firstpost, 2023). Consequently, the potential harm of cosmetic procedures needs to be considered in promotional content, providing accurate information about procedures, potential risks, and recovery processes, as well as promoting reputable and qualified healthcare professionals, enabling informed consent for consumers being exposed to such content. Furthermore, the protection of vulnerable audiences such as children and young adults, as well as the influencers' impact on society can pose a significant problem which is why we need to know about the influencers' justification and consideration of others in producing such ethically contested promotional content (Hudders & Lou, 2022).

As multiple stakeholders are involved in social media marketing there is a potential of unethical effects that could harm the different parties for example due to a lack of transparency and legitimacy of promotional content (Shirish, 2018). This could have negative consequences for on the one hand the reputation of the influencer whose success is enabled by trust and credibility with the audience, on the other hand involved brands and their reputation could be set at risk (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Also, the influencers well-being could be affected by their consumption of aesthetic surgery procedures leading us to question what motives influencers have for promoting beauty procedures and if they may objectify themselves in their work practice as an influencer (Hudders & Lou, 2022; Heeris Christensen, 2022).

Concluding from previously established arguments, influencer marketing ethics are a significant topic of research for this thesis and occur to be especially important in the context of influencers promoting aesthetic surgery on social media due to their impact on health and safety of multiple stakeholders. As the majority of research takes on the consumer perspective, we will adopt the viewpoint of the social media influencer. With a focus on ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery, ethical dilemmas and considerations around influencer

marketing will be thoroughly explored to contribute to the currently underdeveloped research field of influencer marketing ethics.

With our research question we seek to explore justifications of influencers' promotional activities, and how they take ethics and their impact on stakeholders in consideration. Furthermore, we aim to comprehend what kind of ideals are endorsed by social media influencers and how these, as well as potential principles, guide their decision-making and influencer work practice. By exploring what makes contested influencer content ethically sound, we aim to observe how influencers justify themselves and their responsibility in their role of the social media influencer. This leads us to following research question:

***How do Social Media Influencers justify the ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery?***

Our research purpose and our contributions to academical and practical knowledge will be elaborated in the following sub-chapters.

### **1.3 Research Purpose**

The purpose of our thesis exploring ethical justifications of social media influencers in promoting aesthetic surgery is to advance the understanding of influencer marketing ethics. Thereby, our findings can provide knowledge for influencers and their stakeholders.

Through observing and analysing the influencers' digitally shared content related to cosmetic procedures that were done without a medical need, we aim to understand their motives for the promotion of such body enhancing beauty ideals and procedures, in particular considering their audience. Our findings should enhance accountability and transparency in influencer marketing practices and serve as a resource for industry stakeholders, including influencers, brands, regulatory bodies, and healthcare professionals. Further, through the exploration of potential regulatory gaps, ethical guidelines, and industry standards we seek to inform industry practices and policies regarding ethical guidelines in the aesthetic surgery, and influencer marketing sector.

By raising awareness on ethical issues, our research will shed light on the ethicalities of influencer marketing tactics to ensure a further professionalization of the influencer practice and proper protection of involved stakeholders. By providing empirical evidence and theoretical insights, our thesis will enrich scholarly understanding of the ethical complexities at the intersection of the influencer marketing and aesthetic surgery domains which will be further elaborated in the *Contributions* sub-chapter.

#### **1.4 Contributions**

Theoretical contributions of this thesis will include advancing knowledge on ethical responsibility of influencers within aesthetic surgery promotion. Therefore, our research contributes to influencer marketing ethics, and fills the research gap of influencers' justifications for the ethically contested promotion of invasive beauty products and services as a new ethical dilemma in influencer marketing. The findings within the aesthetic surgery context may have broader implications for influencer practices in general, and regarding the promotion of other products and services. This is valuable specifically for the promotion of aesthetic surgery due to high risks and health implications but is also relevant for other areas and may be beneficial for the further professionalization of the influencer marketing work practice. Additionally, the thesis will aim to raise awareness of the ethical implications of influencer marketing among industry professionals, policymakers, and the general public, encouraging dialogue and action towards creating a more ethical and socially responsible digital marketing landscape. Our research can help achieve this by providing findings on what it means to act as an ethical influencer and propose guidelines for moral conduct of influencers, which in turn affect, involved stakeholders.

On a practical level, the thesis seeks to spark insights and recommendations for stakeholders involved in influencer marketing, including influencer agencies, cosmetic surgery clinics or regulatory bodies. By navigating best practices, ethical guidelines, and strategies for promoting transparency and accountability in social media influencer promotion of aesthetic surgery, the research will aim to inspire responsible marketing practices and the protection of the well-being and interests of influencers, as well as other stakeholders which may not be limited to the aesthetic surgery field but contribute to the wider influencer marketing practice.

## **1.5 Outline of the Thesis**

This thesis follows a structured outline comprising seven main sections. The introduction sets the stage for the research by providing background information on the topic of aesthetic surgery promotion made by social media influencers and outlining the research objectives and aims. Following this, the literature review critically examines existing literature and research findings relevant to the topic. Following chapter introduces the theoretical frames used for this study, as well as it provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework and key concepts. The methodology section outlines the research design, data collection method, and analytical procedures employed in the study, detailing how the research question will be answered and the data analysed, as well as it discusses quality of study and relevant ethical considerations. Subsequently, the results section introduces the findings of the research, presenting empirical data and discussing key findings in relation to the research objectives. The discussion section interprets and analyses the results in the context of the existing literature and theoretical frames, identifying patterns, themes, and implications. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings of the research, highlights practical implications, suggests avenues for future research, and addresses any limitations of the study, bringing the thesis to a close. Overall, the outlined structure ensures a systematic and logical progression of ideas, facilitating a clear understanding of the research process and outcomes.

## **2 Literature Review**

This literature review will critically discuss previous research studies and literature on the three relevant research streams of influencer marketing work, influencer marketing ethics and aesthetic surgery. Each paragraph begins with definitions and background for a thorough introduction and understanding, before delving deeper into the aforementioned streams. The literature review concludes with a critique on the presented prior research, framing the knowledge gap to be addressed in this thesis.

### **2.1 Influencer Marketing Work**

Influencer marketing is on the rise as marketers increasingly use influencers in their marketing strategies, an ever-growing set of social media users aim to become influencers, as well as the increasing amount of advertising and influencer agencies making influencer marketing a billion-dollar industry (Campbell & Rapp Farrell, 2020; Joshi et al. 2023). Social media

influencers (referred to as SMI's) have appeared in the early 2000's and have progressed from a hobby to a full-time professional career as social media has fostered new types of creative jobs such as influencer marketing (Joshi et al. 2023; Heeris Christensen, 2022).

As social media applications are being used in people's daily lives, they are highly influential and efficient, allowing for various benefits for influencer marketing especially in terms of increasing consumer's consumption practices (Alves et al. 2016). Through the new social media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation, as well as the development and sharing of user-generated content (Alalwan et al. 2017; Alves et al. 2016), influencers can share content on blogs, discussion forums, content, and feedback community sites as well as social networking sites (Alves et al. 2016; Sharma & Verma, 2018). Further, they are enabled to create and communicate valuable offerings between stakeholders (Alalwan et al. 2017) and establish a connection between brands and consumers (Paquette, 2013). From a business perspective, communicating through social media and influencer marketing offers significant benefits that can improve brand loyalty, awareness, recognition, and recall (Alves et al. 2016).

According to Campbell & Farrell (2020) influencer marketing describes "the practice of compensating individuals for posting about a product or service on social media". The compensation for the influencer varies from money to free products and services. Heeris Christensen (2022) adds to the definition that it is a professional marketing practice involving multiple stakeholders such as firms, media agencies, influencer agencies, and the influencers themselves. Elaborating on the definition it is important to understand that it is campaign work, where the influencer creates the online content, and is often managed by influencer agencies who communicate with stakeholders on behalf of the influencer, coordinate campaigns and manage their brands which include the influencer's private life (Heeris Christensen, 2022). Additionally, media agencies represent the firms marketing demands and set guidelines and approve the campaign.

Influencer marketing as a new type of work in the digital economy differs from traditional work due to social media accelerating the personalisation of marketing and the commercialization of people (Heeris Christensen, 2022). Therefore, it bears new work practices and ethical dilemmas which need to be explored. Argandona (2003) has elaborated how the revolution of informational and communication technologies affects almost all aspects of economy and people's lives, shapes creative work and introduces ethical challenges that come with this new

type of work. Hudders & Lou (2022) point out that previous research revolving around ethics in influencer marketing has been scarce, solely addressing a lack of transparency and the role of advertising disclosures. In the field of influencer marketing, digital ethics are not yet regulated, leaving digital workers to construct their own ethical and moral constructs (Heeris Christensen, 2022). Consequently, ethical principles guiding the influencers' work practice and the production of sponsored content on social media platforms are not well understood.

### 2.1.1 Social Media Influencers

For Joshi et al. (2023) social media influencers are regular people who have created an online presence and extensive network of followers, contrary to traditional celebrities who rely on their careers for popularity and influence. Rundin & Colliander (2021) define SMI's as online personalities that influence their followers on social media across one or more platforms. According to Campbell and Farrell (2020) an influencer posts to social media in exchange for compensation in form of money, free products, services, trips, or experiences. Furthermore, SMI's are content creators who broadcast their personal, everyday lives, experiences, and opinions (Heeris Christensen, 2022). Joshi et al. (2023) combines multiple definitions: "SMI's are people who develop and maintain a personal brand and a following on social media through posts that intertwine their personality and lifestyle with the products (e.g., goods, services, ideas, places, people) that they promote, which can influence the way their followers behave (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, preferences, choices, decisions), positively (e.g., purchase) or negatively (e.g., do not purchase)." (p.2).

As multiple scholars conclude, influencers emerge across a wide variety of age and product categories and differ in their branding and focus, follower base, engagement rates, monetary requirements for collaboration, and skill sets (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Campbell and Farrell (2020) illustrate that SMI's appear able to form around any topic for which a consumer audience exists, for example influencers can be elderly, unborn babies, AI-generated influencers, or pets.

From a brand perspective, influencers are experts at creating engaging social media content that is often seen as more authentic than brand-generated content, because consumers prefer subtly styles and personal stories on social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Social media users consider influencers as sources of inspiration informing them about the newest trends,

products, and brands and giving them trustworthy advice. Thus, they show greater acceptance of sponsored content due to the influencer's credibility (Hudders & Lou, 2022).

### 2.1.2 Influencer Criteria

According to prior research, social media influencers are categorised in different types often using quantitative criteria. For Joshi et al. (2023) influencers are segmented by the numbers of their followers, classifying them from low to high follower count as micro-, meso- and macro-influencers. In micro-influencer marketing, the practice is usually a hobby rather than the influencer's main occupation, thus the level of professionalism ranges (Heeris Christensen, 2022).

Campbell and Farrell (2020) disagree with a categorisation solely based on follower counts and introduce perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital as additional segmentation criteria. They distinguish five categories, namely celebrity influencers, mega influencers, macro influencers, micro influencers, and nano influencers. Their typology distinguishes nano influencers with under 10.000 followers as newcomers, micro influencers with up to 100.000 followers as rising stars, followed by macro influencers with up to one million followers, and macro-celebrity influencers as "the rich & famous" with more than one million followers. The higher the follower count, the higher is the perceived expertise and cultural capital, while the smaller influencers possess higher authenticity and accessibility (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

For Bakker (2018), further influencer criteria have been classified as the "4 R's", namely reach, relevance, resonance, and reputation. Reach represents the follower count as agreed by multiple authors as the major quantitative metric to distinguish influencers. The metric of relevance means how well the influencer fits the brand in terms of personality, content, and audience while resonance indicates their interaction with the audience. Lastly, reputation relates to the overall trustworthiness and credibility of the influencer from both the consumer and brand perspective (Bakker, 2018).

Apart from categorising influencers based on quantitative criteria, the influencers find themselves in one or more roles in the influencer marketing practice. For Joshi et al. (2023), the SMI's role is being a brand ambassador creating sponsored content with the aim to reach

goals such as increased brand image, engagement, and loyalty. Furthermore, SMI's roles can be revealed by the degree of control they assert in collaborations with brands, the three overarching roles being spokesperson, co-creator, and co-owner (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). Influencers create various values for the brand such as organic reach, engagement, post consistency, quality, and targeting, where they employ the roles of content producers, strategists, and community managers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

### 2.1.3 Risks of Influencer Marketing

Besides the fact that multiple scholars focus on the bright side of social media marketing (Alalwan et al. 2017; Paquette, 2013; Sharma & Verma, 2018), there is also a shadow side of this relatively new phenomena with implications for influencer marketing work (Shirish, 2018). Multiple stakeholders are involved including regulatory and public policy bodies, technology infrastructure providers, media platform providers, marketers, and users (Shirish, 2018). Apart from the beneficial roles social media influencers partake in, there are potential risks for the collaborating brands, consumers, and the influencers themselves (Hudders & Lou, 2022).

Based on the stakeholders' involvement, Shirish (2018) reports two types of constraints or unethical effects for social media marketing, namely intended and unintended constraints. Intended, structural constraints are linked to a lack of transparency and legitimacy, while unintended, behavioural constraints encompass the development of negative affect, cognition and behaviour among users, uninformed consent, and limited user privacy as well as controversial advertising. Concluding from this, policies, practices, and regulations are necessary to tackle these constraints systematically to reduce potential negative impact of social media marketing on various stakeholders (Shirish, 2018).

Campbell & Farrell (2020) list risks for the brand which include diluted brand meanings, negative associations with personal indiscretions or scandal of the influencer, influencers using paid follower or engagement bots, and inadequate disclosure.

For consumers, influencers may emphasize physical appearance over well-being in their content, and the frequent exposure to such idealized images may negatively impact the mental health and wellbeing of the followers. Especially young or vulnerable audiences may compare

themselves to the influencer and have feelings of envy towards the looks or lifestyle of the influencer, being evoked by social comparison processes (Hudders & Lou, 2022).

Also, influencers may engage in social comparison and a continuous search for likes and popularity leading to pressure on themselves and potential depression and decreased wellbeing (Hudders & Lou, 2022). Additionally, brands may have strong demands and expectations offering limited financial compensation for the influencer. In addition, influencers privacy and free time can be limited by the pressure to satisfy demands of multiple stakeholders including advertisers, followers, and management (Hudders & Lou, 2022).

## **2.2 Influencer Marketing Ethics**

The rapid evolution and diverse landscape of digital marketing and social media platforms have led to a noticeable absence of clear ethical guidelines within both industry practices and academic discourse. One notable area witnessing significant growth, yet fraught with ethical ambiguities, is the realm of influencer-generated content (Eagle et al. 2020).

According to Eagle et al. (2020), a significant ethical issue surrounding influencers pertains to the disclosure of commercial relationships with brands. Studies reveal that in the absence of such disclosure, followers often assume the impartiality of the content. This blurs the line between paid promotions and organic content, potentially leading to deceptive practices where audiences are unaware of the commercial nature of the content. Furthermore, the regulatory landscape regarding disclosure varies across different regions. While Europe and the USA mandate disclosure of commercial relationships in promotional content, the specifics of these regulations differ. Additionally, the codes of conduct and terms of service across social media platforms exhibit complexity in nomenclature, format, and content (Eagle et al. 2020).

Influencer marketing can be considered as a part of business ethics. According to Iqbal et al. (2023), it is essential to discuss ethics in influencer marketing because it ensures transparency, trust, and accountability in advertising practices. Looking back, until the 1982 Bates Supreme Court decision, cosmetic surgery promotion was largely prohibited in mass media, but today social media influencers have since become a significant marketing force for these procedures, highlighting a need for further exploration into the content characteristics of cosmetic surgery advertising in academic research, which remains relatively understudied despite its

controversial and competitive nature (Hennink-Kaminski, Reid & King, 2012). Hennink-Kaminski, Reid, and King (2012) also highlight the importance of adherence to ethical codes and regulations in advertising practices within the medical field, particularly in cosmetic surgery, indicating a need for further research to explore similar considerations in influencer marketing ethics, which in the recent years have become some of the main promotional forces in the field. In support of this, Gosman (2018) mentions the importance of upholding ethical and professional standards in social media engagement within the field of plastic surgery, highlighting the need for clear guidelines and responsible behaviour to maintain the integrity of the profession and ensure patient safety and trust, which parallels the ethical considerations applicable to influencer marketing practices.

Borchers and Enke (2022) discuss that the existent research on influencer marketing ethics tends to focus on single concepts, authenticity for instance, however these singular identifications are not able to cover the nuanced ethical considerations present in undisclosed paid partnerships, marketing to minors or aesthetic surgery promotion, for instance. Additionally, evaluating the ethics of influencer marketing is challenging since social media influencers lack a leading professional association (Wellman et al. 2020). It is important to improve the current state of the lack of literature on influencer marketing ethics, as according to Javakhishvili (2023), persistent ethical and transparency issues are expected to greatly impact influencer marketing in the future.

### **2.3 Aesthetic Surgery**

Rising demand for beauty enhancement through cosmetic surgery is seen, together with the growth of the cosmetic surgery industry and increased normalization of undergoing such procedures as a lifestyle choice (Griffiths & Mullock, 2017). Evidence shows that media, social media, celebrity endorsement and advertising are central to this normalization, supporting the shift from being discreet about surgical enhancement in the past, to open admittance and even celebration across global media (Griffiths & Mullock, 2017). While the normalization encompasses a wide range of consumers, women are predominantly undergoing aesthetic procedures.

According to Griffiths and Mullock (2017), “Plastic surgery is surgery undertaken for the purposes of altering the appearance of a patient.” (p.222). It is the medical subfield which has

purely aesthetic reasons and cannot be justified on health grounds contrary to reconstructive surgery which is performed based on medical need to improve functions and abnormal structures caused by trauma, infection, or disease (Hennink-Kaminski, 2006; Griffiths & Mullock, 2017). For Hennink-Kaminski (2006), “Cosmetic surgery is elective, and demand originates from marketing efforts and other sources of cultural pressure, as opposed to a patient’s physical needs.” (p.8).

### 2.3.1 Social Media Marketing in Aesthetic Surgery

In the field of aesthetic surgery social media has become a popular marketing tool for the promotion of plastic surgeons, their businesses, and surgery procedures for various reasons (Gupta et al. 2020). According to Sharma and Verma (2018) and Paquette (2013), real-time and two-way communication, greater involvement of consumers, and a new way to listen to consumer needs and real-time feedback has established social media as a key marketing channel and necessity for businesses to sustain a competitive advantage.

The Aesthetic Surgery Journal discusses and reviews literature on the role of social media in aesthetic surgery, benefits and ethical considerations related to its usage as a marketing tool. According to previous studies, patients strongly rely on social media to gather information on their treatments, educate themselves and choose plastic surgery clinics (Gupta et al. 2020). The broad outreach, peer-to-peer education, and learning, as well as patient engagement proves beneficial for the plastic surgeon to use social media (Shauly et al. 2023). According to Shauly et al. (2023), multiple articles give social media marketing content recommendations for the plastic surgeons including age-specific marketing guidelines, recommended content, and platforms to leverage social media as a powerful tool to engage potential patients and increase revenue.

### 2.3.2 Impact of Aesthetic Surgery Promotion

The promotion of aesthetic surgery can have significant impact on societal norms and behaviours as social media influencers may shape its normalization through setting certain body ideals with their promotional content. Content showing surgically modified bodies may lead to unrealistic beauty standards influencing consumers attitudes and intentions for cosmetic procedures that may negatively affect their mental and physical health (Walker et al. 2021).

Therefore, aesthetic surgery involves multiple risks which range from physical to cultural as the invasive procedures can both harm the physical and mental health of the consumer, as well as its normalization impacts society, beauty standards and norms leading to cultural pressure. There are risks for the consumers, as well as pitfalls for plastic surgeons and businesses (Shauly et al. 2023; Gupta et al. 2020). For Griffiths and Mullock (2017), broader implications of cosmetic surgery reinforcing body image concerns and culturally prescribed beauty standards are the contribution to a culture that distains aging and also promotes inequality between people who have the resources to enhance their appearance and those who cannot afford it.

Image-centred social media networking sites such as Instagram have become an outlet for individuals, especially for women who depict the highest usage of social media (Bell, 2016). In recent years, scholars have discovered a relationship between social media usage and body image suggesting that the use of social networking sites is associated with body image concerns (Fioravanti et al. 2022). According to Bell (2016), “Body image is the way one views themselves and their own bodies, sometimes in relation to others.” (p.7). Through social media images and visuals such as selfies, close-ups and full body shots, body and beauty standards suggesting an ‘ideal’ body to be obtained by women are constantly promoted (Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017; Bell, 2016). Especially social networking sites focus on appearance as users post content in form of images that often present an attractive, thin, and fit body portrayal which is enhanced by specific posing, the application of filters, or editing (Fioravanti et al. 2022). According to Bertilsson & Gillberg (2017), the ideal body is increasingly separated from reality by using such alteration techniques especially in advertisements, and the prevalence of cosmetic surgery conveying unhealthy beauty standards.

Furthermore, the consistent exposure of women to these idealised body standards which often promote unhealthy thinness, flawless complexions, and perfect physical features that may be unattainable can lead to pressure conforming to mentioned standards, influence body-normativity, and cause negativity and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Bell, 2016; Walker, 2021). Multiple studies imply that the primary conveyance on social media how women are supposed to diet, exercise and obtain plastic surgery still encourages that women should be thin (Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017). The authors conclude the Western female beauty ideal to be a thin and lean body with a small waist, long legs, flat stomach, narrow hips, in combination with large breasts and toned muscles (Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017).

Griffiths and Mullock (2017) further point out the phenomena of cosmetic tourism, describing an increasing amount of people travelling for cosmetic procedures with cost being the main motivating factor for this decision. They propose that medical ethics around potentially harmful aesthetic surgery should be questioned, and regulatory approaches tightened to protect consumers from physical and cultural risks that come with the ideal of the surgically enhanced woman, especially in a global context.

## **2.4 Critique of Prior Research**

To conclude the review of previously conducted research on the three literature streams of influencer marketing work, influencer marketing ethics and aesthetic surgery, critique will be given to outline the research gap addressed in this study.

Prior research on influencer marketing work emphasises that influencer marketing is a new work practice lacking digital ethics and principles, thus bearing new ethical dilemmas (Argandona, 2003; Heeris Christensen, 2022). However, apart from outlining threefold risks for brands, consumers, and the influencers themselves, researchers do not address specific dilemmas or solutions (Hudders & Lou, 2022). Apart from Shirish (2018) mentioning that policies, practices, and regulations should be established for the influencer work practice, there is not much known about how to tackle the mentioned new ethical dilemmas and introduce guidelines for influencer marketing work.

The stream of influencer marketing ethics further illustrates how understudied the influencer practice is, especially concerning business ethics. Researchers point out the importance of adherence to ethical codes and regulations, as influencers become more powerful and competitive (Hennink-Kaminski, Reid & King, 2012). Apart from highlighting the factors of transparency, trust, and accountability in marketing practices, Gosman (2018) also indicates a need for guidelines in the influencer profession, however no in-depth knowledge has been given.

Aesthetic surgery research links the increase of social media and influencer marketing to the growth of the aesthetic surgery industry, together with the normalization and high prevalence of aesthetic surgery procedures across the media (Griffiths & Mullock, 2017; Gupta et al. 2020). Authors illustrate the highly influential and popular marketing tool, emphasizing the

broad impact it can have on societal norms, behaviours such as the cosmetic tourism phenomena, and idealised beauty standards (Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017; Bell, 2016). Even though high impact and various risks are presented in prior research, little is known about the long-term influences, influencers motives and justifications, as well as prevention of mentioned risks.

Concluding from the relevant streams, research on influencer marketing work in the context of ethics and aesthetic surgery has been scarce, lacking knowledge on the ethical justifications of social media influencers in their promotional, and competitive work practice. Therefore, a clear research gap of ethically contested promotion by influencers is seen, proving particularly relevant regarding potential risks of influencer marketing as outlined by prior researchers. In the promotion of aesthetic surgery, high impact on consumers, as well as extreme risks regarding health and safety indicate high relevance for further research in this specific context.

### **3 Theoretical Frames**

In this chapter, we investigate the theoretical underpinnings that inform our understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding aesthetic surgery promotion by social media influencers. Drawing from Ethics, Boltanski and Thévenot's Theory of Justification, Mills' Vocabularies of Motive, and Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive foundation for examining the ethical considerations and behavioural dynamics inherent in the promotion of aesthetic surgery by influencers. Each theory will be explained, and critique will be highlighted which later on serves the construction of the conceptual framework for this study. At the end of this chapter, we argue for the combination of the chosen theories and combine them into one framework which enables us to answer our research question of influencers justifications for the ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery.

#### **3.1 Ethics**

Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, refers to the moral principles that govern human behaviour, guiding individuals, and societies towards what is considered right or wrong (White, 2017). Striker (1987) further explains that the term "ethics" itself comes from the Greek word *ethos*, which upon translation has a meaning relating to the character of an individual.

In a review of Immanuel Kant's previous work, Denis (2003) brings up a relevant point - the general public seems to be more at ease with dichotomies, or in other words, two opposites, in life; but ethics usually turns out to be more complex than that. Marcus and Hargrave (2020) conclude the discussion by suggesting that ethics is a topic for which there is never a "yes" or "no" answer to a moral dilemma - instead, numerous considerations are weighed to improve the overall conditions, rather than to the advantage of any one particular group. Therefore, ethics are very nuanced and can be understood through various perspectives and frameworks.

From several common ethical frameworks, the *deontological framework* based on the work of philosopher Immanuel Kant was chosen for this study to predict and resolve ethical challenges. According to Eagle et al. (2020) deontology derives from the Greek word duty and proposes ethical 'absolutes' that are universally applicable. It focuses on the inherent moral duties and principles that guide actions, regardless of their consequences. Thus, it accepts that actions may have unintended negative consequences despite differing intentions (Eagle et al. 2020).

In a critical review, Eagle et al. (2020) point out several weaknesses of the common ethical frameworks such as being developed prior to the digital age and lacking analytical power, limiting the domain where they apply, lacking conceptual definitions and relationships between variables. Compared to the teleological framework for instance, deontology does not consider the potential impacts of, and reasonings for actions such as egoism or utilitarianism, where the results determine its ethicality. Therefore, critics argue that deontology may justify harmful actions if they were performed with good intentions.

### **3.2 Boltanski and Thévenot's Theory of Justification**

The Theory of Justification by Boltanski and Thévenot's originated in 1991 with the central thesis that agreement and discord in societies rely on six 'orders of worth' or 'common worlds' which are systematic and coherent principles of evaluation that can exist in the same social space (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Patriotta, 2010).

The Theory of Justification follows an approach based on moral sociology, using ethnomethodological insights of actors, disputes, and controversies as a methodological research entry point (Gadinger, 2016). Boltanski and Thévenot understand justification as a social practice through which different moral claims are tested in legitimacy struggles under

conditions of fragility, uncertainty, and social disorder. Through dealing with conflicting legitimacy claims, people must pass critical moments and tests to coordinate their daily lives. In the theorists' view, justification is always related to critique, and this interplay is driven by claims of moral rightness (Gadinger, 2016).

The six ‘common worlds’, as displayed in Figure 1, are the *civic* world, the world of *fame*, the *market* world, the *industrial* world, the *domestic* world, and the *inspired* world, as well as the *green* world as a later seventh extension. The ‘common worlds’ are distinguished based on modes of evaluation, tests or values, forms of proof, qualified objects, human beings, time formation, and space formation. For example, the market world includes the values of competition and profit, while the inspired world emphasizes creativity, emotional expression, and passion. Another common world is Fame where public opinion is valued, the state of worth is celebrity and prestige, and evaluation takes place through public relations and recognition. Referring from this, the main distinctions between the worlds are made between value, state of worth and evaluation.

Table I. Overview of the seven orders of worth in the consolidated framework of Boltanski and Thévenot

| <i>‘Common worlds’</i>     | <i>Market</i>                             | <i>Industrial</i>                                       | <i>Civic</i>                                                | <i>Domestic</i>                       | <i>Inspired</i>                                 | <i>Fame</i>                       | <i>Green</i>                                              |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Mode of evaluation (worth) | Price, cost                               | Technical efficiency                                    | Collective welfare                                          | Esteem, reputation                    | Grace, singularity, creativeness                | Renown, fame                      | Environmental friendliness                                |
| Test                       | Market competitiveness                    | Competence, reliability, planning                       | Equality and solidarity                                     | Trustworthiness                       | Passion, enthusiasm                             | Popularity, audience, recognition | Sustainability, renewability                              |
| Form of relevant proof     | Monetary                                  | Measurable: criteria, statistics                        | Formal, official                                            | Oral, exemplary, personally warranted | Emotional involvement and expression            | Semiotic                          | Ecological ecosystem                                      |
| Qualified objects          | Freely circulating market good or service | Infrastructure, project, technical object, method, plan | Rules and regulations, fundamental rights, welfare policies | Patrimony, locale, heritage           | Emotionally invested body or item, the sublime  | Sign, media                       | Pristine wilderness, healthy environment, natural habitat |
| Qualified human beings     | Customer, consumer, merchant, seller      | Engineer, professional, expert                          | Equal citizens, solidarity unions                           | Authority                             | Creative beings, artists                        | Celebrity                         | Environmentalists, ecologists                             |
| Time formation             | Short-term, flexibility                   | Long-term planned future                                | Perennial                                                   | Customary part                        | Eschatological, revolutionary, visionary moment | Vogue, trend                      | Future generations                                        |
| Space formation            | Globalization                             | Cartesian space                                         | Detachment                                                  | Local, proximal anchoring             | Presence                                        | Communication network             | Planet ecosystem                                          |

Source: Thévenot et al. (2000, p. 241).

Figure 1 Boltanski and Thévenot's Framework - Overview of seven orders of worth (Patriotta, 2010)

According to Patriotta (2010) Boltanski and Thévenot pay attention to the material dimension of justification, pointing out that justifications involve more than just ‘words’ or ‘accounts’. For example, agreement must be reached through ‘tests of worth’ involving objects. According to the theory, actors are agentic in criticizing and arguing with one another, in challenging institutions, and coming to agreement (Patriotta, 2010). However, due to the uncertainty and

complexity of Boltanski and Thévenot's seven worlds, some scholars find the theory hard to grasp (Gadinger, 2016).

In critical review, Boltanski and Thévenot perceive the social realm as fundamentally shaped by moral justifications across various spheres. However, according to Honneth (2010) their exclusive focus on moral philosophy neglects important sociological structures and alternative non-moral action orientations. They overlook the investigation into how moral convictions crystallize within institutions as well as the possibility of non-moral interests influencing social reproduction remains unexplored (Honneth, 2010).

### **3.3 Mills' Vocabularies of Motive**

Mills (1940) introduced the sociological theory of language and psychology, named Vocabularies of Motive. His focus was clearly not on inner states of drivers or needs, but in how people would develop and articulate reasons for their behaviour in different social situations (Mohammed & Larson, 2013). Accordingly, he approached linguistic behaviour as a social function and indicator of actions, rather than fixed states in individuals (Mills, 1940).

In Mills (1940) original paper he refers to Max Weber's definition of motives as "a complex of meaning, which appears to the actor himself or to the observer to be an adequate ground for his conduct" (p. 906). According to Campbell (1991) motives are no more than words used to account for conduct in situations when questioned by others. He describes four steps which include the identification of situations where motive imputation and avowal occur, the identification of typical vocabularies used, the examination of reasons for the use of some motives over others, and lastly the exploration of the vocabularies' functions in relation to actions and interactions. Mills (1940) gives motives the function of being accepted justifications for present, future, and past acts. Motives are not used to describe experienced social actions and stating reasons, but they are social instruments influencing others as well as the actor himself.

An important requirement of analysing vocabularies of motive is the societal situation in which they are used, thus they must be situated. Motives are used to justify or criticise an act, thus are linked to situations, conduct and norms. Consequently, motives vary in content and character based on societal structure and context, and there is no value of exploring them without

regarding them in the mentioned structure and context (Mills, 1940). Mohammed and Larson (2013) extend that not only situations have their set of vocabularies of motives, but also institutions such as law or medicine would have motives at hand to justify lines of behaviour. Furthermore, motives can be linked to ethical and religious terminologies, meaning that vocabularies of moral motives are used to define "good" and "bad", the lingual behaviour being part of social control (Mills, 1940).

Campbell (1991) has a critical perspective on Mills' Vocabularies of Motive acknowledging that the vocabulary approach was only pursued by a limited number of researchers, therefore there has been no significant effort to follow his terminologies. In sociological theory he points out the weakness of lacking an adequate concept and workable theory of motive. Campbell (1991) argues that Mills associated vocabularies of motive too closely with social positions and failed to recognize additional functions of the individual. In Mills' theory it is unclear how individuals decide between vocabularies, and why the original focus by Max Weber on meanings has shifted to words and talk (Campbell, 1991).

### **3.4 Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values**

Values, representing what is significant to individuals in life, encompass a wide array of desirable goals that motivate actions and serve as standards guiding the selection and evaluation of behaviours (Schwartz, 2012). Theory of Basic Human Values, developed by a social psychologist Shalom H. Schwartz (1992), offers a comprehensive framework in pursuit of understanding the fundamental motivations driving human behaviour and attitudes across cultures. According to this theory, individuals hold a set of universal values that guide their actions and decisions in various contexts (Schwartz, 2012). These values are organized into a hierarchical structure, with each value representing a distinct motivational goal (see Figure 2). For instance, individuals prioritize self-direction, seeking independent thought and action, creativity, and freedom. They also strive for stimulation, seeking excitement, novelty, and variety in life experiences. Additionally, hedonism drives individuals to pursue pleasure, enjoyment, and gratification of desires, while achievement motivates them to strive for personal success, competence, and mastery. Power represents the desire for social status, dominance, and control over others, while security involves seeking safety, stability, and predictability in one's environment. Conformity values tradition, obedience, and social norms, while tradition emphasizes embracing cultural heritage, customs, and religious beliefs.

Benevolence values concern for the welfare of others, altruism, and empathy, while universalism prioritizes principles of equality, justice, tolerance, and environmental sustainability (Schwartz, 2012).

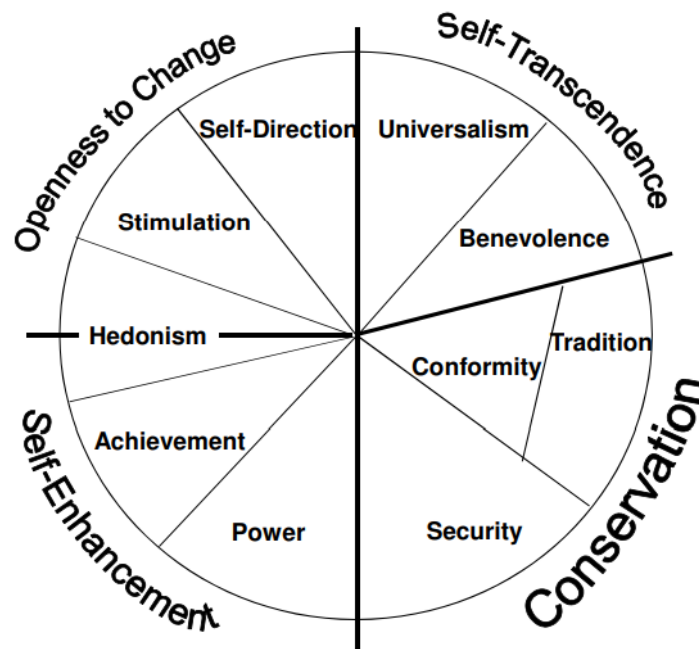


Figure 2 Theoretical Framework illustrating the relationships between ten types of motivational values (Schwartz, 2012)

Schwartz's theory suggests that the interplay between these values influences individuals' attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and decision-making processes across different contexts and situations (Schwartz, 1994). Individuals prioritise certain values over others based on their personal experiences, cultural background, and socialization processes (Schwartz, 2012). The theory has been widely applied in various fields, including psychology, sociology, marketing, and cross-cultural studies, to understand human behaviour and values systems (Czupryna et al. 2024). Researchers have utilized this framework to investigate topics such as consumer behaviour, organizational culture, political attitudes, and interpersonal relationships (Eibels-Spanyi & Hofmeister-Toth, 2013; Rosario, Carmen & Simonetti, 2014). While the theory has been applied to investigate attitudes towards social media activity and influencer content in relation to the portrayed values, little has been done so far in terms of analysing the values of influencers themselves (Nyländen, 2020).

While Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the motivational underpinnings of human behaviour, it is not without its criticisms in academia. One critique is that the theory tends to oversimplify the complexities of human values and behaviour by categorizing values into discrete types (Bardi & Schwartz,

2003). Critics argue that this oversimplification may not accurately capture the multifaceted nature of individual values and their interactions (Strasheim & Ungerer, 2017). Additionally, the universal applicability of the theory across diverse cultural contexts has been questioned, as cultural variations may influence the salience and prioritization of different values (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011). Moreover, some researchers have suggested that the hierarchical structure proposed by Schwartz may not adequately capture the dynamic nature of value priorities, which can fluctuate based on situational factors and personal experiences (Skimina et al. 2018). Despite these criticisms, Schwartz's theory remains a valuable framework for exploring the underlying motivations driving human behaviour, but researchers must be mindful of its limitations and context-specific nuances.

### **3.5 Conceptual Framework**

This sub-chapter depicts how the previously explained theories will be used to examine the ethical justifications of influencers in the promotion of aesthetic surgery. After arguing for each theory, an original framework for this thesis is presented which combines the theories in a way that will answer our research question and discover the influencers' justifications for an ethically contested phenomenon.

First, ethics are a relevant theoretical frame and the basis of this research as we explore influencer marketing ethics in the context of aesthetic surgery promotion. Exploring influencer marketing ethics can benefit from using the deontological ethical perspective which focuses on the inherent moral duties and principles that guide actions, regardless of their consequences. In the context of influencer marketing, this framework could emphasize principles such as honesty, transparency, and respect for individuals' autonomy. When examining influencer marketing practices through a deontological lens, we could assess whether social media influencers are adhering to ethical principles in their intentions and actions, regardless of the outcomes. This includes considerations such as if they are providing accurate information in their promotion, building trust, and showing consideration for their audience. By applying the deontological framework, we can critically evaluate influencer marketing practices and reasonings based on ethical principles rather than solely focusing on the outcomes or consequences.

Influencers must perform continuous “justification work” for their promotional work towards stakeholders, including followers, media and influencer agencies which may have conflicting values. These value conflicts can be understood using Boltanski and Thévenot’s justification theory placing influencers in a social world surrounded by a plurality of orders of worth. According to Patriotta et al. (2010), these higher common principles reflect the degree of legitimacy of certain rules and values in society and define appropriate forms of conduct. However, as the social order is negotiated on an ongoing basis, legitimacy is achieved through public debate among stakeholders who must engage in continuous work of justification across available orders of worth, in order to maintain an acceptable level of legitimacy for their actions (Patriotta et al. 2010). To understand the influencer’s ethical reasonings, Boltanski and Thévenot’s framework will be used to explore how influencers use orders of worth to justify themselves and legitimize their actions. Influencer marketing of aesthetic surgery is an especially interesting setting for applying the justification framework as sponsorship and paid promotion of invasive and risky procedures frame a new ethical dilemma. Furthermore, digital ethics of influencer marketing, which can be seen as institutional logics, are not clearly defined, leaving influencers without appropriate forms of conduct apart from their own moral standards or orders of worth.

To analyse promotional content by social media influencers the Vocabularies of Motive theory by Mills is valuable in connecting the language and communication used in the content to the influencers’ ethical reasonings for their behaviour (Mills, 1940). According to Mills (1940) recognizing the social function of linguistic behaviour helps to grasp complex meanings called motives. Through identifying the typical vocabularies used by content creators to influence others as well as themselves, we can examine how influencers justify their lines of behaviour, and what their moral or ethical motives are (Larson, 2019).

Furthermore, applying Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values to social media influencers in the context of their aesthetic surgery promotion provides valuable insights into the underlying motivations driving their behaviour. Influencers may prioritize values such as hedonism, emphasizing the pursuit of pleasure and gratification, as they showcase the transformative benefits of aesthetic procedures to their online audience (Schwartz, 1992). Additionally, the value of achievement may drive influencers to seek personal success and recognition through partnerships with cosmetic surgery clinics, aiming to enhance their social status and influence within the digital sphere (Schwartz, 1994). Furthermore, the value of self-

direction may manifest as influencers express their autonomy and creativity in crafting content that aligns with their personal brand and aesthetic preferences (Schwartz, 1994). However, conflicts may arise when influencers have to navigate between values such as tradition, which emphasises adherence to cultural norms and conservative ideals, and self-enhancement, which prioritises personal growth and individuality (Schwartz, 1992). Utilising Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values enables a deeper examination of the underlying motivations and drivers of behaviour among social media influencers in their promotion of aesthetic surgery. Additionally, stakeholders, such as advertising agencies, can develop more ethical and effective strategies for engaging with these influential individuals in the promotion of aesthetic surgery once an understanding is established.

To conclude, we build an intricate theoretical framework for this research study as seen in Figure 3 combining the four theoretical frames of Ethics, Justification, Vocabularies of Motive, and Basic Human Values. These perspectives offer a comprehensive foundation for examining the ethical justifications inherent in the promotional content on aesthetic surgery by social media influencers. Using Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values, we can understand underlying motivations and values of influencers that form their ethical standards and behaviour from a psychological perspective. Additionally, using the Theory of Justification and Vocabularies of Motive we can focus on the social situations in which influencers justify their actions when questioned by stakeholders such as their followers, informing us of their moral motives and orders of worth from a sociological perspective.

Based on the critiques of each theory, in this unique combination they can complement each other and give insights into nuanced ethics that should be understood using diverse approaches and perspectives. While Schwartz's Value Theory may not accurately capture the multifaceted nature of individual values and their interactions (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003), the sociological theory of Justification is based on the social context and can enable higher accuracy of findings on the influencers reasonings. Mills Theory may associate motives too closely with social positions (Campbell, 1991); however, Schwartz's theory can contribute to this potential lack of additional functions of the individual and its values. Consequently, an in-depth understanding of influencers ethical reasonings for the promotion of aesthetic procedures will be enabled through a multi-level analysis, and intricate conclusions on the ethics of influencer marketing can be formulated from a deontological perspective that portrays inherent moral principles that guide influencers' actions, regardless of their impact.

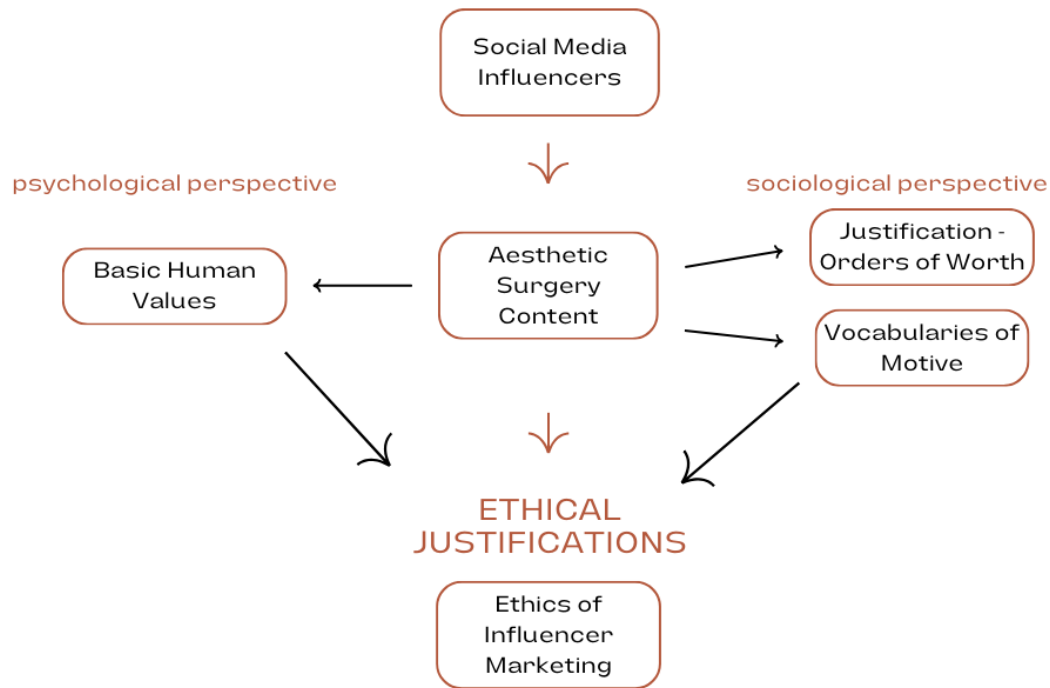


Figure 3 Conceptual Framework of Influencers Ethical Justifications

## 4 Methodology

The following chapter will outline the methodological framework guiding the thesis, putting forth the rationale behind the chosen research methods, data collection technique, and analytical procedures to investigate the research question and objectives at hand. The chapter will begin with a discussion regarding the research philosophy, followed by research design and data collection method chosen for this research, moving on to sampling, empirical analysis, and quality of study. Final sub-chapters will touch upon transferability of findings and ethics of netnography. The aim of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for an insightful and in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between ethical considerations and promotional practices within the context of aesthetic surgery promotion on social media sites.

### 4.1 Research Philosophy

For this thesis exploring ethical considerations and justifications in the promotion of aesthetic surgery by social media influencers, a relativist ontological perspective is chosen, as it suggests that reality is subjective and socially constructed, acknowledging that different individuals and groups may have diverse interpretations and understandings of ethical norms and

responsibilities (Easterby-Smith et al. 2017). In the rapidly changing landscape of influencer marketing within aesthetic surgery promotion, it is important to capture the nuances and complexities of contemporary practices. Moreover, a relativist ontological perspective allows us to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to ethics, acknowledging the cultural, social, and personal factors that shape individuals' ethical decision-making processes. By embracing relativism, an in-depth exploration of how ethical norms are constructed, negotiated, and contested by influencers within this evolving context can take place.

Complementing our ontological perspective, a social constructionist epistemological stance for this thesis is chosen. Social constructionism aligns with the qualitative nature of the research, as it seeks to understand the portrayed subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of social media influencers in the promotion of aesthetic surgery (Easterby-Smith et al. 2017). One of the key strengths of social constructionism is its focus on uncovering the underlying meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to their experiences and interactions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Within the context of aesthetic surgery promotion, ethical considerations are not solely determined by objective criteria but are shaped by a multitude of factors, as mentioned previously. Through a social constructionist lens, we are able to explore how these factors intersect and interact to construct influencers' behaviour in their promotional activities of aesthetic surgery.

The planned methodological approach will follow a structured progression through key stages of inquiry, as advocated by Easterby-Smith et al. (2017). Initially, a comprehensive review of existing literature on influencer marketing ethics in the context of aesthetic surgery was conducted to establish a foundational understanding of the subject matter. This examination encompassed a wide range of sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals and books. By synthesizing diverse perspectives and insights from existing literature, as well as discussing the theoretical background and the critical perspectives of the current research, the literature review informed the development of a conceptual framework that guided the subsequent phases of the research. Following this, primary data collection took place through netnography of social media influencers' posts in relation to aesthetic surgery promotion, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their content, practices, and engagement within the industry.

The choice of this data collection method aligns with the ontological stance of relativism and epistemological stance of social constructionism of this thesis, as the subjective nature of

reality is able to be acknowledged and the importance of understanding how meaning is socially constructed through interactions and interpretations can be emphasised. Afterwards, the gathered primary data underwent a thorough process of content analysis. Through this method, key themes, patterns, and insights were extracted from the data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the ethical considerations surrounding influencer marketing in the context of aesthetic surgery promotion. This analytical approach, rooted in abductive reasoning, involved iteratively moving between the empirical findings and previously established theoretical frameworks, allowing for the exploration of emergent themes and the formulation of new insights, answering the research question of this thesis. In the following sub-chapters, the choices and processes relating to primary data collection and analysis will be explained in greater detail.

## **4.2 Research Design**

When crafting the research design for this thesis, a deliberate choice was made to adopt a qualitative approach over a quantitative one. As discussed previously, the current main measures of success surrounding social media influencers are of quantitative nature, including the number of followers and likes on posts. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the risk of potential manipulation of the metrics due to the possibility of paid followers or bots, and the unmistakable lack of existing qualitative investigation regarding the subject (Cho et al. 2022). Additionally, according to Vrontis et al. (2021), due to the novelty of influencer marketing as a research area and the complex connections between variables within this field, there is a pressing need for additional qualitative investigations to delve deeper into this emerging phenomenon, thus facilitating the advancement of knowledge through theory expansion which could lead to an improvement of industry practices. Therefore, the decision to adopt a qualitative research design was made with the hope of contributing to the existing research gap, as this thesis will explore the nuanced ethical considerations in the online sharing of aesthetic surgery by social media influencers. Qualitative research design allows for a flexible and exploratory process that is in line with the complexity of the phenomenon being studied in this thesis. Moreover, qualitative inquiry facilitates a thorough exploration of individuals' experiences, offering researchers the opportunity to uncover issues as perceived from the standpoint of the research participants themselves (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020).

Additionally, qualitative research design enables the researchers to prioritize depth over breadth in the investigation. Rather than seeking to generalize findings to a larger population, qualitative research focuses on providing detailed and rich descriptions of specific phenomena within their respective context (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This depth of analysis allows us to uncover the underlying meanings, motivations, and contextual factors directing social media influencers' ethical considerations when promoting aesthetic surgery online. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the world becomes a collection of representations when qualitative methods are used, and as mentioned previously in the Contributions sub-chapter, through those representations we strive to deepen the knowledge regarding ethical perspectives of social media influencers and consequently inspire more responsible and ethical marketing practices (Ritchie et al. 2013).

### **4.3 Data Collection Method**

Choosing the right data collection method can be considered to be one of the most crucial decisions in the thesis writing process, as an inappropriate method might lead to imprecise research findings (Mwita, 2022). The data collection method employed for this thesis is netnography, chosen for its suitability in exploring the ethical justifications of social media influencers promoting aesthetic surgery online. Netnography involves observing, interpreting, and analysing the behaviours and interactions of individuals within online spaces, such as social media platforms, making it a valuable method for this thesis investigating the complex dynamics of influencer ethical considerations in the digital age (Kozinets, 2019).

Initially, another primary data collection method was considered for this thesis in the form of semi-structured interviews with social media influencers. By allowing for open-ended questions and probing, semi-structured interviews enable participants to elaborate on their experiences, thereby providing rich and detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Bryman, 2016). However, it proved challenging to gain informants for this research, as many influencers were safeguarded by their managers or requested financial reimbursement for their participation. This posed organisational and ethical challenges, as compensating influencers would compromise the integrity of the research findings. Given these barriers, the use of netnography emerged as a more viable and advantageous approach to answer the research question.

Aligning with the qualitative nature of this thesis, netnography is employed to interpret social media posts by revealing the meaning behind the words and actions of influencers (Kozinets, 2021). Moreover, netnography offers the advantage of non-intrusive data collection, as it does not require direct interaction with influencers themselves (Kozinets, 2019). Compared to interviews or focus groups, netnography minimises the risk of altering participants' behaviour or responses due to social desirability bias, preserving the naturalistic context of online activities (Kozinets, 2015).

Another benefit for choosing netnography in this thesis is rooted in its ability to access and analyse data from social media platforms where influencer marketing activities predominantly occur. According to Doshi, Ramesh and Rao (2023), influencers often select social media platforms based on factors such as the number of active users, engagement levels, and the suitability of the platform for their content. Consequently, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were chosen as the focus platforms for this thesis, given their extensive user bases and popularity among influencers (Geyser, 2024). The choice has been made for all three platforms to be included in the analysis to capture potential variations in ethical considerations across different social media channels, as influencers frequently engage in cross-platform content creation (Ma, Gui & Kou, 2023).

Netnography, while deemed fit data collection method for this thesis, poses challenges and limitations that must be addressed by thesis writers. Firstly, its focus on specific online communities may result in findings that in the case of this thesis are specific to the particular group of influencers, limiting the generalisability of results (Kozinets, 2002). To address this, researchers carefully evaluated the similarities between the sampled online community and other groups of interest and determined the applicability of findings to broader contexts and domains, which will be further explored in the Transferability of Findings sub-chapter. Secondly, conducting netnographic research requires a high level of interpretive skill from researchers to accurately analyse and interpret online interactions and behaviours (Kozinets, 2002). Researchers overcame the challenge of interpreting influencer activities by employing methodological rigour and reflexivity. Methodological rigour involves adhering to established protocols for data collection, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in empirical evidence (Kozinets, 2015). The researchers described the data collection process, including the criteria used for selecting social media sites, influencers and their respective pieces of content, and the methods employed for capturing and analysing their activities with clearly defined codes and

the respective definitions. Additionally, as researchers we continuously reflected on our own potential biases and assumptions throughout the analysis process, ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in the data and free from any potential personal influence.

#### **4.4 Sampling**

Purposive sampling strategy was employed to select a representative sample of female influencers and their content, enabling a manageable and comprehensive analysis within the scope of the study. This deliberate choice is grounded in the fact that females constitute over 94% of aesthetic surgery patients (Rach, 2021). Moreover, given the global nature of social media and the rise of cosmetic tourism, selecting international influencers from different countries ensures a comprehensive understanding of the diverse cultural and societal factors influencing aesthetic surgery promotion (Bentley et al. 2021). The hyper-connectivity facilitated by social media platforms transcends geographical boundaries, making international influencers key actors in shaping beauty ideals and trends worldwide (Backaler, 2018). Additionally, women are the main users of social media, with studies indicating that they are more likely to be exposed to influencer content (Walker et al. 2021; Jung et al. 2022). Therefore, including international female influencers in the sample ensures a holistic exploration of ethical considerations in aesthetic surgery promotion across diverse cultural contexts, enriching the depth and breadth of the research findings.

The purposive sampling approach adopted in this thesis aligns with the qualitative nature of the research, prioritising depth of understanding over statistical representativeness. By deliberately selecting content from influencers who possess relevant experiences and insights in a purposive manner, the researchers seek to uncover distinct perspectives and ethical considerations that may not be captured through a convenience sampling method, for instance (Easterby-Smith et al. 2017).

In this thesis, content was collected from a diverse range of 25 influencers, including micro, macro, and macro-celebrity influencers, to explore potential variations in ethical considerations present in promotional content related to aesthetic surgery. This approach is considered crucial as it allows for a comprehensive examination of the current influencer landscape. Research suggests that different types of influencers may possess varying levels of credibility, reach, and

engagement with their audiences, which can influence the effectiveness and ethical portrayals of their promotional activities (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). By analysing content from influencers across these different categories, the study aimed to uncover any disparities in the messaging, portrayed values, and ethical considerations present in aesthetic surgery promotions. This choice has been made in alignment with the previously discussed argument by Campbell and Farrell (2020) regarding introduction of other factors, such as authenticity, expertise, and cultural capital as additional segmentation criteria alongside the follower count. Understanding how different influencer categories approach aesthetic surgery promotion can help inform regulatory efforts and industry practices in this context, which are part of the purpose of this thesis (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Overall, examining content from micro, macro, and macro-celebrity influencers offers a comprehensive perspective on the ethical considerations and implications of aesthetic surgery promotion on social media platforms.

In order to identify suitable influencer content for the research, social media platforms Instagram, YouTube and TikTok were utilised as discussed previously, due to their popularity and significance in influencer marketing within the lifestyle and beauty industries (Gregor & Olejniczak, 2023; Haenlein et al. 2020). Given the nature of the study, particular attention was paid to influencers who have a demonstrated history of promoting aesthetic surgery procedures on their profiles through photo or video format within the past 24 months. In this thesis, all content generated by influencers, including personal details shared as part of their online presence, is considered promotional due to the nature of their monetisation strategies, where their lives become commodities for advertising purposes (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). Specific hashtags, such as #plasticsurgery, #aestheticsurgery, #fillernation and #botox were used in the search bars of the aforementioned social media sites in the process of finding relevant influencer content pieces for this research. The choice of these specific hashtags was made due to their relevance to the domain of aesthetic surgery promotion, with thousands of posts available under each one of them. When looking for content for this research, some additional elements were sought out, including before-and-after images, procedure documentation, recovery journeys or markings of *Paid promotion* under the posts. This type of content was deemed most suitable for investigating the ethical justifications of influencers regarding the ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery for several reasons. Firstly, such posts directly reflect the influencers' engagement with and endorsement of aesthetic procedures, offering a window into their attitudes, motivations, and justifications. Secondly, visual elements in the content, such as before-and-after photos and procedure showcasing,

provides a tangible representation of the influencers' attitudes and reactions. Additionally, the inclusion of personal details and narratives in these posts offers a glimpse into the influencers' perspectives on topics like body image, beauty standards, and self-esteem, which are central to the ethical discourse surrounding aesthetic surgery promotion. Once identified, the names and usernames of influencers, the number of followers, and links to selected posts were written down by thesis writers in a designated table (see Appendix 1).

The selection of 25 influencers and their corresponding content pieces was justified by the diverse range of perspectives and ethical considerations represented within this sample, leading to a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon. Data saturation was reached as the analysis of these influencers' content consistently revealed recurring themes, motives, and justifications regarding the promotion of aesthetic surgery, indicating that further sampling would yield limited additional insights (Logan, 2015).

#### **4.5 Empirical Analysis**

The analysis of the content employed an abductive reasoning approach, which involved iteratively moving between the empirical data and theoretical concepts to generate new insights (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In this thesis, the focus was on examining numerous examples of influencer content related to promotion of aesthetic surgery. Through methodical examination of various cases, the aim was to identify emerging patterns and themes, allowing for the formulation of the answer to the research question. The methodology embraced the depth and diversity of individual narratives, treating qualitative data as rich sources of insight into human experience. Rooted in grounded theory, the analysis adopted an open and intuitive approach to explore the differing ethical perspectives of influencers. This allowed for a deep understanding of the nuances present in their content, guiding the development of interpretations and theoretical insights (Easterby-Smith et al. 2017).

The selected content for investigation comprised 26 videos, 4 photo-posts and the respective captions comprising of text, hashtags and emojis shared by 25 influencers showcasing their personal experiences with aesthetic surgery procedures. The combined length of the analysed video footage was almost 59 minutes. The empirical qualitative content analysis in this thesis followed a structured approach to systematically analyse the content created by social media influencers promoting aesthetic surgery. The coding process involved three main aspects:

description of content, gathering quotes, and making interpretations based on the previously discussed theoretical frames. Firstly, the description of content entailed identifying and categorising the types of posts and videos by influencers related to aesthetic surgery promotion. This included examining and describing the format, tone, and visual elements of the content, including audio used in the background. This holistic approach to content analysis not only considered the explicit message conveyed in each post, but also delved into the subtleties of how it was communicated, providing valuable insights into the influencers' social context, interactions, and ultimately their ethical considerations, which are integral components of netnography (Kozinets, 2015). Secondly, direct quotes were extracted from the content to capture the language and messaging used by influencers when discussing aesthetic surgery procedures. These quotes served as crucial data points for analysis and provided direct insight into influencers' ethical perspectives and attitudes towards aesthetic surgery promotion. Finally, interpretations involved identifying the underlying vocabularies, justifications and values present in the content, based upon previously discussed theoretical frames. Through the unique combination of theoretical perspectives, this step aimed to uncover the implicit meanings and intentions behind influencers' promotional activities, exploring themes such as authenticity, recognition, and empowerment. This comprehensive analysis process ensured a rigorous examination of the qualitative data, leading to rich and complex findings that contributed to the overall objectives of the thesis.

To summarise, the empirical analysis process of this thesis adhered to the three fundamental steps, in line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), consisting of sorting, reducing, and arguing. Firstly, the sorting phase involved gathering and organising the content from social media influencers promoting aesthetic surgery on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (see Appendix 2). This included identifying recurring themes, key concepts, and significant text fragments within the content. Following sorting, the reduction phase involved condensing the coded segments into a Codebook (see Appendix 6), where each code was systematically categorised and described. This process streamlined the data, allowing for a more focused examination of the emerging themes and patterns. Finally, the arguing phase encompassed thematic analysis, wherein related codes were clustered into main themes. Through this process, interpretations were developed, and arguments were constructed based on the relationships and connections between the identified themes, supported by quotes and excerpts from the analysed content. By following these analytical steps, the thesis ensured a systematic approach to extracting meaningful insights from the qualitative data, contributing to a robust

understanding of the ethical considerations surrounding the promotion of aesthetic surgery by social media influencers.

#### **4.6 Quality of Study**

As guiding principles in the research process, this thesis followed the framework established by Golden-Biddle and Locke, which emphasises authenticity, plausibility, and criticality (Easterby-Smith et al. 2017, p. 126). The thesis placed a high value on transparency throughout, thoroughly outlining every stage of the research process to establish credibility. Criticality was upheld by addressing potential process issues, such as ensuring consistency and reliability in coding procedures. We, as thesis writers, have actively considered the transferability of findings to broader marketing contexts and ethical implications, which will be discussed in the following sub-chapters. By prioritising transparency, comprehensive data collection, and rigorous analysis, we have maintained a research environment aligned with ethical standards and enhanced the validity and relevance of the thesis findings.

In addition to following the framework established by Golden-Biddle and Locke, this thesis also drew upon the principles of reflexivity and methodological rigour to ensure the integrity of the research process. Reflexivity, as outlined by Finlay (2002), involves critically examining the researcher's own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions that may influence the research process and findings. By maintaining reflexivity throughout the research journey, the thesis writers strived to acknowledge and address any potential biases that could impact the interpretation of the data. Methodological rigour, as discussed by Johnson, Adkins, and Chauvin (2020), entails the thorough and systematic application of research methods to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. This involved adhering to established protocols for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as maintaining meticulous records of the research process to facilitate transparency and reproducibility. Through a combination of reflexivity, methodological rigour, and adherence to ethical standards, this thesis aimed to produce findings that are credible, reliable, and actionable for informing marketing practices in the context of aesthetic surgery promotion on social media.

Additionally, in assessing the quality of this research study, Glassick's Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Scholarship served as a comprehensive framework for evaluation across six key dimensions: purpose, preparation, methods, results, presentation, and critique (Glassick, Huber

& Maeroff, 1997). The purpose of the study was clearly articulated, highlighting the significance and relevance of investigating ethical considerations of influencers in aesthetic surgery promotion on social media. Thorough preparation ensured that the research design, data collection instruments, and ethics of netnography are carefully addressed to facilitate rigorous inquiry. Methodological rigour was upheld through the systematic application of qualitative content analysis, ensuring consistency and reliability in coding procedures. The results were presented transparently, with attention to detail and clarity, to provide a coherent narrative of the findings. The presentation of the research adhered to scholarly conventions, with appropriate citation of sources and adherence to academic writing standards. Finally, a critical evaluation of the research process and findings was presented, acknowledging limitations and areas for future inquiry to enhance the overall quality and integrity of the study. By employing Glassick's Criteria, this thesis strived to achieve excellence in scholarship, contributing valuable insights to the field of influencer marketing and informing ethical practice in the promotion of aesthetic surgery on social media platforms.

#### **4.7 Transferability of Findings**

The transferability of findings from this thesis is contingent upon several factors, including the contextual relevance of the research setting, the similarity of content and themes to those in other contexts, and the alignment of the research methodology with the objectives of future studies. While the study focuses on ethical considerations in the promotion of aesthetic surgery by social media influencers within a specific context, the insights generated may offer valuable implications for similar industries or situations. Firstly, the ethical considerations explored in this thesis are not unique to the aesthetic surgery industry; they resonate with broader issues concerning influencer marketing, professional ethics, and consumer trust. Thus, the findings are likely to be transferable to other sectors with influencer promotion, including those dealing with ethically nuanced products or services like pharmaceuticals, holding significant potential for enhancing ethical practices and consumer trust. In the pharmaceutical industry, where ethical considerations regarding product safety, health claims, and public health impact are paramount, influencer marketing strategies often navigate complex ethical dilemmas, similarly as in aesthetic surgery promotional activities.

Secondly, the methodology employed in this study, particularly qualitative content analysis, offers a rich understanding of the content and messaging strategies used by influencers. This

methodology can be adapted and applied in diverse contexts to explore ethical considerations in various industries, such as fashion, beauty, or wellness.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework and conceptual insights developed in this thesis contribute to the broader understanding of ethical decision-making processes in digital marketing contexts. By drawing on established theories and frameworks from disciplines such as ethics, sociology, and marketing, the study offers a concrete foundation for future research endeavours seeking to explore similar phenomena regarding influencers in different contexts, which will be discussed further in the *Limitations and Future Research* sub-chapter.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of transferability inherent in qualitative research. The specificities of the content analysed, including cultural nuances, industry practices, and platform-specific features, may limit the direct applicability of findings to other settings. Therefore, future studies should consider these contextual factors and adapt the research design and methodology accordingly to ensure the relevance and transferability of their findings.

#### **4.8 Ethics of Netnography**

Netnography, as a methodological approach, inherently involves ethical considerations that guide the research process. One fundamental ethical consideration in netnography that researchers must carefully consider is the issue of informed consent (Roy et al. 2015). As the content used in this thesis came directly from profiles of social media influencers, who openly share their life online for monetary compensation, and therefore are public figures, their informed consent to be a part of this research could be deemed not necessary. However, according to Kozinets (2015), it is our responsibility as researchers to obtain informed consent when we are aware that data might be tracked back to the influencer. Therefore, although the links for each piece of content is made available in the Appendix 1, the names of the influencers have been anonymised, referring to each influencer in the thesis with a given respective number, *Influencer 1* for instance, to protect their identities.

## 5 Justifications of Aesthetic Surgery Promotion

This chapter presents the findings and interpretations derived from the content analysis of 25 social media influencers, and their aesthetic surgery related content on the platforms Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. The findings illustrate how influencers reveal vocabularies of motive, orders of worth for their justification, and basic human values through their produced content on social media. Additionally, influencers' motives, justifications and values depict how they justify the promotion of aesthetic surgery and portray their personal stance towards ethically contested procedures.

First of all, in the discovery of ethical reasonings, three vocabularies of motive, namely achievement, self-esteem, and transparency were noticed that were frequently used by influencers (Appendix 3). The achievement vocabulary describes aesthetic surgery as an accomplishment, the self-esteem vocabulary as a form of therapy and a fix, and the transparency vocabulary as a free decision for everyone. Furthermore, in the achievement vocabulary the influencers are conveyed as successful, in self-esteem as confident, and in transparency as honest and open. Through using a specific vocabulary of motive, the influencers depict their reasonings for the promotion of aesthetic surgery, for example wealth and status as an achievement, the journey to confidence and tackling insecurities in the self-esteem vocabulary and raising awareness and presenting their own authentic perspective and experience regarding procedures in the transparency vocabulary. Additionally, hashtags represent the influencer's used vocabulary, for example #glowup for achievement, #insecurities for self-esteem, and #surgeryvlog for transparency.

For a more thorough analysis, we recognized influencers' orders of worth and values based on their presented content across social media channels, for example pictures with captions, vlogs, and videos. As demonstrated in Appendix 4 and 5, Schwartz's human values and Boltanski and Thévenot's common worlds were adapted to the aesthetic surgery promotion of influencers, depicting their underlying reasonings. For example, the value of benevolence relates to influencers empowering the audience to take informed decisions, and the world of fame is tested through follower count and qualified by public recognition. Based on these three theoretical categories the interpretation of the influencers' content took place, from which two main themes with underlying subthemes evolved that best determine the ethical justifications

for the promotion of procedures in the name of beauty, namely authenticity, and empowerment and self-expression.

## **5.1 Authenticity**

The first and most occurring theme was named ‘Authenticity’ as influencers portray the promotion of aesthetic surgery as ethical through justifying their content to be genuine, open, and authentic. The majority of influencers within this theme use the transparency vocabulary of motive, embody the domestic world and the value of benevolence which will further be elaborated in the subthemes. The main hashtags that can be linked to this theme are #storytime, #plasticsurgeryjourney, #surgeryvlog, and #transparency, because they are frequently used by influencers to showcase their genuine, and engaging surgery related content that includes insights into the whole surgery journey, and their personal lives. They are often used for vlogs which allow the viewer to follow along the influencer’s daily life through a collection of video clips. Following subthemes named ‘Openness’ and ‘Sincerity’ emerged from the analysis, as these were found to best describe how influencers portray their promotional content as ethical through an open and sincere behaviour towards their audience.

### **5.1.1 Openness**

The subtheme of Openness pertains to the influencers’ willingness to share, express, and communicate their experiences with aesthetic surgery, readily sharing their thoughts, feelings, and opinions on ethically contested beauty products and services. As openness fosters transparency, collaboration, and inclusivity in relationships, the influencers portray themselves as approachable to build sympathy and trust with their audience, enabling genuine, ethical engagement on social media.

One of the main findings in this subtheme is that influencers advocate for transparency on social media and use this as a significant reasoning for their promotional content. For instance, multiple influencers show and openly mention that their looks are not natural through describing what procedures they have done, how the surgery was facilitated, and document their whole journey and recovery process. Their justifications include the argument:

*"It could be damaging to get something done and maybe not being open about it, because then you're creating this kind of unattainable standard that people think is normal, when really it's like no, I have work done. (...) I think a huge part of me even wanting this I will be straight up is because I am filming myself all day every day. I am asked to be in photo shoots of other people you know, other photographers and brands and things. I am constantly seeing my face and seeing it from every angle and at the end of the day this is my job, and I would love to just not hate the way that certain angles look on me."* - Influencer 5

Influencer 5 articulates a profound ethical insight, highlighting the importance of transparency in aesthetic surgery promotion to mitigate the creation of unrealistic beauty standards. Her acknowledgment of the potential harm caused by concealing surgical enhancements underscores the ethical imperative for influencers to openly discuss their procedures, thereby maintaining a more open, and honest online environment. Furthermore, she admits in her YouTube vlogs showcasing the whole surgical process and recovery, that the influencer work practice has strongly influenced her decisions for plastic surgery, as it is her job to be in front of a camera from all angles and regard herself critically every day as well as to compare to other influencers and celebrities.

This quote exemplifies the transparency vocabulary of motive as adopted from Mills (1940), because aesthetic surgery is seen as a free decision to be made individually and shows the openness of the influencer as a social instrument to give insights into her personal decision to surgically enhance her looks and influence others. Additionally, her reasoning for surgery based on satisfaction with her appearance as an influencer can be connected to the self-esteem vocabulary (Mills, 1940). On a more abstract level, it relates to the value of benevolence from Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values (2012), meaning that the follower should be informed to be able to take decisions individually. This interpretation is fostered in the quote saying that people might think that what is portrayed online is naturally attained, however often times the influencer's body portrayal was filtered or surgically modified, and the influencers raise awareness that followers should be informed of their completed aesthetic procedures to enable trust. Therefore, influencers use transparency to justify the promotion of ethically contested products and services.

This transparency of influencers extends beyond physical healing to encompass the mental and emotional journey as well. Influencers not only share the physical aspects of their recovery but

also openly delve into the psychological challenges they face post-surgery. Thereby, they emotionally appeal to their followers. For instance, influencer 21 openly shares her struggles while healing from a rhinoplasty surgery, saying,

*"In week two, my nose was very very wide. I had a little bit of an identity crisis around this time. There were days where I would look at myself in the mirror and be like, I don't recognize myself. Another thing you have to understand is that your nose is going to heal differently on both sides. My nose was very crooked, so there was different type of work done on each side, meaning the swelling and the healing process is not going to be even and symmetrical". – Influencer 21*

The above shown quote details how the aesthetic surgery is not only a physical, but also emotional process which is something the followers should be aware of in their decision-making. The influencer directly advises her followers and mentions that every person will have an individual healing journey. Additionally, influencer 19 adopts a proactive approach by emphasising the importance of being an *"open book"* with her followers and fans. In a Question and Answer-style video, she highlights the significance of transparency in the hopes of assisting viewers who may be considering similar procedures and surgeries to be aware of the challenging healing which can be related to the transparency vocabulary of motive (Mills, 1940). By openly discussing their healing journeys, both physically and emotionally, influencers demonstrate their commitment to openness and their desire to support their audience members in their own aesthetic transformation journey. On the contrary, even during these open and vulnerable moments influencers do not shy away from mentioning the specific clinics and surgeons they went to for procedures, still maintaining the clear nature of promotion within the content. In these examples, the value of benevolence (Schwartz, 2012) is noticeable, as influencers support followers in their appropriate decision-making, however mentioning the doctors and clinics can be connected to the market world as well. Influencers postulate the market world by supporting aesthetic surgery clinics and doctors, recommending followers to get treatments done and gain monetary benefits for themselves (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Thereby, they strategically use the contested practice to showcase their openness and raise value in the market world.

However, some influencers directly argue that they are not promoting or wanting to influence their audience to get plastic surgery done, but are solely and ethically sharing their experiences

as illustrated in the following caption under a reel showing an arm lift surgery journey from taking a flight to the surgery to the recovering process:

“It was a good idea right \*scissors emoji\* @athenixbody #armlift #plasticsurgery #brachioplasty #looseskin #looseskinremoval *Please do not take this as promoting plastic surgery. Plastic surgery comes with serious risks and it's important to consult a doctor and do your own research and figure out what's right for you. I only share my story to help show perspective on the procedures.*” - Influencer 11

Referring to vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940), transparency is used as plastic surgery is described as a personal decision which should be taken carefully in consideration of risks and consultation expressed by the disclaimer given by the influencer. Additionally, the influencer calls to do own research as she can only speak from her perspective and experience, however the process can be more complex and may not be right for everyone, despite her caption presenting that it was a good idea. This can further be connected to the domestic world adapted from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), as personal satisfaction is in focus and the influencer gives insight into her personal space. Here, the value of benevolence (Schwartz, 2012) may be an underlying value of the influencer to ensure ethical promotion through disclaiming risks, consultation, and own research. However, in a critical review, mentioning clinics and doctors in their captions, reels, and YouTube vlogs despite arguing against active promotion, as Influencer 11 does, depicts that sponsorships and partnerships with benefits for the influencer are involved, again contesting the market world (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

### 5.1.2 Sincerity

In the subtheme of sincerity, the focus is on truthfulness and genuine expressions in the influencer content and communication. The influencers aim to accurately represent their experiences, feelings, and intentions towards surgical procedures aligned with their inner beliefs and values, and free from misleading information in order to promote an ethically contested practice. They are being sincere even when it's uncomfortable or difficult to discuss an ethically contested topic. As sincerity is essential for building trust, it is important for the relationship between the influencers and their followers.

The observed influencers use storytelling, share surgical risks, and their personal regrets regarding their experiences with aesthetic procedures. Following captions raise awareness and clearly emphasise how the influencer's lifestyle has to clearly be distinguished from a realistic, and attainable life of a follower. Following quotes are short as they are captions below postings on Instagram with a limited word count, however they exemplify best and to the point how influencers ethically justify their promotions through honesty in connection to their pictures and videos.

*"Social media is fake"* - Influencer 8

*"I am an influencer of course my life is better than yours"* - Influencer 8

*"Def some regrets!! Also do the OPPOSITE of everything I said!!! #plasticsurgery #implants #storytime"* - Influencer 12

For instance, influencers 8 and 12 highlight that people should not take social media as an example for good conduct, should not compare themselves with the ideals presented, and be careful with the consumption of surgical procedures in the name of beauty. Thereby, they express their sincerity, being genuine and truthful and sharing their beliefs about the influencer work practice and plastic surgery. Additionally, they advocate for transparency and use the vocabulary (Mills, 1940) through informing that influencers receive lots of free or price reduced procedures, travels and amenities making it easier for them to achieve the idealised body image they are portraying as a result of their surgeries. Through these depictions the influencers are empowering others to make informed decisions, and show kindness and empathy, which indicate their underlying value of benevolence (Schwartz, 2012).

Another finding related to the sincerity of influencers in ethically promoting surgery is the justification that beauty is not fully achieved through fitness for instance, but the influencer's body is enhanced through aesthetic procedures. This is manifested by a fitness influencer who states:

*"I work hard for my body. Yes, I have paid lots of money as well. I'm not one to say it's all from hard work. I've had my boobs done twice and a BBL that I'll have to do again. Sometimes ppl say why waste all that money? My response is, it's not a waste because I love who I am today and all the money and hard work I've put in. Just wait!"* - Influencer 7

She clearly states in her caption below a picture of her body that she attained it not only through fitness, which is hard work, but that she invested money to get procedures done. The statement ‘I love who I am today’ also emphasises her improved confidence, relating to the self-esteem vocabulary (Mills, 1940). The quote further depicts the achievement vocabulary of motive as she presents how proud she is of the body she has attained through both fitness and plastic surgery (Mills, 1940). Furthermore, on a more abstract level the inspired world (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) and the human value of self-direction (Schwartz, 2012) are reflected in the quote. The inspired world connects to her goal of self-actualisation and her reflection on her body transformation, as well as mentioning future repetition of procedures to keep the idealised version of her body. Lastly, self-direction is seen in her independent pursuit of her beauty related goals, despite others questioning if her procedures are worth it. Therefore, the influencer connects the promotion of plastic surgery to herself, portraying her body in an honest way appearing ethical towards the audience.

## **5.2 Empowerment and Self-actualisation**

The theme of empowerment and self-actualisation illuminates the ethical reasonings related to self-esteem (Mills, 1940), the inspired world by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), and the values of self-direction and hedonism as adapted from Schwartz (2012). Common empowerment related hashtags used on social media channels are #insecurities, #confidence, and #transformation representing aesthetic surgery as a treatment helping to overcome self-esteem issues, such as low confidence in your own beauty and body and treating negative experiences from the past.

The majority of influencers within this theme embody the inspired world of justification as proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), wherein their surgical transformations represent pivotal moments of self-actualisation. By embracing their aesthetic journeys as catalysts for personal growth and empowerment, these influencers offer a narrative of authenticity, empowerment and advocating for self-expression. The subthemes of ‘Improvement’ and ‘Fulfilment’ will elaborate on the empowerment theme.

### 5.2.1 Improvement

Multiple influencers relate aesthetic procedures to their own self-esteem and present that it has helped them to become more confident compared to themselves in the past. Influencers portray aesthetic surgery as a significant achievement of a goal, a means of correcting perceived flaws, and an expression of personal freedom. Through their content, influencers highlight the emotional satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that is experienced when they undergo aesthetic procedures. Some mention that procedures such as liposuction have helped them overcome traumatising, past experiences and fulfil desires they have since being a teenager. Thereby, they are clearly using the vocabulary of self-esteem as proposed by Mills (1940), exemplified in the following quote:

*“It’s important to note that cosmetic procedures or plastic surgery aren’t meant to be a one size fix for all self-esteem issues, although it can help, and I am not gonna say it doesn’t because I do consider myself a lot more confident than I was then”.* – Influencer 8

Influencer 6 also clearly emphasises her value of self-direction according to Schwartz (2012) and justifies getting a chin implant through the inspired world where self-actualisation is the order of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Her “chin implant day” reel with a doctor, as well as another reel of her shouting and pointing her finger to the camera with the message *“Wait a minute! Hold on before everyone gets their happy little typing fingers out “ahh don’t get plastic surgery you should be happy with the face you’re given”, stop, I don’t wanna hear it, it’s my face, I wanna do with it what I want.”* showcases a collaboration with an aesthetics clinic, and justifies her content through self-direction instead of self-confidence.

When influencers share glimpses of their homes or other personal spaces in the content promoting aesthetic surgery, it serves to create a sense of intimacy and relatability with viewers. Within this context, influencers often candidly discuss their confidence issues and inner struggles, portraying the self-esteem vocabulary of motive (Mills, 1940). For instance, macro-celebrity influencer 16 candidly admits, *“I’ve been insecure about my brows and eyelids not being even for as long as I can remember. So many surgeons told me that they would not be able to fix this problem, and then I finally found two surgeons in New York city willing to help me, I was so excited”*, reflecting a desire for conformity to societal beauty standards. Similarly, macro-celebrity influencer 15 employs the domestic world setting (Boltanski & Thévenot,

2006) by filming in her bathroom, a space typically associated with intimacy and vulnerability, as well as striking resemblance to the popular format of Vogue's Beauty Secrets series. In her YouTube video, influencer 15 openly discusses her self-esteem issues and shares a poignant childhood memory, stating,

*“I had genetic fat pads underneath my eyes and so basically no matter how much sleep I got, how well rested I was, how much water I drank, this fat was just always there and so I just always looked puffy and tired, so that's what this surgery specifically was for. I have had these eye bags my entire life I was literally like 8 years old putting spoons on my eyes because someone told me that I look tired before school and guess what? Did it work? No”. –*

Influencer 15

These revelations not only showcase the deeply personal nature of influencers' content but also highlight the power of vulnerability in developing and maintaining connections with their audiences. By intertwining the domestic world setting (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) with a motive of improving self-esteem (Mills, 1940), influencers offer viewers a window into their inner struggles and provide reasoning for their choices, while simultaneously empowering audience members to make their own informed choices.

Furthermore, influencer 10 promotes the view that just because you were not born naturally beautiful, it does not mean that you cannot have a #glowup and become whatever you want through plastic surgery, make up, and fat removal as she states, *“You're not ugly, you just need a little help”* (Influencer 10). When confronted with the fact that her content is really harmful to young impressionable girls by social media users, she responds with a reel showcasing how a tape should be put on people's mouths that share this opinion and her justification is that social media does not introduce new insecurities to someone, but only highlights insecurities that already existed. Her behaviour can be seen as independently pursuing her self-expression and pleasure which relate to the values of self-direction and hedonism (Schwartz, 2012).

### 5.2.2 Fulfilment

The sub-theme of Fulfilment originated from the vocabulary and value of achievement, the market world and world of fame adapted from Boltanski & Thévenot (2006), as well as Schwartz's (2012) value of power. The main finding in this sub-theme is that influencers have

aims and goals they want to fulfil regarding their ideal body and image, and that their pleasure is derived from the successful attainment of aesthetic surgeries. For instance, influencer 13 presents her before and after pictures with the caption *“Nothing a little Botox can’t fix”* suggesting that beauty is something that can be achieved through aesthetic procedures if it may not be attained naturally. Here, it becomes clear that some of the influencers we have observed objectify themselves using quantified measurements to compare their current achievements with their own— from the past and the future—and with the looks of others. This justification is further reproduced by a reel comparing an influencer’s breasts in different tops before and after the surgery asking the audience, *“Is there a difference?”* in the caption and using the hashtags #plasticsurgerybeforeandafter and #girlpower (Influencer 3). Through this presentation using a viral song, the influencer clearly aims to receive attention, likes and recognition for her procedure which can be justified by the world of fame (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

Following quotes illustrate paid partnerships and collaborations, indicating that influencer reasonings for promotion of ethically contested practices include recognition in monetary terms:

*“Use my discount code INDIA15 for money off your treatments with @\_\_cmaesthetics”*

- Influencer 1

*“I found out about the clinic on Instagram. My whole experience has been absolutely amazing. Everyone is so nice, so welcoming, so amazing. (...) If you guys ever wanted to do any cosmetic procedures or had anything planned for the future, I would definitely recommend Mono”* - Influencer 24

A further example is Influencer 4 who invites her followers through a vlog to join her in surprising her mother with a surgical makeover. She clearly promotes the clinic where she has previously had procedures done, therefore trusts them to perform surgery on her mother. A significant aspect of her promotional video is a scene where the doctor is telling her mother that she will not feel any pain, solely a bit of soreness after the procedure. Through this presentation of the scene, the influencer is downplaying the involved risks of a surgery for the purpose of influencing others to undergo such procedures, however through sharing her personal experiences with and high trust in the doctor, she reassures that the procedure is mindful and ethical.

The market world justification is further recognizable in the visual elements of influencers' promotional content, manifesting in various forms that highlight the facilities and personnel of aesthetic clinics. Notably, influencers 17 and 25 feature promotional shots of various spaces within their respective clinics, meticulously highlighting the facilities and friendly staff members as part of the paid collaborations. Such visuals serve to enhance the appeal of these clinics, positioning them as desirable destinations for aesthetic procedures. Additionally, within the content viewed for this research, the market-driven justification appears to be combined with the underlying value of power. Influencers do not just position themselves as regular patients; they assert parity, if not superiority, to surgeons and staff, making themselves appear as significant figures in the industry through their content. This portrayal is evident in the post made by influencer 22, where she partakes in the TikTok trend "*If I had to speak about love, I would tell them about...*", which is typically used as a way to showcase romantic partners, platonic friendships, or close family members. In this case, however, the influencer appears in a hospital bed with the surgeon who gave a transformation that "*made her dreams come true*", leaning close to her. This unconventional portrayal serves to elevate the deemed status of the influencer to a level akin to that of the surgeon, suggesting a symbiotic relationship built on mutual benefit and consequently influencing the decision of creating the promotional content.

Additionally, when it comes to social media, the pervasive presence of celebrity images and aesthetic transformations are inspiring new ideas for cosmetic procedures that were previously unexplored by influencers. The desire to emulate the appearances of celebrities and consequently attain a similar level of fame has become a driving force behind these decisions. For instance, influencer 23, in her pursuit of aesthetic enhancement, openly shared inspirational photos of celebrities, such as Lea Michele, Bella Hadid, and Gabrielle, with her surgeon before undergoing buccal fat removal surgery in the hopes of reaching a similar look. Similarly, the fox eye surgery trend, popularised by celebrities, has found resonance among influencers, as evidenced by influencer 24 travelling abroad to Turkey to undergo the procedure. These examples illustrate how influencers seek fulfilment by aspiring to achieve the perceived beauty standards and fame associated with celebrity appearances through aesthetic procedures and the showcasing of them through promotional posts. Based on these examples, influencers promoting aesthetic surgery often embody a combination of the portrayed values of stimulation and conformity (Schwartz, 2012). They seek novelty and excitement by following beauty trends popularised by celebrities, showcasing their willingness to embrace new aesthetic ideals

and procedures. Simultaneously, they demonstrate conformity by striving to fit in and fulfil current social expectations regarding beauty standards. This combination suggests that influencers are motivated by a desire for both individuality and acceptance within the larger social scale.

## 6 Discussion

In this chapter a concise overview of the findings will be presented as summarised in the table below, followed by an exploration of the insights that were derived from them. In the following sub-chapter, the insights in the light of previous research of influencer marketing work, influencer marketing ethics and aesthetic surgery will be discussed.

| Themes                                                | Authenticity              |                                        | Empowerment and Self-actualisation |                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Sub-themes                                            | Openness                  | Sincerity                              | Improvement                        | Fulfilment                                  |
| <b>Vocabularies of Motive (Mills, 1940)</b>           | Transparency, Self-esteem | Transparency, Self-esteem, Achievement | Self-esteem                        | Achievement                                 |
| <b>Common worlds (Boltanski &amp; Thévenot, 2006)</b> | Domestic, Market          | Inspired                               | Inspired, Domestic                 | Market, Fame                                |
| <b>Human Values (Schwartz, 2012)</b>                  | Benevolence               | Benevolence, Self-direction            | Self-direction, Hedonism           | Power, Achievement, Stimulation, Conformity |

*Table 1 Justifications of Aesthetic Surgery Promotion*

In summary, the main findings answering the research question of how social media influencers justify the ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery procedures, are that influencers legitimize their promotional content through authenticity, and empowerment and self-actualisation. In analysing the moral standards, they have applied to their marketing decisions and behaviour, the following two themes were constructed. Authenticity includes the openness and sincerity of the influencer in promoting aesthetic procedures and recommending clinics, emphasising informed consent and sincere portrayal of experiences, embracing both positive

and negative factors. Furthermore, empowerment and self-actualisation encompasses improvement of the self, such as confidence and personal satisfaction, as well as fulfilment of both personal and professional goals in the influencer work practice including achievements in terms of money and body transformational aims. Discussing the findings using the deontological framework of ethics (Eagle et al. 2020), our study proposes mentioned themes as ethical ‘absolutes’ and inherent moral duties and principles that guide the influencers’ actions. Regardless of possible unintended consequences, influencers portray the principles of openness and sincerity leading to authentic engagement, as well as self-actualisation and fulfilment that guide the empowerment of themselves and others.

Further elaborating on the findings, it is noticeable how influencers engage in a way that portrays both emotional and rational justifications. On the one side, influencers leverage vulnerability as a tool to establish authenticity and foster trust among their followers. Through candid and transparent conversations, often taking place in their comfort spaces and homes, they invite their audience into their personal lives, sharing intimate details about their experiences with aesthetic surgery. By openly discussing their struggles during the recovery process, influencers showcase their relatability, allowing followers to connect with them on a deeper level. This emotional transparency not only humanises the influencer but also creates a sense of empathy and solidarity within the audience. As influencers document their journey towards aesthetic transformation, they provide a raw and unfiltered portrayal of the highs and lows, garnering sympathy, and support from their followers along the way. Moreover, by showcasing the tangible results and satisfaction they have experienced post-surgery, influencers offer tangible proof of the potential benefits of aesthetic procedures, further strengthening their perceived credibility. Furthermore, influencers frame and rationalise the aesthetic surgery as a goal that is achieved, by fixing a flaw they are considerably bettering themselves. In essence, influencers who embrace vulnerability in their content creation not only cultivate a sense of intimacy and authenticity but also nurture a reciprocal relationship with their audience, where mutual support and understanding thrive.

On the other side, influencers actively partake in partnerships and sponsorships with beauty brands and aesthetic clinics, leveraging their platforms to promote surgical procedures in exchange for monetary compensation, free products, and services. These collaborations are integral to their influencer profession, for most of them serving as a primary source of income and opportunities for career advancement. Moreover, these partnerships allow influencers to

access exclusive perks, such as new treatments and luxury experiences, which they can afterwards showcase to their audience, further solidifying their status as successful figures. However, beneath the emotional portrayal often presented in their content, there exists a rational calculation guiding influencers' decisions. While influencers may genuinely believe in the benefits of aesthetic procedures, they are also motivated by pragmatic considerations such as expanding their audience reach and gaining recognition. The pursuit of achievements, such as increasing follower counts and receiving likes and positive feedback, plays a crucial role in shaping influencers' behaviour and promotional strategies. As social media platforms thrive on engagement metrics and algorithm-driven visibility, influencers are inclined to produce content that resonates with their audience and generates favourable responses. Consequently, the rational aspect of influencer marketing cannot be overlooked, as influencers strategically navigate the digital landscape to maximise their impact and attain their professional objectives.

Initially, in combination with other theoretical perspectives, our findings of influencers' engagements in promoting aesthetic procedures were viewed through the already established common worlds in Boltanski and Thévenot's justification theory (2006). However, our analysis additionally indicates that influencers justify their decision to promote ethically contested practice of aesthetic surgery to enhance their value within a newly identified sphere: *the world of beauty*. The world of beauty can be characterised by its focus on aesthetic enhancement, where physical appearance is not only a measure of perceived attractiveness, but also as a symbol of self-worth and success. In this world, influencers advocate for the pursuit of an idealised physical form, altered by aesthetic surgeries and procedures, as a means of achieving personal empowerment and societal validation. The world of beauty places high value on individual transformation, celebrating those who undergo procedures to attain their desired looks. It also intersects with cultural narratives of self-improvement and self-expression, where altering one's appearance is seen as a legitimate and even celebrated pursuit of personal goals. The development of the world of beauty and its relation to the justification in promotion of aesthetic surgery online indicate an ethical landscape, where social media influencers navigate multiple value systems to justify their actions. Additionally, it suggests that the promotion of aesthetic procedures is largely connected to the deeper engagement with current beauty ideals and trends.

While two clear themes emerged from the analysis of 25 influencers, it is important to consider that ethical justifications of the promotional activity extend beyond that. Influencers'

engagements with their audiences are heavily influenced by a multitude of factors, including their personality, community dynamics, and the stakeholders involved in their promotional activities. For instance, some influencers prioritise maintaining sensitivity through their content, taking care to educate their audience about aesthetic procedures and informing them about potential risks. These influencers may be guided by values such as benevolence and universalism, as outlined in Schwartz's (2012) theory of basic human values, which emphasise compassion, empathy, and the pursuit of the greater good. Furthermore, influencers' justifications can also be shaped by their individual backgrounds and experiences. For example, influencers who have undergone multiple aesthetic procedures in the past approach their promotional activities with a deeper understanding of the potential impact on their audience and more self-assured tone. Whereas the promotion of their first-hand experiences with such procedures are driving the prioritisation of transparency and more responsible communication, as the influencers are more likely to empathise with the concerns and vulnerabilities of their followers.

On the other hand, influencers who lean towards a combination of achievement and power values focus more on showcasing their own success stories and life-changing results, often without explicitly addressing the potential risks or ethical implications of the procedures they promote. For these influencers, the emphasis is placed on personal achievement, status, and influence within their respective communities, rather than on fostering authentic and genuine engagement. Moreover, the influence of partnerships and paid collaborations cannot be overlooked, as discussed previously these engagements often come with campaign briefs and talking points provided by managers or aesthetic clinics (Heeris Christensen, 2022). In some cases, these external directives may shape influencers' justifications for promoting aesthetic surgery, steering them towards certain narratives or promotional angles that align with the interests of the sponsoring entities. This highlights the complex interplay between influencers' personal values and external influences, in turn adjusting the justification of the promotion of an ethically contested practice.

Across social media platforms, the depth of information and promotional content may vary, due to a set limit of video and textual material and the nature of the platform. For instance, on TikTok, where the attention spans of audiences are notably shorter, influencers often rely on brief, attention-grabbing clips paired with trending music or viral challenges to quickly capture viewers' interest. These videos typically highlight the most visually striking aspects of aesthetic

surgery procedures, such as dramatic before-and-after transformations or behind-the-scenes glimpses of the surgical process and the clinics themselves. Due to the platform's emphasis on entertainment and virality, TikTok content made by influencers to promote aesthetic surgery tends to be more visually stimulating and fast-paced, enabling followers to quickly scroll through the content. On the other hand, due to the nature of longer-form content, YouTube serves influencers as the more extensive platform for in-depth discussions, allowing the influencer to further elaborate on their reasonings and implications of aesthetic surgery procedures. As a result, influencers can tailor their justifications to fit the limitations of particular social media platforms and meet audience expectations. This entails highlighting different aspects of the aesthetic surgery journey to suit the format of the platform and cater to audience preferences, rather than solely relying on their own beliefs and values.

## **6.1 Contributions to Prior Research**

Having discussed the findings, we will consider them in the light of previous research suggesting how they support and add to our knowledge of influencer marketing ethics, the work of influencer marketing, and aesthetic surgery. Grgurić Čop et al. (2024) have pointed out that in-depth research on moral dilemmas faced by influencers is needed, which was endorsed in our findings showing that influencers are regularly confronted by their followers and need to justify their actions and production of promotional content to make them ethically sound, especially in the context of potentially harmful surgeries in the name of beauty. Considering that the influencer perspective was underexposed in previous literature (Joshi et al. 2023; Hudders & Lou, 2022), our findings give insights into their unique perspectives and reasonings which have resulted in authenticity, empowerment, and self-actualisation as influencers' main ethical reasonings for the contested promotion of aesthetic surgery.

First of all, prior research highlighted a potential of unethical effects that could harm involved stakeholders due to a lack of transparency on social media (Shirish, 2018). Our research findings, specifically the 'Authenticity' theme, supports this argument as influencers show awareness that their dishonest behaviour could harm their audience by setting unattainable beauty standards. Thereby, they validate prior knowledge of social networking sites focusing on enhanced appearance through specific posing, filters, editing, or plastic surgery which differ from reality (Fioravanti et al. 2022). They legitimize the social media influencer's development of social media posts that intertwine their personality and lifestyle with the aesthetic procedures

they promote, which can influence their followers in a positive or negative way (Joshi et al. 2023). This has been exemplified by influencers giving insights into their personal life, past experiences and challenges touching upon sensitive topics of their insecurities and well-being. In their storytelling, they often claim their aim of being honest, and advocating for followers to take their own decisions in order to provide ethically sound content and ensure proper conduct. Furthermore, the findings present a relationship of trust between influencer and follower, as influencers justify their promotional content through providing trustworthy advice, and information on newest trends (Hudders & Lou, 2022). Being aware that their followers are seeing them as sources of inspiration, they indicate openness and sincerity as ethical reasonings for the sharing of their experiences with aesthetic surgery procedures.

Through differing justifications of influencers, it becomes clear that influencers are left to manage their own moral constructs and set their own ethical standards as previously examined by Heeris Christensen (2022). For instance, our findings indicate that influencers compare themselves to current trends and other influencers as well, proving that their behaviour may be affected by social comparison processes and a search for popularity and recognition (Hudders & Lou, 2022). Additionally, influencers showcase following the cosmetic tourism trend, partaking in international travel for cosmetic procedures and promoting various doctors and clinics revealing the popularity of such global phenomena (Griffiths & Mullock, 2017). Apart from empowering others to take informed decisions about aesthetic procedures, recognition in form of followers, popularity, and monetary rewards proof to make up reasonings for a range of influencers and legitimize their content as being part of the professional influencer work practice. Previous studies have shown that consumers strongly rely on social media to learn about plastic surgery and choose clinics (Gupta et al. 2020), therefore influencers benefit from their authentic content through personal stories, and gain sponsorship with clinics. Thus, they become experts at creating engaging content and being brand ambassadors, aiming at increasing brand image, engagement, and loyalty (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Joshi et al. 2023).

Through the empowerment and self-actualisation theme, it is clearly noticeable how body image and self-esteem play a role in the consumption and promotion of plastic surgery. Similar to prior researchers such as Griffiths & Mullock (2017) who state that increased normalization of undergoing surgical beauty procedures as a lifestyle choice is seen through rising demand and growth of the industry, influencers support this shift by openly admitting and celebrating the attainment of aesthetic surgery as an achievement, and transformation of themselves as a

person and their confidence. Critically seen, this behaviour is reinforcing body image concerns and contributes to a culture of inequality and distaining aging, as Botox and surgeries are promoted by some influencers as easy fixtures for insecurities (Griffiths & Mullock, 2017).

Advancing the limited understanding of ethical principles that guide the production of sponsored content and paid promotion on social media platforms (Gupta et al. 2020), our findings reduce the lack of research on influencer marketing ethics by providing justifications of influencers for the ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery, namely authenticity and empowerment and self-actualisation.

On one hand, our findings warrant the influence of social media to consider aesthetic surgery (Shauly et al. 2023) as influencers exemplify comparison processes and their effect on the audience. On the other hand, the findings extend knowledge on ethics from the influencer perspective illustrating that influencers aim to genuinely engage with their audience through being open and sincere, empower others, and gain recognition through their promotion of aesthetic surgery. What becomes clear is the nuanced and intertwined nature of values and motives of influencers interpreted based on their visible content and storytelling across social media platforms.

Lastly, our findings emphasise that influencer actions encompass justifications that warrant their content as reasonable and ethical, indicating their underlying moral principles which govern their behaviour. This essential discussion of ambiguities in influencer-generated content helps to ensure transparency, trust, and accountability in advertising practices (Eagle et al. 2020; Iqbal et al. 2023). Due to the controversial and competitive nature of influencer marketing work as previously pointed out by Hennink-Kaminski and Reid & King (2012), the necessity of guidelines and ethical principles is validated, and especially important considering the ever-growing impact of influencer marketing and the potential negative consequences of promoting aesthetic procedures (Javakhishvili, 2023).

To conclude, social media influencers portray strategies to justify the ethically contested promotion of aesthetic surgery. Through enabling authenticity in their content, and presenting empowerment and self-actualisation reasonings, they legitimize their promotion and elevate their influencer status benefiting from their engagement in ethically contested practices to build a trusting relationship with their followers.

## 7 Conclusion

The last chapter highlights our previously discussed research findings and reflects on the practical implications for involved stakeholders and limitations of this study outlining promising avenues for future research.

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the ethical justifications of social media influencers when promoting aesthetic surgery – an ethically contested practice. In order to answer the research question, a netnography data collection method was employed in this research. Relying upon theoretical frameworks consisting of Boltanski and Thévenot's Theory of Justification (2006), Mills' Vocabularies of Motive (1940), and Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values (2012), a thorough content analysis of 25 influencers across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube was conducted.

Through the findings, we identified two overarching themes that encapsulate the ethical justifications employed by influencers: authenticity and empowerment and self-actualisation. The theme of authenticity highlights influencers' efforts to create and maintain genuine connections with their audience through sub-themes of openness and sincerity. In the sub-theme of openness, influencers willingly share their experiences with aesthetic surgery, promoting transparency and collaboration in their relationships with their audience. Through storytelling and documentation of their journeys, influencers strive to build trust and authenticity, advocating for transparent communication in the context of aesthetic procedures. Similarly, the sub-theme of sincerity emphasises the importance of honesty and truthfulness in influencer content. Influencers aim to accurately represent their experiences and feelings towards aesthetic surgery, free from misleading information. By sharing surgical risks and personal regrets, influencers demonstrate their commitment to ethical promotion and responsible communication with their followers.

Within the theme of empowerment and self-actualisation, influencers leverage aesthetic surgery as a means of achieving personal growth and self-expression. By framing their transformations as pivotal moments of fulfilment, influencers construct narratives of authenticity and empowerment, advocating for the pursuit of individual desires and aspirations. Identified sub-themes of improvement and fulfilment further enlighten influencers' justifications, showcasing their quest for enhanced self-esteem and the attainment of personal

goals. In the sub-theme of improvement, influencers articulate the role of aesthetic surgery in overcoming insecurities and achieving greater self-confidence. Through candid discussions and personal stories, influencers share their journeys towards self-improvement, inspiring audience members to embrace their own aesthetic transformations. In the sub-theme of fulfilment, influencers pursue aesthetic procedures as a means of achieving personal satisfaction and validation. Through paid partnerships and collaborations with aesthetic clinics, influencers position themselves as aspirational figures, endorsing surgical treatments as pathways to success and recognition. By showcasing their transformations and associating themselves with esteemed professionals, influencers reinforce the allure of aesthetic procedures, assert their influence within the industry, and position themselves next to mainstream celebrities, who get similar procedures done.

### **7.1 Theoretical Contributions**

Alongside the previously discussed contributions to prior research, this thesis additionally provides significant theoretical contributions within influencer marketing ethics. The first theoretical contribution of this study lies in the integration of multiple theoretical frameworks—Ethics, Boltanski and Thévenot's Theory of Justification (2006), Mills' Vocabularies of Motive (1940), and Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values (2012)—to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ethical complexities inherent in influencer marketing practices related to aesthetic surgery promotion. By combining these diverse theoretical perspectives, we created a cohesive framework that offers nuanced insights into influencers' ethical justifications. This combination allowed us to explore influencer marketing ethics from both psychological and sociological perspectives, enabling a multi-level analysis of influencers' ethical justifications employed in their promotional activities. By adopting a deontological ethical perspective, we focused on the inherent moral principles guiding influencers' actions.

Additionally, the theoretical development proposed in this thesis extends Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) justification theory by introducing a new common world—the world of beauty. By framing physical appearance as a measure of self-worth and success, influencers position themselves within the world of beauty, where the pursuit of an idealised physical form is celebrated and endorsed, which consequently serves as a justification for influencers to promote ethically contested practices. This new common world sheds light on the evolving

nature of social values and the emergence of aesthetic ideals as influential forces in contemporary society, providing valuable academic insights into the ethical complexities of influencer marketing practices.

## **7.2 Practical Implications**

The findings of this thesis carry several practical implications for various stakeholders involved in influencer marketing and aesthetic surgery promotion. Firstly, influencers themselves can benefit from gaining insights into how their content is perceived and the ethical considerations surrounding their promotional activities. By understanding the impact of their messaging on their audience and the broader societal implications, influencers can make more informed decisions about the content they produce and the partnerships they engage in.

Additionally, influencer marketing agencies and managers of influencers play a crucial role in shaping promotional campaigns and guiding influencers' activities. By being aware of the ethical reasoning behind aesthetic surgery promotion, respective agencies and managers can provide better guidance and support to influencers, ensuring that their promotional efforts align with ethical standards and personal branding of each influencer.

Aesthetic surgery clinics can benefit from the findings of this thesis by gaining a better understanding of the ethical landscape in influencer marketing. By recognizing the values and motivations driving influencers' promotional activities, clinics can tailor their collaborations and partnerships with influencers to align with ethical principles. This may involve providing influencers with clear guidelines and standards for promoting aesthetic procedures, as well as ensuring that any sponsored content is transparent and informative for consumers. Moreover, policymakers and governing bodies responsible for regulating influencer marketing and aesthetic surgery practices can use the insights from this thesis to inform policy development and enforcement efforts. By addressing ethical concerns highlighted in the research, policymakers can help ensure that influencer marketing practices are conducted responsibly and transparently, protecting consumers from potential harm.

The promotion of ethically contested practice of aesthetic surgery by influencers has broader implications for beauty ideals and societal norms. As the idea of beauty becomes increasingly commodified and influenced by social media, the promotion of aesthetic procedures

perpetuates unrealistic standards and ideals. The trend of idealised beauty and specific alterations going viral can have a profound impact on younger audiences, who may internalise these standards and feel pressured to conform to them. Furthermore, the more permanent alterations made to the face and body through aesthetic surgeries can magnify this issue, as trends change over time but the made physical alterations remain. This can lead to long-term psychological and emotional harm, particularly for vulnerable individuals who may struggle to reconcile their appearance with societal expectations. Therefore, it is essential for influencers and industry stakeholders to consider the ethical implications of their promotional activities and based on the findings of this research consider the well-being of their audience and not exclusively focus on profit.

### **7.3 Limitations and Future Research**

While this thesis provides valuable insights into the ethical considerations of social media influencers in the promotion of aesthetic surgery, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations and opportunities for future research.

Firstly, the sample size of influencers analysed was limited, consisting of 25 individuals. While efforts were made to ensure diversity within the sample, including influencers of varying follower counts and engagement levels, the findings may not fully capture the breadth of perspectives within the influencer community. Additionally, it is important to recognize that influencer content is often subject to external influences, such as guidelines imposed by agencies, clients, or clinics. As a result, the content analysed in this thesis may not fully reflect the genuine ethical reasoning of the influencers themselves, as their messaging could be tailored to meet the expectations or preferences of external stakeholders. Lastly, the complexity of ethics could limit our findings, as ethical conduct cannot be explicitly defined, and the findings are not generalizable to all influencers across a wide range of platforms.

Moving forward, future research should strive to address these limitations and expand upon the findings of this study. One avenue for future exploration involves gaining direct access to influencers to facilitate a deeper understanding of their personal ethical reasoning processes. By employing methods that allow for more intimate insights into influencers' perspectives, such as in-depth interviews or ethnography, researchers can acquire a deeper understanding of

how influencers navigate ethical considerations in their promotional activities of aesthetic surgery.

Finally, future research could extend its focus beyond individual influencers to examine the industry-level dynamics shaping ethical considerations in influencer marketing. Investigating the practices and perspectives of influencer marketing agencies, for instance, could shed light on how promotional campaigns are conceptualised, developed, and executed. As mentioned previously, given that agencies often provide influencers with clear campaign briefs and talking points for promotional content, understanding their role in shaping ethical considerations is crucial in order to improve the overall ethical practices.

## References

- Alalwan, A., Rana, N.P., Dwivedi, Y.K. et al. (2017). Social media in marketing: A review and analysis of the existing literature. *Telematics and Informatics*, vol. 34 n.7, pp. 1177-1190, Available online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0736585317301077> [Accessed 13 March 2024]
- Álvarez-Monzoncillo, J. M. (2023). *The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing - A Multidisciplinary Approach*, First edition, Routledge
- Alves, H., Fernandes, C., Raposo, M. (2016). Social Media Marketing: A Literature Review and Implications. *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 33 n.12, pp. 1029–1038, Available online: [wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/mar](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/mar) [Accessed 13 March 2024]
- Argandoña, A. (2003). The New Economy: Ethical Issues. *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 44 n. 1, pp. 3–22, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023226105869> [Accessed 5 April 2024]
- Backaler, J. (2018). A Global Phenomenon: The Rise of Influencers Around the World. In: *Digital Influence*. Palgrave Macmillan, Available online: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78396-3\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78396-3_4) [Accessed 5 April 2024]
- Bakker, D. (2018). Conceptualising Influencer Marketing. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Marketing and Management*, vol. 1, no. 1, Available online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360061805\\_Conceptualising\\_Influencer\\_Marketing](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360061805_Conceptualising_Influencer_Marketing) [Accessed 28 March 2024]
- Bardi, A., & Schwartz, S. H. (2003). Values and Behavior: Strength and Structure of Relations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 10, pp. 1207–1220, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203254602> [Accessed 6 April 2024]

- Bell, K. (2016). Social Media and Female Body Image. BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects, n.173, Available online: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors\\_proj/173](https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/173) [Accessed 27 March 2024]
- Bell, E., Bryman, A. & Harley, B. (2019). Business Research Methods, Second edition, Oxford University Press
- Bentley, K., Chu, C., Nistor, C., Pehlivan, E. & Yalcin, T. (2021). Social Media Engagement for Global Influencers. *Journal of Global Marketing*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 205–219, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08911762.2021.1895403> [Accessed 5 April 2024]
- Bertilsson, E. & Gillberg, E. (2017). The Communicated Beauty Ideal on Social Media. Jönköping University, Available online: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1107740/FULLTEXT01.pdf> [Accessed 27 March 2024]
- Boltanski, L., Thévenot, L., & Porter, C. (2006). *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton University Press, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1zm2tzm> [Accessed 16 April 2024]
- Borchers, N. S. & Enke, N. (2022). “I’ve Never Seen a Client Say: ‘Tell the Influencer Not to Label This as Sponsored’”: An Exploration into Influencer Industry Ethics, *Public Relations Review*, vol. 48, no. 5, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102235> [Accessed 16 April 2024]
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful Qualitative Research, First edition, SAGE Publications Ltd
- Campbell, C. (1991). Reexamining Mills on Motive: A Character Vocabulary Approach. *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 52, p.1, pp. 89–97, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710717> [Accessed 16 April 2024]
- Campbell, C. & Farrell, J. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing, *Business Horizons*, vol. 63, n. 4, pp. 469-479,

Available online:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S000768132030032X> [Accessed 15 March 2024]

Cho, K., Jung, K., Lee, M., Lee, Y., Park, J. & Dreamson, N. (2022). Qualitative Approaches to Evaluating Social Media Influencers: A Case-based Literature Review, *International Journal of Electronic Commerce Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp.119–132, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.7903/ijecs.2025> [Accessed 24 March 2024]

Czupryna, M., Kamiński, B., Oleksy, P. & Growiec, K. (2024). Schwartz Human Values and the Economic Performance, *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation*, vol. 27, no. 1, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.18564/jasss.5023> [Accessed 6 April 2024]

Denis, L. (2003). Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 66, no. 2, pp.491–493, Available Online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20140553> [Accessed 29 March 2024]

Doshi, R., Ramesh, A. & Rao, S. (2023). Modeling Influencer Marketing Campaigns in Social Networks, *IEEE Transactions on Computational Social Systems*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp.322–334, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2106.01750> [Accessed 26 April 2024]

Eagle, L., Dahl, S., De Pelsmacker, P., & Taylor, C.B. (2020). The Sage Handbook of Marketing Ethics, (Eds.), London: Sage

Easterby-Smith, Mark & Jaspersen, Lena & Thorpe, Richard & Valizade, Danat. (2021). Management and business research, 7th edn

Eibel-Spanyi, K. & Hofmeister-Toth, A. (2013). The Impact of Values on Consumer Behaviour. *International Journal of Economics and Business Research*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp.400–419, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1504/IJEER.2013.054255> [Accessed 6 April 2024]

- Fioravanti, G. et al. (2022). How the Exposure to Beauty Ideals on Social Networking Sites Influences Body Image: A Systematic Review of Experimental Studies. *Adolescent Research Review*, vol. 7, pp. 419–458, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-022-00179-4> [Accessed 27 March 2024]
- Finlay, L. (2002). Outing the Researcher: The Provenance, Process, and Practice of Reflexivity, *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 531–545, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052> [Accessed 29 March 2024]
- Firstpost. (2023). Kim Kardashian lookalike dies after plastic surgery: How dangerous is going under the knife?, Available online: <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/kim-kardashian-lookalike-christina-ashten-gourkani-ashten-g-dies-plastic-surgery-dangers-12516322.html> [Accessed 23 March 2024]
- Fischer, R., & Schwartz, S. (2011). Whence differences in value priorities? Individual, cultural, or artefactual sources. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 7, pp. 1127–1144, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022110381429> [Accessed 6 April 2024]
- Gadinger, F. (2016). On justification and critique: Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology and international relations. *International Political Sociology*, vol. 10, n. 3, pp. 187-205, Available online: <https://academic.oup.com/ips/article-abstract/10/3/187/1750188> [Accessed 17 April 2024]
- Geyser, W. (2024). The State of Influencer Marketing 2024, *Influencer Marketing Hub*, Available online: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report/> [Accessed 26 April 2024]
- Glassick, C. E., Huber, M. T. & Maeroff, G. I. (1997). Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate, Jossey-Bass
- Gosman, A. (2018). Discussion: The Ethical and Professional Use of Social Media in Surgery: A Systematic Review of the Literature, *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*,

vol. 142, no. 3, pp. 403–404, Available online:

<https://doi.org/10.1097/PRS.00000000000004709> [Accessed 29 March 2024]

Gregor, B. & Olejniczak, A. (2023). Consumer Preferences Towards Influencer Marketing in the Beauty Industry on Instagram and YouTube Platforms (Comparative Analysis), *Marketing of Scientific and Research Organizations*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp.47–64, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2478/minib-2023-0015> [Accessed 17 April 2024]

Grgurić Čop, N., Culiberg, B., Komen I. (2024) Exploring social media influencers' moral dilemmas through role theory, *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 40 n.1-2, pp. 1-22, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2023.2241468> [Accessed 4 March 2024]

Griffiths, D. & Mullock, A. (2017). Cosmetic Surgery: Regulatory Challenges in a Global Beauty Market, *Health Care Analysis Journal*, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-017-0339-5> [Accessed 4 March 2024]

Gupta, N., Dorfman, R., Saadat, S., & Roostaeian, J. (2020). The Plastic Surgery Social Media Influencer: Ethical Considerations and a Literature Review. *Aesthetic surgery journal*, vol. 40, n. 6, pp. 691–699, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/asj/sjz329> [Accessed 18 January 2024]

Haenlein, M., Anadol, E., Farnsworth, T., Hugo, H., Hunichen, J. & Welte, D. (2020). Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing: How to Be Successful on Instagram, TikTok, & Co., *California Management Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 5–25, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125620958166> [Accessed 17 April 2024]

Hatcher, K. (2023). Brazilian Influencer and Reality TV Star, 29, Dies After Liposuction Surgery, Available online: <https://people.com/brazilian-influencer-reality-tv-star-dead-liposuction-8400497> [Accessed 23 March 2024]

Heeris Christensen, A-B. (2022). Conflicts and Challenges in Practices of Commercializing Humans: An Ethnographic Study of Influencer Marketing Work. Copenhagen Business School [PhD]. PhD Series No. 37.2022

- Hennink-Kaminski, H. (2006). The content of cosmetic surgery magazine advertisements and consumer use and interpretation of cosmetic surgery advertising, Available online: [https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/hennink-kaminski\\_heidi\\_j\\_200612\\_phd.pdf](https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/hennink-kaminski_heidi_j_200612_phd.pdf) [Accessed 22 February 2024]
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. (2020). *Qualitative Research Methods*, Second edition, SAGE Publications Ltd
- Hennink-Kaminski, H., Reid, L. N. & King, K. W. (2012). The Content of Cosmetic Surgery Advertisements Placed in Large City Magazines, 1985–2004, *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp.41–57, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2010.10505284> [Accessed 29 March 2024]
- Honneth, A. (2010). Dissolutions of the Social: On the Social Theory of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, Available online: <https://voidnetwork.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Dissolutions-of-the-Social-On-the-Social-Theory-of-Boltanski-and-Thévenot-by-Axel-Honneth.pdf> [Accessed 26 April 2024]
- Hudders, L. & Lou C. (2022). The rosy world of influencer marketing? Its bright and dark sides, and future research recommendations. *International Journal of Advertising*, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2022.2137318> [Accessed 4 March 2024]
- Iqbal, A., Aslam, S., Ul, W., Jalali, B. & Vayani, A. S. (2023). Unveiling the Power of Influencer Marketing: A Systematic Review of Influencer Marketing Antecedents, Outcomes, Theoretical Framework and the Future Research Directions, *Research Journal for Societal Issues*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 362-395, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.56976/rjsi.v5i2.119> [Accessed 10 March 2024]
- Javakhishvili, N. (2023). Beyond the Hype: Navigating the Ethics of Influencer Marketing, *Branded Thoughts*, Available online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370158372\\_Beyond\\_the\\_Hype\\_Navigating\\_the\\_Ethics\\_of\\_Influencer\\_Marketing](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370158372_Beyond_the_Hype_Navigating_the_Ethics_of_Influencer_Marketing) [Accessed 29 March 2024]

- Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A. & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and Social Media Influencer Marketing, *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, vol. 37, no. 5, pp.567–579, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2018-0375> [Accessed 29 March 2024]
- Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D. & Chauvin, S. (2020). A Review of the Quality Indicators of Rigor in Qualitative Research, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, vol. 84, no. 1, pp.138–146, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7120> [Accessed 12 March 2024]
- Joshi, Y., Lim, W.M., Jagani, K. et al. (2023). Social media influencer marketing: foundations, trends, and ways forward. *Electronic Commerce Research*, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-023-09719-> [Accessed 11 January 2024]
- Jung, J., Barron, D., Lee, Y.-A. & Swami, V. (2022). Social Media Usage and Body Image: Examining the Mediating Roles of Internalization of Appearance Ideals and Social Comparisons in Young Women. *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 135, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107357> [Accessed 5 April 2024]
- Khamis, S., Ang, L. & Welling, R. (2016). Self-branding, ‘micro-celebrity’ and the Rise of Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp.191–208, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292> [Accessed 5 April 2024]
- Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined*, Second edition, SAGE Publications
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities, *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp.61–72, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.39.1.61.18935> [Accessed 26 April 2024]
- Larson, R. B. (2019). Controlling Social Desirability Bias, *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 61, no. 5, pp.534–547, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470785318805305> [Accessed 26 March 2024]

- Logan, A. (2015). Netnography: Observing and Interacting with Celebrity in the Digital World, *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp.378–381, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1062652> [Accessed 27 April 2024]
- Ma, R., Gui, X. & Kou, Y. (2023). Multi-platform Content Creation: The Configuration of Creator Ecology Through Platform Prioritization, Content Synchronization, and Audience Management, in *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581106> [Accessed 26 April 2024]
- Mills, C. W. (1940). Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive. *American Sociological Review*, vol. 5, n. 6, pp. 904–913, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084524> [Accessed 16 April 2024]
- Mohammed, S. M. & Larson, D. L. (2013). Vocabulary of Motives and Consumer Purchase Justifications, vol. 20, n. 1, Available online: [http://asbbs.org/files/ASBBS2013V1/PDF/M/Mohammed\\_Larson\(P747-755\).pdf](http://asbbs.org/files/ASBBS2013V1/PDF/M/Mohammed_Larson(P747-755).pdf) [Accessed 16 April 2024]
- Mwita, K. M. (2022). Factors to Consider When Choosing Data Collection Methods, *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 532–538, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i5.1842> [Accessed 26 March 2024]
- Nyländen, J. (2020). The Relationship of Value Priorities and Attitudes Towards Influencer Marketing, Available online: <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:aalto-202007124324> [Accessed 2 March 2024]
- Patriotta, G. et al. (2010). Maintaining Legitimacy: Controversies, Orders of Worth, and Public Justifications. *Journal of Management Studies*, Available online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00990.x> [Accessed 29 March 2024]

- Paquette, H. (2013). Social Media as a Marketing Tool: A Literature Review. Major Papers by Master of Science Students, n. 2, Available online: [https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/tmd\\_major\\_papers/2](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/tmd_major_papers/2) [Accessed 13 March 2024]
- Rach, M. (2021). The impact of TikTok's plastic surgery content on adolescents' self-perception and purchase intention. In C. Cobanoglu, & V. Della Corte (Eds.), *Advances in global services and retail management*, pp. 1-13, USF M3 Publishing, Available online: <https://www.doi.org/10.5038/9781955833035> [Accessed 11 January 2024]
- Rennstam, J. & Wästerfors, D. (2018). Analyze! Crafting your data in qualitative research, Studentlitteratur.
- Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C. M. & Ormston, R. (2013). Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers, Second edition, SAGE Publications Ltd
- Rosario, G.-R. M., Carmen, D.-F. M. & Simonetti, B. (2014). Values and Corporate Social Initiative: An Approach Through Schwartz Theory. *International Journal of Business and Society*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp.19–48, Available online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287315456\\_Values\\_and\\_corporate\\_social\\_initiative\\_An\\_approach\\_through\\_Schwartz\\_theory](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287315456_Values_and_corporate_social_initiative_An_approach_through_Schwartz_theory) [Accessed 6 April 2024]
- Rundin, K. & Colliander, J. (2021). Multifaceted Influencers: Toward a New Typology for Influencer Roles in Advertising, *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 50, n. 5, pp. 548-564, Available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00913367.2021.1980471> [Accessed 15 March 2024]
- Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 25, pp. 1–65), Available online: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60281-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6) [Accessed 6 April 2024]

- Schwartz, S. H. (1994). Are there universal aspects in the structure and contents of human values? *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 19–45, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1994.tb01196.x> [Accessed 6 April 2024]
- Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116> [Accessed 6 April 2024]
- Sharma, S. & Verma, H.V. (2018). “Social Media Marketing: Evolution and Change”, Chapter 2 in *Social Media Marketing Emerging Concepts and Applications*, Heggde, G. & Shainesh, G. (eds.), Available online: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5323-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5323-8_2) [Accessed 13 March 2024]
- Shauly, O. et al. (2023) The New Era of Marketing in Plastic Surgery: A Systematic Review and Algorithm of Social Media and Digital Marketing, *Aesthetic Surgery Journal*, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/asjof/ojad024> [Accessed 4 March 2024]
- Shirish, A. (2018). “Shadow Side of Social Media Marketing: A User’s Perspective”, Chapter 5 in *Social Media Marketing Emerging Concepts and Applications*, Heggde, G. & Shainesh, G. (eds.), Available online: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5323-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5323-8_2) [Accessed 15 March 2024]
- Skimina, E., Cieciuch, J., Schwartz, S. H., Davidov, E. & Algesheimer, R. (2018). Testing the Circular Structure and Importance Hierarchy of Value States in Real-time Behaviors, *Journal of Research in Personality*, vol. 74, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2018.02.001> [Accessed 6 April 2024]
- Strasheim, A., Ungerer, L. (2017). An Alternative Model of Schwartz’s Basic Human Values in Consumer Research. In: Campbell, C. L. (eds) *The Customer is NOT Always Right? Marketing Orientations in a Dynamic Business World. Developments in Marketing Science: Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Science*. Springer, Available online: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50008-9\\_224](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50008-9_224) [Accessed 6 April 2024]
- Striker, G. (1987). Greek Ethics and Moral Theory, *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*

- Swaminathan, V., Sorescu, A., Steenkamp, J.-B. E. M., O’Guinn, T. C. G., & Schmitt, B. (2020). Branding in a Hyperconnected World: Refocusing Theories and Rethinking Boundaries. *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 84, n.2, pp. 24-26, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919899905> [Accessed 19 January 2024]
- Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M. & Thrassou, A. (2021). Social Media Influencer Marketing: A Systematic Review, Integrative Framework and Future Research Agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp.617–644, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12647> [Accessed 4 April 2024]
- Walker, C.E., Krumhuber, E.G., Dayan, S. et al. (2021). Effects of social media use on desire for cosmetic surgery among young women. *Current Psychology*, vol. 40, pp. 3355–3364, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00282-1> [Accessed 11 January 2024]
- Wellman, M. L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M. & Ekdale, B. (2020). Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content, *Journal of Media Ethics*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 68–82, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078> [Accessed 14 April 2024]
- White, T. I. (2017). Right and Wrong: A Practical Introduction to Ethics, Second edition, Wiley-Blackwell