Making sense of the relationship between social media influencers on Instagram and the consumers who follow them

Laura Peltola

Department of Business and Management, Marketing
Hanken School of Economics
Helsinki
2019
**Title of Thesis:**
Making sense of the relationship between social media influencers on Instagram and the consumers who follow them

**Abstract:**
Social media influencers (SMIs) are regular people who have built social media profiles with the aim to influence the behaviour of followers. Consumer-SMI relationships influence consumers’ behaviour and thinking continually. To understand how the relationships affect the consumer self-image, one must understand the nature of the relationship.

This thesis studies the relationship between SMIs and consumers who follow them, and the influence of the relationship on consumer’s self-image. The empirical study concentrates on women who follow SMIs on Instagram. Qualitative study was conducted, in the form of interviews, to study the consumer perceptions of the SMI authenticity, the relationship they have with the SMIs, and how these influence the consumer self-image. In terms of self-image, study concentrated on physical appearance; how consumers consider their physical appearance at present and in the future.

Based on the empirical study, consumers are influenced by the SMIs they follow, and the influence extends to how consumer considers herself to be at present and in the future. SMIs can influence all of the consumer selves; neutral, positive, and negative.

Previous research has not studied neither the relationship between consumers and SMIs from consumer perspective, nor whether this relationship influences consumer self-image. This study provides a better understanding, for both researchers and practitioners, of how consumer self-image, in terms of physical appearance, relates to social media influencing.

**Keywords:** influencer marketing, social media influencers, self-concept, self-image, consumer behaviour, para-social relationships
CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1
   1.1 Research problem .................................................................................................. 2
   1.2 Aim of the study ................................................................................................... 5
   1.3 Delimitations of study .......................................................................................... 5
   1.4 Definitions of main terms ..................................................................................... 6
   1.5 The structure of the thesis .................................................................................... 6
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ...................................................................................... 8
   2.1 Influencer marketing ............................................................................................. 8
      2.1.1 Celebrity endorsements as the predecessor of influencer marketing .......... 8
      2.1.2 Development of influencer marketing and SMIs ........................................ 10
      2.1.3 Authenticity .................................................................................................... 11
         2.1.3.1 Collaboration authenticity ...................................................................... 11
         2.1.3.2 Content authenticity .............................................................................. 13
   2.2 Consumer relationships ....................................................................................... 14
      2.2.1 Relationships in social media ........................................................................ 14
      2.2.2 Para-social relationships between consumers and SMIs ......................... 16
   2.3 Consumer self-image in relation to social media influencing .............................. 18
      2.3.1 Consumer self-image concept ....................................................................... 18
         2.3.1.1 Six self-state representations .................................................................. 20
         2.3.1.2 Multiple selves ...................................................................................... 21
      2.3.2 Neutral, positive, and negative self ................................................................ 21
      2.3.3 SMI’s role in the consumer self-concept ....................................................... 22
   2.4 Summary of the theoretical framework and implications for the study .......... 23
3 METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................................ 27
   3.1 Data collection method ......................................................................................... 27
   3.2 Ethical concerns with studying consumer self-image ........................................... 29
   3.3 Sample .................................................................................................................. 29
   3.4 Data collection ....................................................................................................... 31
      3.4.1 Interview guide ............................................................................................ 31
   3.5 Data analysis ......................................................................................................... 33
   3.6 Quality of the data ............................................................................................... 34
4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS .................................................................................................. 40
   4.1 What kind of relationship does the consumer perceive to have with the influencers? ......................................................................................................................... 40
      4.1.1 Characteristics of the relationship .................................................................... 40
      4.1.2 Social comparison in para-social relationships ............................................. 43
   4.2 To what extent are the influencers perceived as authentic? ................................. 45

To what extent are the influencers perceived as authentic?

What kind of relationship does the consumer perceive to have with the influencers?

Quality of the data
data collection
data analysis

Social comparison in para-social relationships

Neutral, positive, and negative self

Authentication

4.3 Are the influencer relationships related to neutral, positive, or negative consumer self?.................................................................................................................................................. 47
  4.3.1 Neutral self .................................................................................................................................................................................. 47
  4.3.2 Positive self.................................................................................................................................................................................. 48
  4.3.3 Negative self .................................................................................................................................................................................. 50

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .......................................................................................................................... 53
  5.1 Theoretical implications ................................................................................................................................................................. 53
    5.1.1 Consumer-influencer relationships ........................................................................................................................................ 53
    5.1.2 Influencer authenticity ............................................................................................................................................................... 56
    5.1.3 Influencer impact on consumer selves .................................................................................................................................. 57
  5.2 Practical implications ........................................................................................................................................................................ 61
  5.3 Recommendations for future research ........................................................................................................................................ 62

References ..................................................................................................................................................................................... 63

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 CONSENT FORM .......................................................................................................................................................... 70
Appendix 2 INTERVIEW GUIDE ......................................................................................................................................................... 71
Appendix 3 DATA EXCEL .................................................................................................................................................................... 74

TABLES

Table 1 Six basic types of self-state representation (Higgins, 1987) ............................................................................................ 20
Table 2 The three dimensions of self-concept to be studied ......................................................................................................... 25
Table 3 Interviews .................................................................................................................................................................................. 32
Table 4 Data coding: themes and categories ................................................................................................................................. 36
Table 5 Examples of data coding ....................................................................................................................................................... 37

FIGURES

Figure 1 Most popular verticals on Instagram worldwide 2015-2017, total number of mentions in millions (Statista, 2018a) ................................................................................................................................. 1
Figure 2 Summary of the theoretical framework .................................................................................................................................. 26
1 INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers (SMIs) are regular people who have built social media profiles with the aim to influence the behaviour of followers. Some SMIs get thousands or even millions of followers, and may assert huge power on their followers’ behaviour. Present day SMIs can be compared with traditional brand ambassadors such as celebrity endorsers; models, actresses, athletes, and other celebrities. There are influencers of all kind, but on Instagram the most popular topics are beauty and fashion (Figure 1). So called lifestyle influencers are not delimiting their content to cover a specific set of topics, but often concentrate on beauty and fashion, which are the most interesting topics for women (Annalect Finland, 2017). Already young women follow beauty SMIs to learn about beauty tricks and brands (Ipid). Expectations on appearance and lifestyle are constantly created by brands, influencers and consumers. Instagram creates worldwide trends (Harper, 2019), and therefore it has the potential to influence the ideals of beauty.

![Figure 1: Most popular verticals on Instagram worldwide 2015-2017, total number of mentions in millions (Statista, 2018a)](image)

This increased focus on beauty has led to media discussions including topics such as distorted beauty ideals, and increases in cosmetic surgery (Greenwood, Pietromonaco and Long, 2008; Perloff, 2014). Beauty is a controversial topic and beauty brands are not known for building realistic expectations and images of the physical appearance of people, women especially (Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard, 2006). There are powerful social norms which relate women’s self-worth with their physical attractiveness (Greenwood et al., 2008). These norms explain why women experience vigilance and
anxiety about their physical appearance and assimilate self-worth to their physical appearance (Ipid). Social norms are constantly nurtured in social and other media. Even though there are more and more actions against supporting a ‘beauty ideal’, the history of women’s physical attractiveness and its role in society is strong. It will take time and require opinion leaders to change the norms.

The ideals of beauty are highly influenced by advertising (Solomon et al., 2006). Beauty and fashion brands, for example, have moulded the ideal of beauty since the beginning of marketing. Throughout the history and cultures women have tried, and still try, to reach the current beauty ideal, whether it is by pursuing a certain weight, using certain types of clothes or applying make-up (Ipid). Internet and social media enable a constant stream of beautiful images and videos, which often do not even aim to present a realistic world. Women compare themselves with others similar to themselves and these comparisons may lead to negative self-evaluations (Wasylkiw, L. & Williamson, M., 2013). Instagram encourages comparison, because selfies and other images are shared constantly (Chung & Cho, 2017), and influences negative thoughts of one’s body (Oakes, 2019).

Women, who follow brands and SMIs, are influenced by these images and videos (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Fardouly, Willburger & Vartarian, 2018), but it is not easy to detect authentic content from manipulated. Recently there has been an awakening about the realism of Instagram. Influencers have raised the topic and published images to raise discussion on authenticity (for example, @nonsensepodi, 2019). Some think that Instagram, and social media influencing in general, has now reached a point where authenticity and passion define success (Elmhirst, 2019). The phenomenon, however, is fairly new, and most images cannot be described as typical and authentic pictures of everyday people.

Taken together, it is important to gain an understanding of how consumers relate to the influencers that they follow. This study dives into the phenomenon of social media influencing and how this stream of ‘ideal’ beauty affects the self-image of women.

1.1 Research problem

Social media has become main stream and 61 % of all people aged between 16 and 89 use social media platforms in Finland (Tilastokeskus, 2018). Social media is a way for consumers to build and maintain relationships. Instagram is the most used platform for influencers (Statista, 2018b), and also the 6th largest social media platform with 1 billion
active users (Statista, 2018c). Besides following their friends and other acquaintances, users can follow and interact with brands, companies, celebrities and influencers (Annalect Finland, 2017). Users spend 135 minutes per day on average on Instagram (Statista, 2018d) and beauty is the most popular topic (Figure 1), thus users come constantly across beautiful people and images. Women are at the centre of the Instagram influencing, because most of the influencers are female, which means that their followers are likely to be female as well, and the dominating topics, fashion and beauty, are especially interesting to women (Sokolova and Kefi, in press).

Influencers are not unique to social media. Earlier research, from times before social media and SMIs, has studied the use of influencers in marketing (Langmeyer & Shank, 1994; Till, 1998). Most of the studies concentrate on celebrity endorsements as a way of marketing practice, but also sports sponsorship as a way of using influencers in marketing (Mcdaniel, 1999). Many studies on celebrity endorsements have focused on the effectiveness and source credibility (Thomas & Johnson, 2017; Bhatt, Jayswal & Patel, 2013), but there are also studies aiming to understand the influence of celebrity endorsements on consumers (McCracken, 1989). More recently, academics have turned their interest to the credibility and authenticity of social media influencers (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2018; Erz and Heeris Christensen, 2018). These studies focus on the characteristics of the influencer rather than the consumer-influencer relationship.

Consumer-influencer relationships have been studied, for example, from the perspective of para-social relationships. Para-social relationships build an illusion of intimacy between the relationship parties (Sokolova & Kefi, in press). Para-social relationships have been studied in a celebrity context, but more recently also on SMIs (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Gong & Xu, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2008; Sokolova & Kefi, in press). The nature of the relationship is an important aspect in a self-image context. “Humans are social animals” (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 303) and their relationships influence their behaviour and thinking continually. In order to understand how the influencers affect the consumer self-image, one must understand the nature of the relationship, which is formed between consumers and influencers.

Based on past research (Hwang & Jeong, 2016), authenticity is expected to affect the consumer-influencer relationships. When the SMI is perceived as a regular, honest person, the content is perceived as authentic (Ipid). However, when a SMI has a follower base of hundreds of thousands or even millions, one may question how much of “a
regular person” they are. The role of SMIs change the more paid collaborations with brands they have (Audrezet et al., 2018). They may lose their authenticity and become professional endorsers (Ipid). Hence, authenticity has a key role when making sense on the relationship consumers build with SMIs. Consumer self-image may be affected by the image influencers present on social media (McCracken, 1989) and the perceived authenticity may affect the ideals they build for themselves.

Beauty relates to self-image; physical appearance being part of it (Markus & Nurius, 1986). People’s self-image consists of several viewpoints on themselves (Ipid), and physical appearance can be argued to be an important aspect of self-image as it is visible for the outside world. People, especially women, are constantly evaluated with regard to physical appearance (Wasylkiw, L. & Williamson, M., 2013). Media is harsh on celebrities and women in general when it comes to their physical appearance. Additionally, media holds on to traditional ideals of beauty with constant beauty and weight loss tips. Physical appearance has also a role in the para-social relationships consumers build with celebrities and SMIs, thus consumers follow these influencers and try to mimic their lifestyles and appearance (Greenwood et al., 2008; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). This may have both positive and negative consequences on their self-image.

Self-concept theories often present several dimensions on which consumer self-image is built on. For the purpose of this study, self-concept will be explored using three dimensions: neutral, positive, and negative (Vuoristo, 2017). These dimensions refer to perceptions on both present and future selves (Sirgy, 1982; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Neutral self relates to the perception of consumer actual, present self, (Sirgy, 1982) and positive and negative selves relate on the future self; what the consumer would like to become or what the consumer is afraid of becoming with regard to their physical appearance (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Even though there are studies on consumer-influencer relationships, they mainly concentrate on the influencer effect on consumer purchase behaviour (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, in press). What seems to be missing is a broader consumer perspective on influencer marketing. This thesis will study how it affects consumer’s self-image. An increased understanding of the consumer-influencer relationship through self-concept theories, drawn from consumer psychology, can provide new knowledge on the impact of influencers on consumers. How do
consumers relate to SMIs on Instagram, and how does the relationship affect their self-image?

1.2 Aim of the study
The aim of the study is to explore how consumers make sense of their relationship with SMIs, in terms of how the SMI relates to the consumer’s self-image.

The following research questions will be answered:

RQ1: What kind of relationship does the consumer perceive to have with influencers?

RQ2: To what extent are the influencers perceived as authentic?

RQ3: Are the influencer relationships related to neutral, positive, or negative consumer self?

Studying consumer relationships and self-image requires a qualitative study, and data will be collected by means of interviews with women in the metropolitan region of Helsinki. The study will interview consumers who have experience of following SMIs.

1.3 Delimitations of study
In social media, women are more likely to be interested in topics that relate to physical appearance (Annalect Finland, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, in press), they have more positive attitudes towards influencer marketing than men (Annalect Finland, 2017), and most of the SMIs are female (Statista, 2019a). Therefore, the study will be delimited to women.

The empirical study concentrates on six female respondents who were between ages 24 and 35. This delimitation is connected to the purposeful sampling process through which the respondents were chosen. The process will be explained later in this thesis.

The study will concentrate on Instagram leaving other social media platforms out, because beauty is a major topic specifically on Instagram (Statista, 2018a), and because Instagram is the most used platform of influencers (Statista, 2018b). The influencers, who are of interest in the empirical study, are delimited to so called lifestyle influencers, whose topics are not restricted to beauty, but cover different aspects of physical appearance; beauty, fashion, and fitness, for example. In addition, the study is delimited
to self-image with regard to physical appearance leaving other possible areas that affect consumers’ self-image out.

The sample is collected from Helsinki Metropolitan region, based on the researcher’s location, as interviews require respondents’ physical presence. All respondents are Finnish. The study seeks to understand the nature of the relationship rather than, for example, the prevalence of different types of self-images. Limitations of the study are discussed in the final chapter.

1.4 Definitions of main terms

*Authenticity:* For the purpose of this study, authenticity is divided into content and collaboration authenticity. Content authenticity concerns the perceived authenticity of SMI’s content; authentic content presents an authentic situation and the image is not manipulated. Collaboration authenticity, in turn, relates to the products and services presented for the audience and the reasons behind the presentation.

*Para-social relationship* is a relationship built on an illusion of intimacy between the parties. The relationship is neither one- nor two-sided, but for consumers’ it resembles a traditional friendship.

*Self-image* covers a person’s view on themselves. For this study, the concept of self-image is delimited to cover consumer’s perception of their own physical appearance.

*Social media influencer (SMI)* is a regular person, without prior celebrity status, who has built a social media profile with the aim to influence the behaviour of followers. SMI s can be, for example, blog writers (blogger), video publishers (vlogger) or Instagram influencers sharing images on Instagram.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

The thesis is organized in five main chapters which include sub-sections. The first chapter introduced the topic. The second chapter presents the theoretical framework. It is built on three topics, which relate to the research aim: influencer marketing, consumer-SMI relationships, and consumer self-image in relation to social media influencing. The third chapter presents the empirical research design and justifies the choices on the approaches and methods. It presents the data collection and analysis, and discloses the ethical issues to consider. Chapter four presents the findings. The final chapter concludes the thesis and synthesizes the findings. Moreover, the final section
presents the suggestions for future research and the implications the study has for theoretical and practical purposes.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reviews literature on the three main topics: influencer marketing, consumer relationships, and consumer self-image in relation to social media influencing. At the end of the chapter, the three streams are drawn together in a summary.

2.1 Influencer marketing

Social media provides platforms, which enable “online opinion leaders to act as brand ambassadors and influencers for products and services” (Lin, Bruning & Swarna, 2018, p. 432). Influencer marketing can be described as marketing practice which utilises online opinion leaders’ status to create effective marketing communications. Influencer marketing is a relatively new term, but similar practices have been used in marketing since long.

Consumers are influenced by brands and marketing (Solomon et al., 2006). There are fewer and fewer situations where a consumer can separate herself from the world shaped by marketing. People carry their mobile phones constantly with them and it is difficult to avoid being influenced by marketing stimuli. Social media provides consumers a way to choose who they follow (Kim & Drumwright, 2016), but they cannot choose which brands they interact with.

This chapter introduces celebrity endorsements as a predecessor of influencer marketing and then continues to recent developments and the rise of SMIs.

2.1.1 Celebrity endorsements as the predecessor of influencer marketing

Celebrities are famous people with a certain status they have achieved from, for example, sports, music, or acting career, and whose actions and words have an audience (Awasthi & Choraria, 2015). Celebrities, who are used in marketing practices, are often called endorsers. Marketing endorsements communicate the experience of someone else than the company itself, usually a celebrity’s, professional’s, or expert’s (Thomas & Johnson, 2017). The endorser’s expertise is measured by how the target audience perceives it (Ipid). Companies use endorsers, whose perceived expertise matches their brand, in order to influence consumers. Celebrity endorsers entice their admirers; consumers evaluate their own values and beliefs in order to imitate the celebrities they admire (Awasthi & Choraria, 2015). Consumers admire celebrities and tend to associate the positive beliefs into the brands celebrities endorse (Dwivedi, McDonald, & Johnson, 2014).
Marketing investments and marketing return on investment has interested academics for long. Everyone is keen to validate that the money they spend is returned by, for example, increased sales or brand equity. Agrawal and Kamakura (1995) studied the economical worth of celebrity endorsements, finding support for the use of celebrities in advertising. The positive effects require that the chosen celebrity is carefully chosen and fits the brand (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). Celebrity endorsements improve brand credibility, which in turn has a positive effect on brand equity (Spry, Pappu & Cornwell, 2011). According to MarketWatch (cited in Spry et al., 2011, p. 882) in 2006 25 % of all advertisements were using celebrity endorsements, which is an increase from mid-nineties when the figure was 20 % (Bradley, 1996, cited in Till, 1998, p. 400). Generally, the advertisements with celebrity endorsers receive more positive results compared to the advertisements which use non-celebrity endorsers (Atkin & Block, 1983). However, not all considerations towards celebrity endorsers are positive; celebrity endorsements have also been regarded to be dishonest, false, and irresponsible (Ipid). The context has a remarkable influence on how the endorsement is considered.

Most studies link the celebrity endorsement effectiveness to attractiveness, credibility, or other attributes of the celebrity. Awasthi & Choraria (2015) argue that social influences, such as peer pressure, and consumer characteristics, such as self-satisfaction, can determine the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement. The general idea is that imitation has an important role between celebrity endorsement and purchase behaviour (Ipid). They suggest that, if an advertisement manages to trigger imitation behaviour by consumers, it more probably succeeds (Ipid). In addition, consumer attitudes have been suggested to affect the celebrity endorsement effectiveness (Roy, Jain & Rana, 2013). Therefore, the influence of a celebrity on consumers depends not only on the celebrity itself, but on the audience as well.

Celebrity endorsements have also been studied in consumer self-concept context. According to Dwivedi et al. (2014), effective celebrity endorser supports consumer engagement with the brand. Celebrity acts as an intermediate between the brand and the consumer, ideally enhancing the consumer self-brand connection. Forming a self-brand connection is defined as “the degree to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concept” (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, p. 340). A brand, which manages to develop a self-brand connection with consumers, is able to build a relationship with consumer self-image (Dwivedi et al., 2014).
Celebrity endorsers are not disappearing even though new types of influencers emerge. For example, footballer Cristiano Ronaldo has the second biggest follower base in Instagram with 152 million followers (Statista, 2019b), and has a huge influence through the content he shares on Instagram. Brands have a wide variety of influencers to choose from, when they plan their marketing strategy. They have to consider the type of influencers they have resources to use, and the type of influencers they think will transmit their message in a way that creates the most engagement.

2.1.2 Development of influencer marketing and SMIs

In comparison to traditional celebrities, SMIs are people who have built their social media careers, for example, through writing a blog, publishing videos on YouTube or sharing images on Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Influencers receive the respect of consumers through being more socially connected with higher status, education, or social prestige (Lin et al., 2018).

SMIs can be divided into two categories based on the size of their follower-base. Micro-influencers have typically 3,000-20,000 followers (Räisänen, 2019) in comparison to other influencers whose follower-bases can be in millions (Lin et al., 2018). Micro-influencers are quite close to regular consumers and have more engaged and active followers, because they have more time to communicate with them (Indieplace, 2017). Their followers perceive the relationship closer than they do with other influencers (Ipíd). Micro-influencers are perceived to be more familiar and trustworthy as their day-to-day lives are similar to normal consumers’, and they engage in two-sided communication with their followers (Indieplace, 2017). In comparison to micro-influencers, influencers with follower-bases in hundreds of thousands or millions turn into brands, which affects their content and self-presentation (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018). This, in turn, affects the way consumers regard them, as they become closer to traditional celebrities.

Traditionally, celebrities and other endorsers have been visible in separate platforms than friends and other acquaintances, for example in television and magazines. Nowadays the platforms are the same, and friends and influencers are all mixed up in the same social media feeds (Annalect Finland, 2017). Social media provide consumers, companies, and brands a platform to build and foster relationships (Kim & Drumwright, 2016). The same platforms and ways of communication are used by people, brands, and companies. Consumers can build relationships with influencers, which may resemble
regular consumer-to-consumer relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017). Communication with one’s friends and other acquaintances resembles the communication with brands in many ways. Brands can be part of consumers’ everyday lives through interpersonal interactions and dialogue that social media enables (Kim & Drumwright, 2016).

Anyone can become and be a celebrity: a minute in spotlight can establish a celebrity and with the right management no talent is needed (Wagner, 1998). However, SMIs are not necessarily celebrities in the traditional sense. What they do have in common with celebrities, is that their voice is heard and listened intently (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Brands are not the only source of communication anymore, but contribution is shared with Internet communities and influencers (Booth & Matic, 2011). Companies cannot decide and influence who discusses their brand (Erkan & Evans, 2016), but they have to accept that discussion happens and they can be part of it, but not necessarily the moderator.

2.1.3 Authenticity

Authenticity is an important aspect of social media influencing, because SMIs’ success has leaned on it. Influencer marketing has been compounded of personal recommendations, and social media users are specifically looking for content presented by ordinary consumers, and not initiated by marketers (Audrezet et al., 2018).

For the purpose of this study, authenticity refers to collaboration and content authenticity. Collaboration authenticity relates to the products and services presented for the audience, and the reasons given for the presentation. Authentic collaboration clearly states the nature of collaboration, thus explaining the monetary gains for the influencer. Content authenticity relates to the perceived authenticity of the SMI’s content. Authentic content presents an authentic situation, and the image is not manipulated.

2.1.3.1 Collaboration authenticity

In general, consumer generated content is perceived as more credible than the content generated by brands (Lee, Lee & Hansen, 2017). Additionally, SMIs are regarded to be more influential than traditional celebrities when it comes to product endorsements (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Thus, one of the keys to SMI success has been the perceived authenticity of their content, but there is a threat that SMIs will not be
regarded as authentic as they start monetizing the content they produce (Audrezet et al., 2018).

Authenticity is something that SMIs have to consider when their social media presence becomes a source of income, because their credibility influences the effectiveness of their message (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, it is important for influencers to retain their perceived authenticity even after they become successful and can monetize their content (Erz and Heeris Christensen, 2018). However, it has been discovered that the influencer’s content and self-presentation do change as they turn into brands (Ipids). SMIs can strategize their authenticity management (Audrezet et al., 2018), which means that the influencer strategizes their stance towards the collaborations they do and how they do them. Consumers are nowadays quite aware of the concept of influencing. Presenting content as paid collaboration may result in lower source credibility and less favourable attitudes, but attitudes can be affected positively by emphasizing the honesty of shared opinions (Hwang & Jeong, 2016).

Several UK beauty influencers have recently spoken out about the transparency and clarity of paid collaborations and gifted products (Bell, 2019a; Magrath, 2019; @lilypebbles, 2019). These influencers are on a path of absolute authenticity, thus they are transparent about the monetary gains, and only collaborate with brands they actually believe in (Audrezet et al., 2018). However, authenticity, in this context, only relates to the collaboration authenticity. They clearly present whenever they share content due to paid collaboration, but whether the content presents reality in any way is another matter.

The credibility of the endorser in the context of the marketed product or service affects the perceived authenticity. The endorser’s expertise has a major influence on the credibility of the recommendation and therefore, brands should focus on collaborating with influencers whose expertise matches their product or service (Thomas & Johnson, 2017). Bhatt et al. (2013) found that endorser trustworthiness is more important to consumers than endorser attractiveness. Their study investigated jewellery products, which can be seen as products with high psychological and social risks, and therefore need different type of persuasion than, for example, fast moving consumer goods (Thomas & Johnson, 2017). Similarly, beauty-related products can be considered to have high psychological and social risks, meaning that content authenticity can be expected to affect influencer trustworthiness. SMIs build their consumer perception of expertise, for example, with tutorials and product evaluations, to achieve a status of an opinion leader.
Content authenticity

Consumers use social media to find inspiration. Inspiration on physical appearance can be, for example, in the form of make-up tutorials or fitness tips. The content may influence consumers in several ways. It can affect their purchase behaviour (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), but it can also have an influence on their self-image; how they regard their own physical appearance (Fardouly et al., 2018). Self-image is influenced by other factors as well, such as the social groups that the individuals belong to (Solomon et al., 2006). These social groups can be, for example, sports teams, groups of friends, but also groups of followers by a certain influencer.

Image manipulation has been especially criticized in beauty advertising as Photoshop modifications and other falsehood have gained headlines. In addition, 82 % of all the claims given in cosmetics advertising have been deemed untrustworthy (Sifferlin, 2015). This and other allegations have raised advertising campaigns to celebrate reality. One example is the Dove ‘Real Beauty’ campaign, which concentrated on different kinds of beauty and also celebrated different body types (Bahadur, 2014).

Authenticity can be manipulated in many ways. Image manipulation, for example to make models look thinner, is definitely not authentic, but images can alter reality in other ways as well. SMIs can present their physical appearance in social media selectively (Kim & Chock, 2015). One example is just modifying the angle of view. Two bloggers from Finland, Alexa Dagmar and Linda Juhola, have recently shown in their shared Instagram account, how reality can be altered. Their post visualizes how SMIs are able to present themselves thinner merely by modifying the angle of the photograph and their posture (@nonsensepodi, 2019). They raise an important issue and show people that SMIs are regular people, and what Instagram shows is not always real, or not at least the complete truth.

SMIs present themselves and their life in a good light, highlighting the great experiences and situations. They rarely show boring real-life situations, for example doing laundry. This can create unreal expectations on consumers, their self-image, and their life in general. When SMIs present paid collaborations, they can affect attitudes by stating that the endorsement is authentic regardless the monetary benefits they receive from it (Hwang & Jeong, 2016), and the same applies to selective self-presentation (Kim & Chock, 2015). The content SMI shares may achieve more credibility if they discuss the reality behind the content. They may, for example, present themselves in a real life
situation and show that they are regular people with normal lives and regular physical appearance (for example, Pastak, 2019).

2.2 Consumer relationships

This chapter reviews literature on the consumer-SMI relationships; their nature and influence on consumer behaviour.

2.2.1 Relationships in social media

The main reason for consumers to use Instagram is to maintain relationships with their friends and acquaintances (Annalect Finland, 2017). SMIs can be regarded, at least partially, belonging to this group, because loyal followers create a close relationship with their favourite influencers (Chung & Cho, 2017), and are likely to relate their self to the portrayed influencer (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The style of influencing in social media is interactive and immediate (Chung & Cho, 2017), one example being Instagram Stories1, which create a need among followers for daily updates from the SMI. Together this makes consumer-influencer relationships resemble the relationships consumers have with their friends and acquaintances rather than the relationships they have with traditional brands.

Research has found that consumers respond more positively to paid posts by influencers than to traditional advertisements (De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012; Hwang, & Zhang, 2018). One of the reasons is that they can relate themselves with influencers, which increases the communication persuasiveness (Sokolova & Kefi, in press). Because consumers relate themselves with the influencers they follow and because they perceive the influencers to be more credible than traditional brands, influencers have a lot of power (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Consumers may also regard influencers as their friends (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), which increases their power. Women compare themselves with their peers, but they also mimic those (Wasylkiw & Williamson, 2013). Thus, SMIs who discuss their physical appearance may have an effect on how their followers regard beauty ideals. Another aspect to separate SMIs from traditional influencers, such as celebrities, is SMIs’ perceived authenticity; thus, consumers are more receptive for content presented by a person they regard as their peer in comparison to traditional advertising (Audrezet et al., 2018).

1 "Instagram Stories is a feature that lets users post photos and videos that vanish after 24 hours" (Read, 2018).
Consumers can choose which influencers they follow in social media and how to engage with them. They can engage with the influencer by likes, comments, or other ways that Instagram or other platforms enable. Therefore, it can be argued that consumers have a major role in the relationship. Consumers tend to build relationships with people who they consider similar to themselves (Sokolova & Kefi, in press). Influencers, therefore, have something that a traditional brand may be missing: a connection to consumer self-image (Ipid).

Social media gathers people with similar interests, values, and beliefs together. It supplements the relationships consumers have offline and is an important source of social support (Sutcliffe, Binder & Dunbar, 2018). A reference group is an actual or imaginary person or a group, who is considered to significantly influence consumer’s evaluations, aspirations, or behaviour (Solomon et al., 2006). There is a variety of reference groups affecting an individual’s behaviour, for example friends, family, or celebrities (Ipid). There also exists aspirational reference groups, such as celebrities and SMIs, which consumers do not belong to, but which act as a reference (Dwivedi et al., 2014). These groups are looked up to, and they provide inspiration on who or what consumers aspire to become. Influencers attract similar people and provide a digital space for interaction. Similarly, SMIs create reference groups on their platforms, where consumers and influencers share similar interests and therefore influence each other. SMI reference groups can be regarded as online communities, which “constitute a social space wherein relationships and ties are formed among the members, and a common set of values and norms are established and shared” (Nambisan & Watt, 2011, p. 890). Consumers can affect influencer behaviour in the online communities, and it is common for influencers to ask opinions from consumers, for example on fashion or beauty (for example, Bell, 2019b; Magrath, 2019).

Not all feelings in social media are positive. Social media provides consumers a possibility to engage with their peers, but it also simplifies social comparison, which occurs when social media users compare themselves with others who they consider to be similar to themselves (Perloff, 2014). Social media has made comparison considerably simple as users present their lives continuously, encouraging the comparison (Lin, 2018). However, social media mainly presents the parts of users’ lives they are willing to share for comparison, therefore creating distortions (Ipid). This so called social comparison may lead to envy, which can be divided into benign and malicious (Lin, 2018;
Benign envy encourages self-improvement, whereas malicious envy encourages to pull-down the other person (Lin, 2018). However, social media users are more likely to feel benign envy (Ip)id, and therefore, SMIs have a possibility to inspire and encourage their followers, rather than deflate them. The way of communication influences the nature of envy, and, for example, grandiose content is more likely to cause envy than subtle content (Lim & Kim, 2018).

2.2.2 Para-social relationships between consumers and SMIs

Consumer-influencer relationships are often para-social in nature (Sokolova & Kefi, in press; Gong & Xu, 2014; Hwang, & Zhang, 2018). These relationships do not substitute real social behaviour, but are rather an extension for it (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Para-social relationships are relationships with an illusion of intimacy (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), in this case, between a consumer and a SMI. Such relationships influence consumers cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Cognitive influence shows on consumer opinions, interests, attention allocation, and construction of relations, whereas affective influence can alter emotions or mood, and induce empathetic reactions, or inspiration (Ip). Para-social relationships can also trigger behaviour; in both online and offline actions (Ip).

A consumer follows an influencer who she can relate with (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) and build a relationship with. This type of para-social relationship between an influencer and a consumer is not completely one-sided as there is often interaction between the parties (Sokolova & Kefi, in press). However, the relationship is rarely two-sided either, as influencers are not able to interact with all of their followers (Ip). Para-social relationship strengthens if there exists a perception of self-disclosure, thus a consumer’s perception that the influencer shares personal and private matters with them (Chung & Cho, 2017). Influencers can achieve perceived self-disclosure amongst their followers by sharing honest opinions and statements, but also by sharing pieces of their day-to-day lives, and for example, images of their family members (Ip). This may support the feeling of intimacy since consumers would normally share this type of information with their friends.

The more followers influencers attract, the further they go from maintaining traditional two-sided relationships (Sokolova & Kefi, in press). Instagram supports the development of para-social relationships between the influencers and consumers by providing tools for simpler interaction (Chung & Cho, 2017). For example, influencers can ask questions,
request questions from followers, and raise polls amongst their followers using Instagram Stories. These same features are used in consumer to consumer relationships, and they can create a sense of community amongst the influencer follower base.

Para-social relationships are built on friendship, understanding, and identification (Chung & Cho, 2017). What creates the illusion of friendship is the mutual liking, intimacy, and the frequency of communication (Ipid). Therefore, SMIs who communicate with conversational tones, frequently, and are able to share private issues, are likely to form para-social relationships with their followers. However, they are encouraged to post positive content, because it tends to receive the most positive response (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This concentration on creating a positive image may lead to avoiding difficult issues and reality; thus, SMIs concentrate on the positive and worth-publishing parts of their lives. Therefore, there exists a contradiction between immediate positive feedback and forming of relationships, because sharing more difficult issues could improve the para-social relationships, but might not cause immediate positive reactions.

Influencer physical attractiveness does not always have a determining role on these para-social relationships (Sokolova & Kefi, in press). However, physical appearance, in general, does have a role. Physical appearance influences the para-social relationships, because consumers have a tendency to mirror the appearance of celebrities they have built a relationship with (Greenwood et al., 2008). This can be extended to SMIs since consumers follow the ones they can relate themselves with (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Thus, consumers can be expected to mirror their own physical appearance with the influencers’, which indicates that self-image is an important variable in the relationship. Influencers support this by providing copy-my-style or copy-my-makeup type of content (for example, Bonaldi, 2019).

Consumer behaviour in social media is influenced by their self-esteem (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Consumers with high self-confidence are more capable of creating counter-arguments and search for additional information, whereas consumers with low self-confidence seek social acceptance and approval and are highly influenced by the opinions of others (Ipid). This affects how the relationship with a SMI can potentially influence the consumer. There is a distinct difference between consumers who follow SMIs to seek inspiration, and those that do it to copy their habits and behaviour.


2.3 Consumer self-image in relation to social media influencing

Beauty is often assimilated with physical attractiveness, but that is only a part of it. Beauty also consists of person’s values, habits, personality, and behaviour (Langmeyer & Shank, 1994). With investments of time and money, one can influence the physical appearance, but ‘real beauty’ is not only about a pretty face (Ipid). Physical appearance is, however, important in social media influencing, especially in Instagram, which is based on images and videos, and likely related to the self-image of followers.

This chapter reviews the consumer self-concept theories and their relation to SMIs.

2.3.1 Consumer self-image concept

Consumers build relationships with services, goods, brands, and people. The relationships vary and some relationships have no deep influence on the consumer’s self. However, some relationships may help to establish the consumer’s identity. For example, using a product can be a way for the consumer to express themselves (Solomon et al., 2006). It has also been argued that consumer’s personality can be defined by the products they acquire (Sirgy, 1982). Similarly, the influencers, who a consumer follows and admires, may affect and tell about the consumer’s personality. However, it is not clear whether the consumer-influencer relationships reflect the consumer’s present self or the self they aspire to become.

Consumer self-concept has several interpretations (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Sirgy, 1982; Higgins, 1987). In several of those interpretations the concept is viewed as three dimensional, reflecting the consumer neutral, positive, and negative selves (Vuoristo, 2017). Dimensions can be extended to reflect selves in present, past, and future (Ipid). Additionally, research suggests that consumer’s self has a variety of aspects depending on the context (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

Sirgy (1982) presents self-concept as consisting of consumer actual, ideal, and social selves. Actual self refers to how people see themselves, ideal self refers on how people would like to see themselves, and social self refers to the way they present themselves to others (Ipid). Self-image, and the perception of one’s own physical appearance, is a combination of all three selves. Actual self, in this context, refers to the way a person sees their actual physical appearance, whereas ideal self is the image the person has about their ideal appearance. An example of a social self is a person’s presentation of herself by dressing to cover her body if it does not represent her ideal self. Consumers moderate
their self-presentation in social situations, for example by controlling what information they share and how (Fox, Bacile, Nakhata & Weible, 2018). This can be regarded as a contradiction to their actual self (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). In addition, self-representation can alter the consumer self by expanding their actual self (Ipid). Therefore, social media enables consumer’s self to be a moderated version of their actual self (Fox et al., 2018). This is simpler in social media than in real life, because images and videos can be edited before publishing, and consumer can show the parts of their life worth presenting.

In some descriptions, social self is replaced with ought self, which holds the attributes that a person thinks they should possess, or someone would like them to possess. The self-concept is influenced, besides one’s own perception, by the perceptions of people significant for the person. Thus, a person’s self-concept is moulded by their own perception of themselves, but also by the perception of the people close to them; how they think this person should be. This is sometimes referred as social ideal self. (Higgins, 1987)

Self-concept is a relatively stable constituent (Fox et al., 2018; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). However, social media creates trends, which may influence the stability. One of the trends risen through visual image sharing apps, such as Instagram, is selfies (Fox et al., 2018). Selfies are a way for users to create impressions; showing other users a carefully chosen part of themselves, often in a positive light (Ipid). Selfies are a way for consumers to participate in social media, but they are also a way for consumers to express and alter their self-concept (Ipid). Consumers, who are sharing their selfies online, tend to present their ideal selves when the content is permanent (for example, Instagram feed\(^2\)), but are also willing to present their actual selves when the content is temporary, for example, Snapchat\(^3\) (Ipid). Because online relationships are wider in amount than offline relationships, there are more weak ties online than offline, and therefore, it is simpler to establish the user’s ideal self online, without influencing the actual self offline (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). This applies, besides consumers, to SMIs as well. They are more likely to present their ideal selves online; thus, creating their own brands around their ideal selves.

---

\(^2\) Instagram feed is the place a user shares their content (Instagram, 2019).

\(^3\) Snapchat is a social media tool where users can decide whom and how long to share the content with (Snapchat, 2019).
2.3.1.1 Six self-state representations

When the three domains of self, actual, ideal, and ought, are combined with two standpoints on the self, others and own, six basic types of self-state representation can be constructed (Higgins, 1987) (Table 1). A person’s self-concept is a combination of the first two self-state representations: actual-own and actual-others, whereas the rest four can be described as self-guides (Ipid). Actual-own and actual-others represent the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you actually possess, and therefore, typically constitute one’s self-concept (Ipid). According to self-discrepancy theory people do not necessarily possess all four self-guides and they differ according to which self-guide they are most willing to meet (Ipid). Physical appearance can be associated with all of the guides. It can be argued that one’s actual self has a pressing effect on the ideal and ought selves. If a person feels herself physically attractive, her ideal self for physical appearance is likely different compared from a person’s who feels herself unattractive. In addition, the actual self affects the social self, and how the person presents herself. Furthermore, how the person presents herself affects how other people sees her.

Table 1 Six basic types of self-state representation (Higgins, 1987)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of self</th>
<th>Standpoints on self</th>
<th>Six basic types of self-state representation</th>
<th>Self-concept or self-guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>actual</td>
<td>own</td>
<td>Actual-own</td>
<td>Self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideal</td>
<td>own</td>
<td>Ideal-own</td>
<td>Self-guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ought</td>
<td>own</td>
<td>Ought-own</td>
<td>Self-guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actual</td>
<td>others</td>
<td>Actual-others</td>
<td>Self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideal</td>
<td>others</td>
<td>Ideal-others</td>
<td>Self-guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ought</td>
<td>others</td>
<td>Ought-others</td>
<td>Self-guide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The key idea of self-discrepancy theory is that consumers are motivated to reach a situation in which their self-concept matches those self-guides that are the most relevant for them (Higgins, 1987). For example, a person whose ideal self is thinner is motivated by this goal and therefore uses the motivation to lose weight.
2.3.1.2 Multiple selves

Multiple selves is a concept, which contains three dimensions on consumer self: what I may become, what I would like to become and what I am afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Multiple selves link to consumers’ goals, aspirations, motives, threats, and fears, and describe how an individual sees their potential (Ipid). Self-image, and the view on one’s own physical appearance, has a clear connection with the multiple selves concept. For example, one can aspire to become a thin self, trim self, and a facially attractive self. Even though possible selves are different from one’s current self, there is a connection (Ipid). If a consumer perceives herself as average looking, it is entangled with an aspiration to become better looking. Possible selves are individual and created in the minds of consumers. However, media, and society in general, has a huge role in affecting the possible selves (Ipid). Certain expectations are set on the physical appearance of people, and social media can accentuate these expectations. However, according to Markus and Nurius (1986) possible selves for young people are led by positive self rather than negative self. Thus, young people have mainly positive aspirations, when it comes to their future self.

One’s past selves can also be possible selves in case they define the individual in the future (Ipid). Beauty and physical appearance, especially for women, are seen to fade the older the person gets, and therefore, the past “young and beautiful” self entangles with the possible selves relating to one’s physical appearance. This can include both aspiration and fear on how they will appear in the future.

2.3.2 Neutral, positive, and negative self

Consumers’ neutral self affiliates with how they concern themselves at present (Vuoristo, 2017). The term actual self is often used to describe the neutral self (Sirgy, 1982; Higgins 1987). Also, social self can be regarded partly neutral as it concerns the way a consumer presents herself in social situations (Sirgy, 1982). Positive and negative selves influence the consumer neutral self. Failures, which are related to consumer aspirations, are reflected on the way they see their actual self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For example, if a consumer perceives herself to be an intelligent person and aspires to become a doctor, but fails the entrance examination, their neutral self is, at least temporarily, influenced by this failure and they may think less of themselves in terms of intelligence.

Positive self relates to consumer’s goals and reflects what they aspire to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The term ideal self or ought self is mostly used to describe the positive
self (Sirgy, 1982; Higgins 1987). Social self relates to positive self, because the way others perceive an individual may influence on their ideal self (Higgins, 1987). Negative self is the version of possible self, which reflects the consumer’s fears on what they might become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Both negative and positive selves have an important role on consumer’s behaviour, because consumer strives to behave in a way, which takes them closer to their positive self and further from their negative self (Ipid).

2.3.3 SMI’s role in the consumer self-concept

Social media provides a convenient platform for comparison (Lin, 2018), and influencers are an easy and enticing source of reference as they are portrayed often in the most ideal way; they rarely show themselves in a bad light. Even though consumers are more likely to feel benign envy in social media, also negative feelings occur (Ipid). Consequently, social media can actually increase women’s physical appearance related concerns as it provides platforms for comparison and a variety of possibilities to enhance and edit the images (Fardouly et al., 2018). Furthermore, users tend to present idealized versions of themselves in online communities and social media (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Comparison is therefore distorted, because users compare their actual selves with others’ ideal selves. However, consumers need a reference when they consider their possible, future selves (McCracken, 1989); who they may become, who they would like to become, and who they are afraid of becoming. SMIs may provide such a reference for the ideal self.

Consumers tend to compare themselves with those, who they perceive to outperform them on attributes that are important for them, which may cause damage on their self-esteem (Koo, Cho & Kim, 2014). This comparison causes negative feelings, such as jealousy and frustration, towards those who are perceived to outperform them (Ipid).

Consumer global self-attitude is the conclusion on how they perceive the relationship between their actual and ideal selves (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers tend to identify themselves with celebrities of average weight, but to idealize themselves with thin celebrities (Greenwood et al., 2008). The gap between the actual and ideal self should not be wide, hence, the wider it gets the more discouraging it is for the consumer to follow celebrities and other influencers (Ipid). When the gap gets too wide, the consumer feels demoralized rather than inspired (Ipid), and social media and influencers may become a source of anxiety rather than inspiration.
Advertising is a way to create associations. It serves as an instrument, which transfers these associations to consumers, setting the brand in a certain cultural meaning (McCracken, 1989). These cultural meanings can vary from associating goods with certain situations to associating goods with certain lifestyles. Celebrity endorsers are a way to communicate the association between cultural meanings and goods (Ipid). SMIs are a similar source of communication. Consumers are at the receiving end, and they conclude the transfer process by connecting the goods and the cultural meaning (Ipid). Advertising, at its best, creates powerful associations between goods and the cultural meanings. Furthermore, consumers, by the help of advertising, merge these goods and the cultural meanings with their selves, and use consumption to create their possible selves (Ipid). Therefore, consumption behaviour is directly linked with the consumer self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Moreover, consumers use brands to communicate their selves to others (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). This links brands into the consumer self, thus consumer aspires to become their ideal self by consuming certain brands. SMIs associate themselves with brands they collaborate with, and therefore have an influence on the brands that are associated with consumer ideal selves.

Consumers refer to influencers when they consider their possible selves, and therefore, influencers can act as a source of inspiration; thus, they may be what the consumer aspires herself to become (McCracken, 1989). The consumer, consciously or unconsciously, creates a possible self, and influencers can act as a reference. They have achieved what the consumer aims to achieve, and they can also provide the building blocks needed for achieving the possible self (Ipid). When an influencer presents content, such as make-up tutorials, consumers can use this content as a reference for their possible self, thus aiming to achieve what the influencer has achieved.

It can be argued that SMIs play an important role in consumer self-image, as they are able to affect the image via their own brand or via the brands that they represent.

2.4 Summary of the theoretical framework and implications for the study

Social media has introduced a common platform for companies and people to communicate with each other, and it has created a new type of opinion leaders, SMIs. SMIs can be compared with celebrity endorsers as they use their influence over consumers and generate income out of it. They have influence over consumer behaviour
and are often more effective brand ambassadors than traditional celebrities. Their effectiveness stems from their perceived authenticity, which is better than celebrities’.

SMIs tend to create closer relationships with consumers than brands or traditional celebrities can. This is because they are perceived to be closer to regular consumers. However, the strength of the relationship depends on how many followers they have, because they are not able to maintain two-sided relationships with followers after their follower base exceeds certain limits.

Consumer-SMI relationships are different from consumer-consumer, or consumer-brand relationships. Consumer-SMI relationships are often described to be para-social in nature. These para-social relationships create an illusion of intimacy, because consumers regard the influencer as their friend, even though they only interact with them via social media. The relationship is often closer to a one-sided than a two-sided relationship. Consumers build relationships with influencers who they can relate to, and therefore, the influencers a consumer follows have a link to consumer self. What is not known is to what extent consumers relate the influencer with their neutral, positive, or negative selves. As SMIs tend to present themselves in their social media content, it is expected that consumers contrast their physical appearance with influencers’ and that the comparison is not always positive.

The empirical study focuses on consumer relationships with SMIs and investigates their self-image in connection to physical appearance. Therefore, the concept of self-image, derived from the previously presented theoretical frameworks, will be examined on three dimensions: neutral-own, positive-own, and negative-own. These dimensions follow the previously presented self-concept theories. Table 2 presents the three dimensions and the theories they are derived from.
Table 2  The three dimensions of self-concept to be studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Linking theories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral self - own</strong></td>
<td>Consumer’s own perception on their present physical appearance.</td>
<td>Higgins (1987), Sirgy (1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative self - own</strong></td>
<td>Consumer’s fear on how they would physically appear in the future.</td>
<td>Higgins (1987), Markus &amp; Nurius (1986)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neutral, positive, and negative dimensions are used to explain the consumer perception of their self-image using time (present and future) and attitude as guides. Neutral self concerns the consumer’s actual, present self. Future self is divided into two: positive and negative selves, explaining the consumer aspirations and fears. When a consumer forms their positive and negative selves, their neutral, present self acts as a reference. The study investigates whether the relationship consumers have with SMIs influences their neutral, positive, and negative selves. The study will only concern the consumer’s own perception of their selves, leaving out the perception of others.

The relationship between SMIs and consumers is scrutinized using the concept of para-social relationships. It implies that consumers consider SMIs as being akin to friends with whom an illusion of intimacy exists, even though the relationship is not two-sided. Additionally, SMIs’ perceived authenticity may help in explaining why consumers’ self-image is, or is not, influenced by the SMIs.

Figure 2 presents the summary of key theories in the theoretical framework. The figure presents the consumer self-concept, which consists of consumer’s view of their present (neutral) and future (positive and negative) selves. Present self acts as a reference for the future selves. The self-concept is likely to be influenced by the para-social relationships consumers have with SMIs, and the interaction between SMIs and consumers are mainly one-sided, from SMI to consumer. However, there may be interaction from consumer to SMI. SMIs’ perceived authenticity is likely to relate to the influence SMIs may have over their followers.
Figure 2 Summary of the theoretical framework
3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present the study approach to empirical research introducing the data collection method, ethical concerns, sampling strategies, and data analysis techniques utilised in the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the quality of the data.

3.1 Data collection method

In the empirical study consumer self-image is analysed in the context of consumer relationship to Instagram influencers. The research is interpretive in nature. The following research questions are answered:

RQ1: What kind of relationship does the consumer perceive to have with influencers?

RQ2: To what extent are the influencers perceived as authentic?

RQ3: Are the influencer relationships related to neutral, positive, or negative consumer self?

The chosen research method had to be able to provide an answer to the RQs. Looking at past research, both qualitative (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) and quantitative (Sokolova & Kefi, in press; Gong & Xu, 2014) methods have been used to study the relationships between SMIs and consumers. For example, Sokolova and Kefi (in press) conducted a quantitative study as a form of online survey to investigate consumer responses to certain SMI features, perception of their relationship with SMIs, and purchase intention. The nature of the relationship was measured with variables on the respondent’s perception of the SMIs social and physical attractiveness, similarities with their interests and thoughts, content engagement, and credibility (Ipid). Gong and Xu (2014), for their part, performed a quantitative study to investigate online social networks. They crawled two datasets, finding that para-social ties are more likely to connect regular users with SMIs than reciprocal ties, and that the structures evolve as social networks evolve (Gong & Xu, 2014). In comparison, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 18 female Instagram users to determine whether Instagram affects their purchase behaviour. According to the findings, SMIs are more powerful for consumer persuasion than traditional celebrities (Ipid).
Even though there exists a variety of studies relating to social media influencing, and it is evident that consumers are influenced by SMIs, none of the previous studies provide insight on how the relationships affect the consumer self-image. Therefore, the empirical study was conducted as qualitative study. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to create a valid questionnaire that would capture consumer self-image effects in relation to SMIs. First, a deeper understanding is needed on the nature of the relationships, and how they may affect different types of consumer self-images. An in-depth study was required to engross into the consumer beliefs and thoughts. A qualitative study can create a deeper understanding on the issue by studying in-depth, information rich cases (Patton, 2015). Because there is no previous academic literature, which would combine the consumer-SMI relationships with consumer self-image, collecting primary data was required.

One-to-one interviews were selected over focus groups as the subject of the study was expected to be sensitive, at least for some women. Focus group is an interview with a small group, and therefore, its effectiveness is uncertain, when the study subject is sensitive, because respondents may refrain their answers so that they would not feel embarrassed over a differing viewpoint (Patton, 2015). The aim of the study is to understand an individual’s self-image, and therefore, it was important that the answers were not affected by the answers or presence of others. It was important that the respondents felt comfortable sharing their thoughts even when the questions may have required them to step into uncomfortable areas. Therefore, one-to-one interview was the most valid choice for the data collection of this study, as it best ensured that integrity was not threatened.

Respondents’ self-image, with regards to their physical appearance, was at the centre of the empirical study and observation did not come in to question as feelings, thoughts, and intentions cannot be observed (Patton, 2015). Observation would not have provided understanding on how influencing affects the consumer self-image, because the effect cannot be visually observed. Interviews, in comparison, allowed the researcher to enter the respondent’s perspective (Ipid). In this case, interview allowed presenting questions on how the respondent regards their relationship with influencers, and what are her motives behind following and engaging with them. By asking these questions, the researcher was able to make sense on the consumer-influencer relationship and understand how it affects the consumer self-image.
3.2 Ethical concerns with studying consumer self-image

Ethical issues in a qualitative study relate to the applied methodology. Here, ethical issues concern interviews, which cover personal topics.

Interviews are like interventions and affect the people involved in them evoking all kinds of feelings and thoughts, especially when the interviews are in-depth aiming for rich understanding on the person and the issue (Patton, 2015). The aim of the interview, first and foremost, was to gather data and the role of the interviewer was to go through the questions and keep the focus on the topic in question. It was important that the interviewer stayed in the role (Ipid).

When assessing the quality of a study, one of the assessment criteria is integrity. Integrity concerns the extent to which the interpretation was unimpaired by lies, evasions, misinformation, or misrepresentations by informants (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). For the study in question, it was important that the respondents felt comfortable discussing the subject, even if answering the questions required stepping into uncomfortable areas. In order to ensure the quality of the data, the interviews were held in private settings, either at the respondent’s or the researcher’s home.

Due to the nature of the study, there was no reason to identify the interviewees in the text and they were kept anonymous. A consent form was collected from all respondents (Appendix 1). It ensured that the researcher had a permission to use the data collected from the interview for this thesis study, but also that the respondents understood what the study aimed to achieve, and for what purpose the collected data was to be used.

3.3 Sample

It is usually not possible to study the whole of target population, and therefore sampling is required (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015). Sampling was designed to meet the research goal, but it was also important in terms of data access consideration. Sample had to fit the research goal, so that it provided the required data, but it also had to be designed in a way that the researcher had access to it.

The concept of population defines the entity from which the research sample will be taken, but additionally, it has a role in the analysis of data (Eisenhardt, 1989). The concept of population, in the data analysis phase of a study, also defines the limits for the generalization of findings (Ipid). The population for this study is women in Finland following SMIs in Instagram.
Purposeful sampling intends to select information-rich study cases (Patton, 2015). This means that the cases are selected for a specific purpose. These information-rich cases are the ones that a researcher conducting a qualitative study can learn the most from (Ipid). The aim is to study cases which provide lots of understanding on the specific issue. It is therefore highly important to select the cases carefully in order for them to provide in-depth understanding on the issue (Ipid). Purposeful sampling has been used previously in similar studies (for example, Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The purposeful sampling used in the study was, to be precise, group characteristics sampling (Patton, 2015). In group characteristics sampling the sample is created based on a group which is studied (Ipid). The sample can be either diverse or homogeneous based on the study in question (Ipid). Homogeneous sampling is used for studies where the purpose is to study a particular subgroup in depth (Ipid). In this case the interest was to study women, from mid-twenties to mid-thirties of age, living in Helsinki Metropolitan region, and who follow SMIs in Instagram. Hence, the sampling strategy was homogeneous sampling with regard to these characteristics. The study concentrated on the self-image of the selected cases, not on their characteristics, and therefore, homogeneous sampling strategy was the best fit for the study.

The age group was selected because women of this age have been able to follow SMIs since the beginning of the phenomenon and build strong relationships with them. In addition, 57% of Instagram users in Finland are between 21 and 38 years old (Statista, 2015).

Self-esteem has been suggested to improve from adolescence to early adulthood but stabilise around the age of 30 (Erol & Orth, 2011). It is likely that self-image is influenced by time as well. Women from mid-twenties to mid-thirties were chosen because they already have life experience, having probably lived through their studies, first employments, and relationships and can be expected to have an understanding of their self-image. Their self-image is also likely to be significantly different compared with women in their early twenties, for example. Additionally, women in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties may already be concerned about aging, and therefore, SMIs may pressurize them more than they do women in their teens or early twenties. It was verified beforehand with each respondent that they follow SMIs in Instagram.

The individual units of analysis, interviewees, were chosen from the circle of people the researcher had access to. This was motivated by resources and by the study purpose. The
subject of the study is sensitive and therefore, respondents were more likely to reveal their thoughts for an interviewer with whom they already have a rapport with. Thus, they were more likely to trust the interviewer and discuss sensitive topic. As a result, the collected data may be of higher quality.

### 3.4 Data collection

Data were collected as one-to-one in-depth interviews. As the study question had no relation to any period of time, the data collection approach was one-point-in-time (Patton, 2015). One-point-in-time approach involves one interview per person (Ipid). Comparison was therefore made with other respondents as there was no comparison point with the same respondent (Ipid).

The purpose of interviews is to get inside the interviewees head and ask questions that reveal the perspective of the person being interviewed (Patton, 2015). The subject of interest was the relationship they have with the SMIs they follow on Instagram, and how this relationship influences their self-image. One of the key challenges of interviews is the role and behaviour of the interviewer, because the skills of the interviewer largely influences on the quality of the interview (Ipid). Interviewer should be non-judgemental, but authentic and trustworthy (Ipid). This was especially important as the study subject might have been sensitive to some. Therefore, the actual questions were important, but equally important was how the questions were presented. It is vital that the interviewee understands what is being asked, and what kind of answer is requested (Ipid).

The rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee is key to successful interview (Patton, 2015). There was an existing rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees, as the interviewees were from the interviewer’s circle of acquaintances. The style of all interviews was conversational and therefore, the questions could be presented naturally as part of the conversation. All interviewees required different types of support, for example probing, and the interview guide style ensured that the interviewer was able to present questions differently depending on the interviewee and her needs. The interview situations were also otherwise informal, and the objective was to arrange a setting where the respondents were able to feel comfortable. Therefore, in order to discuss the topic openly without a concern of audience, the interviews were held either at the interviewees’ or the researcher’s home.

The interviewer’s role was active as the interviews were conversational in style. The interviewer made sure that the discussion concentrated on issues important for the
study, but also supported the discussion with probes and follow-up questions. Probes are used to deepen the response to the presented question; to enrich the already received response, whereas follow-up questions are more exploratory, aiming to explore whether there would be something of interest based on, for example, an afterthought of the interviewee (Patton, 2015). The interviewer also provided examples in situations where the question and the expected response was unclear for the respondent. The examples also aimed to establish neutrality and ensure that the respondent understands that the interviewer does not judge them or their answers (Ipid).

Six interviews were conducted between 22 March 2019 and 20 April 2019. Table 3 presents details of each interview. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there is no exact recommendation for the number of interviews for a qualitative study. The number of interviews was determined during the data analysis by assessing the quality of the data. The researcher therefore assessed that six interviews already provided a sufficient amount of information to answer the aim of this thesis.

Each interview was recorded using a smartphone. The smartphone recorder was first tested to provide sufficient quality of voice. The use of recorder enabled the interviewer to concentrate on the discussion and made the interview situation more relaxed as no notes was taken. Discussion was further analysed using the recorded discussion. The recordings were transcribed after all interviews in order to use the exact words of the interviewees for the analysis. The length of the transcription documents was altogether 46 pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Helsinki, respondent’s home</td>
<td>22 March 2019</td>
<td>54 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Vantaa, researcher’s home</td>
<td>27 March 2019</td>
<td>52 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Helsinki, respondent’s home</td>
<td>28 March 2019</td>
<td>54 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Vantaa, researcher’s home</td>
<td>7 April 2019</td>
<td>33 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Espoo, respondent’s home</td>
<td>11 April 2019</td>
<td>39 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Vantaa, researcher’s home</td>
<td>20 April 2019</td>
<td>34 min.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4.1 Interview guide

The interviews were performed with an interview guide approach, which combines characteristics from informal conversation and standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2015). The topics and issues to be covered were pre-determined, whereas the exact wording and sequence of the question was left to the interview situation (Ipid). In a study, which used an interview guide, all the topics and issues to be covered were listed beforehand, and this way the researcher could ensure that all respondents went through the same basic line of inquiry (Ipid). However, as only topics and issues were pre-defined, there was a possibility for the interviewer to freely explore them during the interview in order to fulfil the requirements for the data collection (Ipid). The style of all interviews was conversational, because there was no pre-determined wording or sequence for the questions. The interviewer was able to build a conversation with the interviewees, but focus was kept as the interview guide set the outline for the discussion.

The advantage of an interview guide is that it ensures that the time is allocated correctly, and all main topics and issues will be covered with all interviewees (Patton, 2015). For the study in question, an interview guide was the most suitable approach as it enabled conversational interview. As the subject was sensitive, the interviewees required different forms and amounts of persuasion and probing before they were comfortable discussing the subject. An interview guide enabled the interviewer to use the same basic structure for the interview concurrently fulfilling the needs of individual interviewee.

The guide was divided into four sections (Appendix 2). The first section concentrated on the respondent’s social media habits, use of Instagram, and influencer following. The second section engrossed in the consumer-influencer relationships, and the third section in the respondent’s self-image and perception on physical appearance. The questions were not asked in particular order but following the conversation and the respondent’s thoughts. Finally, the last section, which was only to be included if the discussion had not otherwise gone there, was about the respondent’s thoughts on Instagram and SMI authenticity. Authenticity came up in all interviews during the previous sections and therefore, the final part of the interview guide was only used to fill gaps. At the end of the interview, background questions were asked to conclude the interview. The following themes were covered.

*Instagram and other social media behaviour*. All interviews begun with discussion about the respondents’ social media use and their behaviour towards SMIs. Questions
concentrated on the motives behind following SMIs and also on the ways the respondents engage with the SMIs they follow.

Consumer-SMI relationships. Interview pursued to understand the nature of relationship between the consumer and the SMIs she follows. It was therefore important to fathom out how the content of influencers affects her behaviour, and how the respondent perceives their relationship to be like. The aim was to understand the SMIs’ role in respondents’ lives.

Consumer self-image. The objective was to reveal how each respondent considered her own and SMIs’ physical appearance, and the perception of differences and similarities between them. In addition, this section concentrated on what are the respondent’s multiple selves, and how influencing relates to them.

Authenticity. The aim was to understand whether SMIs are perceived to be authentic. The questions aimed to reveal whether the respondents considered SMIs to publish authentic content. In addition, the aim was to understand in what sense the content is and is not perceived authentic.

3.5 Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed to form the text-based data for the analysis. There was 46 pages of transcribed text. Interviews were conducted in Finnish, which is the native language of the respondents and the researcher. Data coding was done using the Finnish transcriptions, but the citations, which were used as examples in the thesis, were freely translated to English.

Data analysis was conducted using the framework by Spiggle (1994) as the guideline. The data analysis framework by Spiggle (1994) consists of seven operations, which were utilized throughout the data analysis process. According to the framework, there is no sequential order, which should be followed, thus these operations are discrete activities and were used in various steps during the analysis (Ipid). The operations are: categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration and refutation (Ipid). Iteration is the process of breaking the sequential manner of research. The researcher should not execute the research sequentially but move back and forth between the research stages (Ipid). The research project was done using an iterative manner, thus, the researcher constantly evaluated the process and the output, and both were improved throughout the research project. For example, data collection influenced
the theoretical framework, which was adjusted according to the findings and the depth of interviews. It became evident that some aspects of the theoretical framework required more profound discussion, whereas some aspects were completely irrelevant in the context of the study.

Refutation is the operation where the researcher empirically evaluates their own emerging deductions (Spiggle, 1994). Refutation involves researcher’s own scrutiny towards their own emerging inferences (Ipid) Due to limitations in time and resources, no formal procedures were conducted in terms of refutation. However, researcher is aware of the limitations of the study, which are discussed in the concluding chapter, and has also considered the quality of data and the use of it.

The aim of categorization is to divide the data into certain categories which represent a wider phenomenon (Spiggle, 1994). Categorization was used during the process of coding (Ipid). Data analysis was initiated by reading through the transcriptions to organize the raw data. All pieces of data, which related to respondent-SMI relationship and respondent self-image, were highlighted in the transcription documents. Piece of data, in this context, was a direct citation from the respondent. All pieces of data were then transferred to an excel document for further analysis (Appendix 3). Inductive coding was used for the categorization, thus the categories were derived from the empirical data (Ipid). During the process of coding, it was discovered that the collected data was best characterised by the feelings expressed by respondents. As the empirical study revolves around consumer perceptions, it is natural that feelings are involved. Moreover, it became apparent that SMIs raise feelings, both positive and negative. In addition, it was evident that SMIs and social media engage feelings about consumer self.

Therefore, the data was categorized based on the feeling expressed by the respondent. The interpretation depended upon the wording, expressions, and interpretation of the tone of voice of the respondent. Some pieces of data did not relate to anything that could be described as a feeling, but were coded as fellowship, identification, self-disclosure, and self-appraisal. The process was repeated after each interview and new categories were added whenever they were identified. Since new categories were identified during the process, previously categorized data was re-categorized whenever it was reasonable. A total of 24 categories of feelings in the consumer-SMI relationship were identified (Table 4).
Abstraction goes beyond categorization aiming to construct more general themes from the data (Spiggle, 1994). Abstraction uses more general, conceptual classes and lifts practical categories into more abstract concepts (Ipid). After the data was coded into the categories, it was evaluated to identify more abstract themes.

The categories were interpreted as being related to four more abstract themes of Authenticity, Para-social relationships, Self-image, and Social comparison. The abstractive coding was partially inductive and partially deductive. The themes were identified based on the theoretical framework. However, the utilized themes were not pre-defined, but they emerged from the empirical data. The four abstract themes that were identified are para-social relationships, social comparison, self-image, and authenticity. Table 4 presents the data categorization and abstraction.

### Table 4  Data coding: themes and categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Authenticity</th>
<th>Para-social relationships</th>
<th>Self-image</th>
<th>Social comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Adoration</td>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disbelief</td>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>Self-dislike</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exasperation</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>Inadequacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiration</td>
<td>Fellowship</td>
<td>Mercifulness</td>
<td>Self-satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>Nostalgia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inquisitiveness</td>
<td>Self-appraisal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>Pride</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-disclosure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, all pieces of data were evaluated in terms of tone, neutral, positive, or negative, based on which of the consumer selves the piece of data was related to. All pieces of data were evaluated based on whether they reflected the consumer neutral, positive, or negative self, or had no relation on the consumer self. Data, which had no relation to consumer self, was indicated as none. The process was further extended using the same excel document. Consumer self was only evaluated in the frame of physical appearance. Neutral describes the respondent’s actual self, ergo, as they see their self now. Positive reflects their ideal self, thus what they aspire to become and what they feel they can achieve. Negative is the opposite of their ideal self and describes what they are afraid of becoming, or what they feel is unachievable for them.
Negative tone was the most difficult tone to interpret from the empirical data, because respondents probably do not realize the existence of their negative self, and, even if it exists, do not want to reveal it. In the data, the negative self was interpreted to express the opposite to ideal self. Ideal self is something a person aspires and feels she can achieve, whereas negative self is something a person perceives she cannot achieve even though she would like to. The aspect becomes negative when a respondent feels it to be too distant from what her actual self is.

Table 5 presents citation exerts on data coding in terms of theme, categorization, and tone. Example citations will be presented throughout the results also, in chapter 4.

**Table 5  Examples of data coding**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Example piece of data</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Para-social</td>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Partly, I like kinda people, who have just like succeeded in something that interests me, and maybe founded companies and are people who just go and do. It’s nice to be inspired of them. Maybe those who I have a real emotional bond with.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Authenicty</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>When they exercise they are all sweaty, so that’s so realistic, like you can look good while training, even though you’re all sweaty.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-image</td>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Sara Parikka is really naturally beautiful. She hasn’t done anything to her body and if she has spots, she has spots and she shows them. She’s really at ease with herself.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-image</td>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>...it’s nice to have this kind of body positivity. There is this Ava Training type, who shoots herself, who has perfectly normal body, but still feels herself sporty, and then takes bikini pics of herself, even though she doesn’t fit into the mould which is currently in Instagram.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Instagram is for instance a place, which is full of beautiful people, who have fancy clothes, who have fancy houses. That’s what it’s full of.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Inadequacy</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>…and when you think about the fashion stuff, I feel a bit inadequate, when all day long I look at people who are good at this stuff and you know that you are not as good at it, which makes you feel like you are never stylish or fancy enough.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison looks for similarities and differences within the collected data and in addition, provides suggestions for further data collection (Spiggle, 1994). The aim was to find similarities and discrepancies between different categories and abstracted concepts. After the first two steps, the data was in a form, which enabled comparison to be made between the respondents’, but also between categories and themes. Dimensionalization contributes to the theory construction by clarifying and enriching
the conceptual meaning of constructs and by exploring and defining relationships across the categories and constructs (Ipid). Comparison and dimensionalization were used to make sense of the coded data and to find meanings from the data. When the excel document had all the pieces of data categorized and abstracted, the process was further extended by comparing and finding relationships between the themes, categories and respondents. To present the findings, all citations that were used in the fourth chapter were highlighted with green in the excel document (Appendix 3). The findings are presented in the next chapter.

Integration as an analysis activity concerns combining the collected data with theory. The final step on the data analysis process was to combine the presented findings to the theories presented earlier in the thesis. The results of the integration are presented in the final chapter.

3.6 Quality of the data

This section discusses about the data quality. The evaluation is based on Wallendorf and Belk article (1989). There are five questions to raise when it comes to the trustworthiness of a study (Ipid):

1. How do we know whether to have confidence in the findings?
2. How do we know the degree to which the findings apply in other contexts?
3. How do we know the findings would be repeated if the study could be replicated in essentially the same way?
4. How do we know the degree to which the findings emerge from the context and the respondents and not solely from the researcher?
5. How do we know whether the findings are based on false information from the informants?

To answer these questions, there are five criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Transferability will be discussed in the final chapter, in connection to recommendations for further research.

Credibility concerns whether the representation of the constructions of the studied reality is adequate and believable (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). The methodology chapter has carefully described how the data were collected and analysed. It is possible that someone else would have got other answers from the interviews, but the results
presented in this thesis try to be true to the collected data. The close relationship between the author and the interviewees probably influences the collected data.

Dependability means the extent to which interpretation was constructed in a way which avoids instability other than the inherent instability of a social phenomenon (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). This means that if the study is replicated, the results would be the same. Because the respondents and the researcher have a close relationship from a long period of time, another researcher might not have the rapport between the researcher and the respondents. Thus, it is likely that the results would differ.

Confirmability concerns the ability to trace a researcher’s construction of an interpretation by following the data and other records kept (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). All interpretations were made from the collected data and are available for later check-ups. The data analysis has been carefully described, but it is acknowledged that the data analysis is subjective, and it is possible that another researcher may interpret the data differently.

Finally, integrity relates to the extent to which the interpretation was unimpaired by lies, evasions, misinformation, or misrepresentations by informants (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). During the data collection all respondents were informed about the study and its purpose. No information was refrained. All respondents are kept anonymous in order to protect their privacy. Additionally, the interview setting was private. These measures were executed in order to ensure the respondent would feel comfortable discussing the subject openly and sharing honest opinions and thoughts.
4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The empirical findings are structured under the three research questions presented at the beginning of the study. Para-social relationships and social comparison are discussed in the first sub-chapter. Authenticity is discussed in the second sub-chapter, and self-image, divided into neutral, positive, and negative tones, in the final sub-chapter.

4.1 What kind of relationship does the consumer perceive to have with influencers?

One of the themes abstracted from the data was para-social relationships. It consists of data, which relates to the relationship between SMIs and the respondents. Respondents were not asked about the relationship per se, but the findings were interpreted from the data. Findings on this relationship can be divided into 1) characteristics of the relationship and 2) social comparison within the relationship.

4.1.1 Characteristics of the relationship

Two categories are dominant in the data under the theme characteristics of the relationship: identification and inspiration. All respondents either identified themselves with or were inspired by the SMIs they follow.

Identification is something that drives these para-social relationships. All respondents mentioned similarities between themselves and the SMIs, when they explained the motivation to follow them. Identification was based on similarities in age, sex, life situation, values, and interests. All respondents followed only female SMIs, who were about the same age as they. Respondents 4 and 6, who have children, follow mainly SMIs with children, and identify themselves with the SMIs because of the similar life situation. Respondents 1 and 5 identify themselves through their hobby, CrossFit, and follow SMIs with the same interest. Identification was not limited to similarities in demographic profile and life, but respondents also share interests and values with the SMIs. These were categorized under fellowship (shared interests) and appreciation (shared values).

Respondent 1: "I’ve followed quite many influencers, who are about the same age as me so naturally we’ve grown at the same phase, getting older [laughs], I mean we’ve aged as much. If they were in their twenties then, they are now in their thirties."

Respondent 2: "Well, first of all, all are women who I follow, generally the same age, maybe a little older."

Respondent 4: "Well with these it’s the children, that’s the biggest...with these I can identify with some child stuff."
Respondent 5: “Well it’s the sports and exercise, especially CrossFit and weight lifting interest me a lot and that’s why I like to follow them, just to view their exercise or weight lifting videos, it’s just close to my own hobby.”

Respondent 6: “...but also if there’s been some differing, maybe like if values differ [discusses about unfollowing SMIs]

Inspiration is something that all respondents expressed they are either consciously searching for on Instagram, or they felt inspired by the SMIs they follow. Respondents 4 and 6 differed from the rest of the respondents as they were only looking for inspiration and felt social media only to be a source for that. Others had deeper feelings towards the SMIs they follow, and also a variety of reasons for following them. SMIs provide inspiration on fashion, make-up, hairstyles, sports, and nutrition, for example, which all relate to physical appearance. In addition, inspiration on holidays and things to do were mentioned by respondents 3 and 4. All of the respondents were looking for inspiration on fashion and felt SMIs can provide inspiration on outfits, current trends, and brands. Relating to inspiration, the feeling of inquisitiveness also rose from the comments, thus the respondents were keen to learn new things from the SMIs they follow. This was mainly related to fitness: how and what to train.

Respondent 2: “Well, yeah, I feel for example if you take Janni Hussi, she is kinda like sports person and you kinda look there for inspiration.”

Respondent 2: “...just like inspo on hair or make-up, may check some make-up tutorials.”

Respondent 3: “...well I’m looking for inspiration mostly on fashion and like for style and maybe also for hairstyle.”

Respondent 5: “I really enjoy watching her training videos, just to look at the techniques' she uses.”

Respondent 6: “Hmm, well I feel like, in the sports’ sense, relating to sports, that you gain good tips from them without the need for some trainer to stand next to you while training, simple enough tips, like the length of sets, which weights to use and how are you supposed to advance.”

Friendship was not asked in any of the interviews, but when respondents were asked to describe a SMI they follow, they described her similarly as they could have described someone close to them. In most occasions, the respondent used the first name of the SMI. However, there were differences between respondents in the level of intimacy they expressed when describing SMIs. Respondents 1, 2, and 3 expressed most intimacy. Additionally, respondent 4 told how she discusses about SMIs with her friends. The discussion seems to be similar than gossiping about one’s offline friends. Social reasons, sense of belonging, for following SMI was only mentioned by respondent 3.

Respondent 3: “...probably follow kinda people you’d be friends with anyway or like similarity, yeah many have said that if you’d seen someone in video or images they are quite similar in real life...”
Respondent 3: “Kia is brave and happy [shows Instagram story where Kia is in Bologna], Kia is always positive...Kia also likes food, but every now and then Kia gains weight and then she’s on a diet. Kia trains in Core Trainer’s with all those kinda minor celebrities and Kia is really cool, but she is also heartfelt.”

Respondent 4: “We have discussed with my friends after someone has given birth, that for example Nanna Karalhhti posts an image of her abs two weeks or months after given birth, and someone gets huge pressure of that even though her womb is not even recovered yet.”

However, even though the respondents interact with their friends in Instagram, for example by liking and commenting their posts, they all said they rarely interact with the SMIs. Respondent 5 said she may like an image on Instagram, if there is something special that the SMI has achieved. Respondent 3, for her part, said she once asked a SMI to save some of the recipes she posted via Instagram Stories. Otherwise all respondents said there hardly exists any interaction between them and the SMIs.

Respondents expressed adoring feelings, thus one of the reasons to follow a SMI was that they are perceived superior. Superiority mostly related to their physical appearance and life. There were even situations where the superiority of the SMI seemed to be the only reason for following them. For example, respondent 6 said that she does not have any other similarities with one of the SMI’s she follows than a similar sense of fashion. She also said that the reason to follow this SMI is because “she is cool”.

Respondent 2: “...in many of them you note that, they are kinda people who can better think about fashion stuff or decor stuff, like they can do them better.”

Respondent 3: “...and she has a boyfriend and she has friends, and they do all kinds of stuff. Every day they eat so fancy food that I don’t have even for celebrations and so on. She’s so cool just in a way that I would like to be, just like discreetly cool.”

Respondent 4: “Somehow their life seems wonderful and like everything they do, how they travel and everything they post are really interesting stuff.”

Respondent 6: “Well on person who I like a lot, and have been following for a while now, is Veronica Verho. She’s like...I’m like an old lady compared to her, but I think she’s cool and real and like herself and she speaks things with their own names and stuff. I thinks she’s quite impressive for a, I think, 23-year-old.”

Furthermore, when respondents were asked about similarities between the personalities of SMIs and their own, there were none. SMIs were considered to be more social and courageous. There were also some other qualities that respondents considered themselves not to possess, but the SMIs they follow to possess. These seemed to be qualities respondents would like themselves to possess.

Respondent 2: “...I kinda notice, in many of the people I follow, that they may be petite and small-breasted, just what I would like to be. ... Maybe I notice kinda like a contrast between what I am and who I follow. Somehow you always want what you don’t have. For me that’s being petite which I’m not in any way.”
Respondent 3: “...I must say, it might be one of the reasons to follow her, she’s really fierce, it’s interesting to see how she, there’s a woman who isn’t ashamed of herself.”

**Self-disclosure** means that SMIs are perceived to share intimate issues with their followers. Respondents described this type of content to be often more authentic and also more interesting than commercial or otherwise superficial content. However, respondent 2 also indicated irritation towards situations where she felt SMIs portray self-disclosure with commercial aim. She explained that sometimes she feels that this type of content is only published in order to raise public interest. She was, however, the only one questioning the integrity of SMIs in this context. Otherwise this type of content was perceived to be meaningful and genuine.

Respondent 2: “...maybe for me the most interesting content is such life considerations or life thoughts, like when you think about stuff more deeply...”

Respondent 2: “Well I feel like maybe the most authentic content is when someone just speaks about their own challenges or own difficulties, some like life happenings or something like that, something that has been difficult or something that concerns them or like when kinda bigger things in life are talked about, probably those are most authentic.”

Respondent 5: “Stefanie Hagelstam, when she told about her past year, in which she’s experienced overstress and stuff, kinda talked for mental health, that’s also something I’ve liked because it affects more and it’s not just basic twaddle.”

Respondent 6: “...she’s very open and maybe too honest sometimes, maybe some stuff should not in my opinion be revealed in social media, but maybe that’s why she’s so interesting to follow, because of what she speaks, even though you would probably not discuss that kinda stuff even with your friends.”

Some relationships were described to be built on curiosity. There are SMIs that raise curious feelings and respondents admitted to follow them because they want to peek into their lives.

Respondent 3: “I do like to...kinda to peek into how it is going for people deeper in their lives, like why’s someone doing something.”

Respondent 4: “…and pure curiosity. I’m really interested in Eevi Teittinen’s life, there’s been so much going on, she used to have a relationship with a celebrity and suddenly they broke up and that kind of things. Now she has a new different kind of partner and their life [interests].”

### 4.1.2 Social comparison in para-social relationships

Para-social relationships seem not to be built on comparison, but comparison constantly occurs. Comparison concentrates on the physical appearance of SMIs, including their style, perceived beauty, and bodies. Feelings that rose from the discussion on social comparison were mostly negative: envy, self-dislike, and inadequacy. However, there was also positive feelings categorized under self-satisfaction.
Common opinion is that Instagram is a platform which portrays beautiful people, and there is no interest in people who do not meet the beauty ideals. A couple of the respondents perceived that SMIs are more beautiful than the rest of us, even when they are natural, without make-up. They said there is a tendency that beautiful people succeed in social media, because people rather follow them than average looking people.

Respondent 2: “I feel like some people are just naturally like terribly good-looking and beautiful, like whatever they do, like there isn’t probably a big difference...[discusses about the difference between how SMIs appear in Instagram and in real life].”

Respondent 3: “…maybe I wonder, like if you have a body like Hilves’, I’m not surprised, the fact is that people follow beautiful people. She has half a million followers because she looks lovely and just like everyone would like to look like. If someone would look like Justiina, I wouldn’t follow her.” [Justiina is an old Finnish movie character]

Envy and self-dislike are mostly related to attributes of physical appearance, and such attributes, which respondents feel they cannot acquire regardless of what they would do. Inadequacy seems to rise in situations, where a respondent expresses overall dispirit towards social media. Inadequacy was not a direct negative feeling towards a SMI (envy) or the respondent herself (self-dislike).

Respondent 1: “…yeah, and if I’d go to Madagascar’s tropics the images would be quite far from that imagery [shows a SMIs beach images from tropic destinations]...more like whale that has drifted on the shore.”

Respondent 2: “Nowaday s you have all the beautiful people in the world, like you see their pics every day, and it can be quite problematic. I note that, for example there are these people, those body positivity people, who aim to show the more realistic side, but they are also freakin’ beautiful. There is not many ugly people you’d see in Instagram.”

Respondent 3: “I know the image is built and photoshopped, and it’s made with style, but I still feel that they look better than me in their daily lives. For that I’m a bit bitter. Or I feel like: why don’t I look like that or when I look easygoing, for example in holidays, why don’t I look like cool easy-going, but like rough kinda easy-going.”

Respondent 5: “I feel I admire a person who has thick hair, for example, or something else, and worry like whether I have thick enough hair, even though you cannot influence it in any way, it’s stupid, but you still look how pretty someone else’s hair is.”

Some envy is also related to the lives of SMIs. For example, respondent 5, who is really enthusiastic about exercising and CrossFit, seems envious of the SMIs she follows, because they can work out every day and she cannot due to her job. However, she does say that she is not envious about their life per se.

Even though most of the feelings in the context of social comparison were negative, also self-satisfaction was identified. When respondents compared their lives with the SMIs’, they mostly felt relief, because they do not have to be under public scrutiny as SMIs do.
Many of the respondents also think that SMIs are all under a huge pressure, because of the nature of Instagram and social media.

Respondent 3: “Hmm...it’s more free [her life in comparison to SMIs’], I have the freedom. Well, I’m thankful that I don’t have to sell my life and I don’t have to share my life. I can, it’s kinda like a luxury.”

Respondent 4: “I feel somehow that it may be more valuable that I live for myself and for those close to me, and when I travel, I’m only with them. They [SMIs] have to think about, kinda like, their customers all the time. If I’d have my customers with me in all life happenings, it wouldn’t be the same.”

Respondent 6: “That Veronica is so young, and of course I, because I have two children, know that it affects someway, but she’s so young and naturally has high pressure for everything, she is thin and so on.”

4.2 To what extent are the influencers perceived as authentic?

Authenticity came up in all interviews quite soon. It is apparent that consumers are aware of the realism of Instagram and the professional nature of influencing.

Respondent 5: “Well, Stefanie Hagelstam, when she works out she’s doing it red faced and hands bloodstained, and the in the end she poses. And that’s it, it’s that moment which is captured and not the one with a grin on your face during a lift, for example. No one puts those images there.”

Respondent 6: “Mainly, they probably consider long and then edit a lot, like light exposures and contrasts are tuned...but some influencers are maybe for that reason nice that they show how the image was before editing.”

Commerciality is something that raises negative feelings, mainly exasperation and disbelief, and many SMIs were questioned in terms of the collaboration credibility. Respondents were all aware of the industry behind SMIs and commercial content was something no-one would describe as authentic. Furthermore, respondents who follow certain SMIs continuously also catch conflicts in the content. When there is no mention about a collaboration, some respondents perceived that there is no collaboration, even though it is possible that the products portrayed in the images has been sent to them. Some of the respondents noticed this and this type of content created dissenting comments. Some respondents were only concerned about content which was clearly stated as commercial, but some were also suspicious about the products portrayed in the non-commercial content, and whether they were gifted or not. One of the respondents said that she would really be interested in hearing about the product related comments, if she would be sure that the products are actually purchased by the SMI herself. She felt that she cannot trust the recommendations given by SMIs, if the products in question have been gifted to them.

Respondent 1: “It clearly bums me if it’s clearly a paid ad only for the money. Like that it doesn’t feel natural, but is clearly glued on top.”
Respondent 1: “If all viewers know that you get your lashes done once a month and then you present expensive mascaras and how awesome they are, there might be some other reason for that. It may take some credibility away.”

Respondent 4: “It annoys me that she gets everything, like her life seems so easy even though it’s probably not, she does work several hours per day for her career, but when she daily opens those gift boxes that’s been sent to her, and then recommend that you should definitely buy these and these and these, you just think that no-one has that much money, easy to say when you’ve got everything free.”

When respondents were asked about the content authenticity, or how they consider that SMIs present themselves and their lives, there were variation in the comments. Many respondents were aware of the business behind social media influencing. They felt that in Instagram images are usually edited, and there is a lot of effort behind one image. However, they also felt that there are influencers who aim to be real or at least transparent about the industry. It was mutually acknowledged that social media presents only a part of SMIs’ lives.

Respondent 1: “You are quite astray if you think that’s their real life 100 %, like during weekdays and others.”

Respondent 3: “...but maybe Instagram, kinda depends on the influencer, but it can be closer to so-called real life or like thoughts of a real person.”

Respondent 4: “Nanna always speaks that she never does anything for herself, but she’s had eyelash extensions for like five years, and she always has her nails done. So she’s really groomed, but she has so much that is not her own.”

Respondent 5: “Surely, in social media, showing the bad things is kinda like: I’ve had difficulties, but now I’m already here. Like they don’t publicly discuss it at the moment when the life hits them on the ground. So there is also an edited part of it.”

Aspiration was one of the categories under authenticity and it relates to the perception on how close to reality SMIs are. Respondents appreciate SMIs who they perceive to present themselves, at least sometimes, naturally. Some respondents noted that videos may be more authentic since they are not as easily manipulated and staged as images. Five respondents expressed positive feelings towards SMIs who present themselves also in real-life situations, without make-up, or sweaty after a workout. Aspiration, in this context, expresses that a respondent considers something achievable for herself in relation to what a SMI has presented.

Respondent 1: “It also influences a lot whether you present yourself only on good days or also randomly on a bad day. Because it brings realism and attainability and also feel of authenticity.”

Respondent 2: “I’ve tried to follow also people in Instagram, who are with another view; such that they are not as fit or not so well groomed, for example without make-up.”

Respondent 4: “I appreciate if one posts a lot of images with no make-up or hair is messy, for me those are the best.”
Respondent 6: “Well maybe for me, personally, being real is important, you can sometimes be without make-up, and you don’t have to be always dressed up and with hair made-up, they like break the social media illusion. But they are just normal people and they go to supermarket and they don’t drive with new cars and they have the same problems as we rest.”

4.3 Are the influencer relationships related to neutral, positive, or negative consumer self?

Research question three will be scrutinized within the three stances of self-concept: neutral, positive, and negative.

4.3.1 Neutral self

There exists a vast amount of relation between consumers’ social media use and their neutral self. One of the key drivers in social media, and in the following of SMIs, is inspiration. Inspiration can relate to consumer positive self, however, there are also pieces of data, which are neutral in tone. When it comes to their actual self, consumers search inspiration on their lives on Instagram and in many situations the inspiration comes in the form of everyday tips.

Authenticity relates to consumer neutral self, because when SMIs were considered to portray themselves in authentic situations, it seemed to decrease the appearance pressure of the respondents. Respondents feel better of themselves, if they see SMIs looking dishevelled or sweaty, for example.

Respondent 4: “Well there are posts when they for example are just waken up in the morning and their hair is all messy, they seem real…and sometimes in their posts they are in the gym, without make-up and they might be all sweaty and out of breath and so on, they seem real.”

When respondents were asked about their own physical appearance there were only a few comments to portray pride. Respondent 6 has lost 18 kilograms of weight during the past two years and expressed pride towards her neutral self and her achievement. Respondent 5 discussed about body muscularity, which for her describes the beauty ideal, and therefore, she appreciates those parts of herself that she concerns to meet this beauty ideal.

Respondent 5: “…also in that way you reflect that I’m especially satisfied with those parts of myself, where the muscularity is even somehow visible.”

Respondent 6: “Well, I’m in a situation where I weighted 18 kilos more two years ago, so I’m obviously satisfied with that.”

Other respondents were quite straightforward when they described their physical appearance. Comments were neither negative nor positive, mostly obvious, for example, stating their hair colour (self-appraisal).
Respondent 2: “This type of semi-height, kinda like strong figured, and luckily also quite strong, okayish pleasant face, lots of hair.

Respondent 4: “Well I’m quite average looking, kinda, semi satisfied, of course you could always enhance your appearance and wish that you’d have for example straight teeth or better skin or similar, but still okay.”

Respondent 5: “Well [laughs] blond, maybe kinda sporty, at least I hope so [laughs], I do feels myself sporty and well, I do consider myself beautiful in some way and I do, you should, but yes blond and also kinda person who radiates positivity, also from appearance, smiling a lot and maybe laughing.”

Something that differs between the respondents is their attitude towards their neutral self in terms of physical appearance. Two respondents, 4 and 6, differ from the rest, probably because they have children. It seems that, because of their experience of child birth, they are more merciful towards their bodies. However, there were also other experiences, which have moulded the attitudes of respondents, including difficult illness and problematic relationship with food in the past. In general, all respondents described that their attitudes have changed while aging and that the pressures were higher when they were younger.

Respondent 1: “...when your body gives way completely, you will appreciate in a different way. You are not as hard on yourself as you were when you were younger.”

Respondent 3: “Thank god this human is built in a way that when you get older, the shallow values change deeper. That maybe protects us from the torture [laughs]. If I’d be as shallow as I was when I was 16, I’d probably have a huge crisis on appearance.”

Respondent 6: “Well no, I don’t have any pressures, I’ve become so merciful to myself and I prioritize other things above myself.”

Respondents were also asked about what they consider themselves not to be in terms of physical appearance. It was obvious that the comments were related to their positive and negative selves.

### 4.3.2 Positive self

Consumer positive, ideal self, stood out in the interviews as most of the respondents are aware of social media’s influence on their own aspirations. Respondents are also conscious about their positive self, in comparison to negative self, which is not as obvious to exist. Positive self is something towards they are consciously aiming at, and SMIs are both consciously and unconsciously used as a reference.

Respondent 2: “...it’s like they are a bit better than myself, like I’m trying to get boost on my own life [respondent comparing SMIs on herself].”

Respondent 2: “And of course in general person needs and wants something to strive for and you think or you have a feeling when you look at like damn their home is pretty or similar. And then you think like okay I don’t have it now but could I make it, maybe I could make it, maybe I can be better at it and strive for it.”
Respondent 4: “...they are [SMIs she follows] very natural looking, not in any way extravagant, and that’s what aiming at too.”

Respondent 5: “When I speak about muscularity and admire it, it actually comes from there [social media], it hasn’t come...well I do go to CrossFit gym and I also see lots of muscular people there, but the muscularity itself, for example, it’s not basically a normal person.”

Respondent 5: “No [she was asked whether she has changed something in herself due to following SMIs], rather than me trying to CrossFit as much as possible to look more muscular [laughs], but not anything directly, nothing that I’d be consciously aware.”

Respondent 6: “Well of course she’s a fit gal, that Pia.”

What is most apparent in the data, in the context of ideal self, is body related issues. Several pieces of data from several respondents suggest that they follow SMIs, who they feel have better bodies in comparison to their own. There are both negative and positive tones in the pieces of data. Positive tone suggests that the respondents do feel they can achieve what the SMIs have achieved in terms of their bodies, thus the SMI encourages them to improve themselves. These fitness and nutrition related tips are received from both fitness and lifestyle SMIs. Fitness SMIs may be perceived unattainable when respondents’ compare their own bodies to theirs. However, lifestyle SMIs can provide fitness inspiration at a level, which is more approachable for the consumers.

Respondent 4: “...and here she says ‘on non-special days in life and while exercising’, and she has never, I think, posted anything about exercising...is she going to in the future? That could be interesting as she is kinda, it could fit better to my own exercising, because it’s not just about the work outs and she is not professional.”

Respondent 6: “It’s more about encouraging, like if you’d go more and you’d have more time and you’d delve into it more, that would be the possibility, but the situation is that there’s family and hustle at work and everywhere. I do my best in a situation like this.”

Fitness and body related issues are highly dependent on respondent’s self-confidence and attitudes towards exercise. Respondents 1 and 5 are active CrossFit enthusiasts and their positive selves, in terms of physical appearance, are heavily influenced by their hobby. They follow many CrossFit SMIs to look for inspiration on their positive self. However, the aims are not strictly appearance related even though there is a direct connection. Respondents 2 and 3, however, feel pressure on their weight and body and make more comparison to SMIs. Their positive selves are thinner than their neutral selves, but they both feel they would not be considered thin whatever they would do. Respondent 4 said she’d rather take fitness tips from a SMI, who has similar life situation to her, in order for the tips to be more useful.

Respondent 1: “Even though I do sports a lot, my goals are not really looks goals but goals that are related to the sport.”

Respondent 2: “Yes I would say I have pressure to lose weight and become fitter, and I have pressure to dress better.”
Respondent 3: “I do love my own body and I don’t want to diss it, but you must admit she’s a damn good looking gal, like that kind of appearance would be nice.”

Respondent 5: “Well yeah, it reflects in a way that I, I don’t know, I admire women’s shoulders [laughs], muscular shoulders and it shows in a way that I wish I’d have that, like I’d like to have shoulders like that so that I’d be as strong, maybe like that.”

Respondents compare themselves with the SMIs, in order to improve themselves. Beauty inspiration relates to make-up and hair-do tips. Also dressing is something that SMIs are considered superior at and therefore, they are used as a source of both inspiration and information. Information relates to the current trends, brands to use, and outfits to put together. Inspiration relates more on the style inspiration, in comparison to exact product recommendations. Respondents 1, 2, 3, and 4 said they often look outfits by SMIs, and use them as a reference, when they shop new clothes for themselves. These tips are small things, which can instantly be taken into respondents’ lives, in comparison to aspects that are attainable, but still require changes in order for the respondent to achieve them. These inspirational tips are a way for the respondent to feel better about herself and take her closer to her positive self.

Respondent 2: “Well you do look for fashion inspiration from there [Instagram], like ideas on how a piece of clothing could be worn or what could be a nice outfit combination...just like inspo on hair and make-up, you may look some make-up guides.”

Respondent 3: “...as soon as I have time, I’m going to buy such rust coloured top so that I can wear it with my white jeans, because it seems the whole Instagram is having it.”

Respondent 4: “...and the clothing, she has a lot of [clothes] that you are looking like ‘where did she get that’, or what brand is it or so. You might think like should I get something similar, like it doesn’t have to be the exact same.”

4.3.3 Negative self

When it comes to negative self, respondents did not directly discuss what they are afraid of becoming. As consumers can choose which SMIs they follow and build a relationship with, it would make sense that there would be no SMIs, who would influence their negative self. On the contrary, it would make sense that consumers would avoid these types of SMIs. However, several pieces of data suggest that consumers do follow SMIs towards whom they have negative feelings, and with whom the relationship they have has negative influence on their self-concept.

Collected data suggests that there exists a vast amount of envious feelings towards SMIs. Inspiration encourages the person to become better, whereas envy, in this context, is more of a deflating feeling. When the respondents indicated feel of inspiration, there existed something towards they were aiming at. In the contrary, when they indicated the feel of envy, they perceived themselves to be such distant from the SMI, that they felt
they cannot achieve the same. That represents their negative self. However, the envy was not malicious, as it was not presented in a way that would aim bringing the SMI down. It could also be described as annoyance, but it was aimed more on the respondent herself, than towards the SMI.

Respondent 2: “...when someone is like care freely beautiful, I kinda feel like I wish I would be care freely beautiful and not like troll-like beautiful.”

Respondent 2: “I notice it on a daily basis, maybe it mostly relates on my body and clothing in general. When you see a sporty influencer exercising with sports clothes on, for example, I feel like I wish I could look like that when exercising and having sports clothes on.”

Respondent 3: “I kinda feel pity towards some of these [images], or maybe it’s my envy, because she is so thin and I’m not.”

Respondent 5: “Well an athlete, let’s just say that Stefanie Hagelstam, she works out all the time, every day, many times per day versus my life, when I go to daily job and can work out, or have the energy to work out maybe five times a week.”

In addition, many pieces of data suggest that consumers have admiring feelings towards SMIs. Admiration differs from inspiration in that admiration is present in the comments in which respondents indicate something they do not even aim to achieve, for example a thin figure, as it is not perceived attainable for them.

Respondent 3: “…well I do wonder that, I would not have the courage to present my body that openly because it is not perfect.”

Respondent 5: “Well of course they are naturally beautiful, both of them, for example if you talk about these [refers to couple of SMIs she follows], and also somehow distinctive looking people, like not kind of flat looking, typical Finnish, kinda like stereotypical Finnish appearance like blonde hair and otherwise fair coloured, but they have something special.”

Negativity comes up, for example, when respondent 3 discusses about her youth, and how age has influenced her appearance (nostalgia). She says that women are most beautiful in their twenties and there is no going back, because she is closer to being middle-aged now. Youth is something she cannot achieve anymore.

Respondent 3: “Age kinda influences or like I feel I’m not kinda young girl anymore but I’m more like middle-aged, and I notice it in myself and same aged friends that the time has bitten us all and like that feels kinda sad that the person no longer exists who used to be beautiful when young...There is something in the youth, people are...what do they say, women are at their most beautiful in the age of 25? It makes sense, I’m not getting any beautiful am I.”

Similar comments are given regards to SMIs, who have something that seems unattainable for the respondents, for example being petite in size. It is apparent that these comments are statements rather than aspirations; thus, the respondent is not even aiming at them. Respondents feel insecure or inadequate about themselves, but they acknowledge that the reason for the deflating feeling is something they cannot influence.
Respondent 1: “Everyone has the limitations of their body, those should be acknowledged. Like I’m never going to be 45 kilos, because I happen to be almost 180 cm tall and not so lightweight.”

Respondent 2: “I notice with many, when you follow these sporty people, who have like low body fat percentage and so on, you come to wish like ‘why don’t I have, and should I have’ and that I should look like that.”

Respondent 3: “...you kinda hope that I’d be skinnier and hope that my body would be different shape and not like this thick and small.”

Respondent 6: “I’ve always struggled with bad skin and it’s maybe something that doesn’t bring you any confidence...”
5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The final chapter integrates the empirical findings to the theories derived from past studies and discusses theoretical and practical implications. The chapter finishes with recommendations for further research.

5.1 Theoretical implications

There are studies concerning influencer marketing and SMIs, but there is a gap combining Instagram SMIs and the relationship between the followers’ self-image and the content produced by the SMIs. This study combined influencer marketing concepts with consumer behaviour theories.

Based on the empirical evidence, it can be argued that consumers are influenced by the SMIs they follow on Instagram. The relationship between the consumer and the SMI influence the consumer cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally. The SMI influence extends to how consumer considers herself to be at present and in the future, hence, SMIs do influence consumer self-image. Consumer self-image consists of their neutral, positive, and negative selves, in the context of this study, and SMIs can influence all of the selves. Consumers are partially aware of the influence, but not entirely. When it comes to consumer negative self, they are predominantly unaware of how the SMI is related to it. Conversely, consumers are conscious about their neutral and positive selves, and about the impact SMIs have on them.

The theoretical importance of the findings on each of the three research questions are discussed next.

5.1.1 Consumer-influencer relationships

The study supports previous studies on consumer-influencer relationships in that the relationship between consumers and SMIs can be described to be para-social in nature (Sokolova & Kefi, in press; Gong & Xu, 2014; Hwang, & Zhang, 2018). Several pieces of empirical data support this. The findings show that para-social relationships are formed on the basis of identification (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), illusion of intimacy (Sokolova & Kefi, in press), friendship, and understanding (Chung & Cho, 2017). Based on the data, identification seems to be an important foundation of these para-social relationships, and the relationship engrosses the more positive the respondent feels about the SMI. Thus, identification initiates the relationship, but there are other
elements required in order for the relationship to become meaningful and close to traditional friendships.

However, not all of the consumer-SMI relationships are built on identification alone. Some relationships were described to be based on curiosity towards the SMI. The difference between the types of relationships seems to be whether the SMI is regarded to be approachable or not. Consumers feel curiosity towards SMIs they would like to identify themselves with. Therefore, it can be argued that para-social relationships between consumers and SMIs are built on either identification or the wish of identification. Thus, consumers either relate themselves or they would like to be able to relate themselves with the SMIs they follow. This finding has not been highlighted in previous research.

The more consumer identifies herself with the SMI, the more meaningful the relationship becomes. If the revered aspects of the SMI are something that the respondents perceive they can strive for, the relationship becomes profound. Conversely, there are SMIs, who are felt to be superior in an unattainable way, causing envy, and consequently, not leading to such profound relationships. When a consumer feels her neutral self to be too distant from the SMI, no identification occurs. The closer the SMI is perceived to be to the consumer neutral self, the more they can identify themselves with her, whereas if the SMI is perceived superior in anyhow, they are closer to the consumer positive or negative self. This is in line with Greenwood et al. (2008), who suggest that consumer attitudes towards SMIs differ based on the extent the consumer can relate to the SMI. Hence, it seems that the relationship between SMIs they can identify with resembles more a traditional friendship than the relationship with SMIs who they cannot relate themselves to.

According to Chung and Cho (2017) the illusion of intimacy and friendship is created through mutual liking and the frequency of communication. Para-social relationships have been said to be neither completely one- nor two-sided, but there is supposed to exist some interaction between the parties (Sokolova & Kefi, in press). However, the focal data did not support this. There were a couple of comments about the interaction between the respondents and SMIs, but otherwise respondents described the relationship to be non-interactive. It seems that the friendship is really one-sided and on the level of illusion. There are notions that support the existence of the illusion of intimacy, such as using SMIs’ first names and discussing the SMIs with one’s offline friends. However, all normal
interaction, which exists within their offline relationships, is missing from these online relationships.

These SMIs are looked up to, which possibly means that the respondents do not feel themselves equal compared to the SMIs. Consequently, if the friendship is not perceived equal, it may be that the consumers do not have the confidence to interact with the SMIs. Alternatively, because the consumer may feel herself inferior compared to SMIs, they do not know how to interact with the SMI. Interaction is usually two-fold, meaning that both parties should receive something out of it. When the other party is perceived superior, it may be difficult for the consumer to interact in a way that they believe would be worth interacting. Thus, the lack of interaction may be caused by the consumers’ perception of SMIs superiority.

According to previous studies, para-social relationships strengthen if consumers perceive that the influencer shares private issues with them (Chung & Cho, 2017). This so-called self-disclosure stands out repeatedly in the empirical data. Consumers enjoy the personal issues of SMIs and are more interested in the SMIs they feel are sharing this type of content. It seems they feed their curiosity by consuming the personal content by SMIs, which, in turn, seems to affirm the perceived authenticity of the SMI. In addition, the degree of identification a consumer feels towards the SMI improves. Both of these, authenticity and identification, seem to deepen the relationship.

Self-disclosure also relates to the illusion of intimacy, which is one of the key elements of para-social relationships; thus, consumers feel more intimate with the SMIs who are perceived to share private issues with their followers. In addition, SMIs can achieve self-disclosure if they are perceived to share honest opinions and statements, and parts of their day-to-day lives (Chung & Cho, 2017), which both bring SMIs closer to regular consumers, in comparison to celebrities, who rarely share anything from their day-to-day lives. This also seems to deepen the para-social relationships.

According to the empirical data, consumers tend to follow SMIs they like, thus, the personality of the SMI influences whether the relationships are initiated and nurtured. There is no evidence that consumers would follow influencers they do not like. Even the SMIs, who consumers were envious of, were not considered to be unlikeable. In addition, consumers seem to have only a few SMIs that they have a longer, more meaningful relationship with. Affection towards the SMIs is shown in how consumers discuss about the SMIs they follow; thus, they appreciate the SMIs and only end the relationship when
they feel the content does not support their own values or does not bring the value they seek. It seems that the relationships are not ended, by unfollowing the SMI, without careful consideration. Thus, consumers feel affection towards the SMIs they follow, and the affection influences the relationship.

The consumer-SMI relationships influence consumers cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally (Yuksel & Labreque, 2016). This thesis has shown (see Table 4) that affect plays an important role in the relationships. Whereas previous studies have looked at the (mainly) cognitive persuasion of influencers on, for example, consumer brand attitude and purchases, this study shows that consumer affect towards the influencer motivates the relationship.

5.1.2 Influencer authenticity

SMIs, who only present the best parts of their lives, are not perceived to portray reality. The most interesting content is something that consumers can relate to; content that resembles either the life they already have or the life they could have. Respondents were especially interested in hearing about the difficulties in the SMI’s lives, but also about the normal day-to-day issues. Likewise, this applies to physical appearance. SMIs who are perceived to present themselves naturally, were regarded as authentic. This supports previous findings that SMIs can improve their perceived authenticity through self-disclosure (Chung & Cho, 2017).

According to Audrezet et al. (2018) one of the drivers of SMI success has been the perceived authenticity of the content. In this data, SMIs are not questioned as persons of authenticity, but the content they share is often regarded as unauthentic due to its commercial, or potentially commercial, nature. The fit between collaboration and the rest of the SMI content was questioned, and there was suspicion about the genuineness of product recommendations. In addition, respondents expressed suspicion towards paid collaborations, which in many cases has led to unfollowing SMIs when the content became too commercial. This is somewhat contradictory to previous findings, which suggest that SMIs can achieve a positive impact on consumer purchase behaviour with their product reviews (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The authenticity of the SMIs other content was not questioned similarly. Furthermore, consumers seem not to consider whether the images that SMIs post are manipulated in any way. Being sweaty during exercise or showing a face without make-up were considered authentic. Respondents did not question whether this type of content might
be manipulated. Content, where the SMI is perceived to present her real self, raised feelings of encouragement and aspiration, and feelings that they can be natural and simultaneously feel beautiful. This supports earlier findings on how SMIs can improve their perceived authenticity (Kim & Chock, 2015), and that self-disclosure and non-selective self-presentation improve the perceived authenticity of the SMI herself (Audrezet et al., 2018).

Therefore, authenticity is an important variable in the consumer-SMI relationship, but it is based on the consumer’s perception. Thus, SMIs’ content only has to seem authentic. This improves the relationship they have with their followers. It seems that commercial collaborations are considered unauthentic. However, previous findings suggest that consumers’ purchase behaviour can be influenced by SMI collaborations. Therefore, it is likely that SMIs, who are considered otherwise authentic, may present commercial content if it fits their own brand.

5.1.3 Influencer impact on consumer selves

The findings show that consumers relate the influencers to their own selves. Social media provides a convenient platform for comparison (Lin, 2018), and comparison does occur. Social comparison is part of the para-social relationships between consumers and SMIs. According to the empirical data, social comparison relates to all consumer’s selves and is done by all consumers at some level.

Comparison can influence consumers’ neutral, positive, or negative self. When comparison influences consumer’s neutral self, it means that the SMI is considered inferior. If the consumer feels better about herself after the comparison, she feels self-satisfaction. Ergo, the feeling of self-satisfaction relates to consumer neutral self, which means that she is satisfied with what she considers herself to be at present. In comparison, when the SMI is considered superior as a result of comparison, the comparison relates to either positive or negative self. Whenever a consumer feels empowered, the comparison relates to her positive self, because the empowerment relates to inspiration and encouragement. Thus, the influencer is considered superior in an empowering way, and the consumer can use it as a reference for her positive self. When the SMI is considered superior in a discouraging way, the consumer cannot use the SMI as a reference, because she perceives herself to be too far from the SMI. Consequently, it influences the consumer negative self.
The influence possibly extends to all of the selves simultaneously. For example, when a consumer compares herself with the influencer, and feels self-satisfaction, the gap between her neutral and positive self diminishes, because the positive feeling takes her closer to her aspired, ideal self. Consequently, the consumer aspirations, goals, threats, and fears are revised whenever their neutral self changes, which influences their positive and negative selves.

People tend to present their ideal selves in social media (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012), and it is likely that SMIs are not an exception. This causes distortion for social comparison (Lin, 2018). Based on the empirical findings, consumers seem to consider that SMIs present themselves authentically. Thus, SMIs present their positive self, but consumers consider this to be their neutral self. Therefore, comparison is done between consumers’ neutral self and SMIs’ positive self, and consumers may not comprehend the dissonance. This contradiction is likely to have a negative influence on consumer self-image.

Based on previous studies, comparison often occurs on attributes important for the consumer and against people who are perceived to outperform them on those attributes (Koo et al., 2014). This is in line with the findings. When respondents felt they can achieve what the SMI has achieved, they expressed the feel of inspiration, but when they perceived themselves to be too far from the SMI, they expressed the feel of exasperation and envy. In addition, consumers seem to compare attributes, which are meaningful for them, and the comparison therefore relates to their positive and negative selves. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

Comparison occurs in all aspects of physical appearance, and it depends on the consumer and their aspirations and fears, to what extent the social comparison occurs and how it influences the consumer self. Self-confidence plays a major role in the comparison. The more self-confidence the consumer possesses, the less influence the comparison seems to have. Vice versa, less self-confidence causes the comparison to have more influence, and the comparison also seems to be more extensive, thus covering more aspects. Comparison can relate to the consumer positive self, but there are also comparing behaviour in which the tone is negative. Lin (2018) argues that most envy in social media is benign, which means envy that can be assimilated with inspiration as they both encourage the person to become better, in contrast to deflating them. This argument is not completely supported by the empirical data. In contrast to Lin (2018), who divides envy to be either benign or malicious, the empirical data suggests that most of the
envious comments are neither malicious nor benign. These comments do have a negative tone, but the negativity is not directed towards the SMI in question. It is directed towards their own selves. Thus, respondents feel envy towards the aspects they feel they cannot achieve themselves. This is supported by previous findings. It has been suggested that the negativity is caused by the feel of unattainability, hence, the gap between the consumer neutral and positive self is perceived to be too wide (Greenwood et al., 2008).

The respondents felt that the SMIs they follow are natural beauties, and even though Instagram is not completely authentic in the way people present themselves, these SMIs are nevertheless more beautiful than the respondents themselves. It is apparent that the ideal of beauty concentrates on being natural, rather than groomed, and being naturally beautiful is felt to be in the person’s DNA rather than something that can be achieved. By presenting themselves naturally, or what seems to be natural, SMIs influence the beauty ideal of the consumers who follow them. This is something that has not been stressed in previous studies.

In general, weight and body shape were not considered as unattainable as facial beauty, and most respondents were satisfied with their bodies. However, those respondents, who were not satisfied with themselves, felt afar from their ideal body, and their body related comments were mostly negative. They seem to think that regardless what they would do, they would never be as thin or fit as the SMIs they revere. Furthermore, the respondents, who felt more confident about their bodies, were not as envious about the bodies of SMIs even though they also regarded the bodies of the SMIs to be better than their own. For them, the SMIs provide a reference, and motivate them to become their better selves. Therefore, it can be argued that self-confidence has a significant influence on social comparison and its impact on consumer self-image. This is supported by the earlier finding suggesting that consumers with low self-confidence are seeking for social acceptance and approval and are therefore more vulnerable for the influence of others (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Moreover, it seems that self-confidence, in this context, is profoundly related to body-satisfaction rather than physical appearance in general.

According to self-concept studies, consumer’s positive self is connected to her goals, aspirations, and motives, and describes how she sees her potential (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and this is supported by the empirical findings. Consumers are inspired and encouraged by the SMIs they follow and use them as a reference for their positive self. The creation of positive self is a constant process, it seems. This is supported by earlier notion that it evolves whenever a consumer feels she can improve herself (McCracken,
1989). For example, the respondents exercise, which distinctly reflects to their body image. As their body changes due to the exercise they do, their positive self alters to meet their new goals. SMIs provide inspiration and information on what these goals can be and how they can be achieved. It depends on the consumer and their life situation, which kind of SMIs are used as a reference. Identification is important, because the reference for the positive self has to feel attainable in order for the consumer to have motivation to pursue towards it. Attainability relates on how a consumer identifies herself. Respondents, who identify themselves via sports, use athletes as their reference. However, respondents, who identify themselves through their children, they are mothers first and foremost, seek reference from people who have children.

Consumer negative self reflects the threats and fears consumers have about their future potential (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Consumer negative self can be described to be the opposite of their positive self, thus, what they are afraid of becoming, do not wish to become, or what they do not believe they can become. As long as the positive self is moulded by the SMIs the consumer follows, likewise, there is an impact on the consumer negative self. According to the empirical study, all consumers have a negative self, which they seem to be oblivious about. Besides being unaware of its existence, it seems that consumers do not want to admit their negative self existing. Negative self relates to the attributes that the consumer appreciates and to their view on the beauty ideal.

The most striking finding, in the context of negative self, is how it relates to what is perceived to be unattainable. Self-confidence influences the negative self, because an attribute’s unattainability seems to be a consumer’s own assessment rather than a physical restriction. For example, consumers with low self-confidence seem to think that their body cannot be as fit as the bodies of the SMIs’ they follow. However, this is not an actual restriction, but rather reflects their body related fears. Moreover, an insecure consumer seems to consider more attributes to be unattainable for them than a consumer who has self-confidence. Therefore, their negative self plays a more important role in their overall self-image than in a confident consumer’s. When it comes to consumer who has self-confidence, it is likely that their neutral self may be the most striking part of their self-image. If a consumer is so called achiever, who concentrates on improving herself, her positive self has possibly the most predominant role in her self-image. This is because she defines herself through her goals and aspirations. Consumer self-attitude’s influence on consumer self-image has not been highlighted in previous studies.
According to previous studies, both, consumer’s negative and positive selves, have an important role on their behaviour, thus, consumer behaves in a way they perceive brings them closer to their positive self and takes them further from their negative self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to empirical data, consumers have pressures on physical appearance. However, their goals on their appearance seem to be fairly modest, thus, they would like to appear neat and decent. Consumers seem to aim presenting themselves in a way, which denotes that they have given thought on their appearance, but which abides nonetheless natural. This behaviour brings them closer to their positive self, which seems to be stylish, and takes them further on their negative self, which seems to be dishevelled.

Furthermore, in order to converge into their positive self, in terms of body, consumers exercise. In addition, exercising seems to distance them from their negative self, which seems to be unfit. What separates the consumers from each other is the level of fitness or stylishness they aspire to achieve, and the reasons for doing so. For some consumers, fitness relates to being healthy and strong, but for some it seems to have more relation to appearance. Regardless of the reasons, it is apparent that SMIs influence the consumer positive self. SMIs seem to provide a framework, which combines all the improvements a consumer aspires to achieve in terms of her physical appearance. It depends on the SMIs they follow, which type of framework the consumer has for the creation of their positive self. For example, the consumers, who mainly follow athletes and fitness SMIs, have their positive self based on these athletic and muscular SMIs.

Consumers are consciously choosing to follow SMIs, who reflect their positive selves and therefore, are great sources of reference. In addition, consumers are unconsciously choosing to follow SMIs, who influence their negative self and push their positive self further from their neutral self. The SMIs seem to directly relate to consumer self, not only in terms of self-image and physical appearance, but their selves as persons.

5.2 Practical implications

From practical, and especially marketing point of view, the subject is highly relevant as the influencer industry is quickly becoming a major market and will be increasingly present in the marketing strategies. Influencer marketing provides a huge amount of opportunities, but also raises questions on authenticity and ethics. Advertising, and marketing in general, has had a major role in moulding the beauty ideals of the 21st century. Beauty ideals are however changing, and social media has a role in increasing
the transparency. Brands have an opportunity to take a stand and transfer from building unrealistic expectations to celebrate all kinds of beauty. For practitioners’, this study provides understanding on the nature of the relationship between consumers and SMIs, and the type of influence SMIs have on consumers’ self-image. Thus, practitioners’ will have a better understanding of how their collaborations with influencers may affect consumers, and which type of content could create a positive outcome. Positive outcome is likely to be accomplished when the SMIs brand meets the brand they are marketing. In addition, the relationship SMIs have with their followers has an influence on the outcome. Marketers should therefore collaborate with influencers, who have managed to create meaningful relationships with their followers, and whose brand fits the marketed product or service.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

Even though the sample in this study was women only, it is likely that the results, at least to some extent, are transferable to other contexts (Wallendorf & Berg, 1989). This could be investigated, for example, by replicating it with men. Men and women may respond to physical appearance differently, although, the importance of authenticity and relationship with self are likely to be transferable. Since men are interested in different subjects in social media (Annalect Finland, 2017), it may influence the kind of relationship they have with SMIs. Different age groups would need to be studied also, to add knowledge on differences caused by life experience, for example.

As the research was conducted in Finland, and culture influences the consumer relationships and the nature of them, it would be beneficial to replicate the study in another culture. In addition, as all respondents were Finnish, it is likely that the findings would vary if the study would be conducted in other geographical location, because beauty ideals are also influenced by the society.

Furthermore, because the regulations on social media influencing are still limited, and for example, Kilpailuvirasto (2019) has not taken any stand on product placement without compensation before the spring 2019, there are obscurities when it comes to commercial content. However, Finland is already quite advanced on the influencer marketing regulations, whereas there are probably countries, where consumers are less aware of the industry, and therefore may have different kind of relationships with the SMIs. This would also be an interesting aspect for future research.
REFERENCES


Elmhirst, S. (2019, 5 April). ‘It’s genuine, you know?’: why the online influencer industry is going ‘authentic’. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/apr/05/its-genuine-you-know-why-the-online-influencer-industry-is-going-authentic [Accessed 7 April 2019]


Hwang, Y. & Jeong, S. (2016). "This is a sponsored blog post, but all opinions are my own": The effects of sponsorship disclosure on responses to sponsored blog posts. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 62, pp. 528-535.


@nonsensepodi. (2019, 21 January). Me lomalla vs me lomalla [Instagram post]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs55v0thWJSaCm1pgBOc1WdgWoj3G2QYxVac7go/ [Accessed 3 February 2019]


Pastak, A. [@mungoanna]. (2019, 10 February). I’ve decided to bring back some normality and everyday real-life to my Instagram feed [Instagram post]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BtsvgK8hy_o/ [Accessed 17 March 2019]


CONSENT FORM

Consent form for interviews

The data will be analysed for the Master's thesis by Laura Peltola, master student at Hanken School of Economics, major in Marketing.

1. I understand what the study is about and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.  
   (Check the box if you agree)

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the interview at any time without any reasons.

3. I agree to take part in this study.

4. I agree that my interview will be recorded.

5. I agree that the interview responses I have provided can be used as anonymized statements in the publication (translated by the interviewer into English)

Date: ________________________

Respondent's name ______________ Signature ______________________

Researcher's name ______________ Signature ______________________
APPENDIX 2       INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide is structured into five areas to be covered during the interview. The interview guide, altogether, will consist 43 questions, which will be supported with additional questions depending on each respondent.

1. The use of Instagram and following of SMIs – to create an understanding on why and how the respondent uses Instagram and what type of SMIs she follows and for what reason or purpose.
   a. Do you remember when you started looking at influencer postings in social media? What caught your interest?
   b. How has your following of influencers changed over the years?
   c. Do you follow other types of influencers now, compared to before?
   d. Which are your favourite influencers?
   e. Can you describe what makes them interesting?
   f. In which social media do you follow them?
   g. My study deals particularly with beauty influencers, because these are the biggest group of influencers. You mentioned that you follow X, is this the only, are these the only, beauty influencer(s) that you follow?
   h. What makes you follow these influencers? (can you think of more reasons)
   i. Anything else (on top of reasons given) that make you like each of them?
   j. Why do you enjoy reading the postings/looking at the images/watching videos of these influencers?
   k. Do you also have negative feelings towards these influencers? Tell me about these feelings.
   l. Do you sometimes engage with the influencers?
   m. Tell me about it.
n. Can you show me your favourite beauty influencer?

o. Can you describe from the postings what makes this influencer interesting for you?

p. Do you feel similarities between yourself and the influencer?

q. In what way?

r. In what way not?

2. SMIs and beauty – questions to provide insight into the effect which following beauty SMIs creates on the respondent’s mind.

a. Has following the influencers affected your view of your own appearance?

b. In what way?

c. Have you changed something in your appearance based on postings?

d. Can you give examples?

e. Has following the influencers changed your own postings in social media?

f. In what way? Can you think of examples?

g. How do you consider these influencers’ physical appearance?

h. How do you consider their physical appearance to vary between Instagram and real-life?

3. Consumer self-image in terms of physical appearance

a. What are your own thoughts on the importance of physical appearance?

b. What does physical appearance mean to you?

c. If you think back on how you viewed your appearance five years ago, how has your view changed? (then-----now)

d. Do you reflect on your own appearance when you read the influencer postings?
e. In what way?

f. In your own words, describe your physical appearance.

g. What would you describe yourself not to be?

h. How would your family, friends or other people close to you describe your physical appearance?

i. How do you consider Instagram SMIs and how their affect the pressures on your own physical appearance?

4. (Authenticity – to create an understanding on how the respondent perceives the authenticity and how it influences on their thoughts.

a. In what regards you think the content by SMIs is authentic?

b. What kind of content is not authentic? Can you show an example?

c. Do you think SMIs present themselves in realistic way?

d. How do you perceive their lives to be in comparison to your own?)

5. General – to understand the background of the respondent.

a. What is your age?

b. What is your employment status?

c. Does your job require you to perform in front of people?

d. What is your education level and field of expertise (if applicable)?
APPENDIX 3  DATA EXCEL

As an example, a part of data coding excel is attached below. The full excel file can be retrieved from the author upon request.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>Note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>More hardships than others and being the smallest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the smallest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>More hardships than others and being the smallest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the smallest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More hardships than others and being the smallest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the smallest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More hardships than others and being the smallest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the smallest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More hardships than others and being the smallest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the smallest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More hardships than others and being the smallest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the smallest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Peer-social interaction</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>More achievements than others and being the biggest (Motivation to belong to a group) vs. Not feeling like the biggest</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>