

Understanding the relationship between audience and influencer

A study on the significance of authenticity



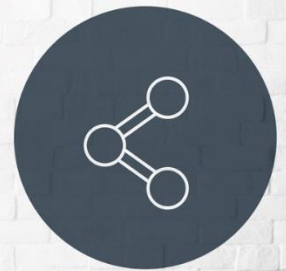
Blogs



Instagram



YouTube



Opinion Leaders



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Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Problem formulation

The problem formulation for this thesis is, **How do consumer audiences perceive social media influencers and in what ways does authenticity play a significant role?**

The problem formulation for this thesis seeks to understand the relationship between a consumer audience and influencers. The problem formulation also seeks to explore the concept of authenticity and understand the significance this concept has on the audience's perception of influencers.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the thesis is based on the building blocks of influencer culture today. The building blocks are, in this thesis, participatory culture online (Jenkins, 2008, 2009), as well as produsage (Bruns, 2008).

Furthermore, the theoretical framework explores the concept of contemporary influencers, who originally referred to as opinion leaders (Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Roper, 1964). The understanding of authenticity as a social construct (Marwick & boyd, 2011), as well as how to manage authenticity (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018) was explored. The mutual benefits between influencer, audience and brand was also explored in the theoretical framework (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

Methodology

To explore and understand the relationship and perception of contemporary influencers by the audience itself, qualitative research was conducted. The thesis applies online survey, focus group interviews and a semi-structured interview with a Danish influencer. The participants were able to

respond and elaborate on their perception of influencers as well as their relationship to the influencers they follow, as well as the significance of authenticity in this relationship.

To systemize the data, template analysis was used, which categorizes the overall themes of the data collected in a neat and comprehensive way. This approach highlights the strongest themes of the data collection as it relates to the problem formulation.

Results

The survey, influencer and focus group participants expressed distrust towards the concept of social media influencers, as the influencers are perceived to be inauthentic. The influencers who are perceived as authentic were perceived to create good quality content. Authentic influencers were perceived to be transparent, realistic, honest, believable, personal, and trustworthy.

Conclusions

Based on theoretical and empirical data, the conclusion and answer to the problem formulation suggests that the relationship between audience and influencer is constructed based on the audience's perception of an authentic influencer. The role of authenticity is vital in the trust, credibility, believability, honesty, transparency and quality of content of and the relationship to the influencer.

Keywords: Social media influencers, authenticity, participatory culture

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I. Introduction

A shift has occurred in the marketing world, as well as the social internet. The shift is called social media influencers, and is a convergence of opinion leaders and Web 2.0. The use of social media influencers has become more common in the past few years, however, the shift is still new and changing constantly.

A social media influencer is a person who uses their platform online to shape behaviors and opinions towards a diverse range of issues (*Cambridge English Dictionary*). While celebrity endorsements and opinion leaders have existed for a very long time (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955), the newer convergence of social media and advertisement is fascinating (Jenkins, 2008).

Social media influencers start out as regular people with a social media presence, whose words start to gain more credibility. This credibility earns them the title of influencer. Credibility is the defining power behind influencer marketing, where consumers believe the words of the social media influencers, which is advantageous to brands. These brands are able to target their demographic specifically to a segment of consumers who follow an influencer whose experiences or opinions they mirror. While influencer marketing is a relatively new industry, consumers seem clear on their perception of an influencer's credibility and authenticity. The phenomenon is a balancing act to remain authentic – trustworthy, believable, honest, personal – while also profiting on the content they post. The profitability of an influencer usually lies in the phenomenon of influencer marketing.

This thesis explores what an influencer was and has become, as well as the relationship between influencers and their audiences, the audience's perceptions of, and relationship with, social media influencers and which degree of authenticity plays has significance in this relationship. These are the building blocks of social media influencers, including participatory culture, produsage, authenticity management, the quality and quantity of influencer content (whether promotional or not) and the relationship between influencer and audience.

AAU works with problem based learning (PBL), and the meta-problem in this thesis lies in understanding the relationship between audience and social media influencers in 2019. This relationship is often implicit and not stated explicitly. This could pose as a problem for influencers and the audience alike, if they do not understand the relationship between them. The problem also presents itself for the brands who wish to collaborate with influencers, as this relationship seems to be constructed complexly. However, the brands'

perception is outside of the scope of this thesis at this point. Therefore, the thesis first seeks to describe what influencers are and how they operate, and then explores how this is perceived by their audience. This problem is explored through qualitative research by way of an online survey as well as interviewing a focus group and a Danish influencer.

This thesis will be exploring the world of the influencer industry, specifically seeking to understand the relationship between influencer and audience as it relates to the concept of authenticity. Authenticity, including credibility, congruence with editorial and personal style, distrust and the democratization of knowledge and availability of equipment is explored through the lens of the participants of this study, the consumer audience. Using relevant theories as building blocks of understanding this subject, the thesis will be exploring the subject further by using online survey responses, a focus group interview as well as an interview with a Danish influencer. The theoretical understanding as well as an in-depth exploration serves as a well-rounded view and understanding of social media influencers in 2019 and the significance of authenticity.

Motivation

In my academic career, I gravitate to, and continually revisit, social media and the concept of participatory culture in social media. Participatory culture is the convergence between traditional media – such as TV, radio, billboards – where mass media has one-way communication towards their consumers, and the newer Web 2.0, which is also referred to as the social internet: a dialogical relationship between media and consumer (Jenkins, 2009). This shift results in users becoming producers (Bruns, 2008), which is fascinating as it shows the possibilities of communication between consumers and the brands who wish to have their products consumed. Social media influencers are opinion leaders who communicate directly with their audience on social media platforms. This means the audience – or consumers – feel a closer connection to the influencer and the products they may promote on their platform. This relationship is a profitable advantage for both influencers as well as the brands they collaborate with.

The thesis was inspired by a podcast episode on the subject, where a Danish Snapchat-influencer had created a company around the concept of influencer marketing, as he saw a flaw between the traditional marketing bureaus who did not seem to understand the work of influencers (Kommagasinet.dk, October

2018). The traditional marketing bureaus were used to controlling the output of the company, and completely missed the dialogical relationship that influencers have with their audiences. This problem was fascinating and in line with the focus of the stream of my Master's degree which is Consumption and Market Communication, and inspired the thesis.

II. Problem formulation

Using relevant theories and qualitative, this thesis seeks to understand the relationship between audience and influencers today. By using the theory apparatus as the building blocks of understanding influencers, authenticity and the management of authenticity, the methodology seeks to explore the understanding of participants who are both audience and influencer. Using template analysis to systematically explore this relationship based on the participants' interpretation of their relationship to influencers today yields further understanding of this relationship, as well as the significance of authenticity within this relationship.

The problem formulation for this thesis is therefore,

How do consumer audiences perceive social media influencers and in what ways does authenticity play a significant role?

III. Philosophy of science

The problem formulation of this thesis addresses the perception of social media influencers by a consumer audience, herein authenticity, credibility, trust, and quality of content.

The philosophy of science in any work of research has a significant impact on the outcome and of academic research. The stances describe the way a researcher views the world as well as how the researcher views data collection, and this has significant influence on the chosen methods and theoretical considerations used within the work. In humanities, a qualitative approach is often chosen, where the researcher seeks to understand the world around them (Bryman, 2012).

Ontological considerations

The ontological stance of this thesis is social constructivism. This stance acknowledges the influences of social actors and the structures that social actors find themselves within.

Social constructivism is a stance that acknowledges that social actors not only produce these structures or phenomena, but also that these structures are under constant revision by the social actors (Bryman, 2012). The thesis explores these phenomena as they are understood and experienced by social actors: the participating respondents. The stance is often presented as the polar opposite of objectivism (Bryman, 2012) which is the stance that objects or participants can be observed as static representations of factual information. However, in this thesis, I acknowledge the fact that I am a social actor within the interactions between participants and their understandings, as I am part of, and influenced by, the society and contexts around me.

Template analysis was used to interpret the collected data. According to (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015), this approach can be used within “contextual constructivism ... a stance which assumes that there are always multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomenon, and that these depend upon the position of the researcher and the specific social context of the research” (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 5)

The use of social constructivism in this thesis relates to the problem formulation and overall theme of the thesis. A social media influencer is a socially constructed phenomenon, where social actors have assigned a value to the opinions and views of an influencer. These views and opinions exist entirely within the language and general expressions (including body language, editorial style, et cetera) of the influencer, and this is expressed and shared online. The outcome is therefore not physically tangible; however, it still has a significant influence on their audience. This influence, and the resulting relationship, is what the thesis seeks to understand.

Epistemological considerations

The stance of this thesis is interpretivist. Interpretivism, according to Blaikie (N. Blaikie, 2007; N. W. H. Blaikie, 2009), is the study of social phenomena, which requires an understanding of the social world that people have constructed and which they reproduce through their continuing activities.

In this thesis, I acknowledge that the experiences and words recorded of willing participants means they have already interpreted the world and assigned meanings to the aforementioned social structures we, as social actors, live in. Within qualitative research, honoring and analyzing the words of participants means acknowledging that the participants' understanding and experiences are already interpreted by the meanings the participants before reaching the researcher.

I acknowledge that I am a social actor within the society where the data was collected, both online and in person. The researcher's interpretations of the participants' interpretations are the product of this thesis. While using methodology and analysis to gain as much insight and understanding of the phenomenon of influencers, systematically analyzing the data collected, it is impossible to ignore the bias of the researcher.

Impact on thesis

These stances have influenced the approach and results of the thesis. The very subject of the thesis is socially constructed, and the data collected has been interpreted by a social actor within the same society.

The choice of methodology is one such element, as the methodology is qualitative and seeks to understand other social actors and their interpretations of a socially constructed phenomenon – the social media influencer. The methodology of interviews is also social, as the interaction between researcher and participants is social, and the interpretations that arise between participants leads to further discussion and interpretation of the subject and the world around them.

The approach of using template analysis to systemize and analyze the data collected is not inherently socially constructed, as the approach can be used in most types of research and is mostly an approach to systemize the data in a coherent and logical manner (Brooks et al., 2015). However, the interpretations of the qualitative approach, and the data gathered hereof, adheres to the philosophy of science of this thesis. Finally, the outcome, including discussion and conclusion, is a product of these ontological and epistemological stances.

IV. Theory apparatus

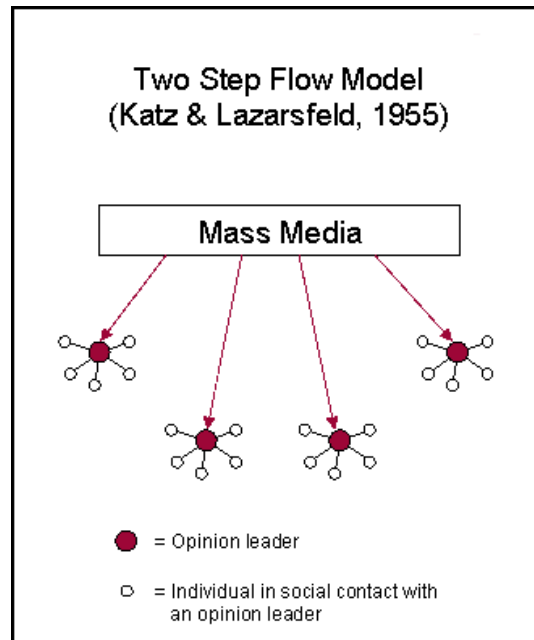
In this chapter, I will be reviewing the emerging industry of influencers and authenticity, based on selected relevant literature pertaining to this area of study. In order to explore this subject, the chapter seeks to describe what influencers are, how the phenomenon began and how context shaped them as well as how authenticity relates to them. The chapter explores the concept of influencers and opinion leaders in the context of social media platforms and online participation, as well as how authenticity is significant in the role of the influencer industry in this context.

Defining the concept of influencers

In the Cambridge Business English Dictionary an influencer is defined as, “MARKETING: a person or group that has the ability to influence the behaviour or opinions of others” (“INFLUENCER | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary,” n.d.).

Influencers are not strictly a 21st century phenomenon. Another term for influencer could be “opinion leader” as coined by Katz & Lazarsfeld originally in 1955. In their two-step flow communication model, they described the relationship between mass media, the opinion leaders, and those influenced by opinion leaders (followers, consumers, etc.).

Below is the visualization of the two-step flow model.



(Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006)

In the two-step flow theory, Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) argued that opinion leaders are people who have access to new information and innovations and help guide the majority on how to feel about said innovations, act upon, use, or distance. In the model, opinion leaders consume information from mass media and actively and influences develops the opinions of consumers by sharing information. The satellites surrounding the opinion leaders then develop their own opinion from the information provided by the opinion leaders.

Influencers on social media are a product of Web 2.0 and the aforementioned opinion leaders migrating to new platforms. In traditional media, consumers were passively consuming products or information. In Web 2.0, consumers are part of the conversation (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). The conversation is now dialogical, global and spans time and space (Bruns, 2008; Johannsen, 2011). Web 2.0 is a democratic revolution where everyone's voice can be heard if you have a device and an internet connection (Jenkins, 2008; Linaa Jensen & Tække, 2015).

The building blocks of influencers

In 2019, influencing happens online via social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter or personal blogs. In order to become an influencer or opinion leader, one must participate online and be part of a community, in order to have a following to impart their influential content upon. In order to understand how influencers become influential, it is important to understand participatory culture online.

Henry Jenkins has defined the phenomenon of participatory culture online, which started with fandoms and knowledge sharing but has now become profitable (Jenkins, 2009).

Jenkins describes online communities and why users participate online by defining the principals of online communities. An online community must have these five attributes:

1. ... relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. ... strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
3. ... some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. ... members believe that their contributions matter
5. ... members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created) (Jenkins, 2009)

That is to say, it must first be easy to express yourself, participate and engage in the community. Secondly, there must be support for this expression and participation, including images (Instagram), videos (YouTube), opinions and more. Thirdly, the structures of the community can be learned by those who have participated in the community for longer. Fourth, it is important that the participants must feel that what they bring to the community is valued. Fifth and finally, there is a social aspect where participants connect and feel their contributions are valued intrinsically.

The phenomenon of participating online lead to the emerging industry of social media influencers, who create promotional content online, and in return receive monetary incentive to use their influence over other participants online (Jenkins, 2009).

Marwick & boyd (2011) explored the world of influencers in their own words, who expressed that those who express themselves feel that they are speaking to friends and peers (p. 117) which aligns with Jenkins' approach to participatory culture.

In 2019, influencers profit from their participation online, sometimes from receiving a portion of advertisement sales. However, many influencers profit from the practice of influencer marketing, where influencers collaborate with brands to create promotional content which serves as an advertisement for the brand's products or services.

In order to understand influencer marketing, it is important to explore the phenomenon of participatory culture, as the background for influencer marketing has roots in this phenomenon. Participating online is a revolution in democracy where every person's voice can be heard as long as you have a device and an internet connection (Linaa Jensen & Tække, 2015). Someone participating by consuming, using and producing your own content (this can be as low-effort as commenting on a video or image) has been referred to as a produser (the portmanteau of producer and user) coined by Axel Bruns (Bruns, 2008). This shift, where regular users become opinion leaders (or by contemporary vocabulary, influencers) by actively participating online is the approach leads to the industry of social media influencers who receive monetary incentive in return for creating promotional content and publishing this to their fellow online participants. Produsers are a key part of participatory culture as well as social media influencers. The attitude of a produser suggests that their contributions – be it blog-posts, images, videos or comments – matter and are valued. These produsers are both the audience as well as the influencers (Bruns, 2008).

Influencer marketing

Influencers are used in marketing campaigns, and this is referred to as influencer marketing. The brands who choose to collaborate with an influencer benefit from the community and relationship that an influencer has with their audience, as the influencers actively engage with their audience, which creates a higher degree of trust and connection between the audience and influencer (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

Influencers are viewed as peers or at least as more honest, credible and trustworthy than regular marketing campaigns (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Therefore, followers of these influencers regard influencer's opinions

as generally true and in good faith, or at least with “(very) little ... corporate speak” (p. 126). Marwick & boyd (2011) discuss the concept of authenticity as it pertains to the influencers’ own self-image, and explores which topics to share are considered authentic and true to themselves. However, Marwick & boyd also argue that authenticity is a social construct that changes constantly:

“Of course, authenticity is a social construct (Grazian, 2003) and it is unlikely that anyone could tweet context-independently with no concern with audience, given our understanding of audience influence on self-presentation (Blumer, 1962; Goffman, 1959)” (p. 119).

This quote argues that context and perceived audience is an important part of how someone expresses themselves, not only in person, but especially online.

Marwick & boyd (2011) go on to argue that authenticity is mainly understood contextually and within a social group, constantly changing and differing according to context. Authenticity is an idealized and manufactured representation of reality that needs to exist in opposition to something else – that is, something needs to be inauthentic in order for something else to *be authentic* (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This contradictory nature of authenticity is, according to Marwick & boyd, a false dichotomy due to the performance-aspect of authenticity and inauthenticity, as these are both – and equally – constructed by discourse and context (p. 124).

The community’s perception is strongly emphasized by Marwick & boyd (2011), as well as the context, discourse and audience on the receiving end of social media presence. A social media influencer is a part of an online community, and must navigate the social clues of their present time and space. In the article, they go on to explore polysemy as a linguistic concept and valuable skill as an influencer, which rejects the idea that authenticity must oppose inauthenticity and embrace the duality of rhetoric. As stated in the above quote, both authenticity and inauthenticity can be constructed concepts.

An influencer could – in theory – simply choose to collaborate with any brand that approaches them and create promotional content. However, in order for the audience to trust the influencer’s intentions and believe there is authenticity behind the campaign, there must be intrinsic value assigned to the campaign. This is described in the Authenticity Management Framework by Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard (2018). This model defines four paths of authenticity based on transparency about collaborating with a brand and receiving incentive (money, gifts or other value) from a brand. An aspect of the framework is

intrinsic value; there must be a personal reason behind the influencer’s recommendation of the brand. Within authenticity management, an influencer must be meticulous about how they choose a brand and the topic of advertisement, as it should be congruent with the influencer’s style and editorial choices in general (Audrezet et al., 2018). This perception is shared by Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip (2014).

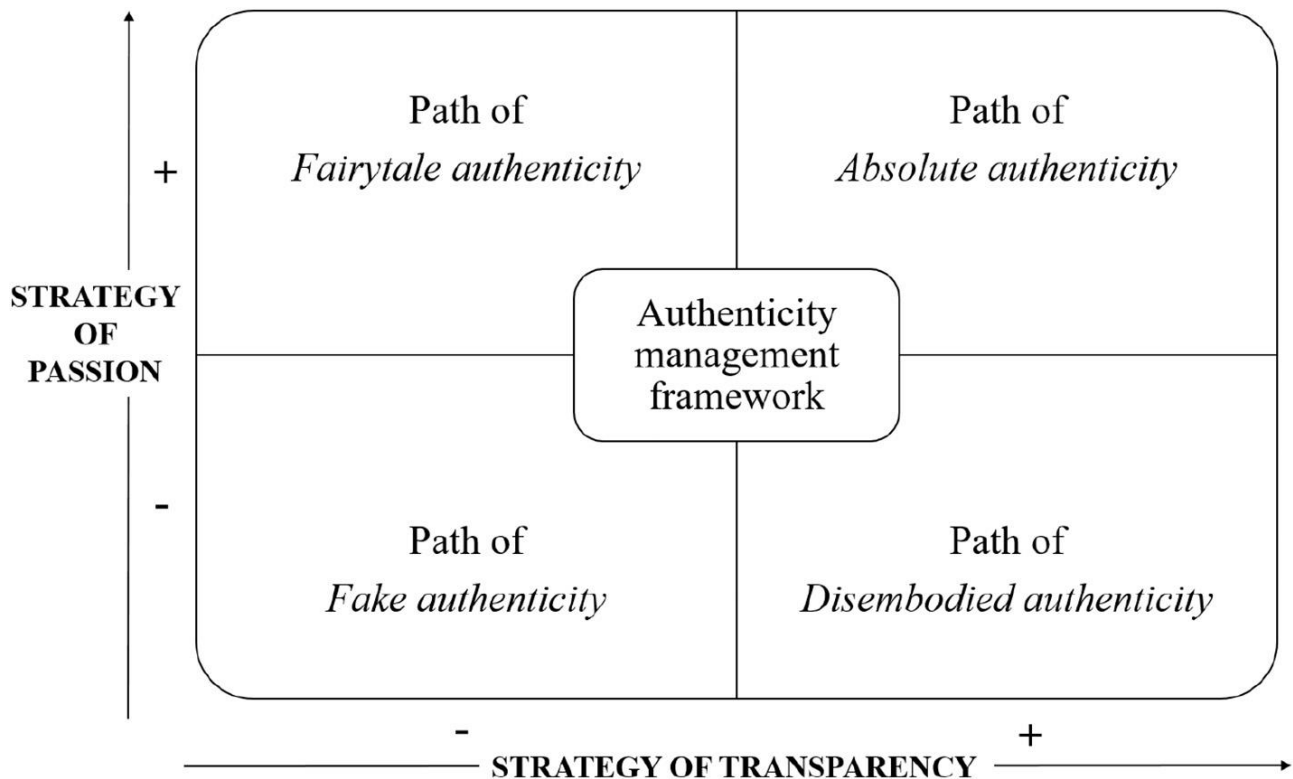


Fig. 2 (Audrezet et al., 2018)

The first path (segment of the model) is called “the path of absolute authenticity” and has a balance of honesty regarding a personal (intrinsic) value that relates to the branded product or service, as well as full transparency toward their audience that the campaign is in collaboration with a brand. In this first path, the influencer has an inner desire to use the product as well as share it with their followers, and the money earned from the branded campaign seems to be a bonus – a win-win situation. The influencer’s passion is relatable to the follower and might see themselves in the need for the product or service being recommended by the influencer. The followers may also learn something about the person they are following, which creates a stronger perceived relationship between them.

In the second path, “the path of fairytale authenticity”, the influencer is disingenuously passionate about the product in the campaign, over-exaggerating their passion for the branded campaign. In the “fairytale” path, the influencer appears to be “spontaneously inspired to talk about (the brand) that day, without specifying any influence from the brand.” (p. 8). That is, no disclosure or transparency regarding collaboration or incentive behind the content, though high degree of passion.

On the low end of strategy of passion, the third path is “the path of disembodied authenticity management” which is seemingly passionless and uncreative and thus may not generate enthusiasm among followers: “the description does not include emotions nor references pleasure of interest, thus adopting a distant and cold approach that abstains from imbuing the content with personal feelings.” (p. 8). This path is, however, transparent in its approach to the branded campaign, though the lack of passion may not inspire the influencer’s followers to purchase.

The final path is “the path of fake authenticity management” and “corresponds to a situation in which (influencers) neither disclose their partnerships nor express any intrinsic passion.” (p. 8). In this path, there is a professional distance between the influencer and the branded campaign, and it seems the influencer merely shares factual information about the product instead of the reasons why the campaign relates to the influencer themselves or their followers. The added factor of not revealing the collaboration between brand and influencer is a lack of transparency from the brand as well as the influencer’s side, and is considered deceptive by the audience. Not only is there no intrinsic value or passion about the product from the influencer, there is also no mention of an agenda or incentive (i.e. the receiving of money, gifts or other value). Withholding information regarding a branded campaign is illegal in Denmark according to the Danish law of marketing §10 stk. 3, which states that whoever is behind the campaign must not be withheld or obscured to the consumers (“Markedsføringsloven - Lov om markedsføring - retsinformation.dk,” n.d.).

(Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014) describe the relationship between brand, influencer and consumer.

“Due to a greater awareness of their power, consumers are no longer merely passive recipients of messages; instead they desire to communicate in a participatory way. In addition, instead of simply accepting packaged brand messages, they tend to place more trust in the opinions of those who appear to be similar to themselves.”(p. 598).

As a result, the brands benefit from the relationship and the engagement (interaction) that takes place between audience and influencer (p. 599).

The brands who choose to work with influencers in their marketing campaigns also have a stake in the selection of influencers used in their campaigns. Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014 offer some criteria for selecting influencers. These include criteria such as match between influencer and brand; tone of voice and content (also referred to as editorial style by Audrezet et al. (2018)); number of followers; reliability and popularity. These criteria are important in the selection of social media influencers, in order for the campaign to work in the best way possible – that is, a win-win-win situation between the brand, influencer and consumer. To elaborate on the criteria above, a match between brand and influencer is important, as well as the influencer's general content and tone of voice. A gaming-influencer may not be congruent with a makeup-brand if the gaming-influencer does not wear makeup. A big brand may also choose an influencer with a large follower-count in order to reach the maximum amount of consumers possible. This match ensures mutual benefits and profit for the influencer and brand alike.

Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip emphasizes the importance of target audience and demographic for the brand: "The blog's relevance to the brand has a supportive role in increasing the intimacy of brand communication. Since the brands aim to reach the appropriate target audience through the most suitable medium, the match of the target audience and blog followers is an essential requirement." (p. 595).

Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip offer their own model based on the Two Step Flow model by Katz & Lazarsfeld from 1955, as seen below:

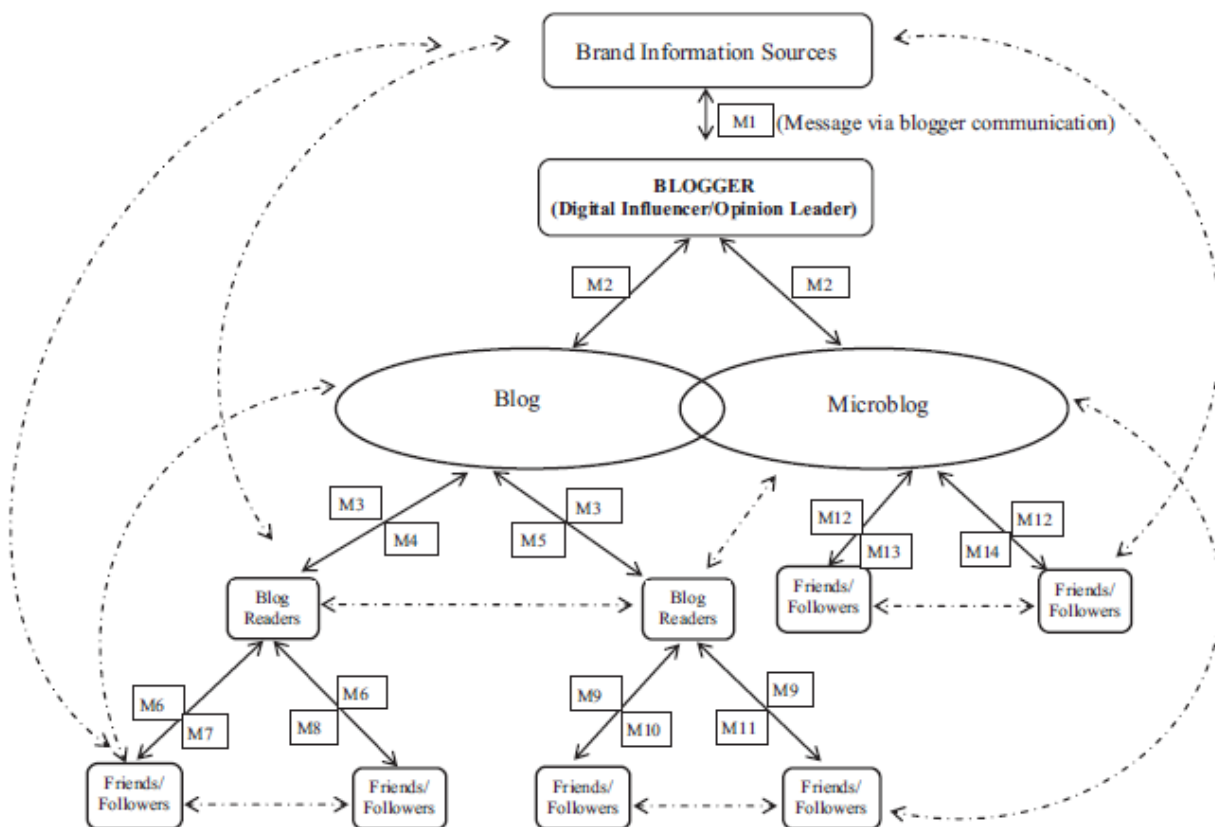


Fig. 1. Brand communication through digital influencers model.

Fig. 3 (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014)

This model is an advanced version of the aforementioned Two Step Flow model by Katz & Lazarsfeld, and elaborates on the consumer's role in the eco-system of influencer marketing. Their role in consuming media and then sharing the advertised content is vital in an influencer marketing campaign. The relationship between audience and influencer is therefore vital in the influencer industry.

The role of authenticity in the influencer industry

As described in the above chapter, the role of authenticity is important in the relationship between audience and influencer, as it inspires trust towards the influencer from the audience. Transparency and passion, as described by Audrezet et al. (2018), is under the umbrella-term of authenticity. The role of authenticity in influencer marketing is therefore a significant aspect of the emerging influencer industry.

Authenticity is a concept discussed in several ways. (Marwick & boyd, 2011) discuss the concept based on the influencer's own perception of their own authenticity, which provides an understanding in relation to how consumers perceive an influencer's authenticity. Marwick & boyd express that those who participate and "produce" content – the influencers they describe in their article – view their audience as friends or even as mirroring their own self-image. However, it must be said that there is a difference between a participant with a low-follower count and influencers with thousands of followers. This difference lies in strategically maintaining a community of fans or like-minded people who enjoy the content that is posted.

Maintaining the community strategically can be done in many ways, as the Authenticity Management Framework by (Audrezet et al., 2018) suggests. When a social media influencer collaborates with a brand to promote a product or service, the Authenticity Management Framework suggests absolute transparency as well as passion based on intrinsic values as the best approach. The influencer must be meticulous in choosing which brands to work with and how to advertise, as long-term followers can easily deduce that the content is uninspired and incongruent with the influencer's style and image (Audrezet et al., 2018; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip (2014) describe the influencer's reliability as a significant aspect within the relationships between brands and consumers. Reliability inspires trust from the consumers, and in turn, prestige for the brand: "A recommendation from a reliable blogger brings prestige to the brand; correspondingly, reliability can result in a blogger becoming an influential and persuasive power." (p. 595).

Summary

This literature review explores and describes various concepts and phenomena regarding Web 2.0 and influencer marketing as well as how the perception of authenticity pertains to these concepts. It explored participatory culture online, how opinion leaders have become social media influencers and the relationships between brands, influencers and consumers. Using models to describe these relationships and concepts, the chapter describes these relationships and practices by influencers to maintain their authenticity and all that this entails.

The theory apparatus explores and describes the building blocks of influencers today, participatory culture online (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2008, 2009; Linaa Jensen & Tække, 2015), as well as the role of authenticity in influencer marketing and how authenticity is managed. The theory apparatus describes authenticity management from brands (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014) and the influencer's side (Audrezet et al., 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011). With these approaches in mind, this thesis seeks to understand the perception of the audience (the consumers) and their relationship with influencers, as well as the significance of authenticity within this relationship.

V. Methodology

In this chapter, I will be describing the methodology of this thesis. In order to collect empirical data, I have utilized an online survey as well as a focus group interview with three consumers who had responded to the online survey, as well as a one-on-one semi-structured interview with a social media influencer. Furthermore, template analysis has been performed on the collected data in order to systemize and further understand and explore the problem formulation, **How do consumer audiences perceive social media influencers and in what ways does authenticity play a significant role?**

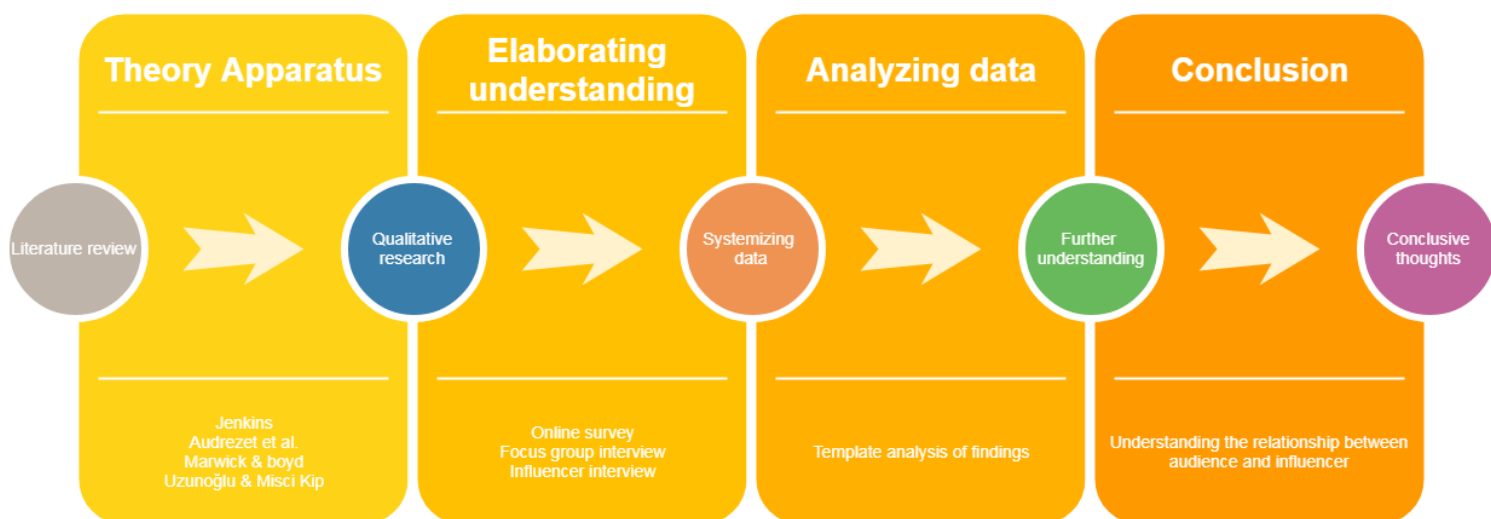


Fig. 4 Visualization over thesis framework

The framework of the thesis is visualized above, as the theoretical basis has created foundation for exploring the problem formulation further. The qualitative approach seeks to understand a situation or phenomenon, and in this thesis, the methodology is the basis for exploring and understanding the problem formulation of this thesis.

Survey

In order to gain an understanding of the perception of social media influencers, an online survey was created and distributed. The survey was not intended as quantitative data and is therefore not representative, but rather a qualitative exploration of perception. A shareable survey has the potential to receive a large amount of responses to specific questions. The survey seeks to explore the perceptions on influencers specifically in relation to personal relationship and authenticity of influencers – that is, trustworthiness, honesty, believability, and transparency, as based on relevant theories described above.

Survey sampling

Surveys are generally used in quantitative research in order to give measurable and representative information about a phenomenon. However, the design of the survey in this thesis was created for qualitative research with several ways to respond to a question, which invites alternative interpretations. “(...) quantitative researchers seek to explain phenomena, while qualitative researchers seek to understand them.” (Kruuse, 2007) which influences the type of questions and how participants answer the questions, as well as how the researcher analyses the data from the survey.

Bryman (Bryman, 2012) refers to this type of survey as a self-completion survey, as the participant should be able to read the questions and respond without interference from the researcher. The survey does not seek to be representative nor exhaustive on the behaviors or opinions of those who consume the content of social media influencers. The sample is a non-probability sample, meaning “a sample that has not been selected using a random selection method. Essentially, this implies that some units in the population are more likely to be selected than others.” (Bryman, 2012, p. 187). That is to say, the survey is restricted due to the network and bias of the researcher. It is therefore not representative of the entire world or

Denmark. Specifically, the survey could be considered snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012), as the survey was shared on my personal Facebook page and asked my network to share the survey with their respective network.

Sampling criteria

The survey was shared with the intention to gather as much information as possible. On the Reddit site for sharing surveys, there are requirements for sharing surveys in regards to demographics, such as age, nationality, gender, age and more. However, I was interested in the relationship and perception towards influencers as expressed by audiences, and therefore these subsets of information were not relevant to disclose to potential participants, as anyone could potentially participate in the survey and relay relevant information. Therefore, I did not specify any ethnicities, genders, ages or educational backgrounds when sharing the survey in order for the dataset to be as broad as possible. The demographical information was included in the survey once participants entered the survey website, as the possibility of relevant information in regards to demographical information was present, e.g. a split of genders or ages in relation to certain perceptions.

The participants were free to leave the survey at any point, for any reason, as ensured during the front page of the survey. When sharing the survey online, I did clarify the topic of the survey was influencers and that the purpose of the survey was for this thesis.

Sampling bias

The survey was distributed via my personal facebook account, as well as some online forums. As I am a resident in Denmark who has spent most of my life here, as well as a social group of other academics, this leads to some bias. This means I will most likely receive responses from participants who...:

- live in Denmark
- Have completed a bachelor's degree
- Have an internet connection and a social media account (Facebook or Reddit)
- Are in their 20s-30s

This bias could have an impact of the outcome and results of participants' perceptions.

Survey design

The flow of the survey was important, as to not overwhelm the participants and have a logical progression. The flow was designed to go from questions that are easy to answer, such as age and country of residence, into their behavior on social media and reasons for following influencers and then open-ended questions about their perceptions of social media influencers and finally some example-scenarios based on the Authenticity Management Framework by Audrezet et al. (2018). See appendix 1 for full survey and results.

Informed consent is important in research, and the survey therefore starts with information about the subject of the survey and a definition of the social media influencer (see appendix 1).

The second page of the survey then goes on to demographic information such as country of residence, age, gender and highest completed education. The third page of the survey then goes on to information about which social media platforms the participant uses the most. These categories were:

- YouTube
- Instagram
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Snapchat

These platforms are the most prevalently used social media platforms. Other platforms could have included LinkedIn, Reddit, Tumblr, or Pinterest. However, these platforms do not offer the category of social media influencers this thesis is focusing on. The selected platforms were chosen due to a casual and social platform where social media influencers may receive incentive (gifts or money) in return for posting paid promotions or reviews of products or services, and where one person or group is the focus of the content. Therefore the professional platform, LinkedIn was excluded, as well as the more peer-based platforms such as Reddit and Tumblr.

I was also interested in knowing which categories of influencers or content the participants enjoy. These categories were:

- Technology
- Beauty/makeup/skincare
- Knowledge/education
- Gaming
- Activism
- Sports
- Fashion

These categories seem most prevalent in the social media platforms chosen. In this section, an “Other” option was included where participants could write other categories that were not presented in the pre-set options.

The next section of the survey seeks to understand why participants follow the particular influencers, and was based on Marwick & boyd (2011) whose participants expressed that their followers seem like themselves or like friends. Therefore, the questions reflected this perception, while also accommodating the possibility of those who oppose this stance. The choices were:

- They seem like a friend
- They seem like someone who is more knowledgeable than me about a topic I am interested in
- They have similar views or experience as me and I can relate to them
- They seem different from me, and I enjoy seeing a different perspective

Due to the aspect of participatory culture online, I was interested in knowing the kinds of interaction participants had with influencers. This ranged from pressing “Like” to sending private messages to the influencer:

- Not applicable: I do not interact with influencers on social media
- I press "Like" or "thumbs up" on their content
- I comment on their content (video, picture, blogpost, tweet)
- I write direct/private messages to them
- I make content (a video, picture, blogpost) in response
- I tag my friends on the content
- I share the content in private messages or on other platforms

There was also an “Other” category for this question in order to give participants the option to elaborate on ways to interact with influencers.

Based on the theory apparatus, the monetary aspect is obviously a large part of influencer marketing; however, some influencers receive money directly from their audience via websites that act like crowd funding. The audience gains exclusive content or access to content earlier than other followers do. The crowd funding can also go to gear such as cameras, microphones, etc., which enhance the experience for followers. Examples include Patreon.com, Ko-Fi.com or the Danish 10er.dk. I was interested in this aspect of the influencer industry, as it allows the influencer to create content with a regular flow of money from their audience, which is separate from promotional content. The options were:

- Yes, I am sponsoring an influencer (or more)
- I have sponsored an influencer in the past, but I do not currently
- No, I have never sponsored an influencer, but I would consider it in the future
- No, I have never sponsored an influencer, and I would not

The promotional content of influencers is a key aspect of this thesis, which prompts the question: “Have you ever purchased a product or service because an influencer posted about it?” The choices, as above, ranged from those who have and would (or would not) again, those who have not but might in the future, to those who have not and would (or would not), as well as those who have not and were not sure if they would.

Next, I was interested in the reasoning as to why someone might purchase a product or service promoted by an influencer:

- Not applicable: I have not purchased a product or service promoted by an influencer
- I was going to buy the product/service anyway. The influencer's promotion did not change my decision
- The influencer made the product/service seem fun or useful for my needs
- I wanted to support the influencer by giving them a commission

The perceptions of promotional content is also a key element, so I asked participants to respond how they felt about sponsored content. This was based partially on Audrezet et al. (2017) as well as (Uzunoğlu &

Misci Kip, 2014) regarding frequency and editorial styles, as well as a specific interest in participants perception for the purpose of this thesis. These options were:

- I prefer sponsored content
- I think sponsored content is fine, as long as there is regular content in between
- I do not like sponsored content, but I watch/read anyway
- I do not like sponsored content, and I avoid it
- Other:

While perceptions on promotional content is key, an understanding of legislation regarding the declaration of promotional content is also interesting. The Danish marketing law states that these sponsored posts must not be deceitful to the consumers ("Markedsføringsloven - Lov om markedsføring - retsinformation.dk," n.d.). However, I was interested in knowing how participants feel when they are told that content is incentivized by a brand, that is, the importance of disclosure and transparency for the participants. The survey described ways of telling audience about sponsored content, such as including relevant hashtags: #ad or #sponsored, or telling the audience via text or speech (if the content is audio-visual) that the content is sponsored:

- I do not need to know
- I need to know because it influences my decision to buy the product/service
- I prefer to know but it does not influence my decision
- I do not care/I am not sure
- Other

I used Critical Incident questions, a term described by Wallace & Becker, 2018. Critical incident questions means two open-ended questions which must mirror each other and is then analyzed using a thematic sorting approach (Brooks et al., 2015; Wallace & Becker, 2018). In this case, the questions were:

- Who is an example of an untrustworthy influencer?
- What makes them untrustworthy?

The questions were then mirrored, and the participants were asked:

- Who is an example of a trustworthy influencer?
- What makes them trustworthy?

This approach offers better understanding of what sets the two categories (trustworthy and untrustworthy) apart, as well as why. The two sets of questions had a textbox where participants could elaborate as much or as little as they wanted upon their understanding and perception of what makes an influencer trustworthy or untrustworthy.

Finally, I used the Authenticity Management Framework by Audrezet et al. (Audrezet et al., 2018) to gather information about editorial styles, transparency of incentive or monetary gain, as well as frequency of promotional content. I used the examples used in the model to ascertain which segment of the framework was preferred by the participants. I wrote five statements that resembled the scenarios described in the Authenticity Management Framework (see appendix 1, pp. 14-15). An example of such statement below:

Statement 3:

The influencer has a personal and positive relationship with the product in the promotion. The influencer does NOT tell their audience that it is a paid promotion.
Do you feel that this makes a post personal, trustworthy, believable, transparent and honest?

The statements referred specifically to personality and transparency and the participants' perception of whether or not this scenario made the influencer seem authentic - personal, trustworthy, believable, transparent and honest, based on the theory apparatus. The participants could then respond Yes or No, or choose to elaborate their response in the "Other" selection, see appendix 1.

The Authenticity Management Framework was a key element in the survey design, as the language, intrinsic values, transparency of incentive or agenda and relationship, as well as general authenticity was important in the exploration of this thesis. The scenarios were described along with their relationship to the collaborating brand, whether the incentive (monetary gain, gifts) was mentioned as well as enthusiasm (passion) expressed by the influencer in a sponsored post.

The survey also asked the survey participants if they would consider participating in the focus group interview for further elaboration on the subject, and invited them to write their e-mail for further contact.

Design considerations

Initially the plan for the survey was to create the survey in Danish, which would limit the participants to people who reads and writes in Danish, as well as Danish influencers. However, in order to gain as much response as possible, as well as an attempt to gain international – and therefore as wide of a response as possible – the survey was created in English and shared in international spaces, including my personal Facebook network and Reddit.com.

Distribution

In order to obtain responses from consenting participants, I shared the survey link on my personal Facebook page and asked my network to share the link. I also shared the link to the survey on a few Facebook groups intended for casual chatter. The Facebook group is international and would therefore yield results from other countries than Denmark. Furthermore, I shared the link on reddit.com on a subreddit (forum) specifically for sharing online surveys. The time of sharing may have impact on the responses, as the time was around noon Danish time, and would therefore potentially not reach those who were sleeping in drastically different time zones.

The survey was open between April 17 and April 24. After one week, 86 participants had partially or fully completed the survey. It was re-distributed on a Facebook group as well as Reddit.com for a few days before closing the submissions.

Interviews

While the survey provides an understanding of pre-set questions based on theories, the interview seeks to elaborate on the perceptions of specific individuals. I contacted a Danish blogging influencer with 17 thousand followers on Instagram and a considerable reader-audience on her online blog. I also set up a focus group interview with three individuals about their perceptions on influencers, participatory culture and the role of authenticity. The focus group was invited via the online survey, as described above.

Interview guide

An interview guide was created for both interviews. The interview guide serves as a red thread for the interview, and provides a clear structure for the interview. Bryman (2012) describes the interview guide to be as simple as brief list of memory prompts for the structure of the interview and thesis (p. 472). Both interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions in order to let the participants expand and elaborate on their experiences and opinions. Both interview guides can be found in appendix 2. The goal of semi-structured interviews is to obtain knowledge within a theme or context, while exploring the experiences and understandings of the participating interviewee (Bryman, 2012).

The interview guide for the focus group interview consists of three sections: Introductory questions, follow-up questions and a final question, with a total of nine main questions and six sub-questions. The introductory questions relate to the participants use of social media as well as the kinds of influencers they follow as well as who they avoid. This introductory round of questions supplies an understanding of the participants' usage and categories of influencers they follow. The follow-up questions relate further to the theoretical background of this thesis and the problem formulation, as it probes the participants experience, understanding and opinions of authenticity as it relates to social media influencers. The follow-up questions elaborate on authenticity, positive and negative views on social media influencers and the laws regarding influencer marketing and transparency. The final question rounds up the focus group interview and ensures all participants have their final word on the subject.

The influencer interview guide is similar in structure with three sections: Introductory questions, follow-up questions and a final question. In this case, eight main questions and six sub-questions. The introductory questions relate to the social media influencer's self-image and identity to the influencer-term. The introductory questions also seek to understand which topics she refuses to write about, which is rooted in theoretical considerations as well (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The follow-up questions relate to the influencer's experiences with sponsored content and advertisements, seeking to understand the process from first contact to publication, as well as ad integration within her usual content. The interview was set in place due to a blog post she has posted about blogger integrity, which begged some questions about her own views on influencer integrity, authenticity and integrity and how this relates to her self-image and the general influencer landscape of 2019. The final question rounds up the interview and ensures the participant has a final word on the subject and may add to any blind spots the researcher may have missed or left out. See appendix 2 for both interview guides.

Interview with an influencer

A semi-structured interview was conducted with an influencer. The semi-structured interview is also sometimes referred to as a qualitative interview (Bryman, 2012). The influencer was contacted after she posted a blog-post (see appendix 6 for full blogpost) about her integrity as a blogger creating promotional content in collaboration with brands, which was relevant to the thesis. It also meant the blogger had made considerations regarding her authenticity in relation to promotions. These considerations were an advantage to the subject of the thesis, as the influencer was not caught off-guard regarding the subject.

The semi-structured interview has a clear structure of subjects with open-ended questions, which gives the respondent room to elaborate on their thoughts. The structure was provided by the interview guide, as described above. This opened-ended questions ensure the participating social media influencer could elaborate and expand on her own experiences and understandings of being a social media influencer in Denmark 2019, while still responding within the scope of the thesis. See appendix 2 for both interview guides.

The goal of a semi structured interview is seeking understanding of the lived experiences of a social media influencer. The qualitative nature of this method means honoring the words of the participant, as their participation makes the research possible.

The interview was set up for April 30 2019 and took approximately 30 minutes. The interview was via phone call where audio was recorded and later transcribed and then coded using template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015). See full transcript in appendices 3 and 4.

Focus group interview

In the survey, I included a question asking the participants if they would consider letting me interview them about the subject (see appendix 1). If they consented, they could input their email to facilitate contact to set up the interview. Some of the consenting participants were able to meet for a focus group interview. A focus group interview is a type of interview using “open questions to ask interviewees questions about a specific situation or event that is relevant to them and of interest to the researcher” in a group setting

(Bryman, 2012, p. 213). In this case, the phenomenon that was relevant to them and the thesis, was their relationship to, and perception of, influencers and the role of authenticity.

The focus group interview was set up for April 26 2019 and took place over approximately two hours including a short break. The interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed, then coded using template analysis. See full transcript and coding in appendix 4. The group consisted of three people, all women, in ages ranging from 23-33. All three women live in the Aalborg area and have an interest in media from their academic backgrounds in culture and technology.

Acocella (2012) encourages the method to be viewed as a group discussion, rather than an interview. A traditional interview “implies the act of asking questions—besides the revelation of personal and private opinions—by an interviewer and, at the same time, the act of providing an answer by the person interviewed” (p. 1129), whereas a group discussion encourages interaction and exploration. This interaction and exploration supports the further exploration of the subject, and leads to potentially un-anticipated knowledge.

Risks and opportunities in focus group interviews

There are several advantages to a focus group interview. While a singular participant may feel unequipped to respond to an interview question, the responses from other participants may inspire a response or a memory triggered with a relevant example or experience. This can provide a larger amount of responses. Another advantage is the agreements and disagreements that may occur within the focus group, which may supply information that could support theoretical knowledge or assumptions (Acocella, 2012).

The informal setting of a group interview should encourage responses that may be unexpected by the researcher, “as it concentrates more on the frames of reference of groups analysed, than on those of the researcher” (Acocella, 2012).

The informality of the setting should encourage spontaneous responses. Furthermore, “group discussions often proceed by means of association of ideas. In these cases, a sort of chain effect is created as one intervention paves the way to the next and encourages the formulation of different interpretations

resulting in better final knowledge of the topic investigated.” (Acocella, 2012, p. 1132). The interaction between participants breeds and multiplies information, which aids in exploration of the subject at hand.

While there are many advantages to a focus group interview, there are also disadvantages, or risks, involved. Some of these include a false bias, where one or more participants may feel subtly pressured to respond in a certain way in order to fit in with the group or avoid becoming a minority.

Acocella (2012) recommends a homogenous group of participants in order to lower inhibition and facilitate interaction, which may skew and bias the information gathered. However, Acocella (2012) warns, excessively heterogeneous groups may have hard-to-manage discussions and may cause inhibitions within the discussion and data collected.

Another risk of the focus group interview is the time limitations or “speed of interaction” which may not allow for all participants to express their ideas or opinions. Due to the social interaction, a topic may be only touched upon briefly and then abandoned as a participant changes directions in their response and is picked up by another participant. “Therefore, there is no guarantee that a (focus group) discussion will provide a complete analysis of the topics that the researcher is interested in investigating” (p. 1133).

While there are several advantages and disadvantages of the focus group interview I wanted to ensure the focus and reduce the risks of the discussion becoming irrelevant to the research, I consulted the interview guide (appendix 2). This ensured the structure and focus of the discussions as well as relevance to the thesis. I sought to understand the participants’ perception of social media influencers, their relationship and their understanding of authenticity in this relationship. Additional information from the group interaction was a bonus to the thesis and reduced researcher bias.

Ethical considerations

While no sensitive information was revealed in these interviews, it was important to ensure the privacy and comfort of the participants. Therefore, I adhered to some ethical principles while carrying out the research.

Bryman (2012) describes the ethical principles by Diener and Crandall (1978) in the following (p. 135):

1. *“1. Whether there is harm to participants;*
2. *Whether there is a lack of informed consent;*
3. *Whether there is an invasion of privacy;*
4. *Whether deception is involved.”*

It was with these four ethical principles in mind, I approached participants and gathered empirical data for this thesis.

As far as informed consent, the front page of the survey states the scope of the survey, including a definition of social media influencers. This page assures participants 100% anonymity of the survey, as well as the assurance that they may end the survey at any point if they so wish, since the survey should be voluntary, which ensures adherence to principle all four principles . On this front page, before starting the survey, participants were invited to e-mail me with any questions or concerns they may have. I did not gather any identifying information from any survey participants, besides the email-addresses they offered themselves at the end of the survey for the opportunity to interview them further (principle 3).

The focus group was gathered from the survey, which means the participants were aware of the subject before the interview took place, which concerns principle 2. Before the interview started, they received an information sheet about the expected duration of the interview, how the recording and transcriptions of the interview would be treated and destroyed after thesis defense. Furthermore, the assurance that only researcher, supervisor and censor would have access to the transcription files, and that their statements would be anonymized. This ensures adherence to principle 2 and 3 The participants then signed a consent form that states they have understood the subject of the interview and had received sufficient information, that they were participating out of their own free will and would not be receiving any payments or benefits for the participation. See full information sheet and signed consent forms in appendix 5.

The influencer was contacted on the basis of a blogpost (see appendix 6) where the influencer had written about her integrity and credibility as a social media influencer. I contacted the blogger via her social media profile on Instagram, informed her of the scope of the project and we started a correspondence via email after that, where she consented to an interview based on information (see appendix 5).

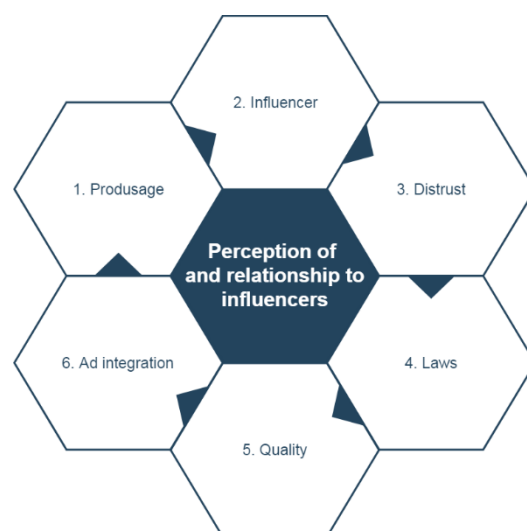
Template analysis

Template analysis is a way of systemizing data collected from the research conducted: "... it is a broad category of approaches to qualitative analysis that seek to define themes within the data and organise those themes into some type of structure to aid interpretation" (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015, p. 6). The interpretation is then the job of the researcher.

The approach is an iterative process where the researcher collects data, goes through the data and systemizes the data, then goes back through the data and interprets said data again and again until exhaustive or comprehensive data is extracted. Brooks et al. (2015) recommend that the researcher is familiarized with the entire data set collected, which in this case is the survey and both interviews, and then starts the preliminary coding. This step includes reading through the transcripts and raw data, making notes of relevant themes or themes that came up organically. This preliminary coding is available in appendices 1, 3 and 4.

This approach systemizes the data and makes the general themes much clearer, as topics may be highlighted or repeated by participants in the datasets. I started with more than 50 codes, and then iteratively worked through the initial codes and data to eliminate weaker codes and integrating sub-codes into larger categories. Each work-through effectively halved the list of codes each time, until I was left with six final codes: Produsage, influencer, distrust, laws, quality and ad integration. It should be said that Brooks et al. (2015) suggest that there is never a final product, as the iterative process means the data can always be worked through again ad infinitum, constantly refining and honing the data to perfection. "On a pragmatic basis, though, the researcher needs to decide when the template meets his or her needs for the project at hand, and considering the resources available." (p. 204).

The themes and their codes are related to the problem formulation in relation to audience perception of social media influencers, as they are present in the theory apparatus and datasets. While the codes and themes are all related across the entire datasets, the themes are presented in a logical progression as presented in the visualization below and in the analysis. See themes, codes and examples from the datasets in appendix 7.



The interrelations of each theme as it pertains to the subject of the thesis and problem formulation, which is: **How do consumer audiences perceive social media influencers and in what ways does authenticity play a significant role?** These interrelations and interlinks are revealed when reading through the analysis, as the reader may notice that some themes are analyzed in more than one chapter. An example of this is the recurring headline of authenticity, as this concept is explored through the lens of several themes.

Each theme has several codes which can be found in Appendix 7 and will be elaborated upon in the analysis. Below is an example of a theme with codes, descriptions and examples from the data.

<u>Influencer</u>		
Code	Description	Examples
Influencer definition	Participants defining the term in their own words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "A person who uses their fame and their presence on social media to sell something, either through sponsorships or advertisements for a product they use or ... reviews of gifts they received. So they use the fact that you already follow them for some reason, and then they use this celebrity factor to sell products." (App. 4, p. 1)
Negative attitudes	The negative attitudes expressed by participants towards the term or specific persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "they start out good, when they were doing it to create information, suddenly changing into getting money for it and then going to the dark side" (app. 4, p. 1) - "I just call myself a blogger, I think the word influencer is kind of a smug word" (App. 3, p. 1) - "They're famous for essentially nothing, and create drama that happens to occur right around a new season of their TV show is released" (app1,p11)
Positive attitudes	The positive attitudes expressed by participants towards the term or specific persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "they're authentic, they show their bad moments as well as the good ones, they don't promote products that are harmful to people or the environment and they look like extremely nice people, they react very well to haters by not being rude or disrespectful but very well mannered" (app1,p13) - "I feel she is honest in her reviews" (app1,p13) - "She is honest, straightforward and will tell the truth about the industry that she is a part of. she is also honest about her own failures and open about wanting to learn" (app1,p13)
Opinion leader	Based on Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip (2014) who refer to influencers as opinion leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I understand that objectively it may be correct [to call myself an influencer] but it is rarely the goal of my blogging. I mean, my goal is not to influence people into buying or doing things ... and I think that when you call (me) an influencer, it makes it sound like that is my primary goal, and it isn't, for me" (App. 3, p. 1)

Fig. 5. Example of theme and coding. Appendix 7.

Within the theme "Influencer", we see four codes with descriptions for each. Each code then has quotes from the data along with where to find each example. This way of systemizing the data provides the researcher a comprehensive overview the data collected as well as the most relevant information in the data sets.

VI. Analysis

This chapter reviews and analyses the data compiled during the research period of this thesis. The empirical data was collected in the online survey as well as a focus group interview and an interview with a Danish influencer. The chapter focuses on six themes, which were categorized using template analysis. The six themes are:

1. Producersage
2. Influencer
3. Distrust
4. Laws
5. Quality
6. Ad integration



Fig. 6. Visualization over themes

The themes are interrelated within the problem formulation as well as the overall theme of the thesis, which seeks to explore **How do consumer audiences perceive social media influencers and in what ways does authenticity play a significant role?**

The figure above visualizes progression of the themes and presents a structure of the analysis. The first theme from the left is “Producers” which offers a starting approach to understanding what the problem formulation seeks to explore.

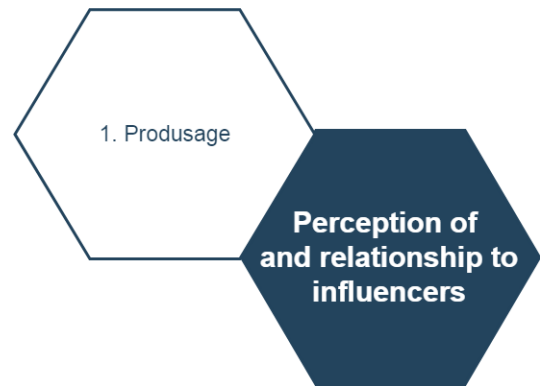
While each theme relates to each other in its own way, as distrust and quality are just as related to laws and ad integration as quality and influencer is interrelated. The order of the themes is visualized and analyzed in the order presented in the figure above. This is to present the analysis in a coherent manner, where each theme is analyzed and presented to the reader. While all themes are interlinked, the order of the themes have been chosen due to the logical order of the research and understanding of the subject.

Producers is the first theme explored, as the concept is one of the building blocks of social media influencers today, the theoretical background offers an insight into how the concept of social media influencers came to be, and the analysis of the collected data explores the contemporary practical implications the influencers have on other professions.

The second theme is influencers, in order to define the term as expressed by participants and understand the participants’ perception of influencers as well as the uses and advantages of influencer marketing. One of the main perceptions of influencers is distrust, which is therefore explored and analyzed further, which brings the order to laws, as participants express their perception and understandings of laws for influencers. Legislation allows a society to regulate the practice of the influencer industry, and provides precedence for what is allowed, and thus trusted, by the audience. The quality of content is explored as well as how this is perceived to be significant in the participant’s perception of authenticity and influencers. Finally, ad integration is explored, to understand how successful and authentic promotional content is created.

1.1 Produsage

In the theory apparatus, the concept of produsage (portmanteau of “producer” and “user”) was described, where users – the audience – becomes producers of content (Bruns, 2008). This shift is relevant to point out, as it describes the shift between when audience becomes influencer, blurring the distinction between the two groups. This shift is also described as participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009), where users participate online (Bruns, 2008) and where some become opinion leaders (Katz et al., 1964; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).



1.2 Closing the gap

The concept was also discussed in the focus group interview, where participants pointed out how they perceive that a gap is closing between formally trained experts and self-taught users. The gap seems to be closing partially due to equipment availability, partially due to democratization of knowledge, and it has practical implications within industries where content is produced. Democratization of knowledge is a phenomenon where knowledge is shared and becomes commonly known or at least publicly available to those who seek it.

Firstly, the influencers are not (usually) trained experts within a field, but go through a process of teaching themselves about products, lighting, audio and video editing. This seems to be a legitimate practice, as expressed by a focus group participant: "... people who are self-taught have been editing and recording themselves for a decade, you could call that a kind of expertise. They just don't have a certificate" (app. 4, p. 11). This quote suggests an attitude and perception that if a person – in this case, an influencer – has been using and honing their skills over a significant amount of time, they become experts in their own right. Some of these self-taught users then share their knowledge to others online, effectively democratizing knowledge that has otherwise been gatekept from regular users. This shift is also relevant to point out, as it unlocks the potential for those users who have something to say or share on an otherwise free platform, such as YouTube or Instagram.

1.3 Democratizing knowledge and equipment

Secondly, the fact that quality equipment has become increasingly more available to non-experts as equipment becomes better and cheaper. This shift where equipment and the use of equipment is spreading to users who are not formally trained is relevant to mention in this chapter, as it shows how the gap between user and expert is closing.

A focus group participant elaborates, "the bloggers are not trained journalists but they do the work of trained journalists, but these bloggers and influencers, they produce video content, they produce this product that a TV studio does, really. And a lot of these YouTubers have great quality equipment" (App. 4, p. 9). The notion that influencers create a product in the same vein as TV studios does is a way of legitimizing the work of influencers, acknowledging that their products are of a certain quality that matches, or closely resembles the quality of experts.

The democratization of knowledge and the availability of equipment is a fascinating shift that seems to highlight the changes of produsage and influencers today.

1.4 Implications of the influencer industry

However, this shift has practical implications for those experts who have trained formally to produce content for traditional media. The consolidation of jobs potentially inherited by self-taught users is one of these implications. Specifically, their formal skills being overlooked for the benefit of a self-taught user who has experience with.

"... a British beauty YouTuber was invited to do a photoshoot or something. She basically had the same equipment as a professional photographer. She had the same makeup as the makeup artist, etc. She could edit, fix pictures, she could do all these things by herself. When the magazine found out she could do all the things they had hired 10 people to do, there was outrage, because then the magazine realized it was easier to pay this one woman instead of 10 professionals" (App. 4, p. 10).

This shift where an influencer takes – or could take – the job of many, is interesting as the participants seem to view the influencers as experts in their own rights.

The theme of produsage is interesting and relevant in this thesis because it both provides some foundation to what an influencer is and how the term became legitimized as an industry. This is the backbone of influencer marketing. Brands putting trust into collaborating with a person who happens to have a large audience is interesting as it is a relatively new industry. Particularly these practical implications seem to suggest where the influencer industry is moving toward in the future.

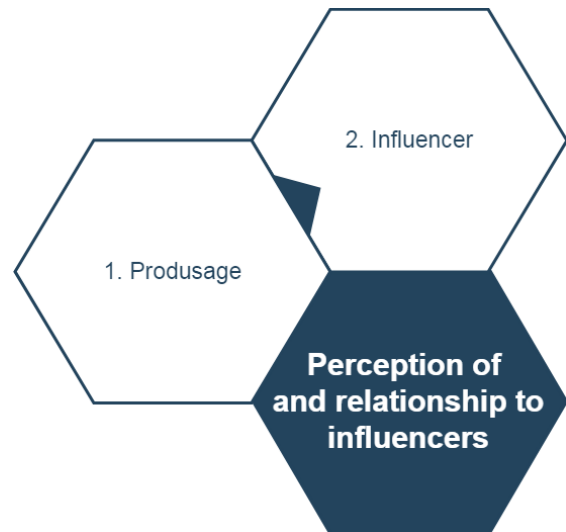
Summary

The concept of produsage was mainly explored theoretically in this thesis (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2008, 2009), and was elaborated upon by the focus group participants. The participants' perception of how participatory culture brings the rise of influencers to the institutionalization seen in 2019 is relevant to the theory apparatus and the thesis.

The focus group interview participants expressed how knowledge and modern equipment is becoming more common among regular users and the real-world implications this democratization has for experts. This suggests the gap closing between formally trained writers, video producers and more, with the influencers who have a passion for the practice. However, while influencers may not take over the jobs of formally trained journalists, camerapersons, etc., the content of influencers may take precedence over the formally trained experts, thus making the work of experts unprofitable.

2. 1 Influencer

In the previous chapter, the produsage term gives some background information on the usage of the social internet, also called Web 2.0. The participatory aspect of the internet provides a need for an intermediary between consumers and mass media, also referred to as opinion leaders previously (Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Roper, 1955; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), while today these are called influencers. The produsage chapter also provides an understanding of how influencers hone their editorial skills, sometimes becoming experts in their own right, such as video editing, lighting, and more.



The term influencer has previously been defined in this thesis: *“MARKETING: a person or group that has the ability to influence the behaviour or opinions of others”* (“INFLUENCER | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary,” n.d.).

While influencers are still seemingly operating as opinion leaders, the contemporary definition acknowledges the influence that social media influencers have on behaviors and opinions, even in the aspect of products and services. The influencer interview reveals the same:

“I understand that objectively it may be correct (to call myself an influencer) but it is rarely the goal of my blogging. I mean, my goal is not to influence people into buying or doing things ... I think that when you call (me) an influencer, it makes it sound like that is my primary goal, and it isn’t, for me” (app. 3, p. 1).

The influencer seems to acknowledge the influence she has on her audience, while maintaining that this is not the primary goal for her.

The focus group defines influencers as starting out ‘good’ by creating and sharing content because of a general interest and desire to share knowledge or experiences, however the involvement of monetary incentive results in the participants expressing a distrustful attitude and dissatisfaction towards influencers. The influencer hence ‘turns bad’. The distrust and dissatisfaction is expressed due to a perception of greed

by influencers, where the influencer's quality of content is compromised by their greed to earn money and selling their integrity. This perception is also discussed in the blog-post written by the participating influencer (app. 6). More on quality of content and integrity in the chapter on Quality. The greed and integrity of an influencer seems intertwined in participants' perception of influencers. In both survey and interviews, the consensus seems to be that influencers are bad people with ulterior motives, untrustworthy and greedy. The next chapter, Distrust, elaborates more on skepticism and distrust towards influencers.

2.2 Contemporary women's magazines

The content of influencers is published on the influencer's social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or blogs. As described in the Producersage-chapter, this is often skillfully done, with good quality equipment and knowledge, practiced on their respective platforms. One participant compared the content to be on par with – or similar to – TV show productions.

One participant described influencers as the women's magazines of 2019: "I consider influencers to be contemporary women's magazines ... even women's magazines write sponsored content or articles with recommendations ... influencers are women's magazines but 'down to earth'. They are the neighbor woman or man who post about their everyday lives instead of a faceless journalist" (app. 4, p. 1). This quote seems to highlight the relatability of influencers, where consumers feel a kinship with social media influencers, as opposed to "faceless" journalists.

The comparison is apt. A women's magazine is a magazine that relates to mainly women, writing about subjects that should appeal and relate to women, and in most cases relates around fashion, beauty and relationships. A women's magazine should appeal to a broad spectrum of women, as the goal is to sell as many magazines as possible while still remaining relevant and with a certain level of quality. While influencers' goal is also to appeal to many people, the onus is on the individual influencer to create and uphold their specific audience while relating on a personal level. The perception by the focus group participant seems to be that an influencer is down to earth, present, relevant to them and relatable, while comparing to the women's magazines who are "faceless" and not personable in the same capacity.

2.3 Editorial style and tonality

Editorial style and tonality is defined by the types of content an audience is used to consuming from an influencer. Editorial style refers to the tonality or “tone of voice” an influencer uses, whether subconsciously or consciously (Audrezet et al. 2018). As the audience follows and gets to know an influencer over time, the types of content and the way the content is expressed through body language, voice, text, or images becomes part of the way the audience views the influencer’s persona online. If the influencer deviates from their editorial style, the audience notices and becomes suspicious. One focus group participant elaborated on this concept,

“(Usually) she has a peppy, soft voice; very casual ... suddenly (snaps fingers) snap! That customer service voice comes out. Flat ... that’s what she sounded like ... just bam! New voice, new personality. For me, that means (I’m watching) a new video.” (app. 4, p. 7).

The participant seems to suggest that the influencer mentioned is not congruent with the tonality and style that the participant is used to in the influencer’s usual content. In this quote, the participants had been discussing the way influencers speak when communicating promotional content in a YouTube video. Audrezet et al. (2018) describe intrinsic value and the influencer’s own passion as part of authenticity management. The Authenticity Management Framework describes how intrinsic value and passion is related to the perceived authenticity of an influencer, and this seems significant to participants of this study, as well, as seen in the quote above. Utilizing a “flat” and “customer service” tonality seems to indicate little to no passion or intrinsic value for the influencer, which is perceived by the participant as undesirable, and thus she skips to a new video.

2.4 Specific targeting

It seems beneficial to hire a social media influencer, as an influencer has a relationship to their audience, and engages directly with them (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). As an example: if an influencer specializes in beauty and specifically lipsticks or foundation, a brand is able to use the influencer’s expertise and specific reach to followers who are interested in lipsticks and foundations. Furthermore, the relationship between influencer and audience ensures a higher probability of a connection to the product (Kommagasinet.dk, n.d.-a; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). This type of specific targeting is an example of an influencer with

editorial style adherence and an engaging relationship to their audience, which is explored further in the following chapters.

The influencer elaborates:

“It’s easy to throw an ad on a bus and then it just drives past people, but in this case we know specifically who will receive the content and that makes it cool to do your best, because you want to make it interesting for the audience, instead of shooting scatterguns” (app. 3, p.6).

This quote is relevant because it seemingly highlights the new and useful usage of influencer marketing today. While this quote does not take into consideration the work behind a carefully researched, produced and placed bus-advertisement, it does seem to highlight the perception that influencer marketing is significantly more relevant to specific audiences. The quote suggests that a bus drives past anyone in the vicinity and therefore may be relevant to some audiences, while not relevant to others, and that influencer content is based on a relationship between the audience and a specific influencer.

This perception is also referenced in the focus group interview, in relation to women’s magazines, where a participant expresses how influencers are perceived to be the “down to earth” neighbor-woman, which seems to offer the perception that influencers are people they – the participants – get to know in a way or at least can relate to on a personal level. Based on these results, it seems the influencers have a more relaxed, audience-relevant attitude towards content. It seems the participants feel a personal connection to influencers, as influencers reveal their struggles and issues that the audience may also be working with.

As one focus group participant says, “When I had a lot of issues with my PCOS (Poly-Cystic Ovarian Syndrome) ... it was nice to find YouTubers who had the same issue as me” (app. 4, p. 14). While it is certainly possible to find professionally written articles and books about others with a certain illness, it seems the participant found solace in following the real-time effects of the changes the YouTuber made, as she goes on to say. “Slowly I could see the changes in her skin, her body, the way she spoke about herself ... you can see that the person is feeling better” (app. 4, p. 15).

Following an influencer’s life in this detail may feel like catching up with a friend or identifying personally with the person you are watching, as described by Marwick & boyd (2011). The influencer thus has an

influence on their audience, and the audience feels a connection to the specific influencer. Furthermore, this suggests an engaging relationship between the audience and influencer, where the audience takes an active interest in the influencer's life and experiences.

2.5 "Nobody pays for content"

While influencers provide a seemingly high quality of content, as described in the produsage-section, the content is generally free to consume. The concept of user-sponsorships, such as Patreon.com, Ko-fi.com and others were explored in the survey, however, the thesis focuses on the content that is posted and consumed on free platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and blogs.

The free aspect is appealing to the influencers' audience, as it means relevant and relatable content for them to consume on a regular basis or whenever they want. While the influencer is able to monetize their content either by displaying ads on their blog or website, some platforms such as YouTube have collaborations with content creators (influencers) who receive a percentage of the advertisement money. This collaboration keeps the content free to consume by the audience on YouTube, while still providing compensation and incentive for the influencer. In influencer marketing campaigns, the influencer collaborates directly with a brand to create promotional content for the brand and is compensated for this work, while the content continues to be free to consume by the audience.

The audience expects the free, relatable content on a frequent basis. One focus group participant enthusiastically elaborates, comparing influencer content with women's magazines, "And it's free! You don't have to pay 40-50-60-100 DKK to get it every fortnight! ... Nobody pays for content" (app. 4, p. 11). The suggestion in this quote seems to be that women's magazines are expensive and too far between, making influencer content superior to the participant. The focus group participant goes on to say, "Who wants to buy 3-4-5 women's magazines for 50 DKK each versus going on YouTube? I pay for the internet already ... I can get it for free" (app. 4, p. 27).

While the focus group participants have expressed distrust towards influencers as a concept, this quote seems to highlight the advantages of social media influencers, specifically for the audience. The relevance of the content to the specific audience is an advantage, specifically to the audience as expressed by

participants. The relevance is also an advantage to the influencer and the brands that the influencers collaborate with to create promotional content (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014).

2.6 Cliques

In the focus group interview, the Danish word “indspist” was used frequently to describe Danish influencers. The word “indspist” refers to a socially exclusive, clannish group who “work closely together, supports and protects each other and who reject outside interference or critiques” (sproget.dk, n.d.). The Danish word is difficult to translate accurately; in this case, the word “cliquey” was chosen and used.

One perception of influencers is that they are all alike; they look the same, have similar opinions, live the same places, and do the same things. This perception is expressed particularly by the focus group (app. 4, p. 5), as well as briefly in the survey where one participant states, “many influencers are sponsored by the same product at once”(app. 1, p. 11). A focus group participant goes on to say, “I’ve scrapped some Danish bloggers because ... I felt they were too cliquey ... the Danish bloggers are in general (cliquey), they all know each other and everything happens in Copenhagen” (app. 4, p. 5). The participant lives in Aalborg and therefore does not relate to the events and every-day lives of those who live in the Danish capital.

Interestingly, the influencer interviewed expressed that she refers to other influencers as her colleagues (app. 3, p. 3), which seems to suggest a sort of unity between influencers in Denmark. This does not outright express a homogeneity from the influencers’ side, however, it does suggest that they do communicate and may be influenced by each other.

2.7 Credibility and trustworthiness

The credibility of influencers was brought up during both the focus group interview and during the interview with the influencer. They offered their different sides of what makes an influencer credible and trustworthy (the Danish word used in the responses was “troværdig”, which could be translated into “credible, trustworthy, authentic, believable, reliable” (Gyldendal, n.d.), although the word “credible” has been used for the most part as a catch-all term for the Danish “troværdig”).

The influencer used the term up to five times during the interview, and it seems to be very important to her to be trustworthy and credible to her audience:

“there is something about credibility, because a lot of followers have an expectation that bloggers only advertise something which they have a genuine interest in. And that means some bloggers accept some (collaborations) which are more questionable. And that means this whole credibility thing is sore spot for me ... some have a higher degree of credibility than others and it is something I care deeply about” (app. 3, p. 4).

This quote insinuates that the influencer, herself, has a high degree of self-perceived credibility as she expresses it is a sore spot for her. At the same time, the quote acknowledges that Danish influencers do not have the same level of credibility as herself, as they accept “questionable” collaborations with brands.

Credibility seems to be a significant aspect of influencers for the focus group as well, as they express that the influencers’ thoughts and opinions are not truly their own if they have been incentivized by a brand to discuss a product (app. 4, p. 7). The lack of perceived credibility and authenticity towards influencers brings the thesis to the next chapter of Distrust, where perceptions of influencer credibility is explored further.

Summary

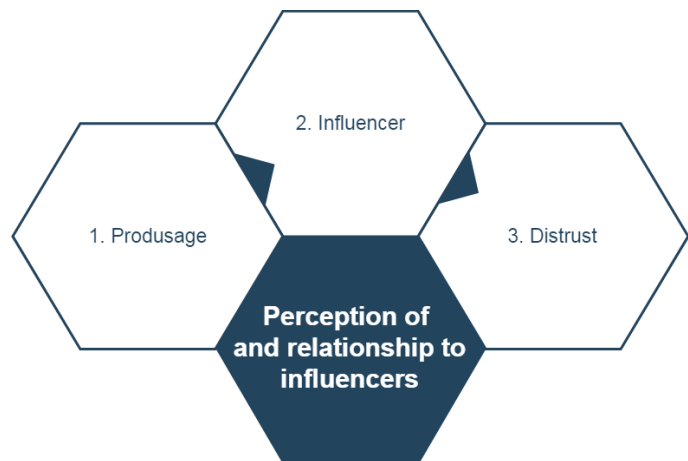
In this chapter, the perception of influencers has been explored further. The chapter describes the perception of the concept of influencers, expressed by participants. The chapter also explores the comparison of influencer content to the content of women’s magazines, as it seems to have taken the place of women’s magazines for the focus group participants. The aspect of free, relevant, and frequent content was described as an advantage that the participants came to expect, where the specific targeting of demographic groups converges with the relevance for the audience of consumers. It seems that influencer content is a concept that is both viewed with skepticism as well as joy.

The perception, of an influencer, as expressed by participants, seems to be generally distrustful, which brings the thesis to the next chapter, Distrust.

3.1 Distrust

One thing that was described in both the survey as well as the focus group interview is the general distrust of influencers. The general attitude towards influencers was expressed to be that an influencer's thoughts and opinions have been sold to the highest bidder and was therefore not credible: "it seems like they are not telling their own opinion and instead just say

what they are paid to say" (app.1, p.10). This perception of influencers is explored further in this chapter, specifically which aspects makes influencers trustworthy or untrustworthy.



These aspects relate to the problem formulation, which seeks to understand **How do consumer audiences perceive social media influencers and in what ways does authenticity play a significant role?** In this chapter, the role of authenticity is introduced and explored further.

3.2 Untrustworthy

The participants seem both aware of promotional content, as well as wary of it. One participant stated in the survey, "In general when someone is being paid to promote a product I usually find it untrustworthy" (app. 1, p. 10). This quote suggests that influencers who are incentivized to create promotional content are inherently untrustworthy, which seems to be a running theme in the perception of influencers.

In the survey, when asked to describe what makes an influencer untrustworthy, some of the responses were:

- "They lie, and scam people only to get money."
- "Her brand is not something I can relate to"
- "The Kardashians only promote things for monetary gain, and not because they have any interest in the products"
- "reviews and ads for products like this is their livelihood and to me it seems like they are more concerned about staying on good terms with brands than giving serious reviews of products. they are

also always way more critical of budget/dupe brands, to a point where it seems like, the more the product costs the better review it gets.”

- “They get payed to give positive reviews”
- “I guess if someone is inconsistent or claims to be objective, it would make them untrustworthy”
- “Too many sponsored posts which are also unpersonal or uninteresting.”
- “I feel they sponsor for money, not because they like the product”
- “They're famous for essentially nothing, and create drama that happens to occur right around a new season of their TV show is released”
- “Taking sponsor deals for the money without considering the repercussions of advertising said products (gambling loot boxes) to their target audience (namely children). Not disclosing the fact that these products are sponsored.”

(“What makes them untrustworthy? “ App. 1, pp. 10-11)

Many of the responses seemed to say, in other words, that the influencer had no real relationship to, or interest in, the products they were promoting or the brands they collaborate with. This is described in the authenticity management framework by Audrezet et al. (2018) as the Fairytale or Fake Authenticity Path, where the influencer either fabricates a relationship to the promotional content, or lacks the innate passion for the product to create authentic, believable and trustworthy promotional content for their audience. The survey participants seem to be specifically describing the influencers who fall into the categories that are on the lower end of what is described as “The Strategy of Transparency” of their Authenticity Management Framework (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 8). As expressed by the survey participants, the influencer is not disclosing the collaborations with brands, or are lacking the intrinsic values expected by the audience – the participants.

Other responses had to do with the social consequences influencers have on their audience, mainly children. This is also expressed by the focus group, who mention the behaviors of influencers that may have an impact on how children behave. This is described further in chapter 3.7 on social responsibility.

This was a common theme among the survey and focus group participants, who also referred to product placement, where they expressed that they question every object placed in view of the audience. The focus group expressed that if an object was in view, they assumed it was either gifted by a brand who wanted to receive exposure by the influencer, or had paid the influencer to put the product in view (app. 4, p. 7).

The participating influencer also expressed her distrust towards other influencers as well as brands, as she mentioned that while influencers tend to know the laws and rules, some brands specifically ask influencers to forego the disclosure that the collaboration is promotional and paid for. This seems to be done in order for the promotion to seem like “an organic recommendation” directly from the influencer (app. 3, p. 8). Legislation and the adherence to laws and rules is described and explored further in chapter 4.1 Laws.

3.3 Being “fake”

Part of the distrust towards influencers is in the expression or image of the influencers seeming incredible or inauthentic. One focus group participant says, “It’s not authentic anymore if you only see them on the days where their hair and makeup and extensions and clothes are all perfect. ... I could get more realism by turning on a soap opera” (app. 4, p. 16). The participant seems to express their inability to relate to the influencers since the influencer seems too polished and unobtainable, comparing the influencer to a fictional character whose image is entirely made up.

Editorial style of the influencer plays a significant role in the perception of appearing “fake” to an audience. One survey participant responds, when asked how they feel about promotional content, “I dislike it. Because its seems fake because they her paid for it” (app. 1, p. 8). Another survey participant goes on to say about an untrustworthy influencer, “simply said, everything about them is fake” (app. 1, p. 10). Another describes an untrustworthy influencer’s behavior as “fake and over the top” (p. 13).

These responses all seem to fall on the low spectrum of transparency in the Authenticity Management Framework by Audrezet et al. (2018). The framework references the disingenuous behavior of influencers who do not disclose collaborations when creating promotional content. One survey participant described an untrustworthy influencer’s behavior as “over the top”, however, the consensus for untrustworthy influencers seem to be a lack of passion or intrinsic value towards the promotional content they publish. These results align with the Authenticity Management Framework (Audrezet et al. 2018) described.

3.4 Trustworthy

However, not all the attitudes were negative, when pressed for elaboration. The Authenticity Management Framework by Audrezet et al. (2018) was used to ascertain when an influencer is viewed as authentic – personal, trustworthy, believable, transparent and honest – by describing scenarios that correspond to the different paths of authenticity in the framework (see appendix 1 for full survey and results).

These results suggest that while the general attitude towards influencers as a concept is negative and represented by greed and distrust, the influencers they personally follow are trustworthy and credible. Approximately 40 influencers were mentioned in the survey when asked for examples of trustworthy influencers (app. 1, p. 12). When asked what makes these influencers trustworthy, using the critical incident questions, some of the responses were:

- “I identify with her”
- “openness, transparency, and a clear set of values disconnected from materialism”
- “She actually uses the products”
- “admitting that they are subjective and sponsored”
- “Was open about the issues with the product, even though he presented the game”
- “Only endorses products they trust and would use on their own anyway. Discloses the fact that they are being sponsored.”
- “That they make awareness about the sponsored posts, and yet the sponsored posts seems to fit the image of the influencer”

(“What makes them trustworthy?” App. 1, pp. 12-14)

This selection of quotes represent the expectations the audience (participants) have towards influencers, in regards to transparency and credibility, as well as the relationship they have with influencers. One participant expresses identifying with an influencer, which was a potentially expected response based to the theory apparatus. Others expressed their trust as it related to transparency, i.e. disclosure of promotional content, as well as honesty about the negative sides of the promoted products. The final selected response refers to the congruence of editorial style of the influencer. Transparency seems to be a common theme within the theme of trust, as the audience is aware that influencers receive money or other incentives to share promotional content. The responses seem to align with the Authenticity Management

Framework, specifically the higher end of the transparency and passion spectrum, which is also referred to as The Path of Absolute Authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 8).

3.5 Authenticity

Continuing with the theme of trustworthy, the concept of authenticity is explored further.

Marwick & boyd (Marwick & boyd, 2011) describe authenticity as it refers to influencers' imagined audience. Marwick & boyd describe authenticity as being "true to self" (p. 120) which seems to be in line with the aspects of editorial style as well as intrinsic values described in Audrezet et al. (2018).

Furthermore, Marwick & boyd (2011) do point out the significance of seeming authentic and transparent to their audience.

The importance of transparency from the audience's perspective is mentioned in several responses in the collected data, i.e. the survey and interviews. It seems fair that the audience of consumers have a desire or need to know whether an influencer's content comes with an agenda or monetary incentive, or if the influencer who simply wanted to share their experience with a product organically creates the content – e.g. blogpost or YouTube video.

The audience expresses awareness that the relationship is built around a constructed idea of the influencer's personality and values. The audience's interpretation of the influencer's persona is valid, as perceived incongruence with editorial style, or failure to disclose incentive or agenda leads to the loss of trust, and subsequently, influence by the influencer. If the audience feels betrayed by the influencer, the audience unsubscribes or unfollows, as described above, which in the end leads to the decrease of influence. Brands also benefit from the relationship and engagement an influencer has with their audience, which seems to further legitimize the need for authenticity (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

"The more personal the influencer is, and the more I can relate to the influencer because of their personality, the more I feel that the influencer is credible/trustworthy" (app. 4, p. 19). The passion and intrinsic value in the word "personal" in this quote, which aligns with the Authenticity Management Framework (Audrezet et al., 2018).

The participating influencer elaborates on the role of authenticity and influencers by speaking about the size of audience, “those with the most followers ... tend to have a less close relationship with their readers, and therefore ... their words have less power as someone who interacts with their followers more” (app. 3, p. 6). It makes sense that an influencer with a larger audience has difficulty engaging with their audience on a more intimate level, which is also argued by Marwick & boyd (2011). This is decreased amount of influence is also highlighted by the focus group who expressed that larger influencers seem less authentic and relatable due to their expressions and lifestyle, which the focus group participants express is not replicable by the audience.

3.6 Relationship building

While the general attitude towards influencers seems to be distrustful, the difference seems be significant within the relationship between the audience and the influencer. This relationship builds from the content an influencer creates over time, and the audience’s constructed perception of the influencer grows. One focus group participant describes this relationship construction, expressing that she is aware that her perception is mostly constructed from her perception of an influencer, based on previous content and expression:

“If I have followed a person for a long time and mentally mapped, subconsciously, what their opinions are, and if they suddenly go against these principles or post sponsored content that goes against my constructed idea of who they are, then I feel forced to unfollow them ... I say constructed because in reality, I don’t know them.” (app. 4, p. 22).

In the survey, participants were asked why they follow influencers on social media (app. 1, p. 5), based on the theory apparatus. 35 (or 45%) of respondents selected the option “They have similar views or experience as me and I can relate to them”. The same amount of participants chose the option “They seem like someone who is more knowledgeable than me about a topic I am interested in”. Only five respondents (6%) selected “They seem like a friend”. These results suggest the audience has a connection to the experiences and views of an influencer, while still being aware that the influencer is not a real-life friend of theirs. Based on these results, the relatability and credibility of an influencer seems to be the driving force for the audience when connecting with influencers.

While it can take a while to build a relationship for the audience – focus group says around a month or so (app. 4, p. 22) – the relationship can sour and crumble immediately if the constructed relationship does not live up to expectations. One focus group participant explains, “It actually takes a while before I know if I want to spend time on them ... but it only takes one video! One video where they (mess) up (to un-follow the influencer)” (app. 4, p. 22). This seems to suggest the relationship between the audience and influencer is quite brittle and relies heavily on the perception of the constructed personality of the influencer. If the influencer behaves in a way that does not align with their previous editorial style or the values of the audience, the audience seems to end the relationship by ceasing to be their audience.

3.7 Social responsibility

The consumer audience-participants (survey and focus group) expressed a concern for social responsibility, especially towards children who may view influencers as they present themselves, with no regard for their motives or agenda for discussing the topics and products. One focus group participant suggested both schools teaching media literacy to spot content by influencers as well as their potential motives or incentives might be (app. 4, p. 25). She went on to say the onus should not exclusively be on schools, however, but that parents should monitor their children’s behavior online and talk to them about the types of content they watch and how it is presented, as well as monetary gain (app. 4, p. 28).

A survey participant also mentions the social responsibility to children and young people, when asked what makes an influencer untrustworthy, “Taking sponsor deals for the money without considering the repercussions of advertising said products to their target audience (namely children). Not disclosing the fact that these products are sponsored.” (app. 1, p. 11). This quote highlights the perceived target audience of influencers, as well as a lack of transparency from the influencers’ side, which may be confusing children and directly deceiving the children who watch undisclosed promotional content created by influencers.

A focus group participant compares promotional content to the more traditional medium of TV commercials, saying “(TV) is not allowed to transmit content that promotes sugar to children ... perhaps YouTubers and other influencers should have the same social responsibility” (app. 4, p. 28). This quote seems to suggest both that influencers have a significant influence over children and that they should be held socially responsible to the same high degree as TV or other mass media.

These results seem to highlight the participants' views on the influence that influencers have on especially children and young people today. The responses seem to suggest that the behavior of influencers is irresponsible in regard to children.

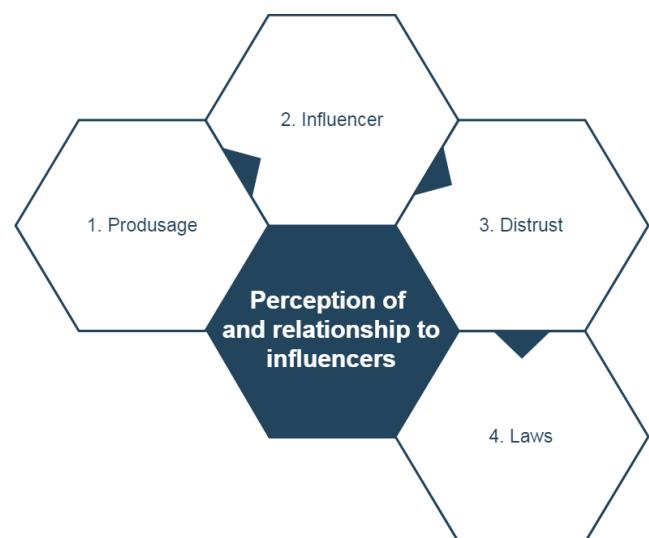
3.8 Summary

When first looking through the data, it seemed obvious that participants had a very high degree of distrust towards influencers as a general concept. Comparing the responses to the Authenticity Management Framework by Audrezet et al. (2018), this holds true when influencers are located in the low end of the transparency spectrum.

Interestingly, when pressed for what makes an influencer trustworthy (or authentic) the participants would elaborate upon their views on specific influencers who *are* trustworthy and authentic as well as what makes them perceive them to be authentic. These results seems to say that while participants find the *concept* of influencers inauthentic and untrustworthy, the participating respondents often perceive the concept as not being transparent or exhibiting intrinsic values or passion, based on the Authenticity Management Framework. The influencers the participants do follow themselves are trustworthy, credible, authentic and essentially *good*, which places these influencers high in both intrinsic value and passion as well as transparency, whereas the view of a *general influencer* is untrustworthy, incredible, inauthentic and essentially *bad*.

4.1 Laws

Interestingly, the participants are quite aware that rules and regulations exist for influencer marketing. This is documented both prompted and unprompted, in the survey and focus group interview (app. 1 and 4).



Unprompted, they bring up the adherence to laws, however, when pressed for their knowledge on the laws of the influencer industry and promotional content, it seems that focus group participants are not quite sure about the specificity of the Danish marketing law. Part of this is the vagueness of legislation. This is also presented by the influencer interview, as the participating influencer explains, “The marketing law itself is short and very, very vague and really open to interpretation. So you have to figure out who to trust, that will interpret (the law) in the best way possible” (app. 3, p. 7). The marketing law (“Markedsføringsloven - Lov om markedsføring - retsinformation.dk,” n.d.) seems to confuse both influencers as well as consumers, as the focus group also expresses that they are not quite sure what kinds of disclosure and transparency is legally required or not.

4.2 Transparency

Transparency is an important aspect of the Authenticity Management Framework (Audrezet et al. 2018), as this has an impact on the audience’s perception of a product that is shared in promotional content. In the survey, when participants were asked how they felt about promotional content, one participant responded, “It’s fine as long the influencer makes it clear that it is sponsored and they are being paid”. Furthermore, an overwhelming amount of participants – 33, or 45% of participants – selected the option “I need to know because it influences my decision to buy the product/service” when asked how they felt about being told that content is paid for by a brand. These results seem to indicate that the survey participants also felt that transparency is very important when it comes to promotional content and the perception of influencer authenticity.

While the consumer-participants (survey and focus group) expressed their need and desire for transparency in order to trust influencers, the influencer herself was also concerned with transparency and lack thereof.

“I honestly believe most bloggers roughly know what the rules are, but there are many who deliberately choose not to adhere to the rules because they feel it would be too much sponsored content on their blog. Or, because some (brands) are cheeky and say they do not want it marked as an ad because it works better if it seems like an organic recommendation. ... I often see bloggers (where) it’s very clear that this is 100% an ad, but it is not disclosed” (app. 3, p. 8)

The influencer seemingly expresses concern about other influencers deliberately not disclosing or following the laws as they are interpreted and prescribed to their situations. The vagueness of the Danish marketing law seems to result in the practice of influencers being able to deceive their audience.

One survey participant expressed and acknowledgement of both the rules of disclosure as well as their expectations towards following these, “I want 100% transparency and I will unfollow if someone has not followed the rules” (app. 1, p. 8). The response is interesting, as it both acknowledges the knowledge of rules regarding disclosure of promotional content, as well as the relationship between the participant and influencers who do not follow the rules of disclosure.

4.3 New industry, undefined boundaries and interpretations

The influencer industry is still emerging and shifting, as expressed by the participating influencer. The innovation of the industry has an impact on several aspects of influencer marketing. One in particular is the vagueness of the Danish marketing law as it relates specifically to influencers in Denmark. The law seems to be difficult to specify, and therefore easy to diffuse for influencers and brands who want promotional content to appear organic as opposed to planned and paid for and therefore opt not to disclose the collaboration. Another aspect of the laws and interpretations is the undefined boundaries of user-generated referral codes, where users receive discounts or rewards for referring others, as described below.

Part of the vagueness of the laws is the fact that the industry is relatively new. Whereas influencers or opinion leaders have been a phenomenon for a very long time, the specific concept of influencer marketing seems to be a relatively newly discovered avenue for brands and thus Danish lawmakers.

The participating influencer elaborates upon undefined boundaries,

“Sometimes the boundaries are just muddy, you know. There is a food delivery service (that just arrived) in Denmark ... who have this concept, which is very common for these companies: ‘if you recommend us to your friend, they get x DKK and you get x DKK to shop for’. Everyone can do this. If you (the researcher) shared this code with your friends, you wouldn’t disclose it as an ad, why would you? You’re just a person. But should an influencer?” (app. 3, p. 8).

Certainly, an influencer with thousands of followers receive a significant difference and increase in rewards or discounts which should be declared and disclosed to their audience, however, the specific limit between regular user and an influencer can be difficult to delimit.

Furthermore, the influencer describes some grey areas, or degrees, of promotional content. According to the influencer, promotional gifts are taxed on the same level as products used for promotional content in Denmark (app. 6). She goes on to describe how she feels this lack of distinction is unfair, as she may enjoy a promotional gift and organically decide to mention it for the joy of her audience for no compensation or other incentive. However, promotional content is paid in large sums, which of course must be taxed as well, "I think there is a significant difference if I do it voluntarily or if I received 20.000 DKK to say (this product) is amazing, wouldn't you agree?" (app. 3, p. 7). Indeed, there is a significant difference between receiving a gift and receiving a large sum of money for promoting a product. However, influencers with large audiences do seem to receive gifts in a larger quantity and frequency, especially if they share these gifts online. According to a focus group participant, "it's the ones who already have a large audience, maybe over several platforms, who receive the most things ... (it is not normal) for brands to send a vault with the products of an entire season to some random YouTuber who may have two thousand followers." (app. 4, p. 9). While the boundaries and legislation seem undefined for influencers in Denmark now, it seems legislation, or the interpretation of said legislation, is updated regularly to fit the needs of the growing industry.

The focus group also brought up the differences in influencer marketing and disclosure in different countries, such as the United Kingdom, United States of America and Denmark. When asked if they were aware of the Danish marketing law, they were unsure but seemed more confident in the UK legislation, as influencers in the UK had described this to their audience. The three focus group participants seemed keen to have globally acknowledged laws, or at least standards for precedence, for disclosure and promotional content. They also expressed importance to include social responsibility towards children in the desired global standards, and compared this to regulated TV legislation where "TV personalities aren't allowed to broadcast content that includes sugar to children, maybe YouTube and influencers should have the same social responsibilities" (app. 4, p. 28).

The understanding and perception of Danish as well as international legislation is expressed by consumer-participants (survey and focus group) to be regrettably and predictably vague for the level of legislation that currently exists for the relatively new industry.

4.4 Linguistic shifts

Part of the law interpretations by the Danish consumer-ombudsman relates to linguistic changes that are subtle but have an impact on meaning and interpretation of promotional content. While the industry is relatively new, the following disclosure of said promotional content is also relatively new and subject to change. While previously it seems to have been good practice to disclose the collaboration between brand and influencer, it has not always been strictly enforceable or regulated. It seems disclosure and influencer marketing is still not completely regulated or enforceable in Denmark. The subject of disclosure is addressed by Audrezet et al. (Audrezet et al., 2018) as part of the Path of Fake Authenticity Management, where the article describes scenarios where an influencer essentially deceives their audience by not disclosing the collaboration with a brand. This lack of transparency is problematic, as it does not allow the audience to make an informed decision. The implications of being vague or deliberately non-transparent are discussed in above chapters as being socially irresponsible, unlawful and as inspiring distrust toward influencers.

The participating influencer elaborates on the impact of laws and interpretation on a tangible language shift. She mentions three or four official interpretations by the ombudsman of consumers, and describes the newest one where the ombudsman advises influencers to refrain from using the word “sponsored” and instead use the word “advertisement”. The influencer elaborates that according to the ombudsman, the word “sponsor” implies that the brand does not have an influence on the content, whereas an advertisement does. The influencer compares it to TV sponsorships,

“... (“sponsored”) means they’ve invested some money, that is, given some money to the TV show in return for an advertisement before the show is aired, but they don’t influence the content in the show, and of course, as a brand, you have (influenced the content) when you hire a blogger. So now we have to use the word “advertisement” instead.” (app. 3, p. 7).

The audience may not notice this change, as the change of wording may seem insignificant or even synonymous to a casual audience. However, the change does have a slight impact on the perception of influencer content as directly promotional and in collaboration with a brand, which has incentivized the influencer monetarily or otherwise.

Summary

Interestingly, consumers are aware that rules and legislation exist, however they are unaware of the specifics, which may be expected due to the vagueness of current legislation. However, the vagueness of the Danish legislation has fascinating properties, as this has a direct impact on both linguistic choices (sponsored vs. advertisement) as well as disclosure and adherence to laws, or the lack thereof. Since influencer marketing is a relatively new and emerging industry in Denmark and the rest of the world, specificity will likely follow, as well as public knowledge hereof. The linguistic choices that seem to be a direct result of legislative interpretation is also interesting. Whereas the casual audience might not notice or care about the difference of the wording, it still seems important to distinguish and disclose when content is promotional and monetarily incentivized by a paying brand, as this has impact on the audience's perception of the content and by extension, the influencer.

5.1 Quality

The quality of influencer content was brought up many times during the focus group interview. The quality of content seems to be significant to the participants, sometimes more so than the authenticity of the influencers. In this chapter, I will be analyzing the perceptions of quality of content by influencers, as expressed by the participants.



5.2 Authenticity

Based on the theory apparatus, the initial approach in the research was to explore the authenticity term and how it relates to consumers and their relationship to influencers. Therefore, to ensure that the survey participants were aware of how the researcher understood this term and how it was approached in the theory apparatus, the authenticity-term was elaborated to the following words:

- Personal
- Trustworthy
- Believable
- Transparent
- Honest

These words were chosen based on the theory apparatus and the relevant theories' definitions of influencer authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

When asked which words the focus group associate with authenticity, they responded (app. 4, pp. 19-21):

- Personality
- Relatable
- Realism/realistic
- Credibility and/or trust
- Responsible

This seems to mostly align with the theoretical understanding of authenticity of social media influencers based on (Audrezet et al., 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). During the focus group interview, the participants elaborated upon their understanding of quality of content. It seemed important to them that the quality was good, that the influencer was responsible, credible and skillful and they skip over content that is poorly filmed, edited, and thought out. The participants' perception of authenticity seems to be tied into the quality of content, as well as the frequency or quantity of content. The relationship between influencer and audience built up through time, where the audience had expectations to the content created and posted by the influencer based on previous content as well as construction of their perceived personality.

5.3 Quantity and frequency of content

Part of the criticism of influencers by the focus group was the quantity and frequency of content produced and posted by the influencers. The participants expressed that the influencers seem to churn out content in such a quantity that the quality of the content suffers, and the lowered quality is a source of distrust and dissatisfaction:

“... (I think to myself) ‘excuse me, how dumb do you think your followers are?’ the fact that (I am) watching this video that is so far below what you usually post, it is obvious that you only posted it because you have your ‘I have to post a video on Mondays and Thursdays’ rule” (app. 4, p. 7).

While the focus group seems disgruntled with a too high frequency, they also refer to women’s magazines lower frequency of output. The difference seems to lay in the quality of content, however, as one focus group participant goes on to say: “I would respect (an influencer) a lot more if they tweeted that they haven’t upload because they are busy or their children are sick, rather than just churning out content” (app. 4, pp. 7-8). The expression of “churning out content” seems to imply a lack of thought in the content, as the influencer focuses on not being forgotten or hidden by the algorithm.

The focus group participants seem to be particular about the frequency and quantity of content. They seem to have requirements for a high quality of content that is regular and frequent, however not so frequent that it has a negative impact on the quality of the content. The focus group participants seem to be aware of the algorithmic challenges that influencers face.

The aforementioned ‘rule’ of posting frequently, despite the quality, is something that the focus group point out is due to the algorithms of the platforms where influencers post their content. While the quantity of content seems to have an impact on the quality of the content, the focus group seems aware that the platform algorithms have a significant influence on this frequency of content. Since the influencer’s livelihood is often dependent on monetization of their regular content which is not necessarily promotional or in collaboration with a brand, the focus group seems a bit more lenient towards influencers when they consider this:

”1: maybe there is something about YouTube and Instagram’s algorithms? About a year ago, there was a lot of talk about YouTube and Instagram installing some algorithms that affected channels, so if they wanted to be promoted by YouTube, they needed to upload once a day.
2: I know something has been changed where if you don’t post often enough, you will be thrown in the back of the line and you won’t be featured in subscribers feeds.” (app. 4, p. 8.
Numbers 1 and 2 refers to separate participants in the focus group).

5.4 Relationship building

While relationship building and the construction of this has been explored in the chapter on Distrust, it seems pertinent to analyze the relationship as it relates to quality. The quality of content seems to be filtered through a lens of a perceived relationship between the focus group participants and the influencers they discussed. Credibility was discussed as something that was constructed over time, as the relationship towards an influencer grew. Proof of results was a concept that was also discussed by the focus group participants as something the participants find credibility as well as relationship building within. Seeing results within an influencer indicates that the audience has been watching the influencer for a while, and is therefore able to witness the proof (app. 4, pp. 14-15). Watching the influencer for a while and noticing these results is an example of the relationship building that occurs when an audience follows an influencer for a while.

While authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness and relatability was discussed in relation to influencers, the quality of content seemed extraordinarily important to the focus group when discussing their attitudes and perceptions of influencers. Quality of content seems to be tied heavily into the focus group participants' perception of what a 'good' influencer is. The quality furthermore seems to be tied closely with an influencer's credibility and authenticity, and vice versa: If the influencer is not credible or authentic, then their content lacks in quality. If the quality of the content is bad, the influencer is not credible and therefore not perceived to be authentic.

5.5 The role of authenticity

Authenticity seems to play a significant, if not vital, role in creating promotional content and successfully executing ad integration with a perceived high quality of content.

Throughout this thesis, the role of authenticity has played a central role around understanding the perception of audience consumers who follow influencers and consume their content. The concept of authenticity has been explored throughout several chapters elaborated to mean transparency, honesty, believability, trustworthy, and personal content. Of course, the elaborated terms used in the survey are up for interpretation by the participants; however, the participants have a larger foundation for context with the chosen words.

Marwick & boyd (Marwick & boyd, 2011) argue that authenticity is a social construct and therefore subjectively and contextually defined, ever-changing in different degrees and societies. Audrezet et al. (2018) came to two strategies for authenticity: passion and transparency (p. 2). Transparency has been explored in this thesis as the disclosure by influencers of collaboration and incentive to their audience, while passion and intrinsic value has been explored in the concept of product placement and seeming “fake”.

The focus group associated the words relatable, personality, realism, credibility/trust and responsible for their words (app. 4, pp. 19-21). This seems to be in adherence with the words chosen in the survey to represent authenticity. Furthermore, it seems to be in line with the theoretical considerations for the concept of authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

The importance of staying authentic while integrating ads in the influencer’s content seems to be important to the authenticity – and thus the success – of content and perception of the audience. If the content is not in line with the influencer’s editorial style or tonality, the audience notices and it seems to lead to distrust and avoiding the content (app. 4, p. 7).

Summary

Quality of content seems to be inherently tied to the authenticity and credibility of the influencers, as perceived by the consumer audience. The quality of content is related to the chapter on Producers, which explores the democratization of knowledge and quality of equipment. It is interesting that the participants express a desire for high quality as well as a relatively high frequency of content. The focus group participants expressed respect for those influencers who engaged with the audience and disclosed if the influencer was not able to create good quality content, as this made the audience perceive the influencer to be realistic and therefore authentic. While a relatively high frequency of free-to-consume content seems to be expected, it should not have a negative impact on the quality of the content.

6.1 Ad integration

Firstly, a term description of ad integration. In some cases, it may mean banner-advertisements or other clickable ads that appear around the website that do not otherwise influence the content of the website. However, in this thesis and specifically this chapter, the term “ad integration” refers to the promotional content an influencer creates and posts. This content should be integrated within the influencer’s usual content and editorial style.



In influencer marketing, an influencer creates their usual content, e.g. lifestyle, fashion, gaming, etc. while promoting a product or service in collaboration with a brand, and based on editorial style coherence, the influencer receives incentive monetarily or otherwise. If the editorial style or tonality of the influencer is incongruent, meaning inconsistent or even in opposition to the usual content that their audience is used to, the audience notices the incongruence and becomes suspicious. In order to successfully integrate promotional content into their editorial style and stay congruent to the expectations of their audience, they must create content that suits the advertisement or collaboration. This balance of integrating promotional content within their usual content is what is referred to as ad integration in this thesis.

The influencer expressed how she views promotional content on her blog,

“I have blogged for many years before I started making money from it, so I have a very personal relationship with my blog. It’s kind of my baby in many ways. Therefore, I think the whole advertisement-thing should be a natural part of the blog, as much as possible. I mean I would highly prefer that a promotional blogpost could be a blogpost I had written anyway. And that isn’t always possible, but that’s the goal, you know.” (app. 3, p. 4).

The quote highlights the influencer’s relationship to her blog as well as her own expectations towards ad integration. Saying it should be as natural part of the content as possible suggests that she is careful about choosing brands to collaborate with, and works to create content that is relevant to her audience as well as beneficial and profitable to the brand.

6.2 Institutionalization

Cambridge defines institutionalization as “the process of becoming a permanent or respected part of a society, system, or organization” (*INSTITUTIONALIZATION | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary*, n.d.).

In the case of this thesis, the influencer marketing industry is relatively new, however still seems to be legitimized and institutionalized by society, at least by participants of the research in this thesis. The industry seems furthermore legitimized and institutionalized since it is recognized by legislation (“Markedsføringsloven - Lov om markedsføring - retsinformation.dk,” n.d.) as the legislation sees a need for regulation. The institutionalization of the influencer industry has an impact on behaviors, such as consumption. The further institutionalization of the industry may lead to stricter regulation and legislation in Denmark and globally, as we continue to see developments in language and behavior as well as exposure to the phenomenon.

6.3 Product placement

As mentioned previously, focus group participants expressed distrust towards product placement, as they believed this was a promotional gift or otherwise incentivized to share the product with their followers, without transparency. One focus group participant says,

“They may have done their own research and figured out which chair is the best to sit on while blogging, when you have to sit on it for 6 hours a day and record and edit a video, but I still assume that if I see the chair there, it is an ad.” (app. 4, p. 7).

As mentioned by the influencer in chapter 4.2 Transparency, this practice does take place in the Danish influencer industry, where an influencer has been incentivized to share a product with their followers and has not disclosed the collaboration with their followers, in order to seem as though the recommendation is organic and not paid for (app. 3, p. 8). While the Danish legislation on influencer marketing is vague, this oversight or deliberate avoidance is not lawful, nor does it instill trust in the audience who consumes the content.

One focus group participant says:

“I got sick of the beauty community ... because it became so fake. It was like ‘look, I’m going on a walk’ while they hold up a watch and the only thing in the frame is the watch, it becomes so fake ... you can tell it’s just product placement, it is just so in your face. ... That fake smile just bothers me, ugh” (app. 4, p. 4).

This is an example of an influencer who failed to integrate their ad successfully by not adhering to their editorial style and failing to be transparent with their audience. The influencer is therefore perceived inauthentic; not personal, trustworthy, believable, transparent or honest. In the above quote, the participant expresses dissatisfaction and distrust towards the influencer’s authenticity due to product placement that is not authentic nor relevant to her, as an audience member.

6.4 Managing authenticity

Relationship building as well as audience-relevance seems to be an important part of managing authenticity, and seems significant to influencers, brands and most importantly, the audience. The influencer brought up audience relevance, when asked about how she manages enthusiasm with all brands. While she pointed out that she does not collaborate if the collaboration does not fit her editorial style or intrinsic values, she did bring up her audience when it comes to collaborations where she may not be enthusiastic about the product.

“Sometimes I think it isn’t the most cool or fun subject for me, but then I consider if it will be relevant for my audience? (If) the concept is relevant to a lot of my audience ... that’s the primary goal for me. I don’t think I’ve experienced a time (where I did not approve or enjoy the collaboration), and if I did, I would probably say no” (app. 3, p. 4).

This attitude suggests that the influencer has an engaging relationship with her audience, knowing their interests and catering to these, if the collaboration may not be entirely relevant to her own interests, which seems noble. The audience relevance seems important to the participating influencer in this quote, as part of the relationship she fosters between herself and her audience.

Editorial style and tonality seems to have significant impact on successful ad integration, as failure to adhere to the previous style and not expressing passion or intrinsic values could be grounds of distrust, and could lead to unfollowing. Editorial style has previously been described in previous chapters, as the significance of editorial style and tonality has impact on the success of promotional content, as expressed by participants of this study. If a fashion blogger has shown no previous interests in literature and suddenly promotes a mobile app for reading books, their audience may be suspicious of the motives, agenda and incentives of the influencer. The suspicion makes the audience distrust the influencer; the influencer is no longer perceived to be credible or authentic and therefore loses influence on their audience's behavior.

The focus group participants express that their relationship with, and loyalty to, an influencer is susceptible to change based on their perception of the influencer and the influencer's behavior. One focus group participant expressed that they would not hesitate to unfollow an influencer if their constructed perception of said influencer does not align with the expressions of the influencer (app. 4, p. 22).

Summary

Successfully integrating promotional content relies on several aspects, including audience's perception of and expectations to product placement, transparency and disclosure of incentive to share products (including promotional gifts or direct collaboration for monetary gain), the relationship between audience and influencer includes the expectations to editorial style of the influencer. The concept of ad integration also relies on the institutionalization of the influencer industry, as this is regulated, however loosely, by legislation as well as social perception of the industry.

Results

In this analysis, the data collected during the research period has been analyzed and explored through the lens of the problem formulation, **How do consumer audiences perceive social media influencers and in what ways does authenticity play a significant role?** With a meta-problem of seeking to understand the relationship between audience and influencer, as this relationship is often implicit and not usually explicitly expressed

The participants of the survey, focus group members and the influencer, had several themes in common, which contributed to the analysis of this thesis. Combined, they provided a further understanding of the relationship between the consumer audience and influencers, as well as the significant role of authenticity.

This is visualized in figure 7 below.

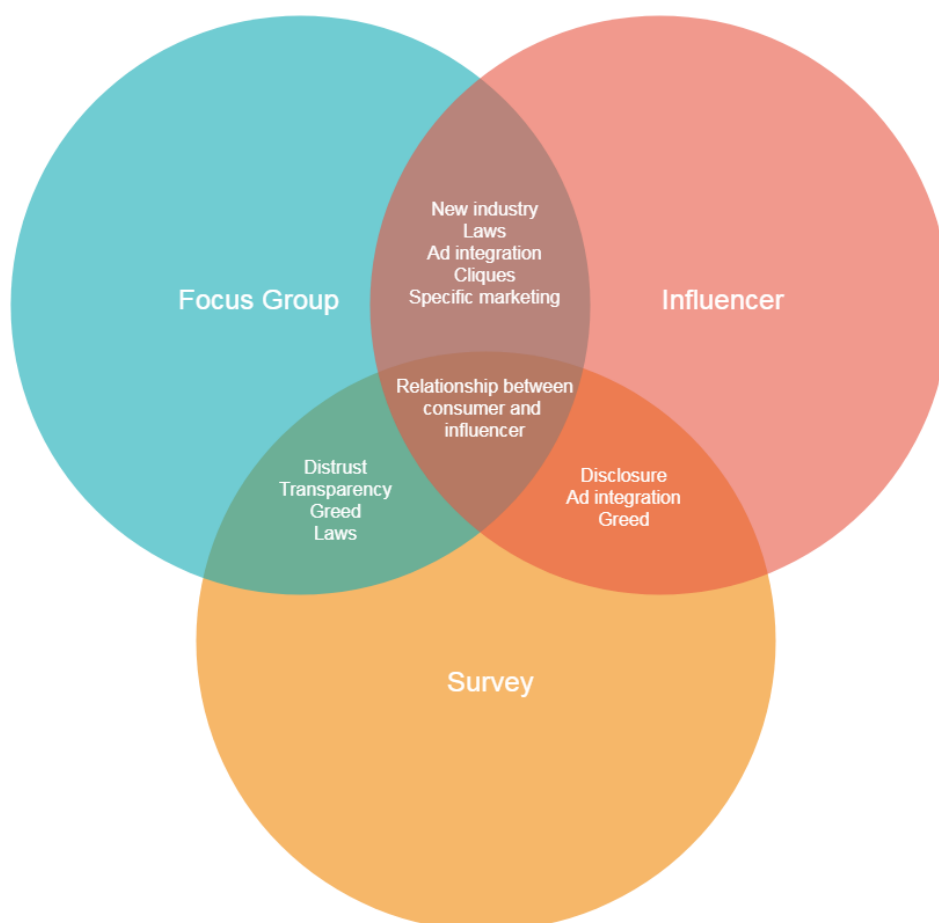


Fig 7. Visualization over relationship between consumers and influencer as expressed by participants

Firstly, the broad concept of influencers was explored, which seemed to be met with distrust. This seems to come from a skepticism that influencers are “fake”; not credible; not transparent regarding incentives to share certain promotional content; in some cases deliberately unlawful. Furthermore, the participants expressed the social responsibilities of influencers, which may have a negative impact on children.

Secondly, when exploring further about the participant’s desires for transparency and what makes an influencer authentic, good and trustworthy, the idea of quality came up and took over the focus group’s discussion of what makes an influencer good. The focus group discussed quality of content, frequency and quantity of content, as well as the democratization of knowledge and equipment, and the implications of the improving quality and availability. Authentic influencer content was likened to frequent, free, relatable and contemporary women’s magazines, created by “down to earth” influencers, as opposed to “faceless journalists”. However, the inauthentic influencers were described as cliquey, “fake”, distrustful and greedy. Inauthentic influencers “churn out content” in a high frequency in order to be recognized by the algorithms that the chosen platforms use in order to publish the content to be consumed by the audience, and the frequency has an impact on quality of the content. The authenticity of influencers was explored in relation to the quantity and frequency as well as the ability to build relationships between audience and influencer.

Finally, the concept of successful and authentic ad integration was explored. Institutionalization of the influencer industry seems to be legitimized further by way of legislation as well as social acceptance and understanding. The concept of successful ad integration relies on the above concepts of authenticity, trust and managing the relationship between audience and influencer, as well as adhering to the editorial style and expressing intrinsic value and passion, as described by Audrezet et al. (2018) and explored in the analysis.

Discussion

"I'm John Green, I write books and I've been making YouTube videos for more than 12 years now, also I'm somewhat repulsed by the word "influencer" it makes me feel like one of the baddies in a dystopian novel, which to be fair, maybe I am. But the nice thing about "influencer" is that it's accurate. If you have an audience, you help shape their worldview, both when it comes to like, which goods and services to purchase, and when it comes to what to believe and value." (Green, John, 2019 | Open Letter to Professional YouTubers).

What John Green says about influencers relates to many of the themes and results in this thesis. For one, the attitude towards the term "influencer" is negative and distrustful, even so far as villainous. However, the quote also embraces and acknowledges the real-life implications of influencer marketing as well as interaction and participatory culture online.

The above quote is poignant, as it also relates to the broader audience behaviors that are influenced by social media influencers, including beliefs and values. The participating influencer expressed similar views about her role in the influencer industry; that she prefers being a blogger while acknowledging that she objectively could be categorized as an influencer.

Commodification of social ties

Marwick & boyd (2011) agree that the balance between being an influencer ("strategic self-promotion") and staying authentic is difficult to strike. They argue that the practice of social media influencers is an intrinsic conflict between a true relationship with their followers and profiting from this relationship. "The encroachment of presumably profit- or status-driven 'public' techniques into 'private' social spaces is met with stiff resistance from people used to interactional norms that do not involve the commodification of social ties" (p. 128). It seems to be problematic to the participants of this thesis, as well, as the promotional nature of social media influencers is to collaborate with brands, and this seems to take advantage of the relationship that has been built between the audience and the influencer. The commodification of social ties and relatability is interesting in this thesis, as we see how the participants of the study regard the industry with skepticism and distrust. However, the commodification seemingly is accepted in the form of compensation, as long as the compensation and incentive is disclosed and authenticity and transparency from the influencer is upheld.

Distrust towards influencers

Going into the research, based on theoretical considerations on authenticity and participatory culture, I expected a more lenient view and attitude towards influencers. Influencers are supposed to be peers who *have something to say*, based on Bruns (2008) and Jenkins (2008; 2009). Furthermore, the act of being able to influence people directly is academically viewed as a democratic revolution a la Habermas' public sphere, where peers are able to express opinions and discuss freely (Linaa Jensen & Tække, 2015).

However, the participants seemed to be skeptical of the concept of influencers, and influencers were perceived in a negative light – except, of course, the influencers who are authentic, i.e. transparent and credible. The influencers who are authentic were perceived in a positive light, in reference to their transparency and credibility, honesty, believability, and personality.

Quality over authenticity?

While initially working with the data collected, it seemed the quality of the content was taking precedence over the perceived authenticity of the influencer.

However, it seems quality of content falls under the umbrella of authenticity, where the major theme of distrust of influencers also falls. It seems authenticity is a much larger concept than initially presumed when working with the theory apparatus of this thesis. Interestingly, both consumer audience groups (survey and focus group participants) as well as the influencer expressed their distrust towards influencers, and this distrust appears to have its foundation in the expectation that authenticity is needed in order to trust not just usual content, but also, and especially, promotional content from an influencer. In the survey, authenticity was described to mean personal, trustworthy, believable, transparent and honest, as a way of elaborating what the author understands and uses the term to the respondents. Transparency seemed to have a high degree of significance for respondents in order to trust influencers and view them as authentic.

While quality of content was briefly thought to take precedence over authenticity in this thesis, it seems that quality of content is within the umbrella-term of authenticity. When describing good quality of

content, the participants required credibility, realism, relatability, personality and responsibility. These terms are synonymous, or at least related to, authenticity.

Practical implications of influencer institutionalization

An interesting aspect discussed by the focus group was the institutionalization of influencers. It seems the focus group was aware, and not opposed to, the influencers receiving compensation for promotional content. They understood the work that goes into creating free content for the audience, and appreciated being able to consume free content that was personally relevant and relatable to their own experiences. The institutionalization of influencer marketing seems to be an overarching theme of the participants, where they distrust their opinions and feel like all their views are bought and sold. Not all influencers are untrustworthy, though, and this is where authenticity and credibility comes in. Both the influencer and focus group agreed that credibility and congruence between style and relationship between audience and influencer was important. The audience, or consumers, build a relationship – at least to a constructed version of the person they perceive the influencer to be (app. 4, p. 22).

VII. Conclusion

The overarching theme of this thesis is seeking the understanding of the relationship between audience and social media influencers. The theory apparatus and methodology was utilized in a way to explore the audience's perception of social media influencers. The participating audience members and influencer was a key in exploring the problem formulation and seeking to understand the underlying problem of the thesis.

The meta-problem of the thesis was seeking to understand the implicit relationship between the consumer audience and the influencers. Their relationship is understood to be constructed by the audience's perception of the influencers. The audience expressed that they are aware of this construction and that their relationship is disposable if the influencer's expression does not align with the audience's needs for authenticity, including personal, trustworthy, believable, transparent and honest content. The participants expressed an awareness of legislation and how this legislation has significant impact on the transparency

the audience comes to expect from the influencer's content, even if the Danish legislation is still quite vague in its current state.

The audience participants expressed a high degree of desire for transparency and adherence to the influencer's editorial style, which should express the influencer's intrinsic value and passion. The audience gets to know influencers through the content they publish, and if this content does not align with their constructed perception of the influencer, the influencer loses credibility and thus influence over their audience. The participating influencer also expressed distrust towards the choices other influencers make, specifically the lack of transparency some influencers choose to exhibit.

In conclusion, based on the interpretations and understandings of the responses of the participants and theoretical understandings, the consumer audience's perception of, and relationship to, social media influencers is based around an understanding of several aspects. Some of these aspects include transparency, credibility, and essentially authenticity. Other aspects include the awareness that the relationship between the audience and influencer is constructed based on perceptions of the audience as well as the influencers.

The answer to the problem formulation, the audience perceives the concept of influencers with distrust and skepticism, as they perceive the influencers to be essentially inauthentic. Authenticity thus plays a vital role in the perception of trust towards influencer content, specifically when the content is promotional. These results suggest that in order to integrate promotional content properly and with authenticity, an influencer must be transparent regarding their incentives, choose collaborations meticulously and with regard for their editorial style. Furthermore, the influencers must appear to be "true to themselves". Furthermore, the quality of content needs to reflect authenticity, as high frequency seems to present to the audience that the content is more important than the audience who consumes the content. It seems the influencer industry is emerging into a legitimized institutionalization where the practice of influencer marketing is only becoming more socially accepted and therefore regulated legislatively. The evolution of this emerging industry will be fascinating to follow going forward.

VIII. Bibliography

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1. Two-step flow communication model by Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955
2. Authenticity Management Framework by Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018
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