Tuning into Influence: Uncovering Ideal Influencer Characteristics for Generating Brand Awareness on the American Market

A Case Study on the Danish Audio Brand, Kreafunk

A Master's Thesis
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Emma Schjødt Frimann   2019 5764
Ida-Louise Andersen   2019 6372

Supervisor: Mia Thyregod Rasmussen

AALBORG UNIVERSITY

Summary

Social media has impacted communication, giving brands enhanced opportunities to connect with their target audience, with significant growth of influencer marketing prompting increased budget allocations. Influencer marketing involves marketing professionals partnering with influencers to reach and persuade followers, aiming to improve brand performance. The increased investment emphasizes the intensified competition for consumer attention, highlighting the importance of selecting the right influencers to create brand awareness. Our research, focusing on the Danish audio brand, Kreafunk's entry into the American market, recommends ideal characteristics of an influencer based on young Americans' perceptions, providing valuable insights for both Kreafunk and other brands.

Through an examination of relevant literature in the field of influencer marketing, we identified gaps in research concerning qualitative approaches, social constructivism, and the perspectives of American consumers. Furthermore, previous research predominantly concentrates on purchase intention.

With a social constructivist position, and a qualitative approach, we seek to understand how reality is constructed based on participants' social and cultural contexts. We explore this by gathering responses from young American consumers through a qualitative online survey, focused on influencer marketing and Kreafunk. Furthermore, in consideration of Kreafunk's strategic aims, we conduct a qualitative interview with a representative from Kreafunk. Data extracted from the qualitative survey is investigated utilizing an influencer marketing framework, consisting of congruity theory, source credibility theory, and the concept of consumer involvement, focusing on the link to brand awareness. For Kreafunk, we focus on achieving brand recognition and brand recall on the American market by utilizing influencer marketing as the sole marketing effort. We use Reflexive Thematic Analysis to analyze the data, prioritizing reflexivity and subjectivity for a nuanced exploration of young Americans' perceptions of influencer marketing and Kreafunk.

In our analysis and discussion, we uncovered that the Americans discover new brands through influencer marketing, particularly on TikTok and Instagram, with TikTok being favored by female participants. In addition, the Americans favor relatable influencers who exhibit characteristics such as knowledge, sincerity, and humor, while disliking overly edited or

aggressive promotional content. Regarding Kreafunk, participants appreciate their products' color variety, with gender-based preferences, and perceive its aesthetic as feminine. While opinions on pricing are mixed, a range of prices could attract a broader audience. Skepticism toward unfamiliar and foreign brands exists, but positive associations with Scandinavian origin are noted as well. The mentioned influencer characteristics depend on the universality of a brand's product category. Our findings further indicate that perceived congruence and credibility, and consumer involvement are crucial for generating brand awareness. Furthermore, we discovered that brand recognition is achievable through influencers, but brand recall remains uncertain.

Recommendations for Kreafunk's initial influencer marketing strategy include collaborating with sincere female influencers in audio, interior design, and active lifestyles niches, using video content that integrates products into daily life for increased engagement. The influencers should further balance showcasing technical skills and maintain a subtle sales focus. Future strategies may involve larger, universal influencers, including male influencers.

In terms of practical limitations, utilizing a qualitative online survey, we faced challenges which included low completion rates and brief responses, attributed to participants' lack of commitment. As the data is collected using a convenience sampling, potential bias due to acquaintanceship with a few participants occurs. Future research could explore whether influencer marketing alone can achieve brand recall. Additionally, investigating the relationship between brand recall, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth for online web shops could provide valuable insights.

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1 Introduction

Social media has changed how people interact and communicate, providing brands with enhanced opportunities to reach their target audience. In recent years, influencer marketing has seen significant growth on social media platforms (Kim and Kim 2021, 405), and brands are allocating increasingly larger budgets to influencer marketing, due to the possibility of leveraging influencers' follower base and perceived trustworthiness (Statista 2023). However, the increased investment in influencer marketing also underscores the issue of intensified competition for consumers' attention, thereby emphasizing the importance of choosing the right influencers to collaborate with in order to create brand awareness.

When using influencer marketing as part of one's marketing strategy, it can be challenging to find the ideal influencer whose purpose is to persuade their followers to a change of attitude, essential for consumers in going from being unaware to aware of a brand. In order to choose the right influencer for one's brand, it is essential to be aware of consumers' interests and perceptions of influencer marketing (Belanche et al. 2021, 188). In relation, we uncovered that certain aspects of influencer marketing are under researched (Nanevi et al. 2022, 1), specifically regarding Americans' perceptions and attitudes toward influencer marketing, and how it can be utilized by an unfamiliar brand in order to generate brand awareness.

To examine this, we have constructed a theoretical framework for analyzing perceptions of the influencer marketing field, consisting of congruity theory (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955; Belanche et al. 2021), source credibility theory (Munnukka et al. 2016), and the concept of consumer involvement (Kim 2003), which impact the possibility of generating brand awareness (Aaker 1996). It is suggested by congruity theory that consumers are more likely to be influenced if they experience consistency between their own beliefs, and the communicator, or stimulus (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955, 43). Furthermore, source credibility theory suggests four dimensions of an influencer's credibility (i.e. expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity) that can potentially affect consumers' perception of their content (Munnukka et al. 2016, 182-183).

In the investigation of the use of influencer marketing to generate brand awareness in the American market, the case of Kreafunk will play a central role. Kreafunk, a Danish audio

brand, designing and selling speakers, headphones, and chargers (Kreafunk n.d.), has quite recently entered the American market. As they have yet to establish a significant brand presence in this new market, they face the challenge of generating brand awareness, which we believe influencer marketing could be a solution to.

This investigation is built upon primary empirical data collected through a qualitative online survey with young American consumers, identifying their socially created perceptions on the matter. This data contributes to knowledge within the under researched field of influencer marketing, relevant for the development of the field, specifically in relation to young American consumers. Additionally, a qualitative interview with a Kreafunk representative acts as background information to ensure that we are able to discuss the implications of the findings for Kreafunk, considering their strategic aims. This gives us a full picture and the best starting point for making a final recommendation for Kreafunk in terms of utilizing solely influencer marketing on the American market to create brand awareness. This further contributes to the field in relation to utilizing influencer marketing as a foreign or unknown brand in the American market, through insights on young American consumers' perceptions, relevant to both researchers within the field as well as marketing professionals. This leads to the following research question:

What are the ideal characteristics of an influencer collaborating with Kreafunk in order to generate brand awareness on the American market, based on young Americans' perceptions of influencer marketing and Kreafunk?

The goal of this research is to provide Kreafunk with a recommendation regarding influencer collaborations. By ideal characteristics of an influencer we mean the influencer's content creation style, personal attributes, and the platforms they use. While we outline the ideal characteristics of an influencer for this collaboration, we acknowledge that finding an influencer who embodies all these traits in the eyes of their followers is unlikely. Therefore, Kreafunk should be prepared to prioritize these characteristics. By young Americans' perceptions of influencer marketing and Kreafunk as a brand, we refer to the perceptions and attitudes of American participants toward influencer marketing, audio products, and Kreafunk, collected via a qualitative online survey. Though the research primarily revolves around Kreafunk, many of our findings and insights can be valuable to other brands as well, whether they are American or non-American. By understanding the nuances of influencer marketing

and consumer preferences that we have identified, other brands can adapt these suggestions to enhance their own influencer marketing efforts on the American market and achieve greater brand awareness and trust.

Moving forward, the sequence of the chapters and their primary content is as follows: Chapter 2, Philosophy of Science, reveals implications of our position as social constructivists. Chapter 3, Structure and Research Design, entails a more thorough presentation of the structure of the thesis, including interrelations and connections to the philosophical position and research question. Chapter 4, Literature Review, presents relevant research within the field of influencer marketing and brand awareness. Chapter 5, Theoretical Framework, covers our influencer marketing framework, consisting of congruity theory, source credibility theory, and the concept of consumer involvement, used to explore the link to brand awareness. Chapter 6, Methodology and Methods, presents our qualitative methodology along with collection methods, qualitative online survey and qualitative interview, and our analytical method, reflexive thematic analysis. Chapter 7, Analysis, and chapter 8, Discussion, examine our data and discuss the findings, respectively. Chapter 9, Final Recommendation for Kreafunk, offers our final suggestion, thus answering the research question. Chapter 10, Conclusion, provides a collection of the most prominent findings and contributions of the study.

2 Philosophy of Science: Social Constructivism

Regarding the philosophical position, we subscribe to social constructivism as we believe that a phenomenon, typically perceived as natural and independently existing, is in fact shaped and influenced by human interests (Collin 2014, 419). Furthermore, we believe that reality is created collectively, meaning it can also be changed by discussing common truths and social norms (Collin 2014, 420; Holm 2018, 144). Our ontological and epistemological positions influence the formulation of our research question, thus shaping the type of data we are able to collect, and the findings we anticipate discovering. Consequently, it directly impacts our selection of relevant methods and theories, further determining our approach to interpreting data. In the following, the role and implications of our social constructivist position is discussed.

Ontology is about what exists (O'Grady 2002, 53), and as social constructivists, we have a relativistic ontology, acknowledging that social phenomena are constantly created and revised through social interaction (Grix 2002, 177). For instance, in the survey responses from

Americans, a relativistic ontology is seen in the fact that all participants hold individual opinions towards the topic, where we believe that these individual opinions are influenced by one's social background. This is evident as all participants understand and hold distinct attitudes toward both influencers and influencer marketing. This specific demographic of 23 to 28-year-old Americans, arguably sharing similar backgrounds, possesses a unique perspective on this issue that may not be comprehensible to other groups, such as an elderly demographic. Thus, altering even a single one of these factors could significantly impact the outcome. As for another example, brand awareness from a social constructivist position recognizes that the perception of brands is shaped by the cultural context and social interactions made by individuals. These social interactions could be initiated by influencers, whose persuasive abilities are constructed socially, and they only exist because social groups acknowledge them. In addition, influencers gain their ability to persuade their followers due to the attention and validation they receive, which itself is shaped by societal norms, values, and trends.

With a relativistic ontology, a subjective epistemological position follows. Epistemology refers to "how we come to know what we know." (Grix 2002, 177), and with a subjective epistemology, we recognize that knowledge is created socially, and that subjective perspectives are valid (Grix 2002, 178). In this research, a subjective epistemology is seen in the certain attitudes we hold toward the topic, which affects both the collection of data, and the analysis, however, we believe our subjectivity is a valuable resource for making meaning (Braun and Clarke 2022, 55). For instance, as Danish researchers in the target audience of the Danish brand, Kreafunk, we share similar contextual backgrounds with the brand, meaning that we have greater ability to understand and study Kreafunk's interests, than non-Danish researchers would have. Furthermore, being in the same age group as the American participants, we arguably have an enhanced capability to relate to and understand the language, compared to researchers from other generations. Therefore, given the inherent subjectivity among individuals, other researchers may only replicate this thesis to a certain extent, as acknowledged in social constructivist research (Grix 2002, 178). Also, while our subjectivism affects the collection of empirical data, our relatability to the participants equips us with the qualifications to ask the most relevant questions regarding their perceptions of influencer marketing. This, in turn, provides us with a solid foundation for initiating the analysis, and looking deeper into the nuances of the Americans' perspectives.

In terms of methodology, with a relativistic ontology, follows a qualitative approach. This entails a search for understanding how reality is constructed based on our participants' social contexts, interactions, and interpretations. Thus, we need more in-depth answers from our participants in order to analyze their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations on influencer marketing and Kreafunk. This can for example be seen in our collection methods, qualitative survey and interview, as we have constructed questions that allow participants to reflect on certain topics without limiting them in their answers. All methodological choices are influenced by our qualitative approach, and these will be further elaborated in chapter 6, Methodology and Methods.

3 Structure and Research Design

In this chapter, we outline the structure of the thesis, briefly describing the content of each chapter, their interrelations, and their relevance to the research question. Furthermore, we explore the implications brought by our choice of philosophy of science, in relation to the various chapters of the thesis.

Earlier in the thesis, we have presented the aim of this thesis, which is to uncover the ideal influencer characteristics on the American market, for Kreafunk to utilize in future attempts of creating brand awareness on the market. Furthermore, as mentioned in the above chapter on philosophy of science, we approach the research from a social constructivist perspective, which entails a relativistic ontology and subjective epistemology, affecting the choices in relation to theoretical framework, collection of empirical data, as well as qualitative methodology and methods. Thereby, it impacts the conclusion we are able to reach.

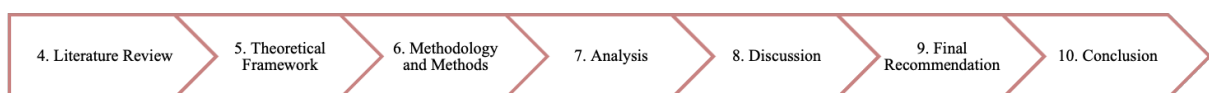Moving forward, the thesis will follow the structural layout depicted below in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Structure of Thesis

In chapter 4, Literature Review, we will present existing research within the field of influencer marketing and brand awareness, to establish a knowledge foundation while identifying gaps that we are able to explore. The literature review is divided into four sections, each reviewing

relevant literature topically related to our project focus. First, literature on influencers and influencer marketing is reviewed, which includes research on influencer fits and influencer relationships. Second, literature on using influencer marketing specifically to increase brand awareness is covered, and third, literature examining American consumer preferences in regard to influencer marketing is reviewed. Finally, previous research methods used in the area of influencer marketing will be evaluated, methods will be critiqued, and our contributions considering the identified research gaps will be presented. Though we search for research subscribing to different world-views, whereof a more psychological world-view, evidently, is prominent in this research area, our social constructivist stance naturally influences our approach to reviewing literature, as we seek not only the most prominent studies, but also studies aligning with our social constructivist perspective. It is critical to consider research with different philosophical positions in order to pinpoint areas where we as social constructivists can contribute, as well as theories and research that align with our interests, methodology, and methods.

Chapter 5, Theoretical Framework, will provide an elaboration of our choice and understanding of the theoretical framework, consisting of influencer marketing, congruity theory, source credibility theory, the concept of consumer involvement, and brand awareness. The considerations behind this framework are based upon the literature review, philosophical stance, as well as the data gathered through our qualitative survey. This is further explained in the introduction of chapter 5. Moreover, a combination of various theoretical aspects within the influencer marketing field, allows for a comprehensive understanding of our data, despite its complexity, compared to a less extensive framework. Besides presentations of each part of the framework, the chapter includes an assessment of the theoretical choices, a recapitulation, and a final section that elucidates the interplay of the theories and concepts. As discovered in the literature review, research from a social constructivist perspective in this field is limited. Therefore, comments on how we can apply the different aspects within the theoretical framework from this philosophical standpoint are provided throughout the chapter.

In chapter 6, our methodological considerations and methods will be presented. First, a section regarding our qualitative methodology, which is a natural fit with our social constructivist approach, will be provided, describing our use of methods, and the implications they have on our research. Next, we will account for how our data has been collected, which will include an elaboration on the methods for making a qualitative online survey as well as a qualitative

interview. The survey is completed by American consumers, meaning that our data is based on social constructions created within the groups to which our participants belong. Consequently, other members of these groups are likely to share similar perceptions, however, keeping in mind that they too belong to other social groups. In addition, since our survey data is based on American consumers, our findings may primarily reflect social constructions specific to this demographic. The interview is with a Kreafunk representative and will ensure that we possess the knowledge enabling us to discuss implications of the findings while considering Kreafunk's strategic aims. Following this, empirical data sections will summarize the qualitative data we have obtained. Lastly, our analytical method, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, will be presented in detail. This method acknowledges benefits to our subjectivity as it focuses on meaning-making rather than truth-seeking, and is rooted within the qualitative paradigm, which means it is a suitable method for qualitative research with a social constructivist perspective. Our qualitative methods enable us to gather rich understandings of our participants' beliefs and attitudes, and the thematic analysis offers a thematic overview of the data, enabling us to make meaning by interpreting our participants' answers, utilizing the above-mentioned theoretical framework. We acknowledge that the subjectivity inherent in our chosen analytical method, as well as our social constructivist position, limits possibilities of replicating our findings.

Chapter 7 will present the analysis, which consists of two main sections, followed by a recapitulation. The first section will focus on Americans' perception of influencer marketing, including perceptions of influencer characteristics and content type, while the second section will concern the Americans' perception of Kreafunk, which will include perceptions of their products, status as a foreign and unfamiliar brand, and preferred influencer types based on brand perceptions. We acknowledge that some of these perceptions might be affected by a few of the participants' relation to us. However, it is important to note that their primary social groups are arguably based in the United States, thus the influence from these groups are likely greater. As mentioned, a recapitulation of the analysis will be provided as well. Although our research question primarily focuses on Kreafunk, it is relevant to examine Americans' general attitudes toward influencer marketing before concentrating fully on Kreafunk. This is relevant since the attitudes formed through experiences with likely American brands may not necessarily apply to an unknown or foreign brand like Kreafunk. By understanding these general attitudes, we can better contextualize our findings when we shift our focus specifically to Kreafunk. This approach contributes general knowledge to the field, relevant for both

researchers and marketing professionals, while allowing us to provide a more personalized and specific recommendation for Kreafunk.

In chapter 8, Discussion, we will discuss our findings from the analysis. On the basis of our interpretation of the qualitative data, we provide a presentation and discussion of our contributions we make specifically to the field of influencer marketing, and in regard to Kreafunk. Furthermore, the findings will be discussed against previous research, particularly, against what is presented in the literature review and theoretical framework, including a discussion of how our findings can contribute to social constructivist research. Both discussions set the stage for us being able to answer the research question as they will provide essential knowledge on how Kreafunk should utilize influencer marketing to create brand awareness in the American market. The chapter will further provide a discussion of practical limitations of the study, as well as possible topics relevant for future research.

Chapter 9, Final Recommendation for Kreafunk, will answer our research question by offering a recommendation for Kreafunk on characteristics of an influencer, they should ideally collaborate with in order to create brand awareness on the American market. The recommendation is based on survey responses from American participants and is made in alignment with Kreafunk's interests. This chapter is meant to be read by Kreafunk for a concise and clear explanation of how they can generate brand awareness on the American market.

The final chapter, Conclusion, will compile all of the most prominent findings and contributions, detailing how we arrived at these conclusions.

4 Literature Review

In the following chapter, we present relevant literature within the field of influencer marketing and brand awareness. The literature review is made in a traditional style, and we subscribe to Li and Wang (2018) in the creation of this review. Li and Wang (2018) build on the definition of Jesson et al. (2011), who define a traditional literature review as "a written appraisal of what is already known [...] with no prescribed methodology" (as cited in Li and Wang 2018, 125). However, the information will be presented thematically, meaning it focuses on "the themes emerging from the primary studies [...], and the flow of information proceeds through arguments." (Li and Wang 2018, 130), meaning a logical presentation of evidence. Specifically

for our review, we have defined a problem, and from our predefined research question, we have searched, selected, and read relevant literature, organized the data, and finally, written up the review (Li and Wang 2018, 126-129). The traditional literature review's purpose is "to *set the stage* for a new study." (Li and Wang 2018, 125), by presenting and evaluating previous research within the field.

Furthermore, Cronin et al. (2008) contribute to our understanding of a traditional literature review in their argumentation that it provides "the reader with a comprehensive background for understanding current knowledge and highlighting the significance of new research." (38). Additionally, the review presents the reader with gaps within the field, as well as an explanation of which aspects will be the focus in this thesis. Finally, the traditional literature review has helped refine and focus our initial research question and helped develop our theoretical framework (Cronin et al. 2008, 38), in collaboration with our empirical data.

Our literature review is divided into four sections, of which the first three each focus on aspects relevant for understanding the background of our research. The first section concerns influencer marketing in general, including different influencer characteristics and consumer preferences. The second section focuses on brand awareness, and influencer marketing as a tool for creating or increasing this. The third section presents previous research on Americans' preferences within influencer marketing. Additionally, this section covers discovered research gaps, which this study will explore further. The fourth section presents methods used in previous research along with critiques of these, including limitations and research gaps. This finally provides an overview of our contributions to the discovered gaps in the field.

4.1 Influencer Marketing

During the past few years, brands' interest in influencers has increased as they have "discovered the far-reaching impact and viral growth potential of forging alliances with social media influencers to promote their products." (De Veirman et al. 2017, 798). Due to an increasing use of influencer marketing, the expenditure within this marketing activity has grown exponentially (Lou and Yuan 2019, 58; Martinez-Lopez et al. 2020, 579). In this subsection, different aspects within influencer marketing, including previous findings on consumer preferences, will be presented.

4.1.1 Choosing the Right Influencer

In relation to influencer marketing, several studies have shown the importance of consumer preferences when choosing an influencer to partner with. For instance, in an exploratory study, Chopra et al. (2021) found that a relevant fit between a product and the influencer is an important criterion for consumers, because they typically follow specific types of influencers within different product categories, and that this congruence is key to achieving great results when using influencer marketing (80). Belanche et al. (2021) agree on this aspect, as their research reveals that a "greater fit fosters more positive product attitudes among consumers and reduces their perceptions that the promotion is advertising." (188). They further argue that marketers should pay attention to this consumer-influencer fit, as it has an effect on followers' behavioral intentions, such as to taking influencers' advice (Belanche et al. 2021, 188).

Results from Belanche et al.'s (2021) study finally show that congruence between product and influencer as well as between consumer and influencer prompts congruence between consumer and product, resulting in "more favorable attitudes toward the product, as well as higher purchase and recommendation intentions" (186), which is optimal outcomes of influencer marketing. In addition, De Veirman et al. (2017) found that, when promoting divergent products, choosing to cooperate with an influencer with a high number of followers might result in a decrease in the brand's perceived uniqueness (798). This indicates that there is no influencer that is the right fit for all brands, meaning that it takes a lot of research and consideration to find the right influencer for one's brand.

Within influencer-consumer fits, a well-researched topic is the concept of parasocial relationships, meaning the relationship between influencers and their followers (Yuan and Lou 2020; Masuda et al. 2022). A parasocial relationship is based on parasocial interaction, which Horton and Wohl (1956) first describes as "audiences' illusory social experiences with media personae." (Yuan and Lou 2020, 134). The two terms, parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship, have previously been used interchangeably, however, the difference lies within the time frame of this relationship. A parasocial interaction is when the perception of a relationship is built during a one-time exposure, for instance in a movie or a single advertisement, whereas a parasocial relationship is built over a longer period of time, thus being more lasting, which, for instance, followers might experience with influencers on social media (Yuan and Lou 2020, 134).

Due to social media platforms, influencers are now able to engage in two-way communication with their followers, compared with traditional media, where these parasocial relationships were primarily based on one-way communication (Yuan and Lou 2020, 135; Masuda et al. 2022, 2). The study carried out by Yuan and Lou (2020) supports previous research on the fact that "followers are more likely to form stronger parasocial relationships with influencers whom they consider attractive and similar to themselves" (143), leading the consumer to have greater interest in products promoted by the influencer with whom they experience a parasocial relationship. Continuing, Masuda et al. (2022) argue based on their study that trustworthiness, perceived expertise, and especially, parasocial relationships are three characterizations that have an impact on influencers' possibility of persuading their followers to purchase. Additionally, the study revealed that the parasocial relationship was influenced by three personal attributes: attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness, whereof social attractiveness is of particular importance (Masuda et al. 2022, 8). Furthermore, researchers have found that although communication between influencer and consumer in real social relations is non-existent, some consumers still perceive influencers as intimate conversational partners due to the existence of parasocial relationships (Masuda et al. 2022, 2), meaning that even with no physical communication, consumers may perceive influencers as if they have a real-life relationship.

When it comes to parasocial interactions, an important trait for influencers is source credibility (Yuan and Lou 2020, 134). This means that the consumer's perception of products and services promoted by an influencer, depends on the influencer's credibility. The more trustworthy an influencer is, the better is the perception of the product or service (Chopra et al. 2021, 80). In relation to this, Hovland et al. (1953) proposed that perceived expertise and trustworthiness are the two key determinants of source credibility, to which McGuire (1985) suggested a third determinant, source attractiveness, also referred to as likeability (Saima and Kahn 2021, 505). In addition, Munnukka et al. (2016) introduced a fourth dimension, namely similarity (182). In relation to a source's credibility, an experimental study shows that "Instagram influencers with high numbers of followers are found more likeable [...] However, if the influencer follows very few accounts him-/herself, this can negatively impact popular influencers' likeability" (De Veirman et al. 2017, 798). Additionally, though influencers with high numbers of followers might seem tempting to partner up with, social media professionals evaluating these influencers cannot rely exclusively on quantitative measures such as follower count, likes, comments, and

shares, as "Such measures can easily be biased, for example, by purchasing fake followers or automated likes." (Haenlein et al. 2020, 17).

4.1.2 Influencers' Impact

A study carried out by Bognar et al. (2019) found that most users discuss recommended products with loved ones, meaning that the influencer's message is not only conveyed to followers, but to a larger group via word-of-mouth (307). Continuing, most users state that the frequency of an influencer's announcements has a positive impact on consumers' attention (Bognar et al. 2019, 307). Also, what is particularly interesting in this study examining consumers' attitudes on influencers is that "87% of examinees declare that when choosing the products between the competition, they pick a product recommended by influencers" (Bognar et al. 2019, 308), supporting the fact that influencer marketing does have a significant impact on consumers' behavior (Saima and Kahn 2021, 503; Ristevska-Jovanovska and Bogoevska-Gavrilova 2021, 107; Lou and Yuan 2019, 67). Bognar et al. (2019) further argue that influencers stand out as one of the most effective promotion channels due to the trust their followers place in them and their relatively low costs compared to alternative methods of promotion (305). These findings indicate the significant impact influencers can have on their followers.

4.1.3 Consumer Preferences within Product Categories

On the basis of in-depth interviews focusing on consumers' preferences, Chopra et al. (2021) were able to divide different product categories into three levels of preference: high, medium, and low. Highly preferred categories are beauty, fitness, fashion, and electronic gadgets/technology, among others (Chopra et al. 2021, 86). Photography, DIY (do it yourself), healthcare, and music are categories with medium preference, whereas parenting, toys, gaming, and dancing score lowest on the preference scale. The study, previously mentioned, by Bognar et al. (2019) supports that beauty and fashion are the two most popular areas of interests within influencer marketing, entertaining 90% and 86% of the examinees, respectively, while the categories of lifestyle and music each entertain about 15% of the examinees. The study further shows that all examinees between the age of 18 and 35 follow influencers, and that video is the far most preferred type of communication, followed by photographic communication, whereas textual communication is only preferred by a few examinees (Bognar et al. 2019, 306).

What is interesting in terms of this thesis focusing on Kreafunk, is the fact that electronic gadgets/technology and music are categories with high and medium levels of attention, respectively (Chopra et al. 2021, 86). According to Chopra et al. (2021), for the category concerning electronic gadgets/technology, thought leaders (100,000-500,000 followers) and professional bloggers (100,000-500,000 followers) are preferred in terms of influencer marketing, whereas for the music category, consumers prefer celebrities and professional bloggers (86). The study further showed that "personal relevance is more important than peer influence" (Chopra et al. 2021, 88), indicating that it is essential to choose the right influencer within particular product categories, as the influencer is then arguably also used to target a niche market. Thus, it is crucial that brands choose influencers with followers in the correct niche (Nanevi et al. 2022, 2; Lou and Yuan 2019, 69; Chopra et al. 2021, 87). This further implies the importance of the research both brands and influencers must do in order to build successful relationships (Nanevi et al. 2022, 2). Additionally, Agustian et al. (2023) argue that influencers "with a large number of followers (macro-influencers) can reach more people, but influencers with a more focused audience (micro-influencers) can have a stronger influence." (69). In relation to this, Freberg (2019) states that "Influencers, compared to celebrity endorsers who are paid spokespeople, are more relatable and viewed as a trustworthy source of information." (171), indicating that it is not the number of followers that should define how powerful an influencer is, as smaller influencers might as well possess great expertise within certain product categories. Thus, follower counts should not be the main reason for a brand to choose a specific influencer.

As for our research, Americans' perception on different fits within influencer marketing, namely consumer and influencer fit, influencer and product/brand fit, and consumer and product/brand fit are important to examine to decide whether this is something Kreafunk should pay particular attention to. Within the consumer and influencer fit, parasocial interactions and relationships are interesting to look into as this might as well be an important factor in choosing the right influencers for Kreafunk. Furthermore, source credibility, including trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity, are relevant concepts to look into in terms of Americans' preferences for influencers. Lastly, it is relevant to look into whether Americans regard perceived relevance as an important factor in terms of being affected by influencers.

4.2 Increasing Brand Awareness with Influencer Marketing

Due to Kreafunk's current position on the American market, what we find particularly interesting, is the possibility of using influencer marketing as a marketing tool for increasing brand awareness (Ristevska-Jovanovska and Bogoevska-Gavrilova 2021, 107), as the first step to gaining foothold on the American market. Previous research has proven that influencer marketing can be used for this purpose (Agustian et al. 2023, 69; Ferina et al. 2021, 167; Ristevska-Jovanovska and Bogoevska-Gavrilova 2021, 107).

4.2.1 Brand Awareness

The concept of brand awareness refers to how easily consumers are able to recognize a brand, which will increase as the brand is being exposed in various contexts. Furthermore, brand awareness develops strong brands (Ristevska-Jovanovska and Bogoevska-Gavrilova 2021, 107), as consumers can more easily identify and recall brands they are familiar with, according to Farquhar (1989). Researchers agree that there are four levels of brand awareness, which constitute the Brand Awareness Pyramid (Aaker 1996, 114-115): 1) Unaware of Brand, 2) Brand Recognition, 3) Brand Recall, and 4) Top of Mind, whereof the ultimate goal within brand awareness is "to achieve the top level of the pyramid because the consumer will attend to choose the brand that they remembered" (Ferina et al. 2021, 168).

Social media and its possibilities for interaction and spreading of information has a large impact when it comes to increasing brand awareness (Aula 2010, 43; Hanna et al. 2011, 266). This is significant as, for instance, consumers tend to trust reviews on social media (Ahmad et al. 2022, 403), and such reviews could be incorporated in a brand's marketing mix by collaborating with influencers.

4.2.2 Impact of Influencer Marketing on Brand Awareness

A primary goal for influencer marketing is to increase brand awareness (Ristevska-Jovanovska and Bogoevska-Gavrilova 2021, 107), and researchers have investigated Instagram as a social media for influencer marketing, and there is clear consensus that utilizing this platform has a positive effect on increasing brand awareness (Bognar et al. 2019, 306; Ristevska-Jovanovska and Bogoevska-Gavrilova 2021, 110; Lou and Yuan 2019, 58). This is due to, among other things, the fact that Instagram influencers are perceived as ordinary people (Ristevska-Jovanovska and Bogoevska-Gavrilova 2021, 105), and that Instagram "delivers a channel to

feature customers, creating a closely tied, meaningful, and real connection." (Copeland and Zhao 2020, 265).

However, a study by Ferina et al. (2021) agrees that influencer marketing does affect brand awareness positively, yet it only happens temporarily, and in order for a brand to stay interesting for consumers, influencer marketing "must be accompanied by other marketing strategies to support maximum results." (167). Other researchers support this thought, and Brown and Hayes (2008) suggest that influencer marketing should not be a replacement for all marketing activities but should rather be integrated in a company's marketing strategy, despite anecdotal evidence indicating that online influencer marketing generates higher sales and returns on investment compared to traditional marketing efforts (Leung et al. 2022, 228).

Furthermore, in order to improve brand awareness, Ferina et al. (2021) argue that advertisements must be seen as attractive by the consumers, and the content needs to be unique in order for the consumers to remember the brand (171). A factor that can impact the effect of influencer marketing, thus advertisements, is consumer involvement as it affects perceived relevance of the influencer's content (Kim 2003, 256-257). According to Lou and Yuan (2019), it is important for brands to remember that the influencers are professional content creators, and that they should make room for influencers' own interpretation of the brand in order to create unique and informative content (69). Furthermore, brands should also be cautious of the number of brands the influencer is collaborating with at the time, as too many partnerships might do more harm than good (Ferina et al. 2021, 170).

In terms of using influencer marketing to increase brand awareness, we assume that two levels of brand awareness are possible to reach for an unknown brand, namely brand recognition and brand recall, meaning top of mind cannot be reached by solely using influencer marketing.

4.3 American Consumers' Preferences within Influencer Marketing

A study investigating different advertising techniques within influencer marketing on Chinese and American social media revealed that "American marketers focus more on the functionality of a product with less focus on the brand, due to the American consumers' focus on the reliability and usefulness of a product." (Nanevi et al. 2022, 2). In addition, the results show that Americans are used to products of a certain quality, meaning that they trust, and arguably

automatically assume, that products are of high quality. This further means that Americans do not only rely on luxury brands (Nanevi et al. 2022, 2). Another study focusing on American consumers showed that Americans "prefer short messages that are high in visual value" (Copeland and Zhao 2020, 265), and a third study shows that the informative value of influencer content is important to Americans (Lou and Yuan 2019, 67).

As to our knowledge, this covers what researchers have previously found specifically on American consumers' preferences within influencer marketing. The relatively limited amount of research on American consumers is arguably due to the fact that influencer marketing in general "has not been adequately researched." (Nanevi et al. 2022, 1). Hence, this thesis will both contribute to research on influencer marketing in general, as well as research on American consumers' preferences.

4.4 Methods, Critique, and Our Contributions

By evaluating previously mentioned research in terms of methods and theoretical frameworks, we are able to identify the aspects we can contribute with in the investigation of our research question.

First, it is apparent that researchers use both qualitative and quantitative methods when investigating influencer marketing, and that most research limits the way participants can express themselves by asking closed questions or providing Likert scales. Furthermore, some of the mentioned studies use statistical tools when analyzing the data, leaving no room for researchers to interpret responses individually. Also, the studies presented in the literature review are primarily based on data from non-Americans, and further, most research is done on the fashion and beauty industry. This leads us to collect our own qualitative data, through open-ended questions, concerning American consumers' perception of influencer marketing, their preferences within the field. This includes preferences regarding influencers, particularly within the product category of which Kreafunk operates, namely audio products.

Second, looking into the theoretical frameworks used to analyze data for the presented influencer marketing research, it is evident that psychology is the most frequently explored theoretical field. Even though there is consensus that influencer marketing is relevant for increasing brand awareness, most research investigates the area of purchase intention, leaving

a gap in the research of influencer marketing and brand awareness, as well as in a social constructivist perspective.

Summing up, we have discovered that the research on influencer marketing is limited in qualitative research, and that a focus on American consumers' preferences is limited as well, which are aspects this thesis will contribute to. In addition, considering this literature review, it becomes apparent that influencer marketing research within social constructivism is particularly limited, which this study will contribute to as well.

5 Theoretical Framework

The following chapter consists of eight sections. In the first section, we present the field of influencer marketing, including our understanding of influencers. In the second section, we focus on brand awareness, including levels of brand awareness that can be achieved by incorporating influencer marketing in a brand's marketing strategy. The third, fourth, and fifth sections concern congruity theory, source credibility theory, and the concept of consumer involvement, respectively. These theoretical aspects make our influencer marketing framework, which is focusing on the link to brand awareness. The framework is developed on the basis of reviewed literature, suitability for interpreting the qualitative data we have gathered through qualitative survey, and alignment with our philosophical stance of social constructivism. The sixth section is an assessment of this framework against other theoretical constructs. The seventh section is a recapitulation of the entire theoretical framework (i.e. influencer marketing, brand awareness, congruity theory, source credibility theory, and consumer involvement), whereas the final section provides an explanation as well as argumentation on how the elements within our framework complement each other.

5.1 Influencer Marketing

Prior to introducing our perceptions of an influencer and influencer marketing, it is relevant to examine other researchers' take on these terms.

5.1.1 What is an Influencer?

In order to understand what an influencer is, it is relevant to take a closer look at the verb 'influence'. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, influence is "to cause someone to change a behavior, belief, or opinion, or to cause something to be changed" (Cambridge Dictionary

n.d.a). Furthermore, in relation to a definition of 'influence', researchers attach importance to the word 'power' (Freberg 2019, 170; Brown and Hayes 2008, 49), indicating that it is not something everybody has, but rather something one has earned. For instance, Bentwood (2008) defines influence as "the capacity of power of persons or things to be a compelling force on or produce effects on the actions, behavior, opinions, etc. of others" (5).

Moving on in understanding what an influencer is, influencers stem from traditional opinion leaders, who can be defined as "individuals who exert a strong influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviours [...], usually via word of mouth [...], because of their superior status, social prestige, personal appeal or expertise." (Vrontis et al. 2021, 618). Today's influencers are defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "a person who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them" (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.b).

Looking at the main difference from traditional opinion leaders and this definition of influencers, it is evident that influencers are present on social media, which is why many researchers refer to influencers as online influencers or social media influencers (Leung et al. 2022, 228; Freberg et al. 2011, 90; Saima and Kahn 2021, 503; Freberg 2019, 170). Furthermore, it is acknowledged that influencers are individuals who have built an audience, naturally and over time, consisting of engaged followers on social media (Leung et al. 2022, 228). In a marketing context, the influencers' primary purpose is to drive conversations about issues and brands that align with their own interests, indicating that they should not promote anything not aligning with their own beliefs and passions, as this might diminish trust from the followers. This is essential when it comes to being able to persuade the audience (Freberg 2019, 171). Solis and Breakenridge (2009) further argue that influencers are "passionate and skilled professionals who know how to communicate, engage, and create dialogue for all the right reasons" (as cited in Freberg 2019, 170), acknowledging that being an influencer is a profession, which some even choose as a career, that requires certain skills, such as shaping consumers' attitudes (Vrontis et al. 2021, 618; Brown and Hayes 2008, 37).

As for our understanding of an influencer, we acknowledge that the difference between traditional opinion leaders and influencers, is that influencers appear on social media. Thus, we find it unnecessary to include 'social media' when referring to influencers. Moving forward, based on previous definitions, we understand influencers as content creators with the power to

persuade due to socially created perceptions, leveraging their online identity to share promotional information with their followers, aiming to benefit both the influencers' personal brand as well as the brands they have formed partnerships with.

5.1.2 What is Influencer Marketing?

Influencer marketing can be defined as "a process in digital marketing where opinion leaders (influencers) are identified and then integrated into a brand's brand communication on social media platforms." (Bakker 2018, 80). In addition, Freberg (2019) argues that the integration of an influencer can be seen as a partnership as it is important to align interests and goals in order to be as successful as possible (170). Martinez-Lopez et al. (2020) further express that this partnership "allows influencers and followers to participate in the co-creation of the brand image on social media" (579). The fact that both the influencer and its followers have an impact on the brand's image indicates how important choosing the right influencer is.

Several researchers express that influencer marketing bears resemblances to word-of-mouth marketing and may therefore be viewed as its digital counterpart (Bakker 2018, 79; Brown and Hayes 2008, 140; De Veirman et al. 2017, 798). Traditional word-of-mouth is "personal communication about a product that reaches buyers through channels not directly controlled by the company." (Bakker 2018, 80). These channels can be personal acquaintances such as friends and family members, and it is primarily a form of communication not requiring payment. Modern word-of-mouth in the internet age, or influencer marketing, on the contrary, "involves brand owners who engage people that have a large followership on social media platforms to speak - for payment - on their brand's behalf." (Bakker 2018, 80). Haenlein et al. (2020) additionally argue that "influencer marketing and social media are inherently linked" (7), as influencers rely on the visibility offered by social media platforms to gain recognition (Haenlein et al. 2020, 7). Other researchers acknowledge the difference between traditional word-of-mouth and influencer marketing by adding the word 'online' to their definition of influencer marketing, also indicating that social media is essential in modern influencer marketing (Leung et al. 2022, 228).

What characterizes influencer marketing in contrast to word-of-mouth is, therefore, a contractual partnership with a brand, including the influencer being present on social media and getting paid, for instance with free products, or money (Vrontis et al. 2021, 618). In relation

to this, when influencers post anything related to the brand they have a partnership with, they are required to mark it as advertising so that consumers are able to distinguish between paid and voluntary, and arguably more genuine, endorsements (Bakker 2018, 80; Freberg 2019, 171).

On the basis of the above elaboration, our understanding of influencer marketing is that it is the practice carried out by marketing professionals, where they incorporate partnerships with influencers in their marketing strategy to leverage the influencers' resources in order to reach and persuade the influencer's follower base, aiming to enhance the brand's performance. From our social constructivist position, we examine how social constructions impact the perception of marketing.

5.2 Brand Awareness

Influencer marketing can be utilized for a number of reasons. However, since the aim of this thesis is to discover how Kreafunk can establish a presence on the American market using influencer marketing, we will focus on utilizing it for creating brand awareness. Therefore, this concept will be elaborated next.

The concept of brand awareness is a part of the broader construct known as brand equity. Brand equity, a construct within marketing, encompasses various concepts such as brand loyalty and market behavior (Aaker 1996, 105), however, these are irrelevant to examine for an unknown brand like Kreafunk. Therefore, we have chosen to focus solely on the concept of brand awareness, as we believe that this is the most important initial step for an unknown brand.

Essentially, brand awareness measures the brand's presence in the minds of consumers, meaning how well-known or familiar a brand is to consumers. Furthermore, it can affect peoples' perceptions and attitudes, and be the incentive to brand choice, and even loyalty (Aaker 1996, 114). Thus, building and enhancing brand awareness involve increasing brand familiarity through repeated exposure (Ferina et al. 2021, 168). A prominent researcher within the field of brand equity, David Aaker, (Taleghani and Almasi 2011, 65), has developed a pyramid known as the Brand Awareness Pyramid or the Aaker Pyramid, which is recognized by several researchers (Ferina et al. 2021, 168; Yanuar et al. 2021, 150).

Aaker's Brand Awareness Pyramid identifies four levels of brand awareness: 1) Unaware of Brand, 2) Brand Recognition, 3) Brand Recall, and 4) Top of Mind (Ferina et al. 2021, 168). At level 1, the brand is unknown to the consumer. Based on Kreafunk being a foreign brand on the American market, we expect that most of our American participants are at this level. Our data demonstrates this as well, which we will come back to in subsection 6.3.1. At level 2, brand recognition, consumers can identify the brand when they encounter it, whereas at level 3, brand recall, the consumer is able to remember the brand without any prompts or assistance. Finally, level 4, top of mind, refers to when the brand is first-named in a recall situation. During this stage, consumers will promptly recall the associated brand when queried about the product category (Aaker 1996, 114; Ferina et al. 2021, 168). For a new brand in a market, such as Kreafunk on the American market, brand recognition is particularly important (Aaker 1996, 115). Nevertheless, as Kreafunk is an online web shop too, brand recall becomes significant as well, since consumers must actively seek and retrieve the brand from memory when necessary (Keller 2013, 74). Therefore, we believe that we are able to exclude level 4, top of mind, as a goal and attainable objective for Kreafunk at this point in time in their American venture.

A visual representation of the Brand Awareness Pyramid can be seen below in Figure 2:
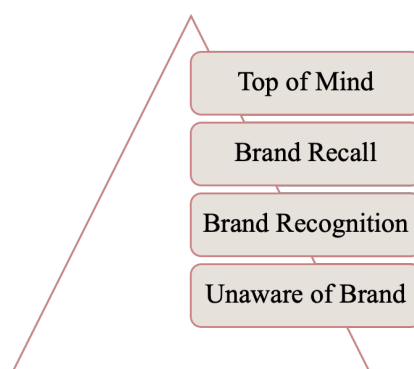
Figure 2: Brand Awareness Pyramid

5.3 Congruity Theory

In influencer marketing, a primary goal is to change the attitude of the consumer, for instance, to increase brand awareness. In relation to this, it is relevant to look at congruity theory, first proposed by Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955), which is oriented toward communication and persuasion contexts. The theory states the principle of congruity as "changes in evaluation are always in the direction of increased congruity with the existing frame of reference." (43),

meaning that people are more likely to change their attitude when they experience consistency between their own beliefs and values, and the stimulus or communicator. Thus, a communicator might convey a statement regarding a specific belief or product, which can be either positive or negative. The audience holds pre-existing attitudes toward both the product and the communicator, influencing whether congruence is achieved (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955, 43). While the theory primarily addresses attitudes as either favorable, unfavorable, or neutral, we claim that a pre-existing attitude could also be non-existent due to unawareness, as being neutral does not necessarily equal being non-existent. Furthermore, the audience's attitudes then tend to adjust in a direction that fosters greater congruence, as individuals are driven to align their attitudes and attain harmony. In addition, according to the congruity principle, consumers usually recall and prefer congruent information over incongruent information (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955, 43). Additionally, when congruence is experienced, stronger connections to the brand or product are created, and the possibility of consumers recalling brands is enhanced (Kim and Kim 2021, 406).

Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955) do not account for factors such as social media and influencers. However, since these are substantial parts of this research, we will supplement with a more recent theoretical take on congruity theory. The additional theoretical conceptualization will be presented next.

5.3.1 A Tripartite Model of Congruence: Influencer, Product, and Consumer

In advertising and marketing literature, congruence "indicates consumers' perception of similarity in various ways" (Lee et al. 2012, 1559), meaning how well the consumers experience a fit between their current attitude, and what they are being exposed to. In relation to this, Varadarajan and Menon (1988) define fit as "the perceived link between a cause and the firm's product line, brand image, position, and/or target market" (Lee et al. 2012, 1559). The cause can, for instance, be an influencer, meaning that a fit is the perceived link between an influencer and a brand, and its operations. Furthermore, it is also evident that consumers "evaluate information more favorably if they perceive their own fit with the influencer but also if the influencer seems to fit well with the entity (e.g., product, brand, outfit) that he or she is promoting." (Belanche et al. 2021, 187). If neither of these links are apparent to the consumer, it is likely that the persuasive communication of encouraging consumers to embrace the promoted brand will fail (Belanche et al. 2021, 187). As apparent from the above, definitions

on congruence and fit match each other, leading us to use these terms interchangeably moving forward.

In an influencer marketing campaign, there are three elements, namely the influencer, the product/brand, and the consumer (Audrezet et al. 2020, 563). All three elements of the tripartite model are interrelated and, according to Belanche et al. (2021), in order for a persuasive influencer communication to be successful, all three elements must align (187), meaning that matches between all these elements are relevant to consider in an analysis. In the following, each fit (i.e., influencer-consumer, influencer-product/brand, and consumer-product/brand) will be presented.

5.3.1.1 Influencer and Consumer

The first two elements in the tripartite model of congruence are the influencer and the consumer. This concerns the influencer, including both personal characteristics as well as content posted, and to which extent this matches with the consumer's beliefs and personality. Furthermore, "Perceived fit with personal interests is related to the extent that content is regarded as relevant to an individual's values" (Casaló et al. 2020, 513), thus congruent with one's interests and personality. It further explains that consumers' assessment of an advertisement will be improved when they perceive "a great match-up between his/her self-image and that of the endorser" (Casaló et al. 2020, 513). In addition, when consumers experience that an influencer's personality and interests match their own, they are more inclined and comfortable following advice regarding different matters from this influencer (Pradhan et al. 2016, 456).

A concept we find relevant to consider within the fit between influencers and consumers is parasocial interactions, which was originally put forth by Horton and Wohl (1956). Parasocial interaction refers to "a media user's reaction to a media performer such as that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner." (Dibble et al. 2016, 21), and though the interaction primarily happens one-way, the viewers get a feeling that they know the media performer to an extent corresponding to their real friends (Perse and Rubin 1989, 60). Related to this, Horton and Wohl (1956) also suggested a related concept, namely parasocial relationship, which indicates that a more lasting relationship is formed (Dibble et al. 2016, 21). These long-lasting relationships are, especially, formed due to social media enabling two-way communication (Yuan and Lou 2020, 135). In order to create these relationships, the consumer

places importance in the influencer possessing three key personal attributes, namely attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness. Furthermore, trustworthiness and perceived expertise are influencer characteristics that increase the chances for an influencer to persuade followers (Masuda et al. 2022, 8).

Summing up, if an influencer's content and personality aligns with a consumer's beliefs and personality, they are more likely to follow the ideas and behaviors advocated by the influencer (Casaló et al. 2020, 513), and perhaps experience a parasocial interaction or relationship, meaning that the higher the level of congruence between the two, the more likely is the influencer to be able to persuade the consumer.

5.3.1.2 Influencer and Product/Brand

For effective influencer marketing campaigns, consumers must also perceive the influencer and the product/brand, to be congruent. The perceived fit between the influencer and the product/brand is recognized as a key factor in collaborations, as this affects the influencer's perceived credibility (Ghosal et al. 2022, 89; Shan et al. 2019, 592). Furthermore, it is assumed by the theory that a higher perceived congruence between influencer and product "should lead to a more positive perception of the advertisement" (Xu and Pratt 2018, 960), emphasizing the importance of a fit between the two elements. Our findings, however, suggest that this depends on the universality of the product category being promoted. We will return to this in the analysis, subsection 7.1.5.

5.3.1.3 Consumer and Product/Brand

The last two elements, which should be congruent to have a successful influencer marketing campaign, are the consumer and the product. This last fit is dependent on the fit between the above-mentioned fits (i.e. influencer-consumer and influencer-product/brand). If consumers experience congruence between themselves and the influencer, and between the influencer and the product, they will most likely also experience an interest in the product. Furthermore, "an influencer that shows good fit with the product should prompt followers to assess the product as a match with their ideal selves too, with influences on their subsequent evaluations and behavioral intentions." (Belanche et al. 2021, 187), meaning that this fit has an impact on whether the consumer will view the product positively.

Although theory suggests that the product element should be considered independently of the brand for this particular fit, our data revealed that perceived congruence between consumer and brand also influences the effect of an influencer marketing campaign. Hence, we have included the brand in this context, which is why this fit is referred to as consumer-product/brand fit from now on.

As mentioned, according to the theory, consumer and product/brand fit is solely dependent on influencer-consumer fit and influencer-product/brand fit, however, our findings show that a consumer's perceived level of congruence is too affected by the promoted product or brand's popularity, or an existing desire. Thus, also suggesting that congruence between consumer and product/brand do in reality also affect influencer-consumer fit. For instance, a consumer's positive associations toward a product or brand may affect influencer perception, enhancing perceived congruence between themselves and the influencer. This will be revisited in the analysis, subsection 7.1.4.

We believe congruity theory and social constructivism align as the role of social interactions and cultural contexts is inevitable in the shaping of attitudes and beliefs. Congruity theory focuses on changing attitudes through messages that align with one's existing beliefs, and social constructivism asserts that these existing attitudes and beliefs are constructed through social interactions and shared experiences. This highlights the dynamic nature of attitudes, and the role of social connections in shaping perceptions. For instance, a consumer might experience a high level of congruence toward a product due to the product being popular among individuals in the consumer's social groups, implying that the attitude toward that product is constructed through social interactions.

A visualization of the above-mentioned model can be seen below in Figure 3. Note that our theoretical contributions have been illustrated with dotted arrows, which will be further elaborated in 5.8, Interplay of Theories and Concepts:
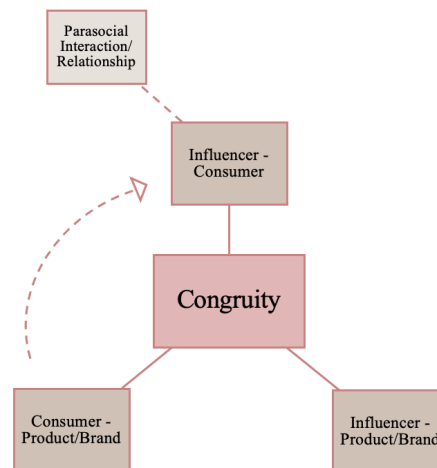
Figure 3: Congruity Theory

5.4 Source Credibility Theory

When attempting to influence someone, credibility is a key characteristic and thus, a very important aspect to consider when utilizing influencer marketing. Source credibility theory describes how the persuasiveness of communication is influenced by the perceived credibility of its source (Hovland and Weiss 1951, 635). As described by Roobina Ohanian (1990), "Source credibility is a term commonly used to imply a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message." (41). Furthermore, Ohanian (1990) defines source credibility as a three-dimensional construct, which includes trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Lou and Yuan 2019, 61; Ohanian 1990, 39). Later research introduces a fourth dimension, namely similarity, which becomes increasingly relevant in the context of influencer marketing (Lou and Yuan 2019, 61). In their adaptation of the theory, Munnukka et al.'s (2016) includes the dimension of similarity because of a rising tendency to use ordinary people as endorsers, instead of celebrities who are perceived as less convincing or believable (182). As we believe influencers can be ordinary people, who have managed to establish a follower base on social media due to a socially created perception that their content is relevant, we find the dimension of similarity to be significant for our research. Thus, we adopt the four-dimensional conceptualization of source credibility based on research from Munnukka et al. (2016) (Lou and Yuan 2019, 61). The four dimensions: 1) Trustworthiness, 2) Expertise, 3) Attractiveness, and 4) Similarity is presented in the next paragraphs.

Trustworthiness revolves around the receiver's perception of the source's, in this case the influencer's, honesty, sincerity, and truthfulness. It encapsulates the extent to which individuals

believe the source is conveying information that they genuinely consider to be valid and truthful (Lou and Yuan 2019, 61; Munnukka et al. 2016, 182). Today, when influencers post anything related to the brand they have a partnership with, they are required to mark it as advertising so that consumers are able to distinguish between paid and voluntary, and arguably more genuine, endorsements (Bakker 2018, 80; Freberg 2019, 171). Considering the dimension of trustworthiness, this could potentially lower credibility, as disclosing information as part of a paid partnership could be perceived as less genuine.

Expertise is the degree to which a source is perceived as being competent or qualified to make valid claims relating to a certain topic or subject, based on the source's knowledge or skills (Lou and Yuan 2019, 61; Munnukka et al. 2016, 182).

Attractiveness concerns both the physical attractiveness of the source, and their social appeal or likeability (Lou and Yuan 2019, 61), as individuals tend to form relationships more readily with media personalities who they perceive as attractive (Yuan and Lou 2020, 136).

Lastly, similarity refers to the perceived shared characteristics between the source and the receiver, encompassing both demographic and ideological factors such as culture and values. This similarity can foster a sense of connection and relatability between the receiver and the source, leading to more positive interpersonal liking (Lou and Yuan 2019, 61; Yuan and Lou 2020, 136). Additionally, greater similarity results in more favorable attitudes toward the advertised brand, leading to increased advertising effectiveness (Munnukka et al. 2016, 183).

Overall, these four dimensions of source credibility play a crucial role in how audiences perceive and evaluate sources of information, as well as how they engage with communicated content, ultimately shaping their attitudes and behaviors. It contributes to the overall impression of credibility and thus, can impact the effectiveness of communication efforts (Yuan and Lou 2020, 136).

Moreover, our findings suggest that source credibility has an additional impact on the perception of the promoted brand, particularly when the brand stands out to the extent that it is perceived as a second source of the communication, even if it is not the source in reality. Similarly, the perception of the promoted brand can influence the perception of the influencer, thereby affecting source credibility. These occurrences seem to be relevant primarily when the

dimensions of perceived trustworthiness and expertise is in question. For example, if an influencer's perceived trustworthiness or expertise is high or low, it is likely to have a positive or negative impact on brand perception, respectively. Likewise, if the promoted brand's perceived trustworthiness is high or low, it would reasonably have a positive or negative impact on the perception of the influencer, respectively, thus diminishing source credibility. Additionally, the theory does not account for any connections between the dimensions, meaning the probability that one dimension can affect another. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that the dimensions of expertise and similarity may have an impact on trustworthiness. We will return to this connection in the discussion, 8.1.2.2.

We believe that source credibility theory aligns with our social constructivist position, which emphasizes that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interactions and shared understandings within social groups. Influencers build their credibility through engagements and interactions with their followers, resulting in users creating a shared understanding of an influencer's level of trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity. For instance, the perception of the dimension of similarity can differ from one social group to another, as one group might perceive an influencer as similar, while another social group perceives the same influencer as someone dissimilar.

An illustration of the above-mentioned can be seen below in Figure 4, in which the dotted arrows visualize our theoretical contributions:
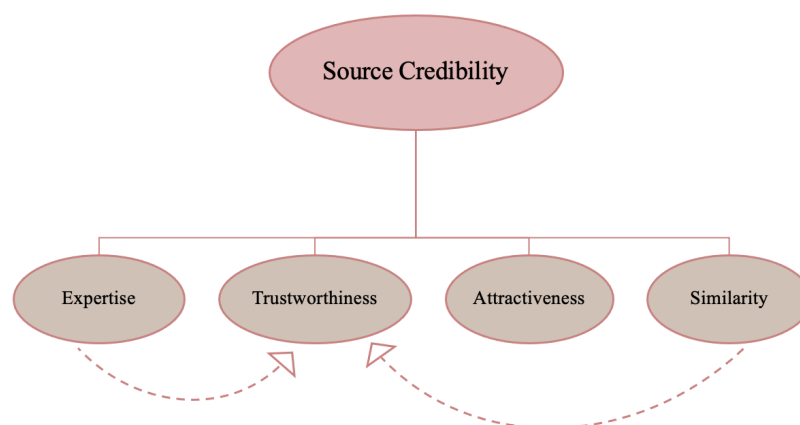
Figure 4: Source Credibility Theory

5.5 Consumer Involvement

According to our understanding, the concept of consumer involvement can indirectly impact advertising effectiveness through the constructs of source credibility and congruity theory. Therefore, we find it relevant to include, with reference to increasing brand awareness.

To our knowledge, previous research on involvement has mainly been related to purchase intention. However, in this thesis, we focus on its relation to brand awareness, as we argue this is the first step for Kreafunk as a currently unknown brand on the market. As mentioned, consumer involvement can indirectly affect the effectiveness of promotional efforts, depending on whether source credibility is perceived low or high, and if there is a perceived fit between influencer, consumer, and product/brand. According to Kim (2003), if involvement is low, repetitive advertisements might be more effective. However, our data indicates that it is possible to get overexposure, arguably causing negative effects on brand perception. This excessive exposure can result in audience fatigue, where individuals become less responsive or even annoyed by the advertisement. This will be elaborated in the analysis, subsection 7.2.2. In previous marketing research, three antecedents have been identified as determining factors of involvement (Kim 2003, 256-257). As defined in Kim (2003), these involvement antecedents are 1) Personal Characteristics, 2) Object Characteristics, and 3) Situational Characteristics (256-257).

Personal characteristics relate to the consumer's experiences, values, needs, or intrinsic interests in the general issue of the communication (Kim 2003, 257; Zaichkowsky 1986, 5-6). For instance, if someone has a strong personal interest in music, they may be highly involved in marketing campaigns related to audio products. Furthermore, their interest in the topic may motivate them to actively remember the product or brand, resulting in increased brand awareness.

Object characteristics refer to the consumer's perceived "personal relevance to materials in the campaign environment" (Kim 2003, 257), including the physical characteristics of the stimulus. This could relate to differences in the content, or in the variation of alternative products (Zaichkowsky 1986, 5-6), or in an influencer marketing context, differences in social media platforms. In essence, object characteristics signify how relevant or meaningful the product, or communicative effort, is to the individual consumer, taking into account their

specific preferences and lifestyle. For example, if someone is exposed to a social media campaign for a pair of headphones, involving an influencer they follow, they may perceive the stimulus as increasingly relevant. Conversely, if the consumer is aware of a competing brand that offers an almost identical product at a lower price point, the perceived relevance of the stimulus may diminish. In this way, object characteristics, such as brand variations and price points, can influence consumer perceptions of relevance and engagement with marketing stimuli.

Lastly, situational characteristics refer to the "level of involvement made up by the situation" (Kim 2003, 257), including the consumer's intention to purchase, their intention to use, or the occasion, meaning the specific event or situation during which the consumer interacts with the message (Zaichkowsky 1986, 5-6). For example, a person may attend to advertisements for Kreafunk's portable speaker with greater involvement, if they are thinking of buying that particular speaker. However, if the person is not looking for a new speaker, then involvement with speaker advertisements, in general, might be lower.

Though consumer involvement in theory is seen from the consumer's perspective, we believe, based on our knowledge on parasocial relationships, that it can be utilized by influencers in terms of actively producing content that will be perceived as relevant by their followers. This entails that the influencers seek knowledge about who their followers are. This will be further elaborated in the analysis, subsection 7.1.3.

We believe the concept of consumer involvement aligns with our position of social constructivism as consumers' involvement is influenced by their social interactions and cultural contexts. Thus, consumer involvement and its antecedents are not solely determined by individual preferences or characteristics, but are closely linked to the collective norms, values, and practices of a given society. For instance, interest in music, preference for a certain social media platform, or intention to purchase are all affected by the individual's social groups, based on what is perceived as relevant or popular in these groups.

The antecedents of consumer involvement are visualized in Figure 5 below:
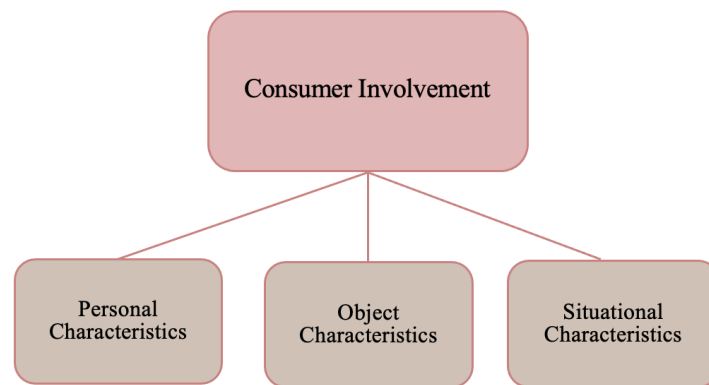
Figure 5: Concept of Consumer Involvement

5.6 Assessment of Influencer Marketing Framework

The three elaborated aspects of congruity, source credibility, and consumer involvement comprise our influencer marketing framework, which is utilized to investigate the link between influencer marketing and brand awareness. In this section, we will assess this framework against alternative theoretical constructs not chosen for this study.

Besides congruity theory, Social Judgment Theory (SJT) also focuses on attitude change based on existing beliefs. SJT examines how individuals evaluate information based on their existing attitudes by proposing three zones: acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment. The theory further explains how people assess information through assimilation and contrast processes. While SJT argues that persuasion occurs when new information falls within a consumer's latitude of acceptance, it also indicates that repetitive communication is necessary to reinforce these changes (Matthews 2019, 422). In contrast, congruity theory suggests that consumers might adjust their attitudes toward the source or the message to achieve congruence. Therefore, while SJT suggests that a consumer must accept a piece of information for persuasion to occur, congruity theory posits that a consumer can modify their attitude to align with the influencer, thus achieving congruence. Furthermore, we believe congruity theory is able to more closely connect with social constructivism, emphasizing the dynamic nature of attitudes in response to social interactions. Based on this, we believe congruity theory is a better fit for our framework.

Similar to source credibility theory, Social Influence Theory (SIT) also centers on factors that influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward advertisements, which ultimately affects persuasiveness of the communication. SIT focuses on how influence occurs when a person's opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors are impacted by others, intentionally or

unintentionally (Liu, Min and Han 2020, 526: Peng et al. 2017, 147). There are two main models of influence: normative influence, where behavior is shaped by the expectation to conform, and informational influence, where behavior is guided by personal assessment of information (Xu and Wu 2020, 1; Kaplan and Miller 1987, 306). SIT also acknowledges that social networks significantly affect individual behavior, with actions influencing friends and their circles, extending to people one may never meet directly (Xu and Wu 2020, 2). Thus, while both theories acknowledge the role of relationships in shaping attitudes and behaviors, source credibility focuses specifically on the relationship between the message source and the receiver, specifically in relation to the attributes of the source (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity). On the basis of this, we believe that source credibility aligns more closely with our research goal of identifying ideal influencer characteristics.

Besides consumer involvement, the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (ELM) is another theoretical construct offering perspectives on how consumers process persuasive messages. ELM distinguishes between the central route, where individuals carefully evaluate arguments, and the peripheral route, where cues like source attractiveness or message length influence persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1984, 70). This model suggests that attitudes formed via the central route are more persistent and predictive of behavior, while those formed via the peripheral route may be more easily changed (Petty et al. 1988, 119). While consumer involvement focuses on the interest and relevance to the consumer, ELM describes the cognitive routes through which persuasion occurs based on that involvement. Thus, ELM suggests a more psychological approach to understanding persuasion, whereas we believe consumer involvement can align more closely with our position as social constructivists.

Based on this, we assess that our influencer marketing framework, consisting of congruity theory, source credibility theory, and the concept of consumer involvement, is a relevant and favorable combination for best addressing our research question, and aligns more closely to a social constructivist position.

5.7 Recapitulation

In order to summarize what has been found on influencers and influencers marketing, we find it relevant to simply remind the reader of our understanding of the two. We consider influencers to be "content creators with the power to persuade due to socially created perceptions, leveraging their online identity to share promotional information with their followers, aiming

to benefit both the influencers' personal brand as well as the brands they have formed partnerships with.", as mentioned in subsection 5.1.1. Additionally, we understand influencer marketing as "the practice carried out by marketing professionals, where they incorporate partnerships with influencers in their marketing strategy to leverage the influencers' resources in order to reach and persuade the influencer's follower base, aiming to enhance the brand's performance.", as presented in subsection 5.1.2. As mentioned previously, there is a lack of research on Americans' perception of influencer marketing from a social constructivist position. Contrary, we as social constructivists believe that attitudes are influenced by the social context, including attitudes toward influencers and content types, as well as perceptions of credibility. Thus, we believe it is pertinent to explore this overlooked philosophical perspective in order to advance in this field of research.

Influencer marketing serves various purposes, but this thesis focuses on its utilization in terms of reaching brand awareness. Brand awareness influences consumer perceptions, choices, and loyalty, and reflects the extent to which a brand is recognized or familiar to consumers. David Aaker's Brand Awareness Pyramid outlines four levels of awareness: 1) Unaware of Brand, 2) Brand Recognition, 3) Brand Recall, and 4) Top of Mind. We assume that brand recognition and brand recall are levels of awareness that can be achieved for an unknown brand solely using influencer marketing. Building brand recognition is vital for brands entering new markets, such as Kreafunk on the American market, and brand recall also becomes significant for an online retailer like Kreafunk. While achieving top of mind status may not be feasible for Kreafunk in the American market at present, focusing on enhancing brand recognition and recall can be strategic goals.

Congruity theory suggests that consumers are more likely to make a change in attitude when perceiving consistency between their own beliefs and the message they receive. In regard to influencer marketing campaigns, the theory suggests that the three elements of such campaigns (i.e. influencer, consumer, and product/brand) must align in order for the communicational effort to be successful. However, our findings indicate that the need for all fits to align depends on the product category. In relation to the fit between influencer and consumer, we find parasocial interactions interesting as such relations can increase the effectiveness of the communication.

Source credibility theory underscores the significance of the source's perceived credibility in communication. Source credibility encompasses the dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity. Trustworthiness concerns the source's perceived honesty and sincerity, and expertise relates to the source's perceived competence or qualifications in the relevant subject matter. Attractiveness encompasses physical appeal and social likeability, and similarity refers to the perceived relatability. The theory does not consider potential interconnections between these dimensions, however, our findings suggest they may exist. Furthermore, our findings indicate that in certain instances, source credibility affects not only the perception of the advertisement, but also the perception of the promoted brand. Similarly, the perception of the promoted brand can influence the perception of the influencer.

Moreover, consumer involvement indirectly impacts promotional effectiveness through perceived source credibility, influenced by three antecedents: personal characteristics, object characteristics, and situational characteristics. On the basis of the theories, we assume that low source credibility leads to low consumer involvement, and high source credibility increases the likelihood of high consumer involvement. This will be elaborated in the next section.

5.8 Interplay of Theories and Concepts

The purpose of this thesis is to provide Kreafunk with recommendations in regard to creating brand awareness on the American market through influencer marketing, which we will research utilizing a framework consisting of congruity theory, source credibility theory, and concept of consumer involvement. A thorough explanation of the elements and their interconnection is provided next, followed by a visualization of the interplay in Figure 6 placed later in this chapter.

The constructs of source credibility and congruity theory impact the level of consumer involvement. Based on what we know about source credibility and consumer involvement as presented in sections 5.4 and 5.5, respectively, we assume the relation to be as follows: When source credibility is perceived low, consumer involvement will be low, due to the advertisement immediately being perceived as less relevant by the consumer. Conversely, when source credibility is perceived high, the probability of high consumer involvement is increased. However, high source credibility would not necessarily be equal to high consumer involvement, because of the various factors contributing to perceived relevance, hence

consumer involvement. When source credibility is perceived, it can be based on various factors, relating to one or more of the different antecedents of consumer involvement (i.e. personal characteristics, object characteristics, and situational characteristics).

Derived from what we know about congruity theory and consumer involvement as presented in section 5.3 and 5.5, respectively, we assume the relation to be as follows: If the perceived fit between influencer, consumer, and product/brand is minimal or non-existent, consumer involvement is low, due to lack of perceived relevance. Contrarily, if the perceived fit is of a higher level, the probability of high consumer involvement is increased. However, high source credibility does not automatically translate to high consumer involvement, given the multitude of factors influencing perceived relevance and, consequently, consumer involvement. When a fit is perceived, it can be on the basis of different factors, relating to one or more of the different antecedents of consumer involvement.

As previously noted, consumer involvement may indirectly influence the effectiveness of an advertisement and thereby, the level of brand awareness that can be achieved. Therefore, if consumer involvement is low, the possibility of achieving brand awareness is low, emphasizing the relevance of repetitive influencer advertisements (Kim 2003, 256). However, from our data, it is evident that some consumers might respond negatively to excessive exposure. We will return to this in the analysis, subsection 7.2.2. If consumer involvement is high, the chance of achieving brand awareness is enhanced, due to an increased time spent looking at the advertisement, potentially leaving a lasting impression.

In relation to this, understanding what Americans deem important regarding congruence and source credibility is crucial for crafting effective influencer marketing strategies, and in this case, for proposing a final recommendation to Kreafunk regarding their use of influencers on the American market.

The interplay explained above is visualized below in Figure 6, displaying the interconnection between the previously presented figures, thus the theoretical constructs. The theoretical aspects of congruity theory, source credibility, and consumer involvement all describe processes (i.e. perceptions of congruence and source credibility, and level of consumer involvement) within our framework of influencer marketing, which impact the possibility of generating brand awareness. Each aspect of the figure is described below.
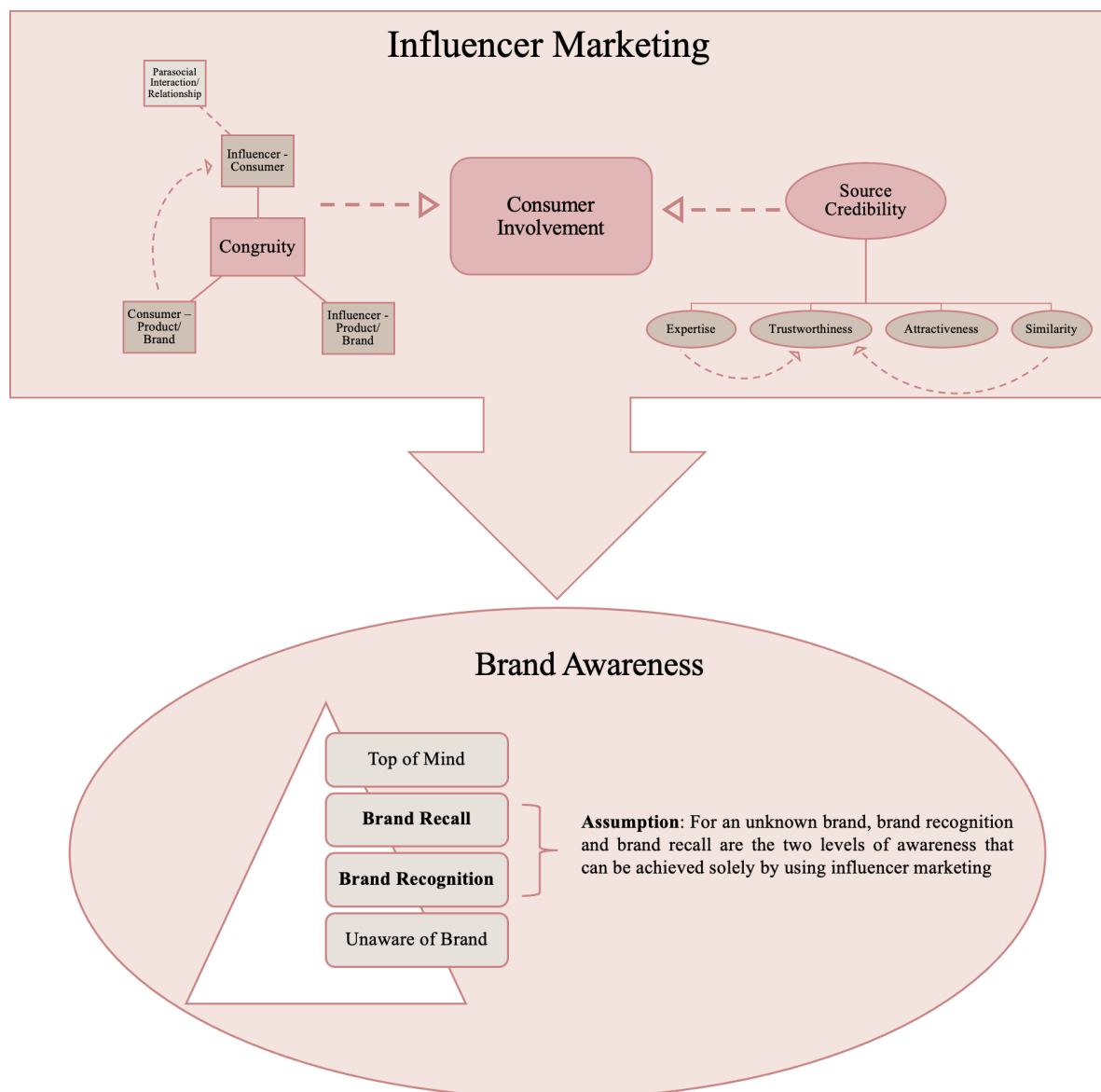
Figure 6: Interplay of Theories and Concepts

Figure 6 should be understood as follows: The figure contains two entities, namely Influencer Marketing and Brand Awareness, where the Influencer Marketing entity affects the Brand Awareness entity, hence, one pointing towards the other. The Brand Awareness entity reflects our assumption as we, based on previous research and theoretical knowledge explained in 5.2, assume that two levels of brand awareness can be achieved when an unknown brand solely utilizes influencer marketing, namely brand recognition and brand recall. This will be revisited later in both analysis and discussion.

The dotted arrows express additional relationships to the existing theories, showing a less direct or more conditional relationship compared to solid arrows. As mentioned, we believe

parasocial interaction/relationship is an important aspect to consider within the influencer-consumer fit in congruity theory. Also, based on findings from the survey responses, we found a connection between consumer-product/brand fit and influencer-consumer fit, which is not touched upon in the theory, thus a dotted arrow indicating that consumer-product/brand fit in fact affects influence-consumer fit. We will return to this connection in the discussion, subsection 8.1.2.1.

Regarding the dimensions in source credibility theory, our data uncovered a connection between the dimensions that is not mentioned in the theory, thus the dotted arrows indicate that both the expertise and similarity dimensions affect the trustworthiness dimension, which is also a connection we will return to in the discussion, subsection 8.1.2.2. Lastly, the two dotted arrows pointing toward consumer involvement indicate that both perceived congruence and source credibility have a significant impact on consumer involvement, which in turn, based on theoretical knowledge, is essential for creating brand awareness.

6 Methodology and Methods

This chapter consists of four sections, whereof the first covers our qualitative methodology. The second section contains a presentation of our choice of collection methods, including a qualitative online survey and qualitative interview. The third section is a description of our empirical data derived from the qualitative survey and interview. In addition, since TikTok and Instagram are social media platforms relevant for the thesis, these are presented as well. The fourth section provides our analytical method, reflexive thematic analysis.

6.1 Methodology: Qualitative

For this thesis, we have taken a qualitative approach, which was a natural choice based on our position as social constructivists. When working qualitatively, the focus is on gaining a complete and in-depth understanding of the "relationship between international culture and communication from the perspective of those inside a society" (Daymon and Holloway 2010, 7). Therefore, the purpose of the research question was to lead us to data that facilitated exploration of the issues or problems that were important to the individuals, organizations, groups, and communities being investigated (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 25). In relation to this project, we were thus interested in understanding the participants' perceptions and attitudes

toward influencer marketing as well as Kreafunk, and based on this, explore the issues of relevance to Kreafunk that appear through the data.

Furthermore, qualitative research's focus on in-depth understanding entails a delimited empirical field with typically only few individuals to provide deep and nuanced information. The goal of qualitative research is not to reach a conclusion that is representative of the view of an entire population group, for instance (Harboe 2006, 33). Thus, in this thesis, we did not seek to find a generalized, and potentially superficial, truth or perception that was valid for all Americans, but instead, complex and nuanced perceptions that were true to our participants.

Our qualitative approach had an impact on both the collection methods, thus the data, and also the analytical method, and these methodological considerations will be presented in the following sections.

6.2 Collection Methods

As for our collection methods, we have utilized a qualitative online survey method for our primary data, concerning Americans' perception of influencer marketing. For our secondary data concerning Kreafunk, their use of influencer marketing, and presence in the United States, we have conducted a qualitative interview with an employee at Kreafunk. In the following subsections, we present each method along with considerations regarding the choices. Following this, in 6.3 Empirical Data, summaries of the data collected will be provided.

6.2.1 Qualitative Online Survey

Our primary data was collected through a qualitative online survey, using the specialist survey software, SurveyXact. The purpose of the survey was to collect data on Americans' perception of influencer marketing, and the brand, Kreafunk. The survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions, and since "participants respond by typing responses using their own words [...], fully qualitative surveys *can* produce the rich and complex accounts" (Braun et al. 2021, 641), which are relevant to us as qualitative researchers. Therefore, it is important that we as researchers access the participants' language and terminology, as the survey captures what is important to them (Braun et al. 2021, 641). Furthermore, surveys facilitate social comfort, which is an advantage if participants might feel uncomfortable in face-to-face interactions, resulting in restraining their thoughts. Relatedly, avoiding the face-to-face meeting gives the

participant anonymity, which creates room for answering more freely without being, or at least having the feeling of being judged (Braun et al. 2021, 645). The flexibility further allows participants to complete the survey at all times during the day, and wherever is best fitted. In addition, as we and the participants are in different time-zones, an online survey is an advantageous solution (Braun et al. 2021, 646).

As seen above, we use the word "participant" to describe those who respond to our survey, and to explore the reason for that, we must first examine the usage of the following terms: respondent, informant, and participant, within the context of qualitative research. The term "respondent" is typically used for structured or semi-structured survey designs. Traditionally, respondents adhere to only answering exactly what the researcher asks – no more or less. In contrast, the term "informant" refers to a role where the individual is providing background knowledge or expertise within a specific community or context, implying a more ignorant or passive role of the researcher. Lastly, "participant" signifies the most active role of the individual being questioned, providing personal experiences and nuanced insights to the topic in question. Their proactive role contributes to the depth and validity of the research findings, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Morse 1991, 403-404). Thus, due to our survey's qualitative traits, such as broad and open-ended questions that encourage a deeper level of engagement and interaction with the individuals, the passive role often associated with the term respondent transcends. Furthermore, as researchers, we are highly engaged in the survey design, and in understanding the different aspects of the responses, as we are aware that the individuals answering are no experts. Therefore, we have chosen to adopt the term participant to describe the individuals answering our survey, acknowledging both their and our own active involvement and contribution to shaping the research.

6.2.1.1 Survey Design

For our survey design, we have employed Braun et al.'s (2021) qualitative online survey method. They propose that six elements need to be considered for the design of the qualitative survey: 1) question design, 2) survey length, 3) participant information, 4) piloting, 5) sample and sample size, and 6) follow-up data collection (646). These will all be presented next, followed by reflections on the order of the questions in our survey.

The first element, question design, and thus, wording of the questions, was crucial "as the fixed design means you cannot evolve questions during data collection, and you cannot probe or

clarify individual responses." (Braun et al. 2021, 647). A qualitative survey typically contains demographic-based and topic-based questions. The demographic-based questions helped us clarify who the participants were, allowing us to choose answers from participants relevant to our research. These questions were designed as "standard demographic click-box closed-response questions" (Braun et al. 2021, 647), which delivered an easy and 'clean' summary of the participants. For the demographic questions, using the right terminology was of high importance in order to avoid offending anyone. As the demographic questions were easy for the participants to answer, these were placed in the beginning of the survey to ensure a less demanding start (Braun et al. 2021, 647). For topic-based questions, clarity was very important, so the participants understood exactly what was being asked. Braun et al. (2021) found that "achieving maximum clarity for questions might require 'breaking the rules' of conventional interview question design." (648), which led us to create brackets providing guidance, as well as more closed questions, followed by an instruction to elaborate or further explain. Furthermore, we included our understanding of influencer marketing, and a brief description of Kreafunk, to ensure that all participants were aware of, what we consider, the foundation for questions relating to these terms. In hindsight, this may not have been necessary, however, this will be discussed in 8.4. In addition, by ending the survey with final open questions, encouraging the participants to reflect on the survey and provide potential additions relating to the topic, we sought to generate useful data on aspects we had not thought of ourselves (Braun et al. 2021, 648).

The second element important for us to consider, when conducting an online survey, was the length, which may affect participant motivation and commitment. When focusing on participants' perceptions, longer surveys seemed to be effective because "shorter responses to each question are often sufficient." (Braun et al. 2021, 648). However, we still kept in mind to maintain a certain simplicity to the questions, and a reader-friendly design of the survey, to avoid disengagement that may have led to short or incomplete responses.

The third element important for us to consider, was the participant information that a survey must have. This information contained instructions and explanations regarding the completion of the survey, for instance, the estimated completion time, and the fact that we sought detailed responses. As "some participants *are* likely to complete the survey without having read some or *any* of the participant information." (Braun et al. 2021, 648), we located key instructions

before the main questions, and incorporated a mandatory action, making the participants unable to continue without knowing about the participant information.

The fourth element was piloting, in which we presented pilot participants with the initial draft of the survey with an aim of editing and thus, improving the survey for the actual participants. Braun et al. (2021) found unexpectedly that the piloting phase was challenging due to a time-consuming process of recruiting pilot participants, leading them to recruit outside the market in which their study was carried out (649). To avoid making the same mistake in this time-limited thesis, we used fellow students as pilot participants with the main purpose of ensuring that the survey design and questions were comprehensible and thus, their relation to the American market was irrelevant. Feedback from our pilot participants suggested making the survey slightly shorter and simplifying one specific question.

The fifth element was sample and size, and Braun et al. (2021) have found that there is no final answer to the number of participants, however, the sample size should rather be shaped by "the scope of the study and breadth of the topic; the research question [...] and, relatedly, the depth and detail of the individual responses." (Braun et al. 2021, 649). Braun et al. (2021) further stated that "dataset richness and ability to address the questions become more important considerations than reaching an exact number" (649). Thus, we were not aiming for a specific number of participants, but rather sufficient data.

The sixth and last element to consider was follow-up data collection. Though the survey was predetermined and fixed, in qualitative online surveys, "there is scope for (pre-planned) *additional* follow-up data collection if needed." (Braun et al. 2021, 650). This meant, if participants were willing, we could reach out to participants after they have completed the surveys if we had further questions. We did this by inviting participants to provide their email address.

In terms of our survey, we designed it starting with an informational page to introduce the participant to the survey along with instructions. Next, we were asking for the participants' consent, so that we could use their responses even if they did not complete the survey, which would not be possible if the consent box was placed in the end. After this, the participants were asked three demographic-based questions before going to the main questions, namely the topic-based questions. These questions were organized in the order of broad topics in the beginning,

which narrows to more specific topics as the survey progresses. Thus, the structure of our survey was: questions on influencer marketing, usage of audio products, Kreafunk, and lastly, questions that relate to all of the topics.

The questions on influencer marketing were placed in the beginning, as we first wanted the participants to reflect on past experiences and preferences in regard to influencers and influencer marketing in general. In order to give the participants an easy start regarding their perception on influencer marketing, we started with a closed-response question on content types, in which click-boxes were provided. This left the question to be of different nature than the rest of the questions, entailing a different presentation in analysis. In hindsight, we realized some response options were too narrow, broad, or overlapping, leading us to only investigate the options from the click-boxes not overlapping with other responses. From the three analyzable options, we are aware that two options fall under the third, however, this will be further elaborated in the analysis, subsection 7.1.6.

Afterwards, we eased into the context of audio brands, before shifting the focus to the specific audio brand, Kreafunk. We did this, as we wanted the participants' reflections on their use of audio products and possibly other audio brands, before they were able to create a perception of Kreafunk and their products. Thus, they were able to form a perception of Kreafunk in comparison with brands they were already familiar with. Furthermore, we used different pictures for questions regarding Kreafunk. The first ones showed clean images of their products, and for a later question, the participants were shown screen dumps of the Kreafunk website. We chose this order, as we first wanted the participants' perceptions of Kreafunk's product without them being influenced by the Kreafunk's aesthetic. Afterwards, we were interested in their perception of the aesthetic as a whole, based on screen dumps of various Kreafunk website pages.

Lastly, final questions were made for the participants to reflect on several of the topics at the same time, in an attempt to explore their perception of the topics in more narrow contexts relevant for the research question. Therefore, they were placed at the end of the survey, to better enable the participants to answer by drawing from their responses and reflections in the previous questions. By structuring the survey in this manner, we avoided constricting the participants, and our carefully selected order of questions enabled them to provide thorough and relevant answers, building on their previous responses.

As for the transcription of the survey, we have gathered all quotes we found relevant in terms of the analysis, thus omitting all quotes that contain information outside the scope of this thesis. Our survey design can be found in appendix 1.

6.2.1.2 Projective Techniques

As for the wording of the questions, different projective techniques were used as a tool to design some of the questions, aiming to achieve maximum clarity. According to Donoghue (2000) "Projective techniques involve the use of vague, ambiguous, unstructured stimulus objects or situations in which the subject "projects" his or her personality, attitude, opinions and self-concept to give the situation some structure" (47). She further argues that projective techniques are used to "uncover feelings, beliefs, attitudes and motivation which many consumers find difficult to articulate" (Donoghue 2000, 47). Finally, Hindley and Font (2018) argue that "Projective techniques have considerable potential to study consumer behaviour" (208), and further state that they are widely used in commercial market research.

Researchers agree that there are five projective techniques: associative, constructive, completion, expressive, and choice ordering (Donoghue 2000, 49; Hindley and Font 2018, 202). In this thesis, the associative and constructive techniques have been used, thus these two are briefly elaborated. Firstly, when using the associative technique, the participants were presented with a stimulus, which in this case were pictures of some of Kreafunk's products, and they responded by indicating the first thought elicited by these pictures (Donoghue 2000, 49). Secondly, using the constructive technique, the participants were asked to construct a story based on a stimulus concept (Donoghue 2000, 49), and in this case, the story should describe how the participants could imagine themselves using Kreafunk's products. These techniques were used to encourage the participants to reflect by projecting themselves into different situations.

6.2.1.3 Survey Participants

As qualitative researchers, we were interested in hearing participants' opinions about influencer marketing, thus gaining rich insights into this specific topic, and we did not seek to achieve any statistical representativeness or claims of generalizability (Braun et al. 2021, 643). Therefore, we did a nonprobability sampling, and convenience sampling (Eldesouky et al. 2015, 362; Fleetwood n.d.), meaning that the participants were not entirely random, nor

completely representative of the population, as they were reached through American acquaintances living in the United States.

In terms of doing a convenience sampling, we were aware that using acquaintances to reach American consumers brought a certain concern, as there was a chance that, due to this connection, some of our participants already did have a perception of Danish and/or Scandinavian culture. This might have affected their perception of the Danish brand Kreafunk, and Scandinavia in general. Furthermore, from the information in the survey, all of the participants were aware that we are students enrolled at Aalborg University in Denmark, which might have led them to feeling pressured to be more positive about Kreafunk. Thereby, they might have answered what they believed we would want to hear, thus answering differently than if they were not aware of our and Kreafunk's shared connection to Denmark. However, as the qualitative survey was anonymous, the participants may as well not have perceived this pressure, thus answered genuinely.

As we were only interested in Americans' perception of influencer marketing and Kreafunk, we included demographic questions in the survey to ensure that the participants have permanent place of residence in the United States. Furthermore, as we had limited control of who answered the survey, other demographic questions regarding age and gender were significant in the selection of the final empirical data, to ensure relevance to our research question. Thus, when using the phrase "the Americans", we reference our American participants, acknowledging that the participants do not necessarily reflect the entire population.

As the participants were American residents, we were aware of potential cultural differences impacting understanding and perceptions and thus, this might have affected our interpretation of their responses. However, our data showed that responses came from individuals between the ages of 23 and 28, and as mentioned in chapter 2, Philosophy of Science, we are in the same age group as the participants, which arguably enhanced our capability to understand the language and thus, the Americans' responses, in comparison to researchers from other generations. This increased the validity of our interpretation of the data. Further elaboration on the participants can be found in subsection 6.3.1.

6.2.2 Qualitative Interview

In this subsection, we explain how we have collected our secondary data through a qualitative interview with Kreafunk's representative. Here, we clarify our understanding of a qualitative interview, how we use it, as well as a description of how we have structured and conducted our interview.

The data is collected through a qualitative background interview, which is needed for interpreting what would be relevant to include in our final recommendation for Kreafunk. The qualitative interview entails an interactional exchange of dialogue between participants, around a certain theme or topic, with a flexible structure (Edwards and Holland 2023, 4), and is about learning how another party, in this case Kreafunk, experiences "the world or how they think, act, feel, and develop" (Brinkmann 2022, 1). Furthermore, it necessitates a "perspective regarding knowledge as situated and contextual" (Edwards and Holland 2023, 4), requiring the researcher to consider and include relevant contexts to generate accurate, situated knowledge, thus creating meaning and understandings through a process of co-production (Edwards and Holland 2023, 4).

6.2.2.1 Interview Design

Our interview was semi-structured, meaning that prior to the interview, we made an interview guide with questions on aspects we deemed important in relation to our research topic (Edwards and Holland 2023, 29; Brinkmann 2022, 18). However, there remained a certain flexibility in how and when the questions were put, and how the interviewee could respond, as the questions were open and broad. Additionally, with this approach, we were able to explore any potential line of discussion that opened up by the interviewee (Edwards and Holland 2023, 29). Therefore, the interview was structured for our purpose of obtaining knowledge about Kreafunk, to be able to examine the possibility for them to create brand awareness on the American market using influencer marketing and thus, it revolved around Kreafunk's descriptions of their knowledge and experiences (Brinkmann 2022, 22). The interview was made face-to-face, making it possible for us to interpret words and tone (Brinkmann 2022, 25). As we are two researchers, one of us led the interview, while the other took notes.

In terms of our interview, the order in which we chose to ask the questions was based on having the broader topic in the beginning, and the narrower topics in the end. Therefore, the first topic

was related to Kreafunk in general. The second topic was concerned about Kreafunk's use of influencer marketing, and the third and last topic was about Kreafunk's operations on the American market, including their considerations relating to influencer marketing and brand awareness on the market. Given the nature of the interview, the sequence of topics held no particular importance, as the Kreafunk employee possessed expertise across all areas covered. Hence, we opted for what we deemed the most logical order.

As for the transcription of the interview, with consent, we recorded the entire interview, and afterwards, we used Good Tape, which is an AI transcription solution. To ensure the quality of the transcription, we listened to the interview while post-editing the AI transcription. We have made a thorough transcription, which is the starting point for valuable background knowledge for the reader, as well as important information on Kreafunk that will be used in the analysis, and the discussion. However, as this interview was not conducted as a research interview, but a background interview, providing data we are unable to find on their website, it has not been subject to interpretation in the analysis, but solely presented as empirical data, in 6.3.3. As soon as the transcription was done, the recording was deleted. The transcription can be found in appendix 2.

6.2.2.2 Interview Participant

The participant in our qualitative interview was an employee at Kreafunk, as we were interested in the company's own understanding of the brand, as well as their use of influencers, and operations in the United States. As elaborated in chapter 2, we take a social constructivist approach, thus acknowledging that meanings and understandings produced during our interview were results of co-construction between the interviewee from Kreafunk and us as researchers, and that it was affected by the broader contexts relevant to Kreafunk and us.

Prior to the interview, we provided the Kreafunk representative with an overview of the interview topics to prepare him for the interview. We believed this was the best possible way to get in-depth and thought-out responses, which in turn enabled us to answer our research questions and provide Kreafunk with a recommendation based on our research. However, we decided not to provide the employee with the entire interview guide, to avoid receiving a rehearsed speech.

6.3 Empirical Data

As mentioned above, we have collected data through a qualitative survey and interview, which in combination will help us to make a final recommendation for Kreafunk, regarding their use of influencer marketing on the American market. The empirical data from the survey and the interview will be presented, including general knowledge on TikTok and Instagram, as such knowledge is important for later discussion.

Primary data	Supporting background information
Qualitative Online Survey with American participants	Kreafunk's website and social media accounts
	General knowledge on TikTok and Instagram
	Interview with Kreafunk representative

Table 1: Empirical Data

6.3.1 Survey: Americans' Perception of Influencer Marketing

From our survey, we gathered insight into Americans' perception and opinions on influencer marketing, audio products, and Kreafunk, which is briefly presented in the following.

We initially received 20 responses, however, with some incomplete. Consequently, we narrowed it down to 11 responses, in which we were able to find sufficient answers to address our research question. Of the 11 participants, three were men, and eight were women, all between the ages of 23 and 28.

From the survey responses, it was evident that all participants had clear attitudes toward influencer marketing, and influencer characteristics they want to see in influencer marketing campaigns. In terms of influencer characteristics, some of the participants' focus areas were evidently expertise, sincerity, relatability, and humor. Other focus areas were the matter of influencers posting about unknown brands, which were perceived in varying ways, although mainly with suspicion. Though Kreafunk was an unknown brand for all of the participants, generally, the participants were positive toward Kreafunk's products. However, the responses

did present differing attitudes towards Kreafunk being a foreign brand, with some expressing positivity about the fact, while others expressed negativity. Furthermore, in terms of the participants' perception of Kreafunk, some expressed that Kreafunk and their products differentiate from what they are used to seeing from other audio brands.

The participants referred to both TikTok and Instagram as platforms on which they follow influencers, and watch influencer content, thus the two platforms will each be presented next, in order to be able to discuss the most suitable platform for Kreafunk's partnerships.

6.3.2 TikTok and Instagram

In relation to this thesis regarding influencer marketing, it is relevant to include users, content formats, and engagement rate on both TikTok and Instagram.

As for the users, consumer insights reports from 2024 on Statista show that Millennials constitute a significant portion of TikTok users in the United States, followed by Generation Z, being the second largest segment (Statista Consumer Insights 2024a, 8). For Instagram, the distribution is similar, however with the Millennial user group being slightly larger, and Generation Z group being slightly smaller compared to their equivalents on TikTok (Statista Consumer Insights 2024b, 8). While the age groups defining these generations are widely debated, it is most common to classify Generation Z as individuals born between 1997 and 2012[1], and Millennials as those born between 1981 and 1996[2] (Pew Research Center 2019).

However, though Statista is a recognized platform, the reports do not consider individuals below the age of 18, who are also present on social media, thus these reports exclude a segment of users. Therefore, it is relevant to consider statistics taking all age groups into account. A 2022 report from eMarketer shows that 18% of TikTok's monthly active users in the United States are between the ages of 12 and 17, implying that Generation Z does in fact make up a larger number of the total users than what was provided in Statista's report. Thus, Generation Z and Millennials each make up around 40% of TikTok's monthly active users in the United States (eMarketer 2022). In terms of Instagram, it is evident from another Statista report that 13 to 17-year-olds make up 8% of the total number of users (McLachlan 2024), which too

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[1] People between the age of 12 and 27 in 2024
[2] People between the age of 28 and 43 in 2024

indicates a larger Generation Z than first mentioned. Though the age groups presented in the statistics are not identical, they are similar enough for us to assume that Generation Z make up more of TikTok's total users, compared to Instagram.

In terms of supported content formats, the platforms are very similar to each other. Both platforms support short videos, photos, stories that are available for 24 hours, live videos, as well as adding captions, sound or voice overs, tags, and hashtags to the posts (TikTok n.d.; Instagram n.d.a; Instagram n.d.b; TikTok 2023). On Instagram, interactive features such as polls can be added to stories, whereas on TikTok, polls can be added to both stories, and video or photo posts (Instagram n.d.a; Owa n.d.). Moreover, TikTok also supports text-based content, offering more space for the users to express themselves in writing, than what is possible in captions and comments (TikTok 2023). Additionally, both platforms have a direct messaging feature that enables users to send private messages to each other (Instagram n.d.c; TikTok n.d.b). Both platforms also provide a discovery surface where the platforms source content based on algorithms that analyze accounts and content the user engages with, identifying their interests (Instagram n.d.d; TikTok n.d.c; QuickFrame 2023).

Looking at the engagement rate on the two platforms, which indicate how many people interact with the content by liking, commenting, sharing, or clicking (Agency Analytics n.d.), it is evident that nano-influencers (1,000-10,000 followers) drive the highest engagement. Though these influencers drive the most engagement on both platforms, the engagement rate is remarkably higher on TikTok compared to Instagram, as nano-influencers had an average engagement rate of 12% on TikTok in 2023, compared to Instagram's 2% the same year. As for influencers with a higher number of followers, they all drive around 1% engagement on Instagram, compared to around 10% on TikTok in 2023 (Lobo 2024). Overall, this shows that TikTok is better for engaging followers compared to Instagram.

From the above-written, it is evident that the two platforms, TikTok and Instagram, are alike in many ways in terms of content formats and possibilities within influencer marketing. As mentioned, in our data, we found divided attitudes toward the platforms, and therefore, different aspects linked to the decision of choosing a platform for influencer marketing will be discussed in chapter 8.

6.3.3 Interview: Kreafunk

This subsection serves as an overview of the data retrieved from the interview with Kreafunk's representative, responsible for e-commerce and digital marketing, including influencer marketing. The interview contributed to valuable and relevant knowledge on topics regarding Kreafunk, their use of influencer marketing, and Kreafunk in the United States. As mentioned, this interview serves as background knowledge, which is relevant when interpreting our primary data, namely the qualitative survey responses. As mentioned, the transcription of the interview can be found in appendix 2.

Kreafunk has existed for 12 years, and is a low-tech hi-fi brand selling speakers, headphones, electronic gadgets, and lighting. Also, Kreafunk is part of the interior industry as they focus on design as well. Furthermore, they are aware of consumer demands within sustainability, thus developing products using 100% recycled plastic. In addition, they are focusing on quality as they want to offer value for money. To ensure this, they design and develop products in collaboration with sound engineers, which in turn also differentiate them from off-the-shelf products, meaning products that can be ordered directly from a supplier, such as Alibaba, an online platform for global B2B trading.

Kreafunk's primary target group is women between 15 and 35 years old, however, with more masculine products, meaning those in black and gray colors, they also target men. Furthermore, with a new kids-category on the way, they are looking into parents as a new target group.

The company name, Kreafunk, is a combination of the two words 'creativity' and 'functionality'. Creativity refers to the expression of products of which Kreafunk differentiates from its competitors, Sonos and B&O, as they offer, for instance, a pink color option. The functionality refers to the fact that Kreafunk products are nothing else than Bluetooth products; there are no apps or other complicated settings, meaning there is easy access to these products.

6.3.3.1 Use of Influencer Marketing

Kreafunk has for the past six months used influencer marketing for creating brand awareness on the Danish market, and recently, also the German and French markets. They believe influencer marketing is efficient in making the products more relatable to the consumers, getting exposed to the right target group, and increasing brand searches. Even though it is not

used as a way of generating sales, they do expect that some of the attention transfers to purchases on the web shop or physical stores. They mainly use female influencers with a 50-60% female audience as a minimum, at least 3000 followers, and an engagement rate of minimum 3%. While not all criteria need to be met, these criteria serve as their guideline for choosing an influencer. They also place importance on the influencers' profiles' fit with Kreafunk's tone of voice and visual expression, so it resembles the product images on their website. Furthermore, they do not provide the influencers with discount codes or other kinds of commission, but only products to use for the promotional content.

6.3.3.2 Presence in the United States

For the past five years, it has been possible to sell to the American market through the web shop and a distributor. From conversations with the distributor, and from looking at the sales figures, it is evident that Kreafunk's products have been well received by the Americans. They see the United States as a country with many people, thus great opportunities as most of these people use headphones or speakers, which is why Kreafunk, and the distributor were certain that they would be able to gain a small market share. Though the products have been well received, expanding to the American market has not been without economic challenges. These challenges concern the cut for the distributor, freight charges, and advertising expenses. Due to very high advertising expenses in the United States, Kreafunk has only utilized organic advertising through social media.

As for the American target group, Kreafunk has not done an actual target group analysis nor a market analysis, however, they believe the target group is more or less the same as in Denmark, namely women between the ages of 15 and 35.

6.4 Analytical Method: Reflexive TA

The analytical method for this thesis is Reflexive Thematic Analysis developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022). This method will, in collaboration with our theoretical framework, enable us to analyze qualitative survey responses from Americans.

Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis, hereinafter referred to as reflexive TA, involves a six-phase process. This is not necessarily a linear process, but rather a recursive and reflexive process. Furthermore, reflexive TA encompasses methods deeply rooted in the

principles of a qualitative paradigm, making it a natural fit for qualitative research (Braun and Clarke 2022, 5).

The six phases: 1) familiarization, 2) data coding, 3) initial theme generation, 4) theme development and review, 5) theme refining, defining, and naming, and lastly, 6) writing up, are elaborated in the following paragraphs (Braun and Clarke 2022, 34).

The process of reflexive TA should begin with a familiarization of the data, which in this case was data collected from our survey. The phase of familiarization entails repeated reading of the text material, concentrating around the data and making notes when a data item or the dataset as a whole inspires analytic ideas. Familiarization also involves being critical about the data, meaning not only taking it in as information, but asking questions and trying to make meaning of it, in order to be able to develop patterns. For instance, the questions of how and why the participants stated something, are questions that could be thought about critically. However, it is also important to be reflexive, thus critical of our own interpretation of the data, asking questions about how the data could be interpreted, and why we interpret this way (Braun and Clarke 2022, 43-44). The next phase, data coding, involves an act of systematically and thoroughly coding through the dataset, identifying segments and finding meanings or concepts that are relevant to the research question, and assigning them a code label that captures the essence of the code (Braun and Clarke 2022, 35). This process is done multiple times to ensure thoroughness (Braun and Clarke 2022, 70). The ideas, meanings, or concepts can be explicit as well as implicit, meaning they can capture both the semantic content and the underlying meaning. However, they should always be specific and precise. Throughout the coding process, it is important to look for both differences as well as similarities and shared meanings. Some segments of the data might not be tagged with any codes, if it lacks relevance to the research question, whereas other segments might be tagged with various codes, as a number of different meanings are evident. Additionally, each meaning gets a different code label (Braun and Clarke 2022, 52-53). Therefore, one code label can apply to different pieces of text, as long as the meaning is the same (Braun and Clarke 2022, 61). When all data is coded through, the code labels are gathered in collections, and all relevant data segments are compiled for each code (Braun and Clarke 2022, 35). Thus, the data is reduced to small pieces of text. There are two broad orientations to coding, namely inductive and deductive. Of the two, we took an inductive approach, meaning that we began the analysis with our collected data as our starting point,

rather than looking for patterns that fit specific and predetermined theories (Braun et al. 2019, 853).

In phase three (initial theme generation), after the coding, initial themes are created by identifying patterns across the dataset, thus compiling clusters of codes that seemingly share a core idea and might provide a meaningful explanation to the research question. To clarify the differentiation between the two terms, codes capture specific meanings, whereas themes are broader, shared meanings. Themes are created and given meaning through the interplay of data, the researchers' background and perspective, and the formulated research question (Braun and Clarke 2022, 35). When the themes are generated, they are further developed and reviewed in phase four (theme development and review). During the initial stages of the analytical process, potential themes, known as candidate themes, are formulated and "tested" in connection to the research question, and the complete dataset. Consequently, not all candidate themes may ultimately be included in the final set of themes (Braun et al. 2019, 854; Braun and Clarke 2022, 35). Some may be merged, while others may be split into new themes, retained, or discarded (Braun and Clarke 2022, 35). Thus, phase four offers a validity check on the quality and the scope of our candidate themes, as well as the opportunity to develop our themes to be richer and more nuanced, "through a process of re-engagement with: (1) all the coded data extracts; and (2) the entire dataset." (Braun and Clarke 2022, 97).

In reflexive TA, meaning can be patterned at three different levels, namely as overarching themes, themes, and subthemes. The overarching theme embraces a number of different, but potentially related themes. If used, this level is most commonly employed as a way of organizing in reflexive TA. Themes are the key analytical units in reflexive TA, and capture multifaceted instances of a single, central concept from the dataset. The central concept of one theme, should differentiate from the central concept of another theme. Lastly, a subtheme focuses on and brings attention to one particular aspect of a theme. Adding structural complexity through overarching themes or subthemes should be approached with caution. For instance, overusing subthemes could result in an analysis that feels fragmented, thin, and lacking in analytical depth. Therefore, subthemes should only be employed when they contribute to telling the compelling story about the data. Hence, they do not need to appear across every theme, but should be used selectively and strategically to enhance the relevance and richness of the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022, 87-88).

This leads to phase five (theme refining, defining, and naming) in which it is ensured "that each theme is clearly demarcated, and is built around a strong core concept or essence." It involves writing a definition of each theme, and choosing a concise, effectual, and informative name for each theme (Braun and Clarke 2022, 36). A theme definition is essentially an abstract for the theme, clarifying and illustrating the key take-away point and specific manifestations of the theme (Braun and Clarke 2022, 108). This phase might indicate that some themes need further development, making it relevant to circle back to one of the previously described phases. Phase six (writing up) focuses on the writing – both the formal writing that typically starts in phase three, and the informal writing, which consists of familiarization notes and reflexive journaling made for only the researcher to see. The ultimate goal of phase six is to produce a coherent and persuasive narrative about how the dataset addresses the research question (Braun and Clarke 2022, 36).

When doing qualitative research, other approaches to text analysis have been taken as well, for instance, Qualitative Content Analysis and Template Analysis. In the following, it is discussed why Reflexive TA was chosen over these alternative methods for this thesis. Reflexive TA recognizes that knowledge production is inherently situated and subjective, meaning that our subjectivity should be considered a resource rather than something we need to control or get rid of (Braun and Clarke 2022, 8). While some researchers consider subjectivity a flaw (Holm 2018, 156-157), Braun and Clarke (2022) view analysis as a process of meaning-making rather than truth-seeking and therefore, our subjectivity is our strength (55). This aligns well with our social constructivism position, which posits that knowledge and reality are co-constructed by individuals within social contexts. Additionally, as we are two coders, thus doing collaborative coding, we aim to enhance and nuance our understanding, interpretation, and reflexivity, contributing to a stronger analysis and interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2022, 8). Reflexivity requires a practice of critical reflection on our role as researchers, as well as on our research practice and process (Braun and Clarke 2022, 5). For instance, phase one (familiarization) greatly enables us to make room for reflexivity and self-awareness, continuously and even before the coding begins, assisting us in understanding and "owning" our perspectives (Braun et al. 2019, 853; Braun and Clarke 2022, 8). Critics, however, might argue that the flexibility of reflexive TA may compromise the reliability and objectivity of findings, potentially leading to concerns about rigor and validity.

In contrast, while allowing for interpretive analysis, Qualitative Content Analysis often involves categorizing data into predefined themes or categories and strives for more systematic and replicable procedures (Mayring 2014, 39), thereby attempting to control and minimize subjectivity (Mayring 2014, 114). Qualitative content analysis maintains a stringent approach, prioritizing objectivity, reliability, and validity. Here, inter-coder reliability assumes particular importance, as multiple coders independently analyze the same material to ensure consistency in findings (Mayring 2014, 42). Thus, the stricter coding guidelines and rule-based analysis of qualitative content analysis, might not accommodate the dynamic and reflexive nature of meaning-making emphasized in reflexive TA (Mayring 2014, 39).

Template Analysis, another analytical method, is a generic approach not tied to a specific philosophical stance. This flexibility necessitates that researchers explicitly define and consistently apply their philosophical stance throughout the method (King and Brooks 2018, 2). Moreover, the freedom allowed in the coding structure can sometimes lead to challenges, such as developing an unmanageably complex coding template. The option to use integrative themes, and lateral connections between hierarchical clusters, combined with the encouragement to code to as many levels as needed for the richest parts of the data, can result in a fragmented and thin thematic structure, lacking analytic depth (King and Brooks 2018, 4). Thus, while template analysis in many ways resembles reflexive TA, these potential pitfalls can impede the development of a coherent and meaningful analysis, underscoring the benefits of a more guided and reflexive approach like reflexive TA.

Considering the fluidity of social constructs, and our search for nuanced meaning rather than a generalized truth in the data, reflexive TA is the preferred choice for our research. While alternative methods like qualitative content analysis and template analysis offer strengths in structure and flexibility, reflexive TA's alignment with our social constructivist position and its emphasis on reflexivity and subjectivity make it the most suitable choice for our thesis. We recognize that our chosen method might result in a less replicable outcome, which further aligns with our social constructivist position.

As mentioned, our themes will be based on data extracts from our survey responses, which can be found in an overview in appendix 3. We have mainly patterned meaning at the level of themes, but for some, we also found it relevant to pattern meaning at the level of subthemes. Since not all themes contain subthemes, the visual display in the thematic schema shows gaps

in the rows where subthemes are not included. Each theme or subtheme is accompanied by quotes that reference the parts of the data relevant to that specific theme or subtheme. Additionally, the number provided at the end of each quote references the participant and their gender, as this information is relevant to the analysis of some of the themes. As this is only relevant for a few of the themes, the overview of participant's gender is provided in a separate table in appendix 4, instead of being incorporated in the actual thematic schema.

The reason for having one thematic schema but two separate analyses, is that the themes identified during the coding process revealed two distinct aspects, which we deemed relevant to explore separately. One of the aspects relates to influencer marketing, while the other concerns the perception of Kreafunk. Since these themes are derived from the same dataset, we have chosen to maintain a single collective thematic schema. The definitions of each theme are provided in tables above the respective analyses to which they belong.

Examples of our inductive themes are: 'Perception of Trustworthiness Affects Awareness', with included subthemes: 'Lack of Trust in Unfamiliar Brands' and 'Lack of Trust in Foreign Brands'. A schematic display of the themes can be found in appendix 4.

7 Analysis

The following chapter consists of three sections, the first covering our analysis of our American participants' perception of influencer marketing, and the second focusing on the participants' perception of Kreafunk. These two sections further provide sectional recapitulations in which our textual findings are presented first, followed by theoretical findings from our data. Textual findings refer to findings that contribute to the main goal of this thesis, namely a final recommendation for Kreafunk in terms of influencer partnerships on the Americans market, and theoretical findings refer to findings that either support, challenge, or contribute to our theoretical framework. The third section is a recapitulation of the entire analysis in which textual and theoretical findings are presented simultaneously.

Prior to the beginning of the analysis, it is relevant to revisit our assumption that solely by using influencer marketing, two levels of brand awareness are possible to reach for an unknown brand on the market, namely brand recognition and brand recall. The findings from our data concerning this matter will be discussed in subsection 8.1.2.4.

7.1 Americans' Perception of Influencer Marketing

This section focuses on Americans' perception of influencer marketing, including preferences toward the influencer as well as their content production. There are 18 themes, of which one contains two subthemes. These themes are split into six subsections with headlines indicating the topic relating to the themes in that subsection, and the final subsection provides a sectional recapitulation. The definitions of each theme are introduced in Table 2 below, while the thematic schema, containing the coding of our participants' responses, referred to in the analysis can be found in appendix 4.

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
New Brands Discovered via Influencers		Participant remembers having discovered new brands via influencer marketing
Friends Influence		Participant is under the perception that they discover new brands through friends
Influencers on TikTok		Participant expresses TikTok as being the social media platform they follow influencers on
Instagram Updates and Inspires		Participant expresses that Instagram is the primary social media platform they use for seeking new inspiration
Knowledge Makes Credible		Participant expresses that they perceive an influencer as more credible when the influencer has certain expertise and knowledge within the area of the promoted products
Influencer Skills Influence		Influencer's technical skills in producing content are seen as a contributing factor to their influence
Sincerity Influences		Participant is under the perception that they are more influenced by an influencer who is sincere and authentic
Don't be Too Eager to Sell		Participant expresses that they do not like when an influencer is too eager to sell products, indicating that they are more focused on the money
Humor Catches Attention		Humor is mentioned as a feature that catches the attention of the participants
Relatable Influencers Influence		Participant expresses that they experience stronger influence by influencers who they can relate to personally

Influencer is My Friend		Participant expresses that they perceive a stronger influence when they perceive the influencer as someone they know as a friend
Popularity Affects Brand Awareness		Participant is under the perception that they pay more attention to influencer content when the promoted product and/or the influencer are perceived as popular
Promoted Product Matches Desire		Participant is under the perception that they pay more attention when influencers promote products that they already had a desire for
New Brands/Products Catch Attention		Participant expresses an interest or curiosity about unfamiliar brands/products posted by influencers
New Product Categories Impact Influencer Perception	**Audio Products are for Everyone**	Participant acknowledges that everyone uses audio products, thus that all influencers can too
	Sudden New Expertise Area is Suspicious	Participant perceives it as suspicious that an influencer suddenly promotes products within a new product category
Videos Increase Attention		Video content is regarded as a characteristic that catches participants' attention
Show How Products are Used		Participant expresses that they like when the function of products is shown by influencers in their content
Audio Products can be Used in Different Scenarios		Participant expresses the scenarios in which they use audio products

Table 2: Theme Definitions #1

7.1.1 Perception of the Effect of Influencer Marketing and SoMe platforms

Beginning with the Americans' perception of the effect of influencer marketing, we have found two themes: 'New Brands Discovered via Influencers' and 'Friends Influence'.

The first of the two mentioned themes focuses on the Americans having discovered new brands solely through influencer marketing. One participant expresses that they[3] have "discovered clothing brands." (Appendix 4), while another says "I don't remember right now, but primarily when it is unusual products that I have not seen before, so maybe new gadgets. I am not sure if

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[3] 'They' is used as a first-person pronoun due to the gender's irrelevance in these instances

another clothing brand would catch my attention" (Appendix 4), implying that there are many clothing brands utilizing influencer marketing, and therefore, it now serves as an annoyance when they are exposed to these kinds of posts. This suggests that it is possible to create too much exposure with influencers, and seemingly, this may lead to a decrease in perceived relevance and thus, low consumer involvement. Furthermore, as evident from the data, the said participant is more likely to pay attention to influencers promoting unusual products that they have not seen before, such as new gadgets.

A third participant expresses about discovering new brands via influencer marketing: "I guess so, don't remember which one exactly. But I sure can imagine I have" (Appendix 4). Both this comment, as well as the one above, indicate that brand recall has not been achieved, as the participant cannot recall a specific brand, even though imagining seeing one. This questions whether brand recall is possible solely with the use of influencer marketing, which we will return to in the discussion, subsection 8.1.2.4. Yet another participant notes, "recently I saw someone making a Birria recipe but they just used some flavor packet they were advertising for the broth. I didn't even notice it was an ad till half way through because it just looked like a recipe video" (Appendix 4), shedding light on how influencer marketing can be used to make advertisements seem less commercial and more organic, thus blurring the lines between regular and promotional content, making it challenging to distinguish between them. Previous participants primarily refer to clothing brands, however, this participant addresses a new type of product category, indicating that influencer marketing can be utilized by several types of brands.

On the basis of the above, it seems that most of the participants have been influenced by influencer marketing, however, the theme 'Friends Influence' indicates that the discovery of new brands can also happen through friends. One participant comments "More through my friends" (Appendix 3), demonstrating that they perceive themselves as more likely to be influenced by their friends in terms of discovering new brands, than via influencer marketing. However, as evident, only one of the participants is hesitant about the effectiveness of influencer marketing, which suggests that Kreafunk can in fact utilize influencer marketing on the American market to create brand awareness.

In terms of which social media platforms our participants follow influencers on, we have created two themes: 'Influencers on TikTok' and 'Instagram Updates and Inspires'. Some

participants express that they mostly follow influencers on TikTok, whereas others express that Instagram is the platform they use for seeking updates and new inspiration. Two participants express that they do follow influencers on both platforms, however, TikTok is the one they follow more influencers on. Another participant remarks about TikTok that "the videos feel more personalized and longer which allows me to hear more about a brand and see it in use rather than not knowing what it is like." (Appendix 4), indicating a preference for TikTok due to its personalized and extended video format. This suggests that the participant perceives content on TikTok to be relevant, implying that the algorithm enhances the likelihood of consumer involvement, which we will return to in the discussion, subsection 8.3.2. Therefore, this consumer's involvement may be high when experiencing promotional influencer posts on TikTok as they are driven by object characteristics such as their preferred platform and thus, the perceived relevance increases. As evident from an overview of the comments (Appendix 4), only female participants have expressed a preference for using TikTok when watching influencer content.

Yet another participant prefers Instagram, communicating that they "prefer watching influencer content primarily on Instagram for its visually appealing and concise updates [...]. Instagram offers quick inspiration and updates" (Appendix 4), focusing on Instagram as a platform that offers visually appealing updates, and quick inspiration. A participant agrees by saying that "Instagram is a great news outlet as well as arts and crafts or for lifestyle related content." (Appendix 4), adding lifestyle related posts to content they perceive as relevant. Additionally, one participant notes Instagram as "the platform I use the most for training inspiration" (Appendix 4), revealing another aspect Instagram offers its users. One participant expressed that they primarily use Instagram due to their perception of it as a more serious medium, hence, this is the place they seek inspiration for new products and/or knowledge, rather than only using it as an entertaining medium. Similar to the consumer's involvement with TikTok content above, the consumers referencing Instagram as their preferred platform may perceive increased relevance to content on this platform, enhancing the possibility of reaching brand awareness. Additionally, the topics the participants regard as interesting to watch on Instagram all require a certain amount of consumer involvement in order for the participant to feel like they benefit from it. Contrary to preference toward TikTok, both female and male participants express a preference toward Instagram for watching influencer content.

With the Americans being present on both TikTok and Instagram and indicating an increased involvement with content on these platforms, it suggests that both social media platforms are relevant options for Kreafunk to utilize for influencer marketing. This is due to a subjective liking of the platforms and different attributes, meaning it is dependent on the individual. A discussion of choice of platform for Kreafunk is done in subsection 8.3.2.

7.1.2 Perception of Influencer Characteristics

The influencers inspiring people on both TikTok and Instagram possess different characteristics, which lays the foundation for the next five themes: 'Knowledge Makes Credible', 'Influencer Skills Influence', 'Sincerity Influences', 'Don't be Too Eager to Sell', and 'Humor Catches Attention'.

The first mentioned theme, 'Knowledge Makes Credible', refers to the fact that some participants express that they perceive an influencer as more credible when they have knowledge and expertise within the niche or product category of which they promote products. One participants says "I like when they know what they are talking about" (Appendix 4), while another expresses that "I feel like a video is more [...] trustworthy if I feel like the influencer has knowledge on the topic or product they are speaking/writing about" (Appendix 4), showing that both the influencer and the content seem more trustworthy when the influencer has certain knowledge about what is being communicated, namely the promoted brand or product. A third participant says: "I like those that actually have brain. Those that are knowledgable [sic] [...] I don't tend to follow people that are all about looks or just want to show off." (Appendix 4), emphasizing that influencers with appropriate and useful knowledge have greater influence than those who focus on physical attractiveness or self-promotion without substance or a broader purpose. In contrast, another participant states that physical attractiveness may be something they subconsciously prefer, recognizing that they do not actively seek out certain influencer traits, but acknowledging that these preferences might still have an effect, even if it is not consciously considered by the consumer. In such instances, the perceived attractiveness of the influencer would likely have an impact in the assessment of the source credibility. Finally, a participant expresses that "there is so much stuff going on on social media, so I think it depends on the product and the presentation rather than the brand" (Appendix 4), implying that a competent presentation of a brand or product is more essential to catching consumers' attention than the actual brand is, due to the extensive amount of content on social media.

These remarks underscore the significance of the perceived expertise dimension in assessing the credibility of a source, and potentially increasing consumer involvement. For example, participants expressing this preference for knowledgeable influencers would likely be more involved in advertisements from influencers perceived as competent, compared to those emphasizing physical attributes. This could also relate to personal characteristics, seeing as this preference could be rooted in past experiences where trust in less knowledgeable influencers led to disappointment, subsequently diminishing the participants' involvement with posts from these influencers thereafter.

The next theme, 'Influencer Skills Influence', explores comments regarding the Americans' perceptions of an influencer's technical skills in terms of creating content. One participant expresses that "I also think it looks good with good lighting and a good camera/phone" (Appendix 4), whereas another likes "technical skills as I feel like a video is more interesting when it's well produced" (Appendix 4). Thus, when consumers placing importance on this aspect perceive the content as well produced, the perceived relevance will likely increase, which in turn affects consumer involvement positively.

Some of the participants further express that sincerity is an important characteristic, prompting us to create the theme 'Sincerity Influences'. In contrast to the theme above, one participant expresses that "I like when the content is not too polished, but more real. It can be fine with good editing, but mostly I like the videos that are not edited too much." (Appendix 4), indicating that less polished content is a way that an influencer can appear more sincere. Relating this to the previously mentioned theme, in which it was discovered that some of the Americans prefer an influencer with technical skills, this participant conversely emphasizes that the editing of influencer content should not be excessive in order to maintain sincerity. This perception of sincerity would also impact source credibility through perceived trustworthiness. If the influencer is perceived to be sincere, trustworthiness and thus, source credibility will increase.

Additionally, three participants explicitly state that they prefer when an influencer is talking about the product, like a review, or showing how it is used, as this is a way to detect whether they are genuine about the endorsement. Another participant agrees with the previous perception, as they "would also be cautious and pay attention to whether the collaboration feels genuine or if it seems like a forced promotional effort." (Appendix 4). This is further supported

by another comment: "It shouldn't just be a random person showing off the brand to earn money" (Appendix 4), suggesting that it is important that influencers are not promoting products simply to earn money, but that they should rather have an honest interest in the brand and product. This aligns with another comment: "I would hope they are promoting a brand that they like already" (Appendix 4).

Furthermore, two participants mention that they like when the influencer is being personal in their approach. This notion is agreed upon by another individual, saying that "If I like them, and I think they're down-to-earth, cool, and genuine people, I'm more likely to be influenced." (Appendix 4), also indicating the importance of expressing sincerity. In addition, the participant implies that a personal and down-to-earth approach makes the influencer seem more like an ordinary person whom they can identify with and trust, thus relating to source credibility's similarity and trustworthiness dimensions.

As for the next theme, 'Don't be Too Eager to Sell', one participant says that "I think influencers are a good way of introducing new products, because if it comes from the company itself, you know they're obviously just trying to sell you something." (Appendix 4), indicating that they might be cautious when the promotion comes from the brand itself rather than from an influencer. Furthermore, this is an indicator that influencer marketing is a way for a brand to piggyback on the influencer, leveraging their follower base and trustworthiness. However, when using influencers to promote one's products, several participants evidently agree on the fact that these influencers should not try too hard to sell these products, as it might scare some consumers away, if it seems as if the influencer is primarily focused on the compensation. Furthermore, one participant says that "I'm not interested in watching informative videos that are trying to sell me something." (Appendix 4), while another says, "If I see the sponsored label I keep swiping" (Appendix 4). These two participants' comments that explicitly state a dislike for sponsored content reflect an attitude that might make it challenging to achieve brand awareness. In addition, it demonstrates that even when the brand is not the direct source, it can still be perceived as one in certain instances. Therefore, consumers' perceptions not only impact the source credibility of the influencer, but potentially also that of the brand. This means that if the influencer appears overly pushy in promoting a brand's product, this perception might extend to the brand itself, potentially resulting in a negative impact on overall brand perception.

The final theme focusing on influencer attributes is 'Humor Catches Attention', which refers to participants expressing that humorous content catches their attention. One participant says, "I just like watching videos that make me laugh" (Appendix 4), while another says, "I also like when the influencer is funny" (Appendix 4), indicating that the influencer's social attractiveness increases perceived source credibility. This shows that humor is valued not only in the content of the videos, but also in the personality of the influencer. Moreover, a third participant says that "if it's funny I'll remember it." (Appendix 4), indicating that integrating humor in influencer marketing will affect brand awareness. Additionally, perceived relevance seemingly increases if the content comes from an influencer the consumer finds amusing, resulting in increased consumer involvement.

7.1.3 Relatability and Relations

The above-mentioned varying characteristics resonate differently with individuals on the basis of their personality and social background, influencing whom and what they can relate to. This diversity gives rise to various factors that contribute to making an influencer seem relatable. When examining the survey responses, we saw some participants mentioning relatability and relations, leading us to create the two themes: 'Relatable Influencers Influence' and 'Influencer is My Friend'.

The first mentioned theme concerns participants expressing that they experience a stronger influence by influencers who they can personally relate to. For instance, one participant, a woman in her twenties, says: "Maybe a young woman in her late 20's could talk about how she uses them, and why these products are special" (Appendix 4), expressing that she would prefer watching content from someone who demographically looks like herself, thus someone she can relate to in some way. Another participant expresses that "I'm more likely to be influenced by someone I can relate to and trust." (Appendix 4), while yet another one says they are primarily influenced "when I can relate to the influencer that is showing the product." (Appendix 4). These thoughts further imply an importance for partnering with an influencer with a follower base that matches the brand's target audience. Furthermore, if there is perceived similarity, the participant might be more predisposed to perceive the content as genuine, resulting in heightened perceived trustworthiness. Consequently, source credibility increases, fostering greater consumer involvement.

The theme 'Influencer is My Friend' relates to when a participant perceives stronger influence when they have a feeling that they know the influencer as a friend. Three of the participants explicitly use the word 'trust' when referring to influencers they follow, one writing: "Only that if I know the influencer, I feel like I can trust them and their content more than I would with influencers I havn't [sic] heard of before." (Appendix 4). This friend-like perception of the influencer as a person they know and trust, might be driven by the influencer's social attractiveness, indicating that a consumer's perception of an influencer and their content is improved when the consumer already knows the influencer. This could also suggest that the participant is more inclined to trust influencers with a substantial follower base, as these are more likely some they have heard about before, compared to an influencer with a smaller follower base. Another participant says, "I follow few influencers, others just show up on my page, but those I follow, I kind of trust, so I would be interested in their thoughts on the audio brand" (Appendix 4), showing that they are in fact interested in hearing influencers thoughts about certain topics, which in this case would be the unknown brand Kreafunk. In relation to this, a third participant says, "if it comes from an influencer you trust, it really doesn't matter whether you know the brand or not." (Appendix 4), indicating that utilizing influencer marketing as an unknown brand could be effective due to the possibility of piggybacking on the influencer's trustworthiness. Additionally, the more trustworthy an influencer is perceived to be, the more likely are source credibility and consumer involvement to increase. For instance, if the participant is exposed to a social media campaign, involving an influencer they follow, they seemingly perceive the content as increasingly relevant.

As for these two themes, it is evident that congruence between the influencer and the consumer is of high importance to the Americans. Furthermore, it sheds light on the perception of parasocial interactions and relationships, in which parasocial relationships in particular have great influence on the consumer, as they experience trust in the influencer. Arguably, such parasocial relationships can further be utilized by the influencer as a tool to enhance the possibility of perceived relevance of the content, thus increasing consumer involvement. This will be discussed further in subsection 8.1.2.3.

7.1.4 Catching the Consumer's Attention

Besides influencer characteristics, and the fit between consumer and influencer, the participants' responses show that other factors have an impact when it comes to catching their

attention, resulting in the making of three themes: 'Popularity Affects Brand Awareness', 'Promoted Product Matches Desire', and 'New Brands/Products Catch Attention'.

'Popularity Affects Brand Awareness' refers to participants indicating that they give greater attention to influencer content when they perceive both the promoted product and/or the influencer as popular. One participant explicitly expresses that popularity of the influencer is important in terms of being influenced, indicating that this participant is also influenced by what other people think of an influencer, as popularity is only achieved when agreed upon in social groups. A comment suggests that popular people could be using Kreafunk's alarm and speaker as part of influencer marketing content, which too signifies this person would pay attention if the products were used by someone who is popular among consumers. A third participant said that "It caught my attention because [...] a lot of people had it.", which suggests that it is not only the popularity of the influencer that is important when trying to catch the consumers' attention, but also the promoted product's popularity. Like the first mentioned, this indicates that consumers are also under the influence of their social groups when it comes to products, meaning that consumers tend to want products that other people already have, perhaps those in their social groups. The remarks suggest that popularity of either the product or the influencer can impact consumer involvement. For instance, consumers might perceive increased relevance of the content when it is endorsed by a popular influencer or relates to a popular product. This could be attributed to the participant adopting the socially accepted perception, thus elevating the perceived trustworthiness.

In relation to this, the theme 'Promoted Product Matches Desire' concerns participants expressing that they are more likely to pay attention to influencer marketing when the promoted product is something they already have a desire for. One participant says that they are primarily paying attention if the advertisement is "for a type of product that I have thought of buying beforehand." (Appendix 4), while another wrote that they have been introduced to a new clothing brand due to the content consisting of clothes that the participant would wear. A third participant simply says: "It caught my attention because I wanted [...] it." (Appendix 4), and this suggests that the products being shown in the promoted content should preferably match the influencer's follower base, thus the consumers' interests, indicating that congruence between the product and consumer is important in terms of catching their attention. Their perception may be influenced by their increased involvement, as they perceive greater relevance to the promotional post when it relates to a product they already desire or have been

seeking. When consumer involvement is high, the likelihood of achieving brand recognition rises, as the content resonates with the consumer, and leaves a lasting impression.

As the theme 'New Brands/Products Catch Attention' indicates, some of the participants express that unfamiliar brands or products can initiate curiosity, resulting in increased attention. One participant says they are more interested "when it is unusual products that I have not seen before, so maybe new gadgets." (Appendix 4), followed by saying "I am not sure if another clothing brand would catch my attention" (Appendix 4). With this, it is evident that new, unusual products attract more attention than usual products, such as clothing. Another participant says that "the lamp would look very cute on my bed side [sic] table, also very cool if it works as a charger for my phone as well" (Appendix 4), showing an interest in a product of which they are not completely sure about its functions, thus a new, unusual product. Two other participants express that they would be more inclined to learn about new products, compared to products they have seen before. Furthermore, this shows that new and unusual products can attract attention, despite the lack of existing awareness, likely because consumers recognize that such products are unique and not readily available elsewhere, or at least not within their current awareness, thereby enhancing perceived relevance. These perceptions place importance on the congruence between the influencer and the consumer, as the influencer should be able to deliver content about new brands and products in a way that makes the consumers pay attention.

7.1.5 Perception of Promoting New Expertise Areas

From the survey responses, we saw that the participants hold different opinions on influencers promoting within new expertise areas, which in turn affects the perception of the influencer. These different opinions led us to create a theme, 'New Product Categories Impact Influencer Perception', containing two subthemes: 'Audio Products are for Everyone', and 'Sudden New Expertise Area is Suspicious'.

The first mentioned subtheme refers to when it is acknowledged that audio products are for everyone. One participant says: "I think that's fine, as long as they don't pretend to be an expert on the area. Everyones [sic] uses audio-related products, so it wouldn't surprise me." (Appendix 4), stating that audio-related products are something everyone uses to some degree, arguably a more universal product category. A discussion on the perception of universal

products will be provided in section 8.2. The participant further implies that all influencers could promote such products, provided they avoid assuming an expert role if they lack expertise in the field. Another participant supports this by expressing that "I feel like everyone uses audio products in some way, so it wouldn't be too surprising. However, I would still be aware of whether they are sincere." (Appendix 4). Thus, if the participant perceives the influencer to be sincere, perceived trustworthiness and thus, source credibility would likely increase, despite promotion within a new area.

Though some find it insignificant that an influencer suddenly promotes a new product category, others are more skeptical, leading to the theme 'Sudden New Expertise Area is Suspicious'. One participant expresses: "I would be surprised. If someone just switches up suddenly, I would find it slightly suspicious." (Appendix 4), while another says, "I would also be cautious and pay attention to whether the collaboration feels genuine or if it seems like a forced promotional effort." (Appendix 4). This indicates that the Americans would be interested in whether the influencer is acting genuinely, and a third participant argues that "I'd expect them to explain why they're collaborating and how it fits with their usual content." (Appendix 4), explicitly stating that they would expect an explanation for the sudden shift. Yet another participant argues that "It depends how the influencer posts about the products, if they are acting as experts or just showing off the products with personal reviews" (Appendix 4), stating that if the influencer is not suddenly acting as an expert, but rather just showing the products along with personal reviews, it would not be as skeptical. In instances where the Americans exhibit skepticism toward influencers suddenly promoting new product categories, linked to situational characteristics, perceived relevance and consumer involvement are likely to be low. Consequently, this lowers the likelihood of generating brand awareness.

These dividing opinions show an inconsistency of whether the participants expect congruence between the influencer and the product/brand. According to the responses within the first mentioned theme, congruence is not particularly important in this case, because audio products are used by almost everyone, however, those who show more skepticism arguably expect more congruence, despite the product category being for everyone. We will discuss this further in 8.1.2.1.

7.1.6 Perception of Content Characteristics

Analyzing the Americans' responses, we saw that they commented on their preferred content characteristics, which led us to make three themes: 'Videos Increase Attention', 'Show How Products are Used', and 'Audio Products can be Used in Different Scenarios'.

Participants arguing that video content catches their attention the most led us to create the theme 'Videos Increase Attention'. One participant says that "When influencers are promoting products, I prefer videos of them talking or acting with the products, so I get a feel of wether [sic] they would actually use the products or not" (Appendix 4), suggesting that video content is helpful when one wants to determine whether the endorsement is genuine. This participant would likely perceive relevance when the influencer's post is in video format, which could potentially increase consumer involvement. Conversely, posts consisting of images may be perceived as less relevant by this participant, consequently resulting in reduced involvement. This participant further expresses that they prefer video content "so I don't have to read too much" (Appendix 4), implying a liking for minimal text. Another participant argues that appealing images and sound will make them watch a video for longer, indicating that many aspects of a video should be well-composed in order to retain consumers' attention. A third participant says: "I like a range of content, but videos with an emotional aspect are particularly effective on me. Especially those where the influencer tells some kind of story, whether it be a happy, a funny, or a sad one. When it's combined with some kind of product, I think it adds a personal element that makes that product more appealing." (Appendix 4), adding to the list of components of which a video can consist of in order to be effective, and retain attention. Moreover, the personal aspect may bolster perceived trustworthiness, as explained in previous sections, thereby enhancing source credibility.

Another preferred content characteristic mentioned is a way of being introduced to the promoted products, namely when the influencer shows the function of the products, leading to the theme: 'Show How Products are Used'. One participant simply says: "I like that there are real life examples of where you can use each product" (Appendix 4), and another participant adds: "I would love to see an influencer using the products, and also how they fit in in a home" (Appendix 4), indicating that it is important for consumers to be able to picture how they could use the products themselves, as well as how they would fit in to their home. Three other participants agree with this perception as they too want to see the products being integrated in an influencer's daily life.

The participants further express examples of scenarios in which they use audio products, leading to another theme: 'Audio Products can be Used in Different Scenarios'. Different activities such as working out, hiking, driving, commuting, bike riding, walking, running, studying, and cooking are mentioned by the participants. Two participants further express that they primarily use speakers, when they are with friends, and another says they use audio products "When working or studying to help focus and block out distractions, or when excercising [sic] or relaxing at home." (Appendix 4), suggesting that audio products can also be used to block out distractions in work situations.

As mentioned in 6.2.1.1 Survey Design, one question stood out as it provided the participants with click-boxes containing options regarding which content types they find interesting and therefore, these responses will be analyzed differently than responses to other questions in the survey. Additionally, we recognized a limitation in utilizing parts of that data, which is why only three elements will be interpreted in the following, namely 'Interactive content', 'Polls', and 'Giveaways'. Although our focus lies within these three elements, and we acknowledge that other parts of the data are unanalyzable, all gathered data is presented in a diagram that can be found in appendix 5.

It is evident from the data that only few of the participants chose giveaways as what they perceive as an interesting content type. This could be because of the level of involvement giveaways often require from the audience if they wish to participate, and likely also the feeling of having low chances of actually winning even if they do participate. Similarly, the data shows that two of the least valued content types were polls and interactive content, which suggests that the participants do not prefer content that requires much action from themselves. As mentioned in 6.2.1.1, we are aware that giveaways and polls fall under the category of interactive content, nevertheless, the fact that all of these options are chosen by only few of the participants strengthen the indication that, without exception, all types of content requiring more involvement is perceived as less interesting, and that this is a general notion. On the basis of this, it is apparent that demanding content is perceived as less engaging, compared to content that allows the participant to take a more passive role. Thus, demanding content seemingly lowering the chances of the Americans perceiving relevance, resulting in decreased possibilities of achieving brand awareness. Contrary to what may be the intention with interactive content, specifically increasing engagement and consumer involvement, it is evident

from the responses that it may have an opposite effect. This notion will be further discussed in section 8.2.

7.1.7 Sectional Recapitulation

From the sections above focusing on Americans' perception of influencer marketing, for textual findings, we found that the participants do discover new brands solely through influencer marketing, however, one participant expresses that they are more influenced by friends. Furthermore, with preferences based on content format, it is evident that TikTok and Instagram are both prominent platforms for following influencers, however, with TikTok only being referenced by female participants.

In relation to the participants' perception of influencer characteristics, we see that they value characteristics such as knowledge, sincerity, humor, and technical skills. Regardless of this, influencers overly editing the content, and appearing overly aggressive in their promotional content is explicitly mentioned as a behavior that is disliked, which may cause the consumers to perceive the influencer as insincere, potentially extending that perception to the promoted brand itself. Furthermore, it is clear that the participants prefer and are more influenced by influencers who they can relate to, and those they perceive as a friend.

From the survey responses, it is further evident that various occurrences catch the participants' attention, namely influencer and product popularity, existing desire, and new products. In terms of influencers promoting new product categories, the participants had divided opinions. Some view it as suspicious, while others find it insignificant, particularly because audio products cater to a wide audience.

Lastly, the Americans' commented on their preferences within content characteristics, in which video content evidently increased attention. Moreover, the participants seemingly prefer seeing content in which the products are integrated into the influencer's daily life. In relation to this, the participant specifically mentioned using audio products when they are being active, cooking, commuting, studying, or being with friends. Furthermore, the Americans expressed a dislike toward content where the influencer requests certain actions, such as giveaways or polls.

In terms of theoretical findings from our data, it is evident that preferred platform, influencer characteristics, content characteristics, as well as the advertisement's ability to catch attention

have an impact on the Americans' involvement, affecting whether an advertisement can generate brand awareness. Furthermore, our data indicates that brand recognition is achievable, however, it is less clear whether brand recall can be achieved as well. We will return to this in the discussion, 8.1.2.4. Moreover, as derived from the analysis, consumer involvement likely has a significant effect on brand awareness, as a lack of this may lead to an immediate disregard of the influencer's content.

Additionally, perceived congruence influences consumer involvement, and from the analysis it is clear that the Americans prioritize influencer-consumer fit, emphasizing their desire for relatedness and parasocial relationships, and consumer-product/brand fit, determined by popularity and/or existing desire. In contrast, our data shows divided opinions on promoting new product categories, questioning the relevance of an influencer-product/brand fit for a brand like Kreafunk. This will be further discussed in 8.1.2.1.

Similarly, perceived source credibility also impacts consumer involvement, and from our data, it is evident that the Americans prioritize the dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity, indicating that our participants deem the dimension of attractiveness less important in terms of determining an influencer's credibility. Furthermore, we found that the expertise and similarity dimensions affect the trustworthiness dimension, which will be further discussed in subsection 8.1.2.2.

On the basis of this, the degree of congruence as well as source credibility influence the perceived relevance of the influencer's advertisement, thereby the level of consumer involvement, ultimately affecting whether brand awareness can be achieved.

7.2 Americans' Perception of Kreafunk

This part of the analysis focuses on Americans' perception of Kreafunk, including their products as well as mentioned brand characteristics. There are seven themes divided into three subsections for analysis. Additionally, a fourth subsection is included, offering a recapitulation of the section. Table 3 with theme definitions can be found underneath, and as mentioned, the thematic schema containing participants' comments can be found in appendix 4.

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Liking the Color Options		Participant explicitly expresses that they like the color options of Kreafunk's products
Aesthetic Affects Demographics Differently		Participant states their perception of Kreafunk's aesthetic
Pricing Affects Brand Awareness	**Pricing Scares Off**	Participant thinks that Kreafunk's products have a high price point
	Cater to Different Budgets	Participant thinks that the price point of Kreafunk's product cater to different budgets
Kreafunk Differentiates		Participant expresses that they think Kreafunk differentiates from other audio brands
Perception of Trustworthiness Affects Awareness	**Lack of Trust in Unfamiliar Brands**	Participant expresses a lack of trust in unfamiliar brands
	Lack of Trust in Foreign Brands	Participant expresses a lack of trust in the brand because of its non-American origin
"Scandinavian" is a Quality Stamp		Brand's Scandinavian origin is perceived as a positive attribute
Brand Perception Affects Preferred Influencer Type	**Kreafunk Fits Audio Influencers**	Participant perceives Kreafunk as a match for influencers with an interest in music
	Kreafunk Fits an Interior Focus	Participant perceives Kreafunk as match for influencers making home interior content
	Kreafunk Fits an Active Lifestyle	Participant perceives Kreafunk as a match for influencers that have an active lifestyle

Table 3: Theme Definitions #2

7.2.1 Perception of Kreafunk's Products

This subsection covers the themes 'Liking The Color Options', 'Aesthetic Affects Demographics Differently', 'Pricing Affects Brand Awareness', and 'Kreafunk Differentiates', which are themes that all relate to the Americans' perception of Kreafunk's products.

Looking at the survey participants' comments, a likability for the colors of the products was indicated by several of the participants, leading us to make the theme 'Liking The Color Options'. One male participant "like[s] the soft and neutral colors." (Appendix 4), while another male participant states that he "liked the black headphones and grey [sic] speaker." (Appendix 4), which is potentially affected by their preexisting perception of audio brands, and

audio products. Other participants expressed their preference for colors, with remarks such as "Like the bright one the best" (Appendix 4), and "I like that they're not all black." (Appendix 4), indicating that they experienced a departure from the typical color schemes they associate with audio brands. Other comments like those state that they too "like the variety of colors" (Appendix 4), "like the bright colors" (Appendix 4), and "like the modern design and the color options, seems very sleek" (Appendix 4). The last-mentioned comment implies that the color options, in combination with the design, gives the product a stylish and polished look, which might have been different from what they expected.

These comments reflect a positive reception to the distinctiveness of the color options, likely affected by their perception of other audio brands on the market. This positive reception may be influenced by a perception that the market has previously lacked these options, meaning that the participants may have been unable to find audio products in bright colors from audio brands they already know. Thus, a perceived relevance of an influencer's post promoting Kreafunk's products might appear, leading to an increase in involvement, potentially enhancing the possibility for brand recognition.

Additionally, it is relevant to note that the participants who favored the bright colors are female. Considering the previous comments regarding neutral colors, this suggests a gender-based preference, with male consumers showing a preference for neutral colors, while the female consumers lean towards bright color options. This assumption is supported by remarks such as: "I think it is good that there are many colors, so one can choose one's favorite" (Appendix 4), and "love all of the colors! It seems there is something for everyone" (Appendix 4), indicating that the color scheme resonates with a wide range of consumers. Therefore, Kreafunk's color scheme could contribute to increased brand awareness, as it seemingly appeals to diverse preferences.

The color preferences are not the only aspect that seems to be affected by the gender of the participants. Comments regarding Kreafunk's aesthetic led us to make the theme 'Aesthetic Affects Demographics Differently'. One male participant stated that "It seems like a brand for women from what I have seen, but to reach a male audience, maybe it should be less polished and show how the products are used" (Appendix 4), arguably showing that there may be a perceived disparity between the brand's current aesthetic, and its potential appeal to male consumers. This is backed by another male participant, who remarked that the products "look

clean, perhaps a little feminine" (Appendix 4), implying that Kreafunk's products predominantly target women, and that a less refined look might better attract male consumers. The same participant, however, expressed a liking for the products in black and gray, indicating that not all the products are perceived as exclusively suitable for a female audience.

On the basis of these comments, male consumers exposed to Kreafunk's products through influencer posts would likely experience less congruence between themselves and the product/brand, thus perceiving their relevance to be low, resulting in decreased consumer involvement, and reducing the opportunity for reaching a level of brand recognition, as they would simply scroll past such posts. Like the male participants, a female participant also perceives it as a "more of a feminine or warm aesthetic" (Appendix 4), indicating that this perception may go beyond gender boundaries. Hence, it is logical that another female participant describes it as "Aesthetically pleasing." (Appendix 4). Consequently, brand recognition might be more readily achieved with female consumers, who arguably experience more congruence between themselves and the product/brand, given their perceived relevance of the object characteristics, increasing consumer involvement. Lastly, in terms of the aesthetic, one participant perceives the aesthetic as "very nordic [sic] and clean." (Appendix 4). While this does not necessarily suggest a negative perception, it does indicate a differentiation that could affect the perceived relevance of promotional influencer posts, and its ability to create brand awareness on the American market, considering that this aesthetic may not align with American preferences. However, it appears that this is not a widespread perception, thus minimizing its significance as a potential issue for Kreafunk.

In further relation to Kreafunk's products, some comments provided insight into the perception of the pricing, leading us to create the theme 'Pricing Affects Brand Awareness'. Similar to the perception of the color variants, the participants also perceived the pricing of the products positively, as it catered to different people. This is evident by the comments: "The pricing seems to cater to different budgets." (Appendix 4), and "good thing with different pricing" (Appendix 4). As with the color options, a broad price range could contribute to increased brand awareness, as it appeals to different consumer preferences. However, some participants expressed a concern with the pricing. For instance, three of the participants noted that the products were "A little on the pricey side." (Appendix 4), that "The price is a light bit high" (Appendix 4), and one specifically mentioned, "The headphones seem a bit expensive" (Appendix 4). Thus, exposure of an influencer's post featuring a high-priced product might

discourage certain consumers, prompting them to scroll past without taking notice of Kreafunk's brand or products. Furthermore, the participants' perception of Kreafunk's price point is likely compared to their preexisting perceptions of audio products costs, meaning that if they believe similar products are available at a lower price from other audio brands, the advertisement may seem less relevant. This would result in decreased consumer involvement, thus lowering the chances of brand awareness. While the same concept could apply if products appear too cheap, our data did not indicate such concerns regarding Kreafunk's products.

Throughout this subsection, we have examined perceptions of Kreafunk's color scheme, aesthetic, and pricing, all of which serve as elements that Kreafunk can leverage to differentiate themselves from competitors in the American market. While we touched upon possible differentiators in the previous, some comments directly highlight points of differentiation noticed by the American participants, causing us to make the theme 'Kreafunk Differentiates'. For example, one participant remarked: "Very clean and bright aesthetics. Different from what I'm used to seeing from audio brands I think. They also have more color options to some of their products, which I also feel like is uncommon for most audio brands." (Appendix 4). This participant notices characteristics related to both the aesthetic, and the range of color options specific to Kreafunk, setting them apart from perceived competitors. This thought is echoed in other participants' comments, such as "they have more color options than I usually see for audio brands." (Appendix 4), and "Bright and more colors than I'm used to seeing on audio brands' websites." (Appendix 4). The latter comment, referring to the website, may also suggest a connection to the perceived aesthetic of the brand online.

Based on the above comments, it is evident that there is a perceived differentiation between Kreafunk, and what we can reasonably assume are American audio brands, or at the very least, audio brands that are already established on the American market. Such differentiation might facilitate brand recognition, as they stand out as something distinct from competitors in the minds of consumers. Furthermore, as deduced from the previous themes, there is a clear liking for the products as well. This, in combination with the perceived differentiation, suggests that consumers may believe Kreafunk's products fill a gap in the American market. This signifies a viable market for the products in the United States. This will be further discussed in subsection 8.3.1.

7.2.2 Perception of Unfamiliar and Foreign Brands

The following subsection covers the themes 'Perception of Trustworthiness Affects Awareness' and '"Scandinavian" is a Quality Stamp', which concern the Americans' perception of brand characteristics such as being an unknown or a foreign brand, including Kreafunk's positioning as a Scandinavian brand.

The perception that Kreafunk differs from other audio brands may also be influenced by the fact that it was unfamiliar to the survey participants. Consequently, they might have focused more on the aspects they perceived as standing out, rather than those that appeared similar to what they already knew. This presents an opportunity to determine whether the distinctive factors contribute to the brand's perceived trustworthiness. Several of the participants commented on their perception of trustworthiness regarding both unknown and foreign brands, prompting us to make the theme 'Perception of Trustworthiness Affects Awareness'. As the comments distinguish between an unfamiliar brand and a foreign brand and considering Kreafunk's status as both on the American market, we have further divided this theme into subthemes: 'Lack of Trust in Unfamiliar Brands', and 'Lack of Trust in Foreign Brands'. This segmentation allows us to ascertain if both characteristics have a similar impact on brand awareness.

Examining the theme 'Lack of Trust in Unfamiliar Brands', it is not anticipated that the participants consider these brands as foreign when asked about them in the survey. Rather, given their background, they would likely imagine them as American brands they are unfamiliar with, when not provided with further context beyond encountering them in influencer content on social media. One participant stated that they would "just wanna be sure that the brand they're advertising is reliable" (Appendix 4), showing a lack of immediate trust in the unfamiliar brand, and a preference for further research on the brand before considering a purchase. While our focus is not on purchase intention, this consideration is still relevant as it affects the level of consumer involvement and thus, the relevance of the influencer post. Additionally, if consumer involvement is low, it may diminish brand recognition. However, high involvement, driven by object or situational characteristics, such as if the person is looking for a new audio product at the moment, could lead to the post generating sufficient interest for the consumer to actively pursue further research on the brand. This increases the likelihood of reaching brand recognition, or even brand recall, due to the consumer's newfound knowledge. On the other hand, another participant expressed a deeper skepticism, stating that they "feel

like it could be a scam" (Appendix 4). Such a skeptical mindset indicates a challenging path to creating brand awareness, as individuals might immediately perceive the relevance as low, and scroll past without acknowledging the message, brand, or product.

Additional comments revealed that skepticism extended beyond just the brand itself, as demonstrated by the following comment: "If I don't know the brand, I might be hesitant about the influencer's endorsement. However, if they explain and recommend it well, I might consider it." (Appendix 4), which is further supported by "If I don't know the brand, I might be more skeptical about the influencer's endorsement and the quality of the product. However, if the influencer provides genuine and convincing information about the brand and its products, I could be interested in trying them out." (Appendix 4). Both comments indicate not only a lack of trust in the brand, but also a questioning of influencer credibility. By endorsing an unknown brand, the influencer's trustworthiness is brought into question, thereby lowering source credibility, which could ultimately impact consumer involvement, and the ability to achieve brand recognition. However, both comments also emphasize the importance of the influencer's ability to deliver a genuine and convincing message, thereby increasing perceived expertise and source credibility. Furthermore, the latter comment also suggests a transfer of skepticism to the promoted product and its quality, further reducing the perceived relevance of the influencer's post and subsequently, consumer involvement.

Moving on to the subtheme 'Lack of Trust in Foreign Brands', which explores comments regarding Kreafunk's status as a foreign brand on the American market, we found expressions of skepticism, necessitating further information about the brand. For instance, one participant states: "I feel like they would have to be somewhat informative since Kreafunk isn't an American company and many people might not know it." (Appendix 4), indicating that influencers promoting Kreafunk's products may need to provide additional information, compared to what would be necessary for promoting an American brand. Another participant expressed that "It might make me wonder about accessibility and affordability of their products in the American market" (Appendix 4), thereby raising questions about practical aspects such as ease of obtaining the products, and if they can afford them. Such considerations could negatively impact perceived relevance unless addressed in the promotional message, or if consumers proactively seek out further information regarding these considerations. However, such proactive behavior may only occur if the consumer's involvement is driven by personal, object, or situational characteristics, for instance, having a strong personal interest in music, and a need for new headphones, like those being promoted in the post. A third participant

explained that "In terms of me buying from them, I feel like I would need to do more research on my own before I trust buying from there. I'm not aware of what you can expect in terms of the quality or customer service from Scandinavian companies." (Appendix 4), indicating a skepticism toward the brand's trustworthiness due to its Scandinavian origin. This comment not only raises doubts about the product quality of a Scandinavian brand, but also about the customer service, hinting at a potential concern regarding the ability to contact the brand after a purchase.

Lastly, a participant expressed that "If I don't know the brand, I might question the influencer's sincerity, especially if the brand is non-American." (Appendix 4), demonstrating that a consumer's brand perception can affect influencer perception. This further implies skepticism toward non-American brands, including Scandinavian ones. Additionally, the perception presents challenges for achieving brand awareness, as perceived relevance and consumer involvement are likely to be low. However, repeated exposure to promotional messages or attention-grabbing content could potentially lead to brand recognition, although it will likely not turn into brand recall due to the negative perception. This will be discussed in 8.1.2.4. Furthermore, these attitudes reflect a broader skepticism, suggesting that trust may be influenced by brand origin rather than solely product attributes. The negative associations evident in both of the two aforementioned themes could relate to personal characteristics, as participants' past experiences with unfamiliar or foreign brands could have shaped their perceptions negatively. This perception could diminish the perceived relevance of an advertisement, ultimately leading to low consumer involvement.

Despite the above negative perceptions associated with being a foreign or Scandinavian brand like Kreafunk, we also identified a pattern of positive comments on this matter, leading us to establish the theme '"Scandinavian" is a Quality Stamp'. At one point in the survey, Kreafunk is identified as a Scandinavian brand, to which one participant reacted with "Makes its European which is cooler" (Appendix 4), implying that, for this participant, European brands generally evoke positive associations. Looking into perceptions that are more product related, a participant expressed that "Scandinavian brands are known for stylish and modern design, which I think this company lives up to. I also think they're known for high quality product. I don't know anything about the quality of the speakers, but I assume they're pretty solid.". Here, it is evident that Kreafunk aligns with the associations this participant links with being a Scandinavian brand. Furthermore, for this participant, the Scandinavian origin instills trust in

the quality of the products, even without firsthand experience with them. Two participants further state that "it looks legit and useful" (Appendix 4), and "I feel like Scandinavian design is often associated with minimalism, functionality, and high quality." (Appendix 4), with the former comment indicating a belief that Kreafunk embodies this association. However, it is relevant to note that the same two participants indicated skepticism towards either unfamiliar or foreign brands, which might be due to a potential relation to us, the researchers. This will be elaborated in the discussion, section 8.4. In the final comment under this theme, the participant notes that they "feel like scandinavian [sic] design is clean and timeless, and I think that fits with what I think of Kreafunk after seeing these pictures, I think it is a good thing" (Appendix 4). These positive associations may contribute to antecedents of involvement such as object characteristics, as it appears that several participants view Scandinavian brands positively.

With high involvement comes a greater opportunity for increased brand awareness, especially if the status of being a "cool European brand" motivates consumers to discuss the brand or product with their friends, thereby creating word-of-mouth, and additional brand awareness. It is important to note that those of the participants who know us may have biases due to their relationship to us, which might have influenced them either consciously or unconsciously. As the survey is completed anonymously, we are not able to see which of the responses belong to the Americans we are acquainted with, however, it is evident in the recurrence of this perception that participants with no connection to us also express positivity toward Scandinavian design and quality, implying it is a general notion for the Americans.

7.2.3 Brand Perception Affects Preferred Influencer Type

This subsection addresses the theme 'Brand Perception Affects Preferred Influencer Type', exploring comments regarding perceived influencer fits for Kreafunk. The patterns found in the comments showed three distinct focuses, leading to the making of three subthemes, namely 'Kreafunk Fits Audio Influencers', 'Kreafunk Fits an Interior Focus', and 'Kreafunk Fits an Active Lifestyle'.

Beginning with the subtheme 'Kreafunk Fits Audio Influencers', a pattern emerged where participants emphasized the compatibility of Kreafunk with influencers who have a passion for music. This alignment was substantiated by remarks such as "Influencers who like music" (Appendix 4), and the acknowledgement that influencers "interested in [...] music could be good collaborators for Kreafunk." (Appendix 4). This alignment appears natural given

Kreafunk's core products being speakers and headphones. As found in prior parts of the analysis, the participants expressed a preference for being able to see the products in use, and video content, as this was perceived as a great way to detect sincerity. Thus, it is logical that participants would view music-interested influencers as effective mediums to showcase the quality of the product and sound. First of all, these influencers would be attributed a perceived knowledge and passion for audio products, which would make them more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and sincere. In such a case, the source credibility would increase due to the dimensions of expertise and trustworthiness. Second of all, music-interested influencers are likely to integrate Kreafunk's products into their daily lives, providing authentic demonstrations of product usage.

In continuation, a third participant wrote "Music and podcast marketing" (Appendix 4), underscoring the potential for collaboration with not only music-interested influencers, but also podcast influencers. While podcast marketing may seem somewhat unrelated to traditional influencer marketing, podcast hosts may still be assets in influencer marketing campaigns. Due to the intimate setting of a podcast that has targeted content, direct communication, and personal storytelling, podcast influencers often have dedicated and engaged followers who trust their recommendations, making them powerful advocates for brands. This would likely affect source credibility and consumer involvement, as the closer the relationship between the consumer and the influencer, the more significant the impact on perceived trustworthiness. For instance, when consumers engage with a social media campaign featuring an influencer they feel like they feel closely connected to, they are more likely to perceive the content as highly relevant. It is plausible that these perceptions are based on the Americans' previous observations of similar strategies employed by other audio brands, possibly American ones.

In the remarks under the subtheme 'Kreafunk Fits an Interior Focus', we observed a distinct pattern wherein participants identified a high level of congruence between Kreafunk and an influencer "who likes interior design" (Appendix 4), as stated by one of them. Two other participants agreed, saying: "I feel like influencer interested in home decor [...] could be good collaborators for Kreafunk." (Appendix 4) and "Influencers focusing on [...] home decor could collaborate with Kreafunk." (Appendix 4). This observation aligns greatly with Kreafunk's focus for interior design, which indicates that collaborating with influencers in the home decor niche could serve as a strategic approach to reinforce Kreafunk's brand identity. In a final comment on this matter, a participant expressed that they "like the home setups" (Appendix 4),

based on the images we provided from Kreafunk's web shop**,** which suggests an appreciation for the aesthetic appeal of the products within a home environment. While the participant's comment may not have been directly related to influencer marketing, it does give indication to the fact that an influencer with an interior design focus could be a natural fit for Kreafunk, as they could seamlessly integrate Kreafunk's products into their content, showcasing how they could be used in a home setting. Utilizing such influencers is likely to foster trust, as it not only instills confidence in the visual appeal of Kreafunk's products but also indirectly communicates their quality. While the focus may not be solely on sound quality, the endorsement of reputable interior influencers can influence perceptions of the product in general. If the influencer is perceived as trustworthy and knowledgeable in the field of interior design, the source credibility of the influencer would likely increase. However, it is probable that in certain instances, the credibility of the brand will also be positively impacted, despite not being the direct source of the promotional effort. Given consumers' trust in the influencer's judgment and expertise, the brand can capitalize on this perception by associating itself with the influencer, thereby leveraging their authority and reputation to enhance its own credibility.

Lastly, within the subtheme 'Kreafunk Fits an Active Lifestyle', participants consistently identified an alignment between Kreafunk's products and individuals leading active lifestyles. This pattern emerged through multiple comments suggesting compatibility with influencers described as "Athletic" (Appendix 4), or alternatively referred to as "Working out influencers" (Appendix 4) by another participant. These remarks underline a perception that Kreafunk's products complement the needs and preferences of those engaged in fitness activities. This notion is further supported by another participant's comment, suggesting that an ideal influencer "could be someone using the products when working out" (Appendix 4). This demonstrates a desire not only to see the products being promoted by this type of influencer, but also to observe these influencers actively using the products, correlating with the previously revealed preference for seeing how products are used. This aspect could impact perceived trustworthiness, as the advertisement may appear more genuine when the influencer is actively engaging with the product rather than merely showcasing it. Moreover, this would not only bolster the perceived trustworthiness of the influencer, but also reflect positively on the brand, as it gives the audience an indication of the product's quality and suitability for environments such as wet and sweaty conditions during workouts. Consequently, as mentioned previously, both the influencer's credibility and that of the brand are likely to increase, despite only one of them being the direct source of the content.

Another participant stated that compatibility with Kreafunk could extend to "someone that lives an active lifestyle. Like someone that likes to hike/camp/run/travel." (Appendix 4), highlighting that an active lifestyle does not only encompass sports, but could also mean a lifestyle characterized by exploration and adventure, exemplified by activities like hiking, camping, or traveling. The reference to camping and traveling implies that the participant personally leads an active lifestyle during such activities, for instance, taking long walks. If this is the case, there might be a perceived similarity between the participant and the mentioned influencer, potentially enhancing source credibility. In addition, if there is perceived similarity, the participant may be more inclined to accept the content as sincere, since they can relate to similar experiences. Thereby, perceived trustworthiness would also increase, further bolstering source credibility.

Noteworthy for all three subthemes is that the participants comment on the perceived congruence between influencer and brand, suggesting which type of influencer would fit Kreafunk, in order for the consumers to perceive the influencer as credible.

7.2.4 Sectional Recapitulation

As for textual findings regarding the Americans' perception of Kreafunk, we found a general appreciation for the color variety as it resonates with diverse consumer preferences. However, the data also suggests gender-based preferences, as the female participants expressed a liking for the bright color options, whereas male participants indicated a preference for the neutral colors. Furthermore, there is a prevailing perception that the aesthetic is feminine. As for the pricing of Kreafunk's products, participants were divided, with some having concerns about high prices, while others recognized that the products cater to different budgets. Emphasizing that a price range catering to different budgets would likely catch the attention of a broader audience, than focusing on only high-end or low-end products. The participants further noted Kreafunk's differentiation from other audio brands, which is primarily due to the many and bright color options, as well as the aesthetic, arguably filling a gap in the American market.

Examining the participants' perception of unfamiliar and foreign brands, we found a general skepticism as well as trust related concerns toward unfamiliar brands. Additionally, some of the Americans expressed skepticism toward Kreafunk's Scandinavian origin, hence, the Americans indicated that trust may be impacted by brand origin rather than only product attributes. However, other Americans associated the Scandinavian origin with something

positive, particularly citing trust in product quality. From the participants' perception of Kreafunk, they suggest different influencer types that could be a fit for Kreafunk, including audio influencers, interior design influencers, and influencers living and displaying an active lifestyle.

As for the theoretical findings in this section, color variants, aesthetic, and pricing are all elements that affect how the advertisement resonates with the Americans, thus determining their level of involvement. This influences the ability to reach brand awareness. Due to gender-based preferences regarding the color options, it is evident from the survey responses that female participants experience a higher level of congruence between themselves and the product/brand compared to male participants. Also in regard to congruence, the mentioned influencer types will seemingly generate a high level of experienced congruence between the influencer and the product/brand, which in turn enhances perception of the advertisement, giving the best qualifications to create brand awareness.

The survey responses further show that the influencer's source credibility is affected by the Americans' familiarity with the promoted brand, as they implied that perceived skepticism could extend to the promoted product as well as the influencer. As in the first part of the analysis, the Americans seemingly perceive trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity as the most important dimensions, when considering Kreafunk and unfamiliar brands in general.

On the basis of this, the level of experienced consumer-product/brand fit, and influencer-product/brand fit, as well as perceived source credibility, influence the perceived relevance of the influencer content and thus, the level of consumer involvement. This ultimately impacts a brand's possibility of creating brand awareness.

7.3 Recapitulation

In the analysis, we found that the Americans acknowledge influencer marketing as a way of discovering new brands, however, with one expressing that they experience stronger influence from friends. Relating this to our assumption, it is evident that it is possible for an unknown brand to reach brand recognition solely by using influencer marketing. However, it is not clear from the survey responses whether it is possible to reach brand recall, which we will return to in the discussion, subsection 8.1.2.4. For following influencers, the social media platforms TikTok and Instagram are preferred, though TikTok is only referenced by female participants.

Interpreting perceptions of influencer characteristics, the Americans like knowledge, sincerity, humor, and technical skills, but at the same time, dislike overly edited content, and influencers being overly aggressive in their promotional content. Furthermore, they prefer influencers they can relate to or perceive as friends, highlighting the importance of perceived congruence between consumer and influencer, and parasocial relationships. Based on these perceptions of influencer characteristics, the dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity are seemingly the dimensions that influence consumer involvement the most, placing less relevance on the dimension of attractiveness.

As for factors catching the Americans' attention, we found influencer and product popularity, existing desire, and new products. We further found divided opinions regarding influencers who promote new product categories. Some find it suspicious, while others perceive it as insignificant, especially if the product is universally relevant, questioning the consumer's perceived relevance of influencer-product/brand fit for Kreafunk, which will be further discussed in 8.1.2.1. This further shows that it is either individual or situational whether the Americans would perceive congruence between influencer and product/brand to be relevant. This contradicts what is suggested by congruity theory, namely that all three elements of an influencer marketing campaign must align in order for the communication to be successful. These findings will be further discussed in 8.1.2.1 as well.

For content characteristics, we discovered three main findings. First, video content is favored due to its ability to increase attention. Second, participants appreciate when influencers integrate the promoted product into their daily lives. Third, Americans find interactive content to be less engaging, thus they prefer watching content that allows them to take on a more passive role. The two first mentioned findings enhance the possibility of consumer involvement, while the last mentioned reduces the possibility of consumer involvement, thus lowering chances of generating brand awareness.

Regarding Americans' perception of Kreafunk, we found the participants to be overall positive toward the color variety, nonetheless, exhibiting gender-based preferences, in which it was evident that women experienced a higher level of congruence compared to men, who instead favored the more neutral colors. As for Kreafunk's aesthetic, the Americans perceive it as feminine. In terms of the pricing, some had concerns, while others positively noted that it caters to different budgets, thus a broader audience. These factors contribute to some of the

participants' notions on Kreafunk's differentiation from other audio brands, and are likely to affect consumer involvement, influencing brand awareness.

Additionally, we discovered skepticism toward unfamiliar and foreign brands, however, Kreafunk's Scandinavian origin also fostered positive associations. These findings implied that the degree of familiarity with a brand affects source credibility. Finally, audio influencers, interior design influencers, and influencers displaying an active lifestyle were suggested as a fit for Kreafunk, however, some of those participants also argue that all types of influencers could potentially be utilized, as Kreafunk's product category is universal.

8 Discussion

The following chapter contains five sections, of which the first is a discussion of our findings seen in relation to previous research. The second focuses on our contributions to the theoretical field of influencer marketing, and the third section contains a discussion of our findings that are relevant regarding a final recommendation for Kreafunk in terms of them utilizing influencer marketing on the American market. The fourth section focuses on practical limitations of the study, while the fifth section provides a discussion of possible future research.

8.1 Discussion of Findings in Relation to Previous Research

As mentioned above, this section contains a discussion of our findings seen in relation to previous research mentioned in earlier chapters of this thesis, namely in the literature review and theoretical framework. Concepts that appear in both of the aforementioned chapters will be discussed in subsection 8.1.2, focusing on the theoretical framework.

8.1.1 Findings in Relation to Literature Review

In terms of the size of the influencer's followership, as mentioned earlier, Chopra et al. (2021) found that influencers with a follower base between 100,000 and 500,000 people are preferred within the product category of electronic gadgets/technology. This applies to the music category as well, in which also celebrities are preferred (86). In relation, Agustian et al. (2023) argue that influencers with a large follower base can reach more people, however, influencers with a smaller audience can have a stronger influence (69). In our data, the size of an influencer's follower base does not receive significant attention. Instead, our participants are focused on the influencer's personality and lifestyle.

Furthermore, rather than focusing on follower count, some of the Americans reference popular influencers. Yet, an influencer's popularity is subject to individual interpretation; one consumer might view an influencer as popular due to a large follower base, while another might perceive an influencer to be popular due to a certain reputation within one's social group. Consequently, on one hand, a brand cannot exclusively form partnerships with influencers whom the brand perceives as popular, as this might not align with the target audience's perception. On the other hand, if there is existing brand affinity or a pre-established relationship between the consumer and the brand, there is arguably a level of perceived similarity between the two and thus, they will have similar perception of which influencers are popular and suitable for the brand in terms of a collaboration.

Conversely, for unfamiliar or foreign brands, this would arguably not be the case as there is no pre-established relationship and thus, no perceived similarity or fit between the consumer and the brand. Moreover, our participants perceive an influencer with a personal approach to be more sincere and trustworthy, which arguably suggests that partnering with an influencer with a small follower base, who is acting authentically, down-to-earth, and ordinary, may be beneficial. These characteristics indicate an unpolished influencer, which is arguably not the case with influencers with more followers, as they potentially experience a pressure to display a more polished persona in order to maintain confidence. This aspect will be further explored in the discussion of source credibility in 8.1.2.2.

Examining content type, the literature review presented survey data revealing that the far most preferred type of communication is video, followed by photographic communication, with textual communication being the least preferred (Bognar et al. 2019, 306). Our data aligns with this trend, as the Americans express a strong preference for video content, with remarks that it is the most interesting and least demanding format. Furthermore, video content allows consumers to better determine the sincerity of influencers, which is evidently important for our participants. Concerning photographic and textual communication, our participants do not explicitly articulate preferences for photographic communication. However, their affinity for video content suggests a similar liking of photo content due to both formats likely containing minimal text, which is expressed by participants as preferable.

Additionally, Ferina et al. (2021) argues that attractive advertisements, and unique content contribute to the possibility of improving brand awareness, by increasing the likelihood of the

consumers remembering the brand (171). However, it is up to subjective interpretation what is meant by "attractive content", as what appeals to one consumer might not resonate with another. On one hand, our data shows an appreciation for influencers with technical skills, indicating that they like what Ferina et al. (2021) refer to as attractive content, however, on the other hand, some of our participants explicitly express that the editing of content must not become too much, making it less authentic. Thus, the latter contradicts previous findings on attractive advertisements improving brand awareness.

Similarly, the notion of "unique content" is up to individual interpretation. Although none of our participants explicitly use the word "unique" about content, some of the participants' interest in unusual products suggests an implicit liking for uniqueness. For instance, one participant expresses that Kreafunk is "European which is cooler" (Appendix 4), indicating an interest in Europe, which, by some, might be seen as unique in the United States.

Furthermore, Ahmad et al. (2022) are mentioned in the literature review as they argue that consumers tend to trust reviews that they see on social media, for instance in influencer marketing. Our data does not explicitly indicate that our participants prefer reviews, however, it is implied implicitly as the Americans express a desire to see the products in action, which may resemble a review. Furthermore, some of them express that they do trust influencers whom they have followed for a period of time, indicating that they follow these influencers for advice. One way of building such trust is through parasocial relationships, and Masuda et al. (2022) argue that these relationships are influenced by three personal attributes, namely attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness, in which they place particular importance on social attractiveness (8). Our participants, however, place more focus on relatability, and arguably attitude homophily, and attribute least importance to attractiveness in both forms, thus challenging Masuda et al.'s (2022) finding. Our participants' thoughts on attractiveness will be further elaborated in subsection 8.1.2.2.

As for previous research on American consumers, a study carried out by Nanevi et al. (2022) revealed that American consumers typically focus on the reliability and usefulness of a product (2). Furthermore, the study showed that the consumers have become used to a particular standard of product quality, leading them to place trust in, and perhaps automatically assume, the high quality of products. Moreover, this indicates that Americans do not solely rely on luxury brands (Nanevi et al. 2022, 2), as they arguably assume all products, regardless of brand

status, are of relatively high quality. In terms of a product's reliability and usefulness, none of our participants expressed concerns, which arguably supports Nanevi et al.'s (2022) finding on American consumers being used to products of high quality.

Another study carried out by Copeland and Zhao (2020) shows that American consumers "prefer short messages that are high in visual value" (265). This supports a previously mentioned finding, namely that video content is mostly preferred, as it typically also provides only minimal text. However, as mentioned earlier in regard to preferred content, while some participants appreciate an influencer with good technical skills, thereby arguably delivering high visual value, other participants dislike excessive editing, as this may compromise authenticity of the content, thus the credibility. Hence, our data supports the findings on American consumers preferring short messages, however, preferences toward high visual value are more divided.

Additionally, a study by Lou and Yuan (2019) demonstrates that Americans find the informative value of influencer content important (67). As evident from earlier, on one hand, our participants do not like too much information, especially not in a textual form. On the other hand, with Kreafunk being an unfamiliar brand to most American consumers, our participants acknowledge the necessity for information about the brand, its products, and practical details, such as how American can easily purchase from the website, despite it being foreign. This information should arguably be delivered by influencers who consumers deem credible, in order for the influencer to be able to convince the consumers.

The literature review indicates consensus among researchers that influencer marketing should not be the sole focus, setting aside all other marketing activities (Ferina et al. 2021, 167; Leung et al. 2022, 228). However, from our interview with Kreafunk's representative, we discovered that other marketing activities are very expensive, or at least exceeding the budget Kreafunk is currently willing to allocate for the American market. Therefore, influencer marketing emerges as the sole marketing activity that Kreafunk will be using in order to create brand awareness among the American consumers. Though researchers advocate for a multifaceted marketing strategy, based on our empirical findings, we argue that influencer marketing can effectively be used for creating brand awareness. Notably, one of our participants explicitly says that leveraging influencers and their follower base through influencer marketing is a good way to introduce new products. In addition, Kreafunk does produce organic content on their own social

media channels, however, given that they have yet to establish brand awareness on the American market, the American audience on their channels is likely limited. Thus, as Kreafunk is unfamiliar to Americans, the influencer marketing strategy can help increase their own American audience as brand awareness grows on the market, enabling them to leverage their own channels in the future as well.

8.1.2 Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework

In this subsection, we will discuss our findings and contributions to the theories applied in this thesis, touching upon their utilization in an influencer marketing context. The sequence of focus is congruity theory, source credibility theory, concept of consumer involvement, and brand awareness.

8.1.2.1 Congruity Theory

Since Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955) developed congruity theory without being able to consider the impact of social media, we found that a new theoretical conceptualization was necessary to complement their framework, namely a tripartite model of congruence. An influencer marketing campaign consists of three elements, the influencer, the product/brand, and the consumer (Audrezet et al. 2020, 563), and according to Belanche et al. (2021), all three elements must align in order for the campaign to be successful (187). However, based on our data, we argue that this is not always the case. Discussions of the three fits follow underneath.

First, for the influencer-consumer fit, we believe that parasocial interactions and relationships play a substantial part in terms of being able to persuade consumers, thus be successful in influencer marketing. However, our empirical data indicates that parasocial relationships have a greater impact than parasocial interactions. Relationships are built and developed over a longer period of time, compared to an interaction, thus the consumer will place more trust in the influencer, enhancing credibility and effectiveness of a campaign.

For a foreign and unfamiliar brand like Kreafunk on the American market, it is evident from our data that the Americans experience a lack of trust, thus minimal, if any, congruence between themselves and the brand. We further observed that the Americans prefer influencers whom they have followed for a long period of time, or even perceive as friends. This implies that utilizing parasocial relationships could arguably be a way of convincing consumers that Kreafunk is a trustworthy brand, despite its unfamiliarity. While it is crucial to convince the

consumers of Kreafunk's trustworthiness, capturing their attention is equally, if not more, important. This indicates that Kreafunk should focus on partnering with influencers who understand and nurture relationships with their followers. Our data indicates that such influencers have a positive impact on how unfamiliar brands are perceived, and that this relationship should make the influencer able to catch the followers' attention and further convince them.

Second, examining the influencer-product/brand fit, researchers argue that this fit is important for consumers, as they tend to follow specific influencers with focus on specific product categories (Chopra et al. 2021; Belanche et al. 2021). However, our survey responses revealed that the Americans have divided opinions on this aspect. This finding both challenges and contributes to existing theory, suggesting that the importance of alignment among these elements (i.e. influencer and product/brand) of an influencer marketing campaign depends on the universality of the product category. While some participants express a preference for a fit between the influencer and the product/brand, others did not find it important in this case with Kreafunk, whose product category (i.e. audio products) is widely used. However, we acknowledge that the significance of this alignment may vary depending on the product category, in which we assume that a perceived fit is particularly important in more niche product categories compared to a broad product category like Kreafunk's. A detailed discussion on such universal and niche product categories will be provided later in section 8.2.

Third, the consumer-product/brand fit is suggested by theory to be solely affected by the previously mentioned fits, namely the influencer-consumer and influencer-product/brand fits (Belanche et al. 2021, 187). However, besides the inclusion of the brand within this fit, our data challenges this statement in two different ways, resulting in two contributions to existing theory.

To begin with, we have discovered that additional factors, such as popularity or existing desire for a product or brand, impact this fit as well, indicating it is not solely dependent on the consumer's perceived congruence of the other two fits. This is evident based on responses from our participants, however, asking individuals in another segment might have shown a different outcome. For instance, for our participants to perceive something as popular, they may in some way have been influenced by their social circles in terms of deciding what is popular, and what is not. Contrary, individuals from different demographics, for instance those in their 50s, may

not seek such validation of what is popular. Similarly, an existing desire for a product can stem from either necessity, or the fact that other people have it, thus popularity. On one hand, we know that all individuals desire products that they perceive as necessary. However, on the other hand, we argue that an existing desire driven by a product's popularity is particularly influenced by one's social circle, with younger demographics being more susceptible to social influence or pressure, compared to older demographics. Thus, the factor of popularity is arguably primarily relevant when targeting younger demographics.

Additionally, the existing theory does not acknowledge perceived consumer-product/brand fit as a factor capable of affecting other fits, however, we argue that in reality, it can influence perceived influencer-consumer fit. For instance, on one hand, if a consumer has a strong affinity for a particular product or brand with which an influencer forms a partnership with, the consumer is arguably more likely to develop a positive attitude toward the influencer, solely because of the consumer's existing relation to the product or brand, even if the influencer is previously unknown. On the other hand, if a consumer holds negative, neutral, or no associations with a specific product or brand, it can affect the perception of the influencer negatively. This is particularly relevant in the case with foreign and unfamiliar brands, as consumers' skepticism might affect the perception of the influencer negatively.

8.1.2.2 Source Credibility Theory

In terms of source credibility, the dimension of similarity was added in newer research due to its relevance when using ordinary people as endorsers, which, we argued for in the theoretical framework, could relate to influencers. As evident in our data, the similarity dimension does have relevance in an influencer marketing context. However, the degree of similarity necessary for this dimension to be perceived by the consumer can be discussed.

First of all, our data shows indications of a preference for influencers that are down-to-earth, arguably resembling an ordinary person and thus, the consumers themselves. Often, this would likely be influencers with fewer followers as they have yet to establish a polished persona. As touched upon previously, influencers with a sizable number of followers could feel a pressure to be perfect, due to a fear of being judged by the people who have chosen to place their focus and attention on them, making them seem less ordinary or down-to-earth than an unpolished influencer. This could, however, also have an impact on perceived attractiveness, as being unpolished, whether it is through physical appearance based on looks, or the way they act or

speak, arguably would make the influencer seem less attractive. On one hand, this is a negative implication, as attractiveness is another dimension related to achieving source credibility. On the other hand, our data did not show significant indications of attractiveness being an important dimension in terms of establishing source credibility and thus, we argue that the dimension of similarity should weigh higher in the assessment of the two dimensions. This is because of consumers' ability to put themselves in the place of influencers perceived as relatable, whereas perceptions based solely on attractiveness may not be as convincing.

Second of all, demographic similarities between the consumer and the influencer were indicated as a preference. Nevertheless, we argue that this similarity-characteristic is less relevant in cases where the promoted product is universal. Therefore, based on what was previously mentioned about audio products' universality, we argue that for audio brands, demographic similarity-characteristics is of lesser importance than other forms of similarity-characteristics. While our data did not indicate anything about cultural similarity-characteristics, it is possible to assume that these would too be relevant if the advertisement revolves around a product from a foreign brand, as some of the Americans indicated immediate skepticism toward these.

Besides contributing to the understanding of the similarity dimension's role in relation to influencer marketing, this thesis also revealed other aspects that were not accounted for in the existing source credibility theory. For instance, the theory focuses on how the communication is affected by a source's credibility, and while we agree that this is and should be the main focus of the theory, we believe there are other aspects to pay attention to as well. First, the source credibility, meaning the perception of the influencer and their credibility, does not only affect the persuasiveness of the communication, but also the perception of the brand they promote, particularly, if the brand is prominent enough to be perceived as a second source. In relation, it is appropriate to discuss the perception of a promoted brand as a second source. On one hand, a promoted brand could stand out and thus, be perceived as a second source, if it is a well-known brand, of which the consumers have already established expectations and opinions on, impacting what kind of influencer and communication they find appropriate or "correct" for that brand. On the other hand, it could be when the promotion is perceived as forced. Thus, the negative impression would arguably lead the consumer to identify who the promoted brand is, to be able to avoid it in the future or recognize if more influencers post about it, and then determine if the brand/product is worth trying.

Second, returning to the notion of source credibility affecting brand perception. When a brand partners with an influencer, they piggyback on the influencer's credibility, and as evident in our data, this is for good and for worse. Thereby, if the influencer is perceived low in any of the dimensions, this could arguably transfer to the perception of the brand, however, likely only in relation to certain dimensions. Before discussing the weight of the four dimensions, it is reasonable to mention a similar matter, namely that the brand perception can impact the influencer perception as well, meaning the source credibility and thus, the effectiveness of the communication. As discussed above, the attractiveness dimension appears to carry less importance than the dimension of similarity, and the other dimensions. The other dimensions, however, are implied to be influencing factors on this matter, likely as they are all valued highly by the Americans.

To begin with, the dimension of trustworthiness was found to be of great importance, both in terms of the influencer and the promoted brand being perceived as sincere and credible, especially, if the influencer or the brand is unknown to the consumer. Furthermore, if the brand is foreign, this dimension may carry an even greater importance, due to the skepticism many participants displayed. Although, at the same time, many participants also suggested that Scandinavian brands, specifically, would boost trustworthiness, due to positive associations with Scandinavian quality and design, however, this will be elaborated later. The dimension of expertise also carried importance in the responses, as many of the participants turned to this dimension as an indicator of the influencer's genuineness and sincerity, arguably determining if the advertisement is forced, or fits with the influencer's expertise. Finally, the dimension of similarity was, as elaborated earlier, too perceived as valuable, due to the consumer's ability to put themselves in the spot of the influencer, imagining themselves with the product. However, while the other dimensions would likely not have a particular connection to number of followers, this dimension might, as discussed above.

Hence, if the influencer is perceived low in any of the three dimensions; trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity, this will arguably affect the perception of a prominent brand, as the advertisement may be perceived as insincere or forced. Furthermore, seemingly, if the consumer perceives low similarity, and no other dimension is perceived high either, the brand will be perceived as less credible. The negative impact on the brand perception, arguably follows as the consumer in cases of low source credibility, would question why the brand has chosen to partner with this influencer, if it identifies itself as trustworthy and knowledgeable.

On the basis of this, if the influencer is not capable of convincing the consumers, it is apparent that consumers would think the partnership is made solely on the grounds of the payment, questioning if it is even a good quality product in the first place. Similarly, as indicated in our data, if the brand is unknown or foreign, the consumers might question the influencer's intent with promoting this product/brand, questioning if it is only done for compensation.

Thus, on one hand, it would seem that the dimensions can be present independently, but that a presence of more than one dimension would simply enhance source credibility even further, diminishing any doubt left in the mind of the consumer. On the other hand, this independence is arguably only possible for the dimensions of trustworthiness and attractiveness, seeing as the presence of either the dimension of expertise or that of similarity will affect the trustworthiness dimension. According to our data, a perception of either of the two dimensions (i.e. expertise and similarity) as high, will enhance the perception of trustworthiness, as well as a perception of them being low, will lower perception of trustworthiness. However, even though this was not evident in the data, one might also argue that low similarity carries less effect than low expertise, especially, in the context of advertising a more universal product.

On the basis of this discussion, there is in fact a probability that the expertise and similarity dimensions can affect the dimension of trustworthiness, meaning that there is a connection between some dimensions. The dimension of trustworthiness is arguably the most important dimension of the four. Additionally, in the context of foreign brands and universal products, expertise is also valued higher than similarity, as well as attractiveness arguably being the least important.

8.1.2.3 Concept of Consumer Involvement

Our exploration of the concept of consumer involvement revealed a link to both source credibility theory and congruity theory. Responses from the Americans implied that when source credibility was perceived low, and congruence between influencer, consumer, and product/brand was minimal or non-existing, consumer involvement would also be low or non-existent. Opposite of that, high source credibility and a perceived fit would increase probability of high consumer involvement. These perceptions can be based on the various different antecedents of consumer involvement (i.e. personal characteristics, object characteristics, and situational characteristics). In terms of influencer marketing, all of these antecedents arguably would impact the effectiveness of an influencer's advertisement. Therefore, a comprehensive

understanding of consumers and preferences within these contexts can lead to more effective influencer content.

While the existing conceptualization of consumer involvement does not account for how it can be utilized by the influencer, we argue that this would increase the persuasiveness of the communication. It does, however, entail that the influencer makes themselves aware of who their followers are through interaction with the followers. This would arguably further increase the consumers' perception of parasocial relationships, which in turn would increase source credibility, and perceived influencer-consumer fit. By making themselves familiar with their followers' likes and dislikes, the influencer is able to provide content that would be perceived as relevant by the consumer, thus increasing involvement and overall effectiveness.

To our knowledge, research on consumer involvement from a social constructivist perspective is limited, but seemingly presents a natural fit. For instance, our findings revealed that the Americans exhibited high skepticism toward unfamiliar, and especially, foreign brands like the Danish brand, Kreafunk. This perception is likely influenced by the cultural context in which the individuals are situated. On the one hand, had we chosen to focus our research on a country such as Sweden, where the cultural distance is arguably smaller compared to the United States, this perception might differ. Hence, the Swedes would likely perceive relevance to a greater extent, and consumer involvement would increase. On the other hand, similar perceptions could arise in Sweden if the brand was from a distant cultural context like Asia, leading to reduced consumer involvement similar to the Americans'. These culturally and socially shaped perceptions are also deciding factors of which antecedents of consumer involvement are relevant for a specific person or social group. In continuation of what was written previously, considering that an influencer's popularity is socially constructed, there is arguably some level of similarity among their followers. Consequently, when it comes to leveraging consumer involvement, influencers may not need to individually familiarize themselves with each follower.

8.1.2.4 Brand Awareness

In this thesis, our aim was to explore whether it is possible to establish brand awareness solely through influencer marketing. Per the findings in our data, we argue that achieving brand awareness is indeed attainable through influencer marketing alone. Although existing theories emphasize the importance of both brand recognition for unknown brands and brand recall for

online brands, our data only supports the possibility of achieving brand recognition. In terms of brand recall, our data indicated that this may not be achievable only by using influencer marketing, as few participants expressed not being able to remember a brand, even if they could imagine it. While this is not a widespread perception among our participants, our data does not support making an actual claim on this matter and thus, further research is necessary to explore this aspect thoroughly. However, a discussion on why this perception may appear, could still be relevant, in order to identify aspects of this matter for future research.

As influencer marketing entails advertising that does not come directly from the brand, the promoted brand might not stand out enough for the consumer to pay attention to it, hence diminishing the possibility of reaching the level of brand recall. Therefore, on one hand, marketing coming directly from the brand, meaning they are the source, may be more effective for achieving brand recall. On the other hand, the brand would miss out on the benefits of influencer marketing, such as utilizing the influencer's follower base and their perceived relationship and/or relatability to that influencer, thus reaching further and potentially deeper than they would be able to through their own channels. Certainly, the brand could leverage paid advertising to extend its reach beyond their own followers, however, based on the American's dislike to influencer advertisements that appear overly forced and sales-focused, the brand might encounter consumers being deterred from their sponsored advertisements, as they perceive sponsored advertisements as constant sales pitches. On the basis of this, and our argument that influencer marketing is an effective tool for reaching brand recognition, a combination of marketing via an influencer and the brand itself might create a balance. This combination may maximize both reach and authenticity, and likely also create an opportunity for achieving brand recall due to heightened attention to the brand itself as a source.

Furthermore, although our data suggests that brand recall cannot be achieved solely by the use of influencer marketing, it might in fact be possible with repetitive influencer advertising. Relating it to the concept of consumer involvement, Bognar et al. (2019) found that most consumers state that the frequency of influencer advertisements has a positive impact on consumers' attention (307). Our data showed that in the context of foreign brands, where consumer involvement may be low, utilizing repetitive influencer advertisements became increasingly relevant to achieve brand awareness. Nevertheless, even with repetitive advertising, if the perception remains negative, we argue that only brand recognition can be reached, as consumer involvement is still too low for the consumer to process the content long

enough for it to leave an impression strong enough for reaching brand recall. In addition, our data suggested that repetitive advertising could be perceived as excessive exposure, arguably resulting in consumers becoming less responsive, or even annoyed by the advertisement. Hence, repetitive advertising could have the opposite effect than intended, and should thus be carefully considered. As mentioned, these aspects of brand recall could be relevant in future research, which we return to in section 8.5.

In relation to repetitive advertisements, it is relevant to discuss how this could be implemented. On one hand, the brand could choose to utilize only a few influencers for repeated promotion of their products, meaning that one influencer would post several times about the product/brand. This could give the influencer a perceived ambassador status in the eyes of the consumers, which would arguably increase source credibility and thus, consumer involvement. On the other hand, the brand could utilize several influencers, roughly meaning that many influencers would post only once or twice about the product/brand. This could be an advantage, as the product might be perceived as popular, when the consumer is exposed to several people posting about it. However, there is a chance that the consumer will only be exposed to the post from one influencer they potentially follow and therefore, would never know about this said "popularity". In addition, as the influencer only posts about the product once or twice, source credibility must immediately be established through either past created parasocial relationships, or through content specific characteristics relating to, for instance, the expertise dimension. Finally, employing several influencers could more readily be perceived as excessive advertising, as it presents as multiple different advertisements. Conversely, if only a few influencers promote the product in multiple posts, although they may represent different endorsements, they are arguably more likely to be perceived as a cohesive entity, rather than different advertisements as they are posted by the same influencers. The question of which approach Kreafunk could benefit from using is discussed in subsection 8.3.2.

As to our knowledge, previous research combining a social constructivist position and influencer marketing with the goal of building brand awareness is limited. Through this thesis, we found that building brand awareness solely with the use of influencer marketing involves more than just conveying information or advertising products. Instead it entails actively constructing meaning and shaping perceptions within a society, in this case the American. For a foreign brand, we argue based on our data, that utilizing American influencers for that

purpose is an important and necessary step to evade the skepticism and achieve brand awareness in the American market.

8.2 Contributions to the Field of Influencer Marketing

The contributions mentioned above enrich our theoretical framework, however, since the overall context of this thesis is the utilization of influencer marketing, it is natural to highlight our specific contributions within this field.

Initially in our research, it became apparent that the amount of research on American consumers' perception on influencer marketing was limited. By conducting a qualitative survey regarding influencer marketing, using American consumers as participants, we naturally contribute to this gap. More specifically, we contribute to research on young Americans, as our participants are all in the age range of 23 to 28. Due to shared social constructs influenced by social media, peer interactions, and cultural background, it is likely that the participants' perceptions will to some extent be similar to other young American consumers' perceptions.

Our data indicates that influencer marketing is an effective tool on the American market, and that brand recognition can be reached, even by an unknown brand solely implementing this marketing activity. This is evident as most participants expressed that they remembered having discovered new brands via influencer marketing. Though a primary focus of this thesis has been Kreafunk, we have too focused on the participants' attitudes toward influencer marketing in general. Thus, our data and findings can be leveraged by all American and international brands as well as researchers investigating possibilities with influencer marketing on the American market, especially in regard to young Americans' preferences. For instance, a Swedish brand considering entering the American market by utilizing influencer marketing could leverage our data and findings to better understand young American consumers, and their perception on influencer marketing. While suggesting that other brands with larger cultural distances from Denmark may find our findings less directly applicable, they can still use these insights as a starting point for initial research on the American market, in relation to leveraging influencer marketing to generate brand awareness.

Furthermore, it became evident that research on influencer marketing used in relation to audio products was limited as well, as most research was made on beauty products. Our data showed

that influencer marketing can also be used for promoting audio products. In fact, we argue that there are even greater possibilities for choice of influencers in this case, compared to beauty products, due to audio products being a universal product category. As mentioned, some of the participants express that audio products can be used by everyone, thus, we refer to such products as universal. We argue that a product is universal if an influencer no matter niche area can start promoting a product, with a majority of their followers not perceiving it as irrelevant, unexpected, or questionable. For clarification, we do not perceive beauty products as universal, as, for instance, a male car enthusiast could arguably not start promoting these products, without it being perceived as unusual by his followers. The same applies to a female sports influencer whose primary content relates to fitness and nutrition, and who has never expressed an interest in beauty products. However, both influencer types could arguably easily start promoting audio products without most followers being surprised.

However, we did discover certain preferences among our participants, while still acknowledging this can vary from brand to brand, from influencer to influencer, and from consumer to consumer. In terms of social media platforms, they prefer watching influencer marketing on Instagram and TikTok, and they prefer influencers that are knowledgeable, sincere, and relatable. Furthermore, some of the Americans enjoy watching content from influencers with certain technical skills, while some dislike when influencers are too eager to sell. Thus, while it could be assumed that a sales-focused influencer would be effective in persuading the consumers, we argue that such a focus can make an influencer appear overly aggressive, likely affecting the consumer's perception of the influencer's and potentially, the brand's genuineness and trustworthiness. In terms of showcasing the products, most participants expressed a liking of seeing the products being implemented in the influencer's daily life, so they can see them being used in different contexts, and for this purpose, video content is favored. Additionally, we found that the Americans disliked content that demands action, thus prefer the ability to take on a more passive role. Even though demanding content, such as giveaways, aim to increase the possibility of brand awareness, by utilizing users' ability to share the communication with their network, this finding indicates that brands should focus less on this type of content. Based on these findings, such influencer characteristics will arguably have the most influence in regard to audio products, specifically. This further supports what has been previously discussed regarding size of influencers' followership, that, despite audio products being universal, an audio brand should not just choose influencers with many followers, as these might not be as persuasive as those with less followers, as they are arguably

more personal and have stronger connections to their followers. These connections may foster trust in the influencer's judgment, making them more convincing. We argue this to be particularly important in relation to foreign brands that have yet to establish trust on the market.

As mentioned above, the Americans prefer watching influencer marketing on Instagram and TikTok. These platform preferences may be a reflection on each of the platforms' algorithms, which on one hand, may present itself as an ethical issue. Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram utilize users' personal data to increase the likelihood that the content they see is relevant. Subsequently, these platforms offer services to companies, leveraging the data collected from the users to optimize targeted advertising and influencer collaborations. If consumers, at the moment of being exposed to the advertisement, realize that their personal data is being used, they might experience discomfort, deem the advertisement as irrelevant, and form negative perceptions of the promoted brand or influencer. However, this perception may be more readily formed when the advertisement originates directly from the brand, as influencer content arguably feels more organic, as mentioned in 7.1.1. Furthermore, such negative perceptions may also be dependent on the consumer's involvement with the advertisement, which, on the other hand, might be enhanced by the algorithm's ability to source content that aligns with the consumer's interests and preferences. Thus, targeted advertising and influencer marketing might enhance user experience through personalized recommendations that help them discover new products and services. Additionally, many social media platforms offer users the ability to regulate their privacy settings and tailor their data preferences, meaning that consumers are able to withdraw from targeted advertising and adjust their privacy settings to limit data collection. Hence, it is reasonable to presume that for the most part, consumers have accepted or become accustomed to encountering targeted content, diminishing the potential impact on the brand.

Another ethical issue to take into consideration arises from geopolitical tensions, notably involving China and the use of TikTok (Gray 2021, 2). Given the ownership of the platform and data privacy controversies, brands must carefully assess the reputational risks associated with partnering with influencers on TikTok. The ethical dilemma lies in whether brands should engage with a platform that has faced scrutiny regarding user data security and geopolitical implications. Furthermore, brands must consider how their association with TikTok might reflect on their own ethical standards, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Nevertheless, we argue that in relation to the consumers that are already active on TikTok, this

aspect would not pose an issue, as they have likely acknowledged and reconciled with the prevailing circumstances surrounding the platform, forming their own perspectives on the issue.

Besides asking Americans about attitudes toward influencer marketing, audio products, and Kreafunk, we also gained knowledge on the Americans' perceptions and opinions on unfamiliar and foreign brands, in which we discovered skepticism from some participants. Based on this knowledge, we argue that it is particularly important for unfamiliar and foreign brands to choose the right influencer. If the influencer is not effective in promoting the brand or product, or if the content is poorly produced, it can significantly impact the perception of these unfamiliar and foreign brands negatively. This is especially true if there is no prior knowledge of the country from which the foreign brand originates.

Moreover, for foreign brands, it is essential to ensure that content is relatively informative, for instance, in terms of practical information. On one hand, the information can be written in text as a description below the video or photo, making it possible to make these aesthetically pleasing. On the other hand, the Americans prefer minimal text and video content, and appreciate when influencers speak directly to them, making it easier to detect authenticity. Thus, there is a balance to maintain, as too much text can initiate less perceived relevance, and well-crafted visual content can enhance appeal. Furthermore, perceived trustworthiness becomes particularly important in this context, influenced by the influencer's expertise. This is crucial when dealing with unfamiliar or foreign brands, as trust plays a key role in acceptance. Additionally, influencers may find collaborations with unknown brands risky, as it could possibly affect their reputation. Thus, the brand must also display trustworthiness in order for influencers wanting to collaborate with them.

8.3 Findings in Relation to Kreafunk

This section will carry focus on our findings relating to Kreafunk, directly impacting our recommendation to the brand. In three subsections, we will discuss Kreafunk's alignment with American consumers, content specific details that could be utilized in influencer collaborations, and lastly, choice of platform and influencers suitable for Kreafunk in the American market.

8.3.1 Alignment with American Consumers

First and foremost, considering Kreafunk's origin, and the market we investigate for influencer marketing opportunities, namely the United States, we find it crucial to initially address Kreafunk's alignment with American consumers, or assess any necessary adaptations for the brand.

From the participants' perceptions on Kreafunk's products, we know that Kreafunk was perceived as different from their American competitors, which was based on their color scheme and overall aesthetic. Concerning the color scheme, our data revealed gender-based preferences, with male consumers favoring neutral colors, and female consumers preferring brighter color options, as well as a perception that the brand was feminine. As a result, female consumers may be more easily reached in terms of brand recognition. However, as both female and male participants reacted positively to the products, Kreafunk could arguably keep the color scheme as it is, acknowledging that they will have a stronger hold in the female consumers than the male consumers. They could also aim to balance the perceptions by incorporating more products in neutral colors both within their product range as well as in their marketing efforts, thereby presenting the brand as less feminine. This strategy would arguably entail collaborating with male influencers, as they likely have a high proportion of male followers. Furthermore, given their demographic similarity to male consumers, utilizing male influencers could also help the brand appear less feminine, and make male consumers aware of other males using the products. This strategy could prevent Kreafunk from missing out on male consumers who might otherwise view using products from a brand with a more feminine reputation as taboo.

Such a strategy of incorporating more neutral colors would make them more similar to their American competitors, which, on one hand, would arguably be positive due to the amount of skepticism our data have shown surrounding foreign brands. Hence, if the American consumers perceive Kreafunk as more similar to known American audio brands, they might not recognize that the brand is foreign. Thus, they may carry more focus on the actual products of the advertisement and be more receptive toward the brand as they manage to create a perception about the brand without the negative association to foreign brands. Although this would likely work with foreign brands in general, Kreafunk's name may hinder their ability to use this strategy, as the Americans would likely immediately perceive it to be a foreign brand due to

the spelling. On the other hand, lacking differentiation from other American brands may also pose a threat, as Kreafunk could be lost in the crowd, meaning that the consumer will pay less attention to them. Moreover, the positive reception of the bright color options may be shaped by the perception that such options were previously absent in the market, framing the differentiation positively. On the basis of this, we argue that Kreafunk does align with the American consumers, at least to the necessary degree of not having to make significant adaptations to the brand, however, also emphasizing the importance of collaborating with convincing influencers.

As established above, we believe that Kreafunk does align with the American consumers and thus, can maintain their Danish identity on the American market as well. This notion is particularly interesting as it suggests minimal difference between consumers in the American market, and those in the Danish market. In this thesis, the similarity between the two cultures is found in the participants' perceptions. As the participants all belong to the younger generation, the interconnectedness between globalization and social media may play a significant role. Social media platforms greatly facilitate globalization by enabling instantaneous communication, information sharing, and networking across borders and cultures, which is also how influencer marketing has arisen and become possible to utilize in foreign markets (Kim and Kim 2021, 405). Therefore, based on the arguably considerable amount of time a younger generation spends on social media, and the ability to communicate and share information across borders, they are able to impact each other, despite being on different sides of the world. Thus, young people in Denmark or Scandinavia may be able to influence young people in the United States, as well as the other way around, shaping their perceptions to be similar, even though they are from different cultures.

Had our research been based on data from participants of an older generation, we might have experienced an increase in perceived differences and thus, a misalignment between Kreafunk and the American consumers. This would arguably be as a result of a lesser amount of time spent on social media, but potentially also the people they interact with online. Whereas individuals from a younger generation arguably interact with both people they know personally, online networks, and influencers, individuals from older generations might spend their time on social media mostly interacting with people they know personally. Thereby, the information and communication possible to be exchanged across borders is arguably limited, compared to that of the younger generation. Nevertheless, as our participants are all within the

age group of Kreafunk's target group, this unexpected finding is advantageous to Kreafunk's future use of influencer marketing on the American market.

8.3.2 Platform and Influencer Specifics

In terms of choosing the right influencer, choosing the right platform is significant too. If the consumers are present on one specific platform, the brand should be as well, meaning that they should partner with influencers who are on these platforms. Building on the discussion in 8.2, our data showed that TikTok and Instagram are the Americans' preferred platforms for watching influencer content, meaning that Kreafunk should employ influencers on these platforms.

The selection of a platform for influencer collaborations also depends on the target audience demographics. According to our data, only female participants used TikTok for influencer content, whereas it was more mixed between male and female participants on Instagram. On one hand, using Instagram influencers could broaden the marketing reach to include a larger segment, encompassing the male demographic for Kreafunk's neutral, and more masculine, products as referenced by Kreafunk's representative. On the other hand, Kreafunk's primary target group comprises females aged 15 to 35, making TikTok a suitable platform for reaching this group. This is discussed in the following.

The age distribution of the users of the platforms are relevant to consider when selecting which influencers to partner with. Despite TikTok's extensive user base, which includes a substantial number of young individuals, brands must carefully assess if this demographic aligns with their target audience. Additionally, the youthful user base arguably means that some users may lack the financial capacity to purchase Kreafunk products, hence they might perceive influencer advertisements for Kreafunk's products less relevant, decreasing their involvement with the advertisement. As some of our participants favored TikTok for consuming influencer content, it would be premature to dismiss the platform solely based on this discussion, however, it is essential to acknowledge that they also fall within a younger demographic. Consequently, considering Kreafunk's target audience, spanning from 15 to 35 years old, TikTok may capture the younger segment of Kreafunk's target group, as TikTok has a larger proportion of Generation Z users in comparison to Instagram. Furthermore, as indicated previously by engagement rates, TikTok appears to be more effective for consumer involvement and brand

awareness than Instagram. This could be attributed to the significant number of Generation Z users on the platform, as they presumably spend more time on TikTok than Millennials.

Furthermore, influencers with a small followership on TikTok drive significantly higher engagement rates compared to those on Instagram. Similarly, influencers with larger followings also experience substantially higher engagement rates on TikTok compared to Instagram. Thus, if Kreafunk partners with a TikTok influencer with a substantial following, they arguably gain more brand awareness, than with influencers on Instagram. However, as mentioned, TikTok would arguably capture less of the older segment of Kreafunk's target group, underscoring the relevance of also utilizing Instagram influencers. Also, while a substantial follower count may seem advantageous, our research suggests that it is not always the primary determinant of influencer effectiveness, as mentioned previously, authenticity and relatability often trump pure follower counts, as influencers with smaller follower counts arguably have stronger connections to their followers. Thus, Kreafunk should arguably prioritize influencers whose authenticity and engagement resonate with their target audience, even if they have a smaller following.

As mentioned previously, the wrong composition can harm both the brand and the influencer, therefore the correct research prior to collaboration is important. In terms of identifying the ideal influencer for Kreafunk, we found that our participants highlighted certain characteristics they believed had an impact in influencing them. In reality, finding a perfect influencer is impossible. Thus, in practice, Kreafunk and brands in general would arguably find that compromises on influencer criteria are inevitable. Therefore, we will propose essential criteria to streamline the Kreafunk's evaluation process. While we have already elaborated some of them in relation to Kreafunk, a few other characteristics are relevant to discuss in terms of effectively promoting Kreafunk in the American market.

The explicit preference among the Americans for influencers with specific technical skills highlights the importance of this characteristic in influencer partnerships, particularly for brands like Kreafunk aiming to enhance brand awareness. On one hand, technical skills arguably increase the quality of the content, which can make an influencer seem more convincing, likely enhancing their perceived trustworthiness. On the other hand, technical skills could also be perceived negatively, as excessive editing was indicated to decrease the influencer's sincerity. These findings underscore the need for influencers to strike a balance in

content creation, and for brands like Kreafunk to carefully choose to partner with influencers who have found this balance. Furthermore, it suggests that while technical skills are valued, authenticity and genuineness in content delivery are valued higher.

As mentioned in the empirical data, Kreafunk utilizes a strategy in Denmark that involves sending products to the influencer, rather than providing them with discount codes or other kinds of commission. On one hand, this would make the solution of using several influencers advantageable, as the product is then payment enough. Hence, avoiding having to pay additional money for several posts, as the product may no longer be seen as sufficient payment. On the other hand, if Kreafunk chooses to use one or few influencers for several posts, they could still avoid the issue of paying additional money, by sending more or other product variants to the influencer. This would also result in more varying content, as the products in the posts change or could be used together, further enhancing the perception of the influencer as an ambassador for the brand. This perceived ambassador status is arguably particularly important as Kreafunk is a foreign brand, thus unknown on the American market, as a perceived ambassadorship may increase trust in the brand.

Based on our findings, it appears that the size of an influencer's follower base is not the primary concern for our participants, in terms of being persuaded by the influencer. Instead, they place greater importance on factors such as the influencer's personality, as well as their expertise in the context of the product. Furthermore, our data indicates that authenticity, sincerity, and relatability play a significant role in how influencers are perceived by consumers. This suggests that collaborating with an influencer who has a smaller follower base, but embodies these qualities, may be more beneficial in establishing trust and credibility with the American consumers. Therefore, while a significant size of the follower base certainly has its advantages, it seems that other factors such as expertise and personal approach hold more weight in influencer marketing effectiveness.

8.3.3 Content Specifics

While the above subsection mentions the perceived skepticism from the Americans, our data also suggested positive associations with Scandinavian brands, affecting Kreafunk positively. As mentioned previously, some of these perceptions may be influenced by few of the participants' relation to us, however, this bias and its impact is discussed later, in section 8.4.

In this subsection, the focus is on whether the positive perception of Kreafunk can be utilized in an influencer marketing campaign. From our data, it was evident that some of the Americans associated Scandinavian companies with good quality, causing wonder of whether this could be employed in influencer advertisements for Kreafunk. On one hand, emphasizing the brand's Scandinavian origin can potentially differentiate the promoted products from competitors, and appeal to American consumers who value good quality products, with the endorsement being perceived as a quality stamp, increasing the trustworthiness of the endorsed brand. On the other hand, this emphasis could be perceived as hollow and arguably forced. Thus, without a convincing influencer, it could backfire and undermine the brand's credibility, proving the importance of an influencer perceived as sincere and persuasive.

Price is another element that can actively be utilized in influencer advertisements for Kreafunk. Our data displayed Kreafunk's price range as broad, with participants perceiving some products priced fairly, and others as more expensive. Relating this perception to brand awareness, if the influencer's advertisement concerns an expensive product, it may scare some consumers away, limiting the ability of the advertisement to increase brand awareness. Conversely, the expensive products could also intrigue consumers, as they may be perceived as luxurious or exclusive; attributes that consumers may leverage to convey status or prestige. Additionally, only showing the cheaper products could reach the consumers who are put off by higher prices. However, the brand also risks getting a certain image, arguably that the products are low quality, if all advertisements focus on cheaper products. Based on this, Kreafunk may have more success with using products of various price ranges, ensuring that they do not miss out on the interest of a particular group of people. Greater interest leads to heightened awareness and a larger opportunity for the message to spread widely among those individuals' friends and social circles. Thus, this impacts the choice of influencer. For example, an influencer known for promoting luxury products may lack credibility when endorsing Kreafunk's lower priced items, compared to their effectiveness in promoting the brand's higher priced products. Relating this to the previous discussion on perceived ambassadors, finding a suitable influencer for promoting products across various price ranges becomes challenging, as the ideal candidate would need to be perceived as neutral, or align well with both low-priced and high-priced product segments.

Our data further showed that the participants imagined audio influencers, interior design influencers, and influencers displaying an active lifestyle for a collaboration with Kreafunk,

which are arguably influencers whose content aligns with Kreafunk's brand identity. As previously mentioned, the participants expressed preferences for video content, knowledgeable influencers, and seeing products in action. Thus, an ideal influencer for Kreafunk to collaborate with could be one of the three mentioned types, integrating the products into their daily routines, while demonstrating their expertise, for instance, in terms of audio quality, design aesthetic, or the product's ability to endure wet and sweaty environments. Such an approach arguably combines the authenticity of lifestyle integration with informative content that showcases the unique features and benefits of Kreafunk's products.

Some of the same participants, however, also indicated that audio products can be advertised by all types of influencers, meaning that Kreafunk's product category is universal, as discussed previously. On one hand, this suggests that the ideal influencer might not necessarily fit into one of the predefined types mentioned earlier, but could belong to a fourth niche area, or even operate without a specific niche. As the participants found relatability to be a persuading factor, influencers from any niche, including those without a defined area, could, as well as the previously described types, effectively integrate Kreafunk's products into their daily lives, utilizing scenarios familiar to their followers. Many influencers' followers, particularly from the younger generation, likely use audio products in similar situations as described by our participants: when they are being active, cooking, commuting, studying, or being with friends. On the other hand, considering that the participants valued knowledgeable influencers, as it enhanced the authenticity and genuineness of the advertisement, an influencer without a niche area may be less effective in terms of persuading the consumers. Based on this discussion, given that Kreafunk is a foreign brand, and has yet to establish a presence on the American market, influencers specializing within a niche relevant to Kreafunk would arguably be more effective in building consumer trust. However, in the future, when Kreafunk has established brand awareness and trust in the market, we argue that they can broaden their influencer collaborations to encompass a wider range of influencer types.

Our data further revealed a level of skepticism toward influencers promoting new product categories, among the Americans. This highlights an importance for providing consumers with an explanation for new partnerships and maintaining transparency in content, which can play a crucial role in building trust and mitigating suspicions about influencer promotions in new product categories. Such an approach arguably demonstrates honesty and integrity, which could enhance the credibility of both the influencer and the brand. However, if the influencer

fails to convey convincing arguments, some consumers may still harbor suspicions about their promotion of a new product category. This issue would arguably be particularly relevant with followers who closely identify with the influencer. Thus, if the promoted product category diverges from these followers' own interests or preferences, they might perceive a lack of authenticity, or perceive the advertisement as driven primarily by compensation.

Moreover, while brands aim for positive brand awareness to spread, for example, through word-of-mouth, negative perceptions could also spread. These skeptical consumers may express their perception publicly or in their social groups, potentially leading to backlash against the influencer, or the brand. This negative attention has the potential to damage the brand's reputation and undermine consumer trust. Still, it is worth noting that our participants also hinted at the universality of Kreafunk's products, arguably making a direct alignment between the influencer's niche area and the product category less significant, as mentioned earlier. This implies that influencers can effectively promote new product categories to certain segments of the audience, who perceive them as relevant or beneficial, despite potential initial skepticism.

8.4 Practical Limitations of the Study

Regarding practical limitations, our qualitative online survey encountered some challenges. One advantage of doing an online survey is the flexibility for both researchers and participants, however, we did experience complexities when engaging with American participants. First, we did not receive as many completed surveys as anticipated, and second, some responses were provided in brief sentences, making it difficult in terms of interpretation. We attribute this to the participants' lack of commitment, as most of the participants did not have a relation to us. In hindsight, this issue could have been solved by doing online interviews instead, as once the participant has agreed to participate, we would have had their full attention, and it would have become harder to avoid answering parts of the questions. However, this approach would require face-to-face interaction, removing their chance of being completely anonymous, potentially scaring some Americans away.

Furthermore, we did a convenience sampling by asking acquaintances, being aware that some participants would already have a perception to some degree of Danish and/or Scandinavian culture due to their relation to us, which could affect their perceptions of Kreafunk and

Scandinavian brands in general. Additionally, if these acquaintances lacked prior experiences with Danish or Scandinavian corporate culture, for instance purchasing products from such brands, their perception could potentially be biased due to their assumably positive relation to us. Thus, the participants' perception of Danish and/or Scandinavian brands might be inherently positive, making it harder for them to offer critical feedback, potentially leading them to express positive notions solely due to our relation. Similarly, participants previously having negative experiences with Danish or Scandinavian brands might have biased perceptions of Kreafunk. However, doing a non-convenience sampling might have posed even greater challenges in gathering responses, as we lacked alternative options to directly reach American consumers.

With this said, one potential approach to avoid these issues could have been to indirectly reach out to Americans, for instance through a platform like Amazon Mechanical Turk, which we have seen been used in several previous studies. On one hand, this would provide us with a certain type of participants, namely people motivated by monetary compensation, however, on the other hand, by reaching participants through acquaintances too results in a certain type of participants, as evident in our data. Thus, conducting qualitative interviews with participants either being acquaintances or acquaintances' friends, or reaching out to random, and strange Americans via Amazon Mechanical Turk, could potentially have facilitated a more comprehensive data collection.

Moreover, upon reflection, we acknowledge that we could have omitted our own understanding of influencer marketing in the survey. Considering our relatability to the anticipated participants, we could have reasonably assumed that they were already familiar with the concept, and leaving out the relatively lengthy definition could arguably have prevented some participants from prematurely disengaging with the survey.

By addressing these practical limitations, other practitioners can improve their data collection processes and obtain even more comprehensive insights. We suggest considering qualitative (online) interviews as an alternative data collection method, in order to enhance participants' engagement, as we assume that once participants agree to an interview, they are more likely to provide detailed responses. Furthermore, practitioners may consider platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk for reaching a more diverse participant pool. While this might attract participants motivated by monetary compensation, it can still provide a broader range of

responses compared to convenience sampling, depending on the researcher's ability to reach individuals within the context they wish to study. Another lesson is to assess the familiarity of your target audience with the survey topic beforehand. If participants are likely to be familiar with key concepts, simplify the survey to maintain engagement and avoid overwhelming them with information.

8.5 Future Research

This thesis focuses on leveraging influencer marketing to create brand awareness on the American market for the Danish audio brand, Kreafunk. We perceive this as an initial step for Kreafunk, given its status as foreign and relatively unknown brand in the United States, however, from this research, we have discovered a potential issue for future research.

We have discovered that it is possible to achieve brand recognition by utilizing influencer marketing as the sole marketing activity in a new market. However, we have yet to ascertain whether brand recall is attainable solely through influencer marketing. Should this future research indicate that brand recall cannot be achieved with this strategy, we argue that Kreafunk may beneficially place more focus on the physical stores rather than the web shop.

Furthermore, brand recall is important to consider for online web shops, as consumers must actively seek out the brand. However, due to a lack of findings on brand recall, we question whether brand recall for online web shops is increasingly relevant in the context of purchase intention, and its ability to generate word-of-mouth, compared to brand recognition. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate the effect of brand recall on purchase intention and word-of-mouth.

9 Final Recommendation for Kreafunk

Evident from the research question, the aim of this thesis was to uncover ideal influencer characteristics of which Kreafunk could leverage to create brand awareness by collaborating with such influencers on the American market. On the basis of findings and discussions of our empirical data, a final recommendation that briefly and clearly explains what Kreafunk can do to generate brand awareness in the American market is provided in this chapter. Hence, this chapter is designed to be understandable without additional context from the thesis, particularly with Kreafunk's understanding in mind. Note that this recommendation is based upon survey responses gathered from young Americans between the age of 23 and 28.

For a general influencer strategy, we recommend adopting the model currently used in Denmark, Germany, and France, only providing the influencers with necessary products to create the promotional content, thus refrain from offering discount codes or other forms of payment. In a market with high advertising costs, this approach will help to keep the expenses down.

In terms of social media platforms, we propose Kreafunk partnering with influencers who are present on either TikTok or Instagram, as these are the platforms mostly used by the Americans, compared to other social media platforms. As for Kreafunk's primary target group (15 to 35-year-old females), TikTok influencers would be effective in reaching the younger segment of their female target group, as indicated by data showing that only female participants watched influencer content on TikTok and considering TikTok's youthful user base. To ensure also capturing the older segment of the primary target group, utilizing Instagram influencers is recommended. Instagram influencers would also be more efficient in reaching a broader segment, encompassing the male demographic suitable for Kreafunk's neutral and masculine products.

When attempting to reach male consumers, using male influencers is recommended, because of their ability to present the brand in a way that makes it appear less feminine, resonating more with a male follower base. Additionally, we recommend that Kreafunk initially collaborates with influencers who specialize in niche areas related to audio products, interior design, or active lifestyles, even if audio products are universal. This is elaborated later in the chapter.

Regarding the personal attributes, we suggest that Kreafunk seeks out influencers that are knowledgeable, sincere, and relatable. The Americans perceive influencers with expertise and knowledge as more persuasive. Additionally, sincerity is valued and is often possible to detect through video content, which is preferred as well. In relation, we recommend collaborating with influencers who possess technical skills but can maintain authenticity by balancing their use of these skills, avoiding overly polished content. Moreover, the ideal influencer should be capable of producing sincere content, avoiding an overly eager sales approach. In terms of finding relatable influencers, it is most important for Kreafunk to look for influencers interested in sharing personal experiences, which their followers can relate to.

Thus, for Kreafunk's initial influencer marketing strategy, we suggest focusing on influencers with smaller follower bases, as they tend to have stronger connections with their followers, compared to those with larger follower counts. In relation, it is essential to partner with personal and sincere influencers with the ability to convince followers that Kreafunk, despite being a foreign brand, can be trusted. In the future, when Kreafunk has reached a certain amount of brand awareness and trustworthiness on the American market, they can also make use of influencers with larger follower counts. This includes universal influencers, referring to an individual who has a broad appeal and influence across diverse demographics and interests, as well as influencers focusing on different niche areas than mentioned earlier (i.e. audio, interior design, and active lifestyles), as audio products are universal and thus, can be promoted by all types of influencers, as described by the participants.

On the basis of our findings, we further recommend using influencers who incorporate content that demonstrates the use of Kreafunk's products. Relating to this, the younger segment of Kreafunk's target group is likely to use audio products in situations similar to those described by the American participants. Therefore, we believe that content showcasing the products through the influencers' use of them in their daily life, encompassing scenarios such as being active, cooking, commuting, studying, or being with friends, would be more relatable and thus, persuasive to young American consumers. Linking this to the previously recommended influencer niches (i.e. audio, interior design, and actives lifestyles), Kreafunk's initial influencer marketing strategy should focus on influencers who combine the authenticity of lifestyle integration with informative content that highlight the unique features and benefits of Kreafunk's products. This approach would form the foundation of a more sincere and convincing advertisement.

In the above, we have provided characteristics that are important for Kreafunk in order to create an effective influencer marketing campaign. We have covered the various types of influencers, which entails both TikTok and Instagram influencers, influencers with small and large follower counts, influencers with niche areas and more universal influencers, as well as female and male influencers. Moreover, we have explored different personal attributes, namely expertise, sincerity, and relatability, as well as possessing technical skills and being sales-focused. Lastly, content specifics were covered, including a preference for video content, and influencers showcasing products in daily life situations.

In Figure 7 presented below, we have ranked these elements from most to least important, in order to assist Kreafunk in prioritizing characteristics for their initial influencer marketing strategy, recognizing the impossibility of finding an influencer who possesses all of them at once.
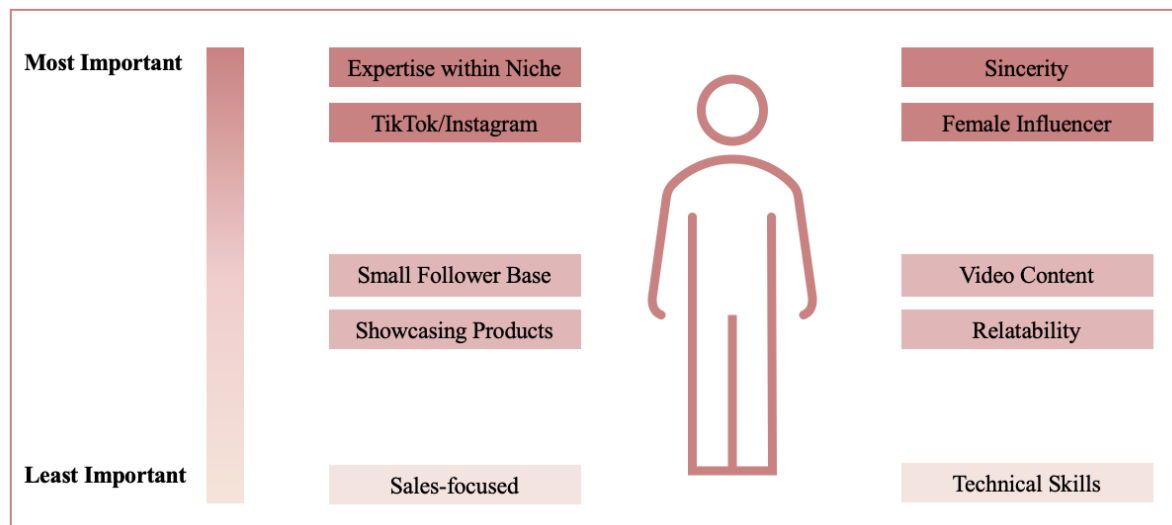

Figure 7: Influencer Characteristics for Initial Influencer Marketing Strategy

Considering Kreafunk's initial influencer collaboration, we have developed a persona named "The Instamom", inspired by the influencer characteristics outlined in Figure 7. Although we recommend starting with female influencers who have smaller follower bases and expertise within a specific niche, in the future, once Kreafunk has established brand awareness and trustworthiness on the American market, they can begin including larger and more universal influencers, including male influencers. Therefore, we have created two personas, "The TikTok Star" and "The Tech Expert", representing influencers for Kreafunk to collaborate with in the future. We have created these personas for Kreafunk to better understand the characteristics of the influencers that would best resonate with their target audience. All three personas are presented in the following.

Persona 1: "The Instamom"

Jennifer Smith is a 34-year-old woman from Portland, Oregon, who has found her passion in interior design. She is a mom, a podcast host, and an Instagram influencer. In her podcast, Jennifer dives into a variety of topics close to her heart, from parenting to mindfulness, and alike. Through her open and honest discussions and engaging storytelling, she creates a sense of connection and community among her listeners. Jennifer's Instagram is a vibrant mix of

family life and design inspiration, where she showcases products that enhance her daily routines, and decorate her home. With her keen eye for style and practical approach, she inspires her followers to create beautiful, yet functional spaces in their own home. With her down-to-earth presence and relatable content, Jennifer has built a small but dedicated follower base who trusts her recommendations and values her perspective.

Persona 2: "The TikTok Star"

Kayley O'Leary is an 18-year-old marketing student in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is well-known on TikTok, where she has gathered a large follower base due to her engaging content and charismatic personality. She likes collaborating with brands and sees it as a way to connect her followers with products she tries out and reviews. Kayley has excellent technical skills, particularly in video editing. She takes pride in producing high-quality videos that showcase her best self, and editing skills ensure that each video is visually appealing. Her relatable personality, creativity, and appealing content make her a beloved figure among young girls on TikTok. Kayley aspires to become a full-time influencer, leveraging her marketing knowledge to get more brand collaborations, and continue growing her social media presence.

Persona 3: "The Tech Expert"

John Baker is a 31-year-old tech engineer based in San Francisco, California. He works full-time in the tech industry and dedicates his free time to his passion for technology on Instagram. Although his follower base is relatively small, John has a strong connection to his audience. He regularly engages with his followers by answering individual tech questions on a weekly basis. John is known for his expertise in technology, providing valuable insights and solutions to tech-related problems. John's content includes tech reviews, how-to guides, and tips on the latest gadgets, making his Instagram a go-to resource for tech enthusiasts. Despite his busy schedule, John remains committed to maintaining a strong relationship with his followers.

This chapter clearly illustrates that numerous decisions must be made before selecting an influencer to partner with. Although this process requires extensive research, we suggest being thorough, as an unsuccessful collaboration could potentially harm the brand. This Final Recommendation should ease the process of finding ideal influencers for Kreafunk on the American market.

10 Conclusion

In response to our research question: *What are the ideal characteristics of an influencer collaborating with Kreafunk in order to generate brand awareness on the American market, based on young Americans' perceptions of influencer marketing and Kreafunk?*, we conclude that, when Kreafunk implements their initial influencer marketing strategy on the American market, the ideal and most important influencer characteristics are being female, active on TikTok or Instagram, being perceived as sincere, and possessing expertise in a niche that aligns with Kreafunk's products. The next most important characteristics are a small follower base, relatability, an influencer posting video content, and showcasing products in daily life routines. The least important characteristics are technical skills and a sales focus, as these could potentially be perceived negatively. For a future influencer marketing strategy, once brand awareness and trust are established on the American market, Kreafunk could start focusing on larger, more universal influencers to reach a broader audience. This could entail using male influencers and focusing on neutral and masculine color variants, in an attempt to engage a male audience.

Taking a social constructivist position, we reached this conclusion by utilizing a qualitative approach. Thus, we collected our primary data through a qualitative online survey, which gathered American participants' socially and culturally constructed perceptions on influencer marketing and Kreafunk. Additionally, we collected background data on Kreafunk through a qualitative interview, enabling us to discuss implications of the findings with their strategic aim in mind. The primary data was analyzed using Reflexive TA, which acknowledged the strength in our subjective interpretations of the data. To investigate the patterns found in the data, we created a framework within the influencer marketing field, consisting of congruity theory, source credibility theory, and the concept of consumer involvement, which was utilized to examine the link to brand awareness.

Additionally, for general findings within the influencer marketing field, young Americans prefer influencers who are knowledgeable, sincere, and relatable. Some appreciate influencers with technical skills, however, dislike when it is overdone. Furthermore, sales-focused influencers are disliked when they appear too aggressive, which can affect perceived genuineness and trustworthiness. The young Americans prefer seeing products integrated into the influencer's daily life through video content, to understand their practical use in different

contexts, and to be able to determine level of sincerity. As for unknown and foreign brands, we discovered slight skepticism from the Americans, which could transfer to the influencer perception, and may require more informative content about the brand.

In terms of our theoretical contributions, we contribute to congruity theory by suggesting that the brand also holds relevance in the consumer-product fit. Second, we propose that the perceived fit between consumer-product/brand in reality is influenced by other factors than the two other fits, hence, also by popularity and existing desire. Third, we argue that the consumer-product/brand fit is further capable of influencing influencer-consumer fit based on existing attitude toward a product or brand, either positively or negatively affecting the consumer's perception of a previously unknown influencer. Fourth, together with influencer-consumer fit, we suggest investigating parasocial relationships, as they positively impact persuasion of followers. Finally, we challenge the notion that all three elements (i.e. influencer, consumer, and product/brand) must align for an effective influencer marketing campaign, as our research suggests that consumers accept minimal to no congruence between an influencer and universal products. Thus, we argue the necessity for alignment depends on the product category being promoted.

As for source credibility theory, we posit that some of the dimensions are interconnected, as expertise and similarity can impact an influencer's perceived trustworthiness. Furthermore, we find that perceived source credibility may affect the perception of a prominent brand, when dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise or similarity are perceived low. Similarly, brand perception can impact the influencer's credibility, if the brand is perceived as prominent and lacking trustworthiness. Lastly, our findings reveal that among young Americans, the trustworthiness dimension is deemed most important, and in the context of foreign brands and universal products, expertise is valued higher than similarity, leaving attractiveness as the least important dimension.

As discussed, our influencer marketing framework focuses on the link to brand awareness. We find that perceived congruence and source credibility influence the level of consumer involvement, which ultimately affects the possibility of generating brand awareness. In addition to the previously mentioned findings, our research indicates that influencer marketing alone can enable an unknown brand to achieve brand recognition. However, our findings do

not clearly demonstrate whether this approach also enables brand recall. Therefore, this remains an issue for future research.

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