Let’s be EVERYWHERE:
Exploring consumer attitudes towards marketing overexposure through Influencer Marketing
Abstract

Background: In present time, social media usage has come to be an essential part of peoples’ everyday life, resulting in a movement from traditional marketing towards a more digitised marketing strategy. Since the effectiveness of traditional marketing is decreasing, marketers are using influencer marketing to create awareness of their brand. However, brands increased presence on social media platforms can easily lead to consumers being overloaded by marketing messages. In response to this overexposure, the effectiveness of using influencers is decreasing due to consumers ignoring the sponsored posts. Meaning, brands put more effort into their social media marketing than ever, yet their marketing attempts is getting less and less attention.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to clarify whether overexposure of sponsored posts by Swedish influencers affect consumers’ attitudes, and if the general impression of the brand and the influencer will be perceived as negative.

Method: This research applied an abductive philosophy, with an interpretive, qualitative methodological approach. The empirical data was retrieved through semi-structured interviews with males and females from Generation Y as the target group. The participants were chosen through judgemental sampling within the region of Jönköping.

Conclusion: The empirical study showed that influencer marketing in general represents an efficient strategy for marketers to use since it easily opens up possibilities for companies to reach a broader audience. Three equally important relationships were identified in order for influencer marketing to work successfully. These relationships were; between a brand and a consumer, between a brand and an influencer, and between an influencer and a consumer. It was found that despite how strong these relationships are, if a consumer is exposed to too many marketing messages the strategy will be inefficient. It is therefore vital for marketers to find a balance when using influencer marketing to avoid overusing this strategy.
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1 Introduction

In this section, the authors will introduce the concept influencer marketing, the benefits of it and the difference from traditional advertising. A research gap is identified on consumers’ attitudes towards marketing overexposure via influencer marketing. Problem, purpose and key definitions will explain why this problem is worth studying. Furthermore, the research question is presented followed by delimitations.

1.1 Background

In present time, social media represent a central part of the everyday life and social media platforms are often used by marketers to deliver a certain message (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). Influencer marketing (IM) has come to be a crucial part of brand marketing in response to consumers increasing presence on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). IM, a sort of Word-of-Mouth (WOM), established itself as a central marketing technique for firms to facilitate higher trustworthiness to their consumers (Solis, 2017). Today, IM is a digitalised strategy (Lyons & Henderson, 2005) focusing on pushing out a marketing message to an audience (Keller & Berry, 2003). IM uses influencers on social media and are receiving noteworthy scholarly attention as both consumers’ digital presence and the power of these influential individuals are increasing (Weinswig, 2016). A typical trait of influencers is that they have a large number of followers whom are interested in their life (Killoren, 2016). An influencer usually has a niche theme of their posts on social media, for example, fashion, health or food (Wong, 2014).

Companies are today using social media platforms for promotion due to its lower cost and extensive reach of customers (Saravanakumar & SugantaLakhsmi, 2012). Because of these benefits, brands are increasing the use of influencers and are at the same time able to interact with the consumers on a more personal level, which leads to a consumer relationship based on trust (Jaakonmäki, Müller & vom Brocke, 2018; Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001). Another reason for brands increasing their use of influencers is due to the importance to differentiate themselves from the rising numbers of competitors on social media platforms. As a consequence, there is a risk that companies overexpose their brand when trying to attract consumers’ attention (Reed, 2016) through
marketing strategies such as IM (Solis, 2017). The term overexposure is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as someone’s diminishing attitude or attraction towards, for example a brand, when being exposed excessively to their advertisement.

On the other hand, influencers are argued to establish stronger relationships with the consumers’ who follow them, compared to the relationship a consumer has to a specific brand. This relationship generates a bond of trust between the influencer and the follower, where opinions from the influencer regarding brands are of high value (Sheena & Sudha, 2017). Consequently, a fundamental element in consumers’ evaluation of brands or products is recommendations from other peers and WOM marketing, which has been said to generate twice the sales of paid advertising (Wong, 2014). It is clear that WOM is extremely powerful in commercial and purchase aspects. Previous research states that the strongest influence comes from family and friends, or people who consumers trust (Brown & Hayes, 2015; Hasan, Subhani & Osman, 2012).

A related phenomenon that has surfaced in recent years is the increasing trust of peer consumer feedback while the trust in traditional advertising has declined (Lee & Youn, 2009). Traditional advertising, such as television commercials and newspapers, had in the past acted as a tool to advertise a brand. The general attitudes toward traditional advertising are perceived as negative (Speck & Elliot, 1998), where consumers have shown dislike and tend to avoid this type of marketing (IZEA, 2018). In a study by Ha and Litman (1997) findings showed that by increasing adverts in magazines, the effectiveness was reduced by each individual ad. Today companies are aware of this issue and are in need of a solution to go around the problem (IZEA, 2018). Marketing via influencers is, therefore, a tool to “camouflage” the messages of the advertisement. This marketing strategy is used to avoid the perception of being noise (Talavera, 2015). However, a concern is that IM can potentially be exposed to the same negative effect as traditional advertising has shown if it is overused (Pelosi, 2012; McNamara, 2017; Clancy, n.d).
1.2 Problem Formulation

Brown and Hayes (2015) indicates the importance of finding the right influencer to represent a specific brand in order to deliver a proper message. Otherwise, there is a risk of the consumer avoiding that message (Brown & Hayes, 2015). Research shows that the primary difference between IM and traditional advertising is the level of trust when attracting new customers (Platon, 2015; Jaakonmäki, Müller & vom Brocke, 2018). Meaning that IM has a personal connection between the consumer and the influencer which can not be created via, for example, a television advertisement (Jaakonmäki, Müller & vom Brocke, 2018). Through the personal connection, the marketing strategy also delivers the perception of credibility to the consumers (Solis, 2017). However, marketers needs to ensure that the influencer can deliver the same values and beliefs as the brand stands for in order to deliver credibility (Brown & Hayes, 2015).

Nowadays there is an increasing scepticism towards traditional advertising as people are overwhelmed by the marketing messages (Burns et al., 2014). Resulting in a less efficient strategy (Jaakonmäki, Müller & vom Brocke, 2018; Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001) since it does not build enough trust to the audience. The lack of trust has as a consequence resulted in a disliking towards the brand (IZEA, 2018). If a consumer has been inflicted by negative experience by a marketing strategy previously they tend to make active decisions to avoid the advertisements and the brand (Kelly, 2008). As the effectiveness of traditional marketing is decreasing more and more, marketers are using IM to communicate their company message (Jaakonmäki, Müller & vom Brocke, 2018; Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001). However, since IM is a relatively new marketing strategy, the reactions from the consumers and certain attitudes towards the brand are unexplored (Godey et al. 2016).

Certain scholars argue that in response to an increasing overexposure of marketing messages, the effectiveness of using influencers are decreasing. This decrease of effectiveness is due to consumers ignoring sponsored posts when IM is overused by brands (Terrelle, 2016; Griffith, 2015). This effect was also shown in a study conducted in 2014 where the findings revealed that brands used IM at a higher rate than the previous year (Burns et al., 2014). However, the results showed that consumers’ engagement in sponsored posts decreased from 4.2% to 2.2% on Instagram. Stated more clearly, brands lay more effort into their social media marketing than ever, yet their marketing attempts
is getting less and less attention (Burns et al., 2014). Resulting in a scenario where consumers ignore certain advertising from a brand and is considering them as negative interruptions rather than informational commercial messages (Wang et al., 2016).

In today’s media society, a key marketing tool is the push marketing strategy (Geipel, 2016). The strategy is an essential part of digital marketing and social media marketing, used as a way to push a company’s products and services to an extensive group of social media users. The phenomena consist of two concepts called reach and engagement (Geipel, 2016). Reach means that companies wish for as many people as possible to know about their products via, for example, social media platforms. Meanwhile, engagement is when consumers make interactions or investment in forms of purchase or just by “clicking” further on the advertisement (Chaffey & Ellis- Chadwick 2013). The aim of using engagement strategy goes beyond transactions or “clicking”, companies want a behavioural manifestation towards their brand to create a need of their products. Another purpose is to develop a nonfinancial value through WOM, recommendation or similar situations (Van Doorn et al. 2010). Therefore, reach and engagement is an indicator for how well a company pushes the commercial message of a product or business out to the public. But the effect this phenomenon has on consumers, if overused on social media platform, has not yet been investigated.

Certain scholars argue that pushing out a brand or product onto as many people as possible, through social media, will only result in a positive outcome for the company (McDonough & Egolf, 2003; Rao, 2017). However, as the outcome from traditional advertising has resulted in a marketing overexposure of some form, existing research argue that the use of IM on the social media platform Instagram will end up in the same downward spiral (Burns et al., 2014). Meaning, if a brand uses too many influencers to push out their marketing messages the relationship a consumer has toward a brand and an influencer will be negatively affected. The authors argue for a feeling of marketing overexposure in the eyes of the consumers, which will result in avoidance or even a dislike of the whole brand and the influencer pushing out the message.
1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to clarify whether overexposure of sponsored posts by Swedish influencers affect consumers’ attitudes and if the general impression of the brand and the influencer will be perceived as negative. If the marketing overexposure of IM is continuing in the same direction as traditional marketing strategies, one can argue that the relationship a consumer has towards a brand and an influencer will be damaged. The findings of this research are hence of high importance to brand managers in order for them to create a solution to an issue that it is not yet too prominent.

1.4 Research Question

In order to fulfil the purpose of this study, the following research question was formulated:

*RQ: How do consumers evaluate marketing overexposure via influencer marketing?*

Sub questions were formulated to help the authors understand the subject and answer the research question. These are formulated as the following:

- *How does overexposure through IM affect the relationship a consumer has towards a brand?*
- *How does overexposure through IM affect the relationship a consumer has towards an influencer?*

1.5 Delimitations

This study aims to focus on both males’ and females’ attitudes towards brands and influencers when being overexposed by IM. Research is limited to the social media platform Instagram and takes no other platforms into consideration. Furthermore, this study will solely focus on individuals born between 1993-1995, which falls within the group Generation Y. The individuals chosen for the interviews will be geographically limited to Sweden and lives in the region of Jönköping.
1.6 Definitions

**Influencer:** An individual with the power to influence its audience or following. Influencers has a following customarily in a distinctive niche, they will engage with its followers through posts on Social Media platforms. (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2018)

**Social Media platforms:** A distribution center for information in today’s technology and a place where people can connect and encourage other individuals to whom they share a common interest. On social media platforms, individuals can share information via comments, discussion forums and reviews. Some of the most well-known platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and YouTube. (Osterrieder, 2013)

**Sponsored posts:** Sponsored content can be described as paid advertisement placed on a digital screen or stream, which promotes marketing content from a brand, advertising products and services (Wojdynski & Evans 2015).

**Collaboration:** A collaboration is when, for example, brands collaborates with a popular influencer to create, publish and promote brand-sponsored posts or videos. The goal is to increase brand awareness and/or develop a positive brand identity for the influencer’s broad following base. (Lampeit & Åberg, 2017)

**Feed (Instagram):** A flow of posts (photos/videos) from the Instagram accounts users are following (Loren, 2016).

**Follower (Instagram):** Individuals/companies who are following an Instagram account are named “followers”. Instagram’s social network is asymmetric, meaning that if user A follows B, B does not need to follow A back. Followers are friends or fans, choosing to follow an Instagram profile and therefore be updated with photos, videos and Instagram stories of that person. (Hu, Manikonda & Kambhampati, 2014)
2 Literature review

In this section, an explanation of the literature review will offer an understanding of the chosen theories and key concepts. A selection of academic articles will provide the foundation of the research regarding IM, consumer trust, ad-scepticism and brand identity. The research material, as well as the chosen theories will investigate self-perception in order to understand feelings and attitudes a consumer might have towards influencers and brands.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

IM strategy focus on pushing a marketing message to a large target audience via influencers (Keller & Berry, 2003). An influencer can be compared to an opinion leader whose opinion matters to the consumer (Brown & Hayes, 2015). Influencers are not celebrities, however, their effect are comparable to celebrity endorsement. Both strategies are used to generate awareness of a brand and develop the perception of it in a promising direction. The success of IM is grounded in the ability to create trust and establish a relationship between the influencer and the consumer (Sammis, Lincoln & Pomponi, 2016). IM started as an offline strategy, focusing on opinion leaders such as journalists (Brown & Hayes, 2015), yet today’s focus has shifted to online influencers without a face-to-face interaction. The digitalisation of IM has made it easier to reach a larger market audience (Lyons & Henderson, 2005).

Today, influencers can be seen everywhere. On social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, but also among friends, family and other individuals who has the opportunity to influence our opinions and attitudes. Furthermore, from a marketing perspective, influencers often work as bloggers, Instagrammers and YouTubers with a solid social influence. Using influencers as a communication channel is an effective way of creating awareness of a brand. (McQuail, 2005)

In recent years, companies have acknowledged the opportunity and ability to grow by using influencers. Companies collaborate with the influencers to present their brand by uploading appealing posts on social media for payment (Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017) through either money or by receiving free products from the brand (Jaakonmäki, Müller & vom Brocke, 2018). Furthermore, it is common that brands are providing each
influencer with a unique discount code to promote in their Instagram posts. These
discount codes are time-limited and allow the influencer to personalise the product even
more, and at the same time encourage the consumer to make impulse purchases (Hu,
Milner & Wu, 2016). Abidin and Thompson (2012) argue that since IM is becoming an
ernous part in people’s everyday life, it is more trustworthy than traditional marketing.
Using influencers is shown to be successful and are used by 75% of marketers today
(Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

2.2 Consumer Trust
Trust is an essential part of IM where an influencer develops a strong relationship with
the customers who follows them. Trust is according to Gefen, Rao and Tractinsky (2003)
based on the consumer’s expectations that the seller will behave in an ethical and
responsible manner. It is of significant importance to sellers to create trust because the
determination of a final purchasing decision is based on consumers’ perception of the
brand’s level of trustworthiness (Gupta, Yadav & Varadarajan, 2009). It is also necessary
in order to develop consumer loyalty and establish strong long-lasting relations between
sellers and buyers (Santos & Fernandes, 2008). However, when dishonesty or negative
purchasing experience occur, negative attitudes will appear among the consumers and
they do not longer trust the seller. As a consequence, they will in most cases turn to other
alternatives in order to fulfil their desires and needs (Lee, 2014).

As Internet and e-commerce are becoming widespread, the role of consumer trust has
increased, especially in social networks where consumer reviews are present (Jiang,
Wang & Wu, 2014). Today, brands are using influencers to gain consumer trust and to
make them feel connected towards the brand. It is of their best interest to find influencers
whose personalities and beliefs are relevant to the brand in order to create trust among
the consumers (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). Since the shared thoughts and experiences
about the product made by an influencer are their own, the message is perceived as more
trustworthy (Wu & Wang, 2011).

2.2.1 Electronic-Word-Of-Mouth
The importance of recommendations from peers has never played such an important role
as it does today since it creates trust (Lu, Chang & Chang, 2014). Keller and Fay (2012)
states that, on average, 2.4 billion daily conversations involving a brand is taking place,
which encourage marketing managers to continue investigating the ways to grasp the concept of consumer WOM. However, when trying to understand the activity happening on the internet, WOM differs and marketers use the term electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM) instead. The concept of eWOM can be defined as any positive or negative sharing of views, opinions and experiences about a product or service, which is made available to users online. This phenomenon has become a reliable source of information and studies show that consumers trust eWOM more than corporate messages (Wu & Wang, 2011). In fact, 74% of consumers rely on information they receive on social media when making purchase decisions, which means that the effectiveness of traditional marketing strategies decreases (Saboo, Kumar & Ramani, 2016).

The process of eWOM is of high importance today as marketers rely more on this strategy as a key factor to success compared to other advertising strategies. Trustworthiness of the sender is one of the most important outcome of eWOM since the consumers will analyse the source and then decide whether there is a perceived risk when making a purchase or not (Peters et al. 2013). To increase trustworthiness of the message, marketers are using influencers to promote their products to a certain target audience. By implementing this, consumers will not directly identify the message as a sponsored post which will increase the source credibility (Hwang & Jeong, 2016).

When consumers’ genuinely comment, shares or likes posts on the internet, the trustworthiness of that post is increasing among fellow consumers. However, even though eWOM is an easy way of engaging the consumer, when they see a sponsorship disclosure and recognise the post as an advertisement, the outcome can be negative. The trustworthiness of the information provided in the post will be downgraded which will have a contradictory effect of the intention to share the post. (Boerman, Willemsen & Van Der Aa, 2017)

2.3 A Growing Issue of Marketing

2.3.1 Misleading Messages & Ad-scepticism

Sponsored posts are part of a term called native advertising, which describes editorial content as any paid advertisement (Wojdynski & Evans 2015). In other words, this advertising form could be presented in a non-advertising way, resulting in the content being misleading. An example of a native advertising could be an ad written to resemble
an article. This occurs on many sites where articles are posted regularly, such as news sites, which could make the reader believe the advertisement is an article and build a scepticism towards it (Smit, van Reijmersdal & Neijens, 2009).

Collaborations through sponsored posts can certainly yield benefits to companies and it is used when companies aim to reach the target audience about their products or services in an efficient way (Becker-Olsen, 2003). On the other hand, Cho and Cheon (2004) found that Internet advertising can be perceived as annoying and intrusive for individuals. Considering this, the exposure of advertising on the Internet can have negative consequences and the effect can be a negative view towards a brand or website (Cho & Cheon, 2004). Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) found similar negative observations from people about advertising. They investigate consumers scepticism towards advertising messages and named it ad-scepticism, which is defined as the shift towards disbelieve in advertising (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Furthermore, Wang and Chien (2012) explain scepticism as the emotional response which will differ depending on the communications context and content. They also highlight the tendency of disbelieve against an argument. Consumers are, in general, sceptical about advertising because the message usually only focus on the positive characteristics of a product (Wang & Chien, 2012).

The scepticism towards advertisement can also be connected to the marketers’ goal to persuade consumers (Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). It is argued by van Reijmersdal et al., (2016) that one can explain how consumers respond to persuasive messages via a cognitive response approach. People who suffer from resistance against convincing messages create negative cognitions. Consumers can feel resistance towards an advertisement if they realise the message has the goal of persuasion. This can generate negative reaction from consumers by them feeling a violation against their freedom of choice (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). For the consumers to remain positive or to have neutral cognition towards a brand, it is crucial that there is a trusted relationship between the brand and the influencer (Brown & Hayes, 2015), and also a bond or a relationship between the influencer and the follower (Sammis, Lincoln & Pomponi, 2016).
2.3.2 Social Media Overload

As previously discussed, when consumers feel disbelief about a marketing message that is considered too persuasive, feelings of ad-scepticism is present. Another growing issue in the modern society is information overload which is when the amount of input to a system exceeds its processing capacity (Gomez-Redriguez, Gummadi & Schölkopf, 2014). According to Gross (1964), humans have a limited cognitive processing capacity and when they are overloaded with information, the quality of their decision making suffers (Gross, 1964). The extensive usage of online social networking has led to a remarkable increase in the amount of information a user is exposed to. With this in mind, one can argue that users experiencing an information overload on social media is greatly increasing (Gomez-Redriguez, Gummadi & Schölkopf, 2014).

A UK-based online questionnaire, investigating aspects of usage of social media, revealed that there is a high engagement with social networking media such as Facebook and Instagram. However, it was announced that two-thirds of social media users have felt that they have been exposed to too many posts, and over half of the users have also felt the need for a tool to filter irrelevant posts (Bontcheva, Gorrell & Wessels, 2013). Relating this to the problem of this study, there already exist a large number of posts on social media and users feel overloaded of information. When brands are pushing out sponsored posts via influencers to promote a product or service, this tends to have the same consequence. Meaning that social media users will be overexposed to these messages through IM, resulting in active avoidance of the messages.

2.4 Brand Identity

Branding and brand-based differentiation are both influential means for organisations wanting to create and sustain competitive advantage (Aggarwal, 2004). They can also work as the facilitators of social identity for consumers’ creation and expression, and consumers can easily identify themselves with a brand they perceive to match their self-concept (Wolter et al., 2016). Previous research has discovered differences in how consumers perceive and evaluate brands when, for example, considering brand personality, brand extension and brand equity (Keller, 1993; McQueen, Foley, & Deighton, 1993). In recent years, marketing literature show that consumers not only differ in how they perceive a brand, but also how they relate to them (Bartsch et al., 2016). The role brands play in shaping consumer identities has increased as people often form
relationships with brands in similar ways in which they do with others in a social context (Aggarwal, 2004). In fact, consumers search for a brand with an identity that matches their own to satisfy their needs. If the consumption of the brand helps them to form their ideal self-image, the need of satisfaction is fulfilled (He, Li, & Harris, 2012).

Research suggests that individuals form relationships with brands that mirrors their social identity. Following sections will further explain how consumers identify themselves, not only towards a brand, but also towards individuals influencing their attitudes. Concerning brand identification, Self-Congruity Theory and Self Concept will be further explained in order to gain an understanding of how consumers evaluate when being overexposed towards a brand. Later, Social Comparison Theory and 6 Principles of Persuasion will justify the reason for consumers comparing themselves towards influencers they follow on Instagram.

2.4.1 Consumer Attitudes toward Brands

Sirgy (1982) suggests that self-congruity theory connects the consumers’ perception of a brand to the concrete value it adds to the consumer and the symbolic meaning it communicates (Sirgy, 1982). This means that there is a profound connection of the level of congruity, between a person’s attitude towards a brand and the image they have of themselves (Sirgy, 1980). The self-concept or self-perception of the audience matches the valuable attributes of a product (Sirgy, 1982), which can be connected to IM and the consumers’ perception of identification towards the brand an influencer is recommending.

Self-image or a product-image comparison forms an interaction of self-concept, which Rosenberg (1979) states as the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). Swann, Stein-Soroussi and Giesler (1992) argue that the more alike the two different perceptions, self-image and product-image are, the more likely an optimistic attitude towards that brand or product will be generated within the consumer. Therefore, a purchase of a specific product is strongly affected by a person’s self-concept and the connection he or she shares with a brand (Sirgy, 1982). Connecting this to IM, O’Mahony and Meenaghan (1997-1998) stresses the importance of congruent, as perceived by the target audience, between the celebrity and the product they are endorsing. In order for a consumer to feel congruent
toward a brand recommended by an influencer, the consumer must not only perceive a connection between the endorser and the brand, but also a connection toward the endorser (O’Mahony and Meenaghan, 1997-1998). A clarification of this will be further explained in the following section.

2.4.2 Consumer Attitudes toward Others

The ways in which consumers and other social contexts influence each other are of major interest to modern marketers (Shalev & Morwitz, 2012). It has previously been stated that consumers must feel a connection between a brand and the perceptions they have of themselves before an attraction towards the brand can be made. However, numerous scholars have investigated the psychological means that promote social influence from others. Consumers have today more acceptance toward influence from a source they identify themselves with and reject influence when they want to difference themselves from the source (Berger & Heath, 2008; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Ferraro, Bettman, & Chartrand, 2009; White & Dahl, 2006). This section will be focusing on two comparison theories: Social Comparison Theory and two aspects from Robert Cialdini’s (2005) 6 Principles of Persuasion.

Social comparison theory (SCT) focus on how individuals naturally compare themselves to others (Festinger, 1954) since individuals care about the opinions from peers as well as how they are perceived (Bearden & Rose, 1990). Studies have found that consumers who are hesitant towards a purchase tend to compare themselves to a person with similar views. The reason behind this is to seek confirmation of an upcoming choice (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2004). Consumers have different individuals or groups to which they compare themselves with, which acts as a reference group (Khan & Khan, 2005). These people can be either similar or close to the consumer, for example, colleagues, friends and family. However, it can also be people that are not close to the consumer, such as celebrities (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000).

The SCT do not only occur face-to-face, in the modern society the theory has also become relevant online. When consumers compare themselves to others on the internet, it can generate a relationship and a bond between them. Opinions by other people online will affect a consumer’s willingness to purchase or not to purchase a product (Luo, 2005). Evans et al. (2017) argue for a profound connection between the relationship with influencers and its followers as it is tremendously important when using IM. When an
influencer positively delivers information and recommends a product, consumers will compare themselves to the influencer and it will affect their opinion (Evans et al., 2017).

Further, Robert Cialdini (2005) has identified six fundamental principles of persuasion which depicts what people are influenced by during decision-making on both a conscious and a subconscious level. The principles are reciprocity, commitment & consistency, social proof, liking, authority and scarcity. This study will focus on the principles of social proof and liking, since they have a substantial impact on the influence of peoples´ perceptions and behaviour (Cialdini, 2005). Social proof explain peoples´ susceptibility to group pressure since people tend to do the same things as individuals they bear similarity to. Therefore, if an individual trust or see as a peer endorse a product or service it tends to be more trust towards it. The principle indicates that individuals decides between what is right and wrong through assessment of others actions and what the social perception of the right thing is (Cialdini, 2005). “We see a behaviour in a given situation as correct when we see others behave in the same way” (Cialdini, 2005, p. 118).

Liking is the second principle developed by Cialdini (2005), and states that people tend to say yes to individuals they know and like. This is a rule influencers are aware of and will utilize to get their points across. Physical attraction also plays a vital role when trying to administer likeness on to others. This factor makes a person more compelling and convincing, resulting in them having an easier task when trying to get their wills and points across (Cialdini, 2005). The bond between, for example, an influencer and a follower usually strengthens if flattering occurs, especially if the influencer is someone the follower likes or whom they recognize similarities with (Cialdini, 2005).

2.4.3 Two-step Flow of Communication

The concept of IM and how consumers interpret certain messages can be connected to the two-step flow of communication model, which is one of the earliest communication theories. Due to the importance of feeling connected toward another person, either by SCT or one of the fundamental principles of persuasion, the two-step flow of information model highlight that the information from an opinion leader is more effective than traditional advertising. (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)
In 1948, Katz and Lazarsfeld proposed this model after discovering that messages sent via mass media did not have the same impact as previous research had shown. However, if a message was interpreted by an opinion leader who then communicated the message, it would become easier for the recipient to relate to the message (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Two-step refers to the ideas that flows from mass media to opinion leaders, and from them to a broad population. Opinion leaders were explained as individuals who tend to be more exposed to the media messages, and with an interest in politics and social issues (McQuail, 2005). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1995) described that these individuals would convey their impressions of the message in a more personal and simple way to the less active members of the population which, in turn, would radiate trust (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

The two-step flow of communication model indicate that interpersonal communication is more effective than mass communication when considering influencing an individual’s attitude. Even though this theory is conducted in the 1950s, modern research is strengthening the theory as it demonstrates that individuals are more willing to receive a message conveyed by WOM than to mass media or more traditional marketing (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). The theory has been modified by communication researchers and been used to study the channels of acquiring information. It has been revealed that the public nowadays is more likely to be influenced by online opinion leaders, particularly when making purchase decisions (Case et al. 2004).
3 Methodology

In this section, the research purpose, research philosophy, research strategy, research approach and research method will be presented. Further, the chosen methods for data collection as well as sampling, data analysis and quality of data is outlined. Lastly, the authors explain the concepts of semi-structured interviews followed by a description of the social media platform Instagram. Throughout this section, the authors argue for the reason why specific methodologies chosen.

3.1 Research Philosophy

The primary step when conducting a research is to identify a research philosophy. The purpose of doing this is to expand knowledge in a particular field and to use that knowledge to resolve a specific problem. One can divide the research philosophy into four dimensions; interpretivism, positivism, pragmatism and realism (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

The philosophical approach used for this study is interpretivism, which advocates the importance of understanding differences between humans as social actors, which can be connected to consumers’ different attitudes towards marketing overexposure. Interpretivism recognises the reason for utilizing theories as an understanding of previous lived experiences, rather than an abstract generalisation (Hurworth, 2017). Saunders et al. (2009) conclude that interpretivism can help researchers explore consumers’ perceptions in an in-depth manner, which is the reason for why the approach is suitable in this thesis. To receive the in-depth material, the researchers will be using semi-structured interviews, which will be explained in section 3.6.2. The term interpretivism is relatively broad, but the primary focus is on the experiences of the social world, which can be linked to this study (King & Horrocks, 2010). When the authors critically researched the topic, it was found that consumers attitudes toward marketing overexposure via IM has not been emphasized enough. With this in mind, it could be argued that by applying the interpretivism philosophy, the authors were able to investigate how different relationship can be affected when IM is overexposed.
3.2 Research Approach

When conducting a study, researchers can decide whether to use a deductive or an inductive approach. When using the deductive approach, theories and hypotheses are being developed in the beginning of the study, and are later tested by the research strategy. This approach is often used in quantitative studies where researchers focus on the amount of data instead of theories. Further, an inductive approach is used when the researchers collect the data first and, based on the results from the data collection, develop a theory. This approach usually examines smaller samples, compared to the deductive approach. (Saunders et al., 2009)

According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), the deductive and inductive approaches can easily limit the research and consequently, make it too one-sided. Therefore, the authors of this research paper chose to adopt the abductive approach, which has some similarities with the two approaches mentioned. However, it is important to clarify that this approach does not serve as a combination for the others, but only shares several characteristics (Erikson & Lindström, 1997). The abductive approach emphasizes on empirical findings but does not necessarily reject all the existing literature within the research area. It allows the researchers to move back and forth between the existing literature and the empirical findings. This aims to recognise patterns and, simultaneously, be able to obtain an understanding of the field of research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

The abductive approach is beneficial for this study since there is a possibility that not all the answers will be found in existing literature. The research is based on human attitudes which, with help from this approach, will allow the researchers to use clarification and interpretation, and not only existing literature to explain the answers. By moving back and forth between existing literature and collected data allows the abductive approach to be used to its fully competence in this study (Collis & Hussey, 2014). It will be an advantage for the researchers when conducting interviews for information gathering and later, analyse the findings.
3.3 Research Purpose

There are three different methods to use when investigating the research purpose of this study. These methods are named explanatory, descriptive or exploratory. The explanatory approach clarifies the relationship between variables. Consequently, this type of research is not applicable due to the lack of knowledge from the researchers about the relationship between a consumer, an influencer and a brand if IM is overexposed. In contrast, the descriptive approach outlines a person's profile, events or situations. This can be a part of exploratory or explanatory research or an extension of these methods.

An exploratory study will be a beneficial approach and is the chosen method for this research. This approach is suitable because the purpose of the study is to understand how consumers evaluate when many influencers on the social media platform Instagram are overused. Exploratory research is useful when pursuing understanding regarding a problem, ask questions and gain insight concerning a phenomenon. A vital aspect of the exploratory method is the willingness to change direction because the data collected might yield new insights about the problem.

3.4 Research Strategy

A research strategy is defined as a plan of action used to carry out the aim of the research question. There are several strategies available to use, each serving a purpose that will help answering different types of research questions. The most frequently used techniques for collecting data is ethnography, survey, grounded theory, action research, case study, experiment and archival research (Saunders et al., 2009). In order to answer the research question for this thesis, the authors have decided that case study strategy is the most suitable technique to use.

Case studies can be defined as a strategy researchers’ use when investigating a phenomenon within a specific context. This strategy is chosen because the researchers are investigating the phenomenon of IM, which makes this a relevant case study. Several data collection methods are encouraged in this strategy including documentation, participant observation and interviews. Since participant observation and interviews serve as the main methodical techniques in this case, one can argue that it is an appropriate strategy. It is also beneficial for researchers when they are in need of an in-depth insight of a research phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Saunders et al. (2009) argues that a case study
often is applied to an exploratory research which answers questions such as; “how?”, “when?” and “why?”. This is another indication of how this is suitable to this study since the research question that will be answered refers to “how” (Saunders et al., 2009). Further, Yin (2009) argue that researchers can choose from four different case study strategies where one is named single case. It is appropriate when the researchers want to gain a deeper understanding of one specific case. For this reason, the authors argue that this is a single case study since there will be an investigation on the phenomenon of consumers’ attitudes towards marketing overexposure via IM (Yin, 2009).

3.5 Research Method
In order to conduct a study, researchers need to decide whether to use a quantitative or qualitative research approach. A quantitative research aims to gather a substantial amount of data by using random selection methods. Another purpose for implementing this method is by collecting data to test a specific hypothesis. In contrast, qualitative methods are used to contribute a contextual knowledge of the study. The purpose is to gain a greater understanding of a phenomenon instead of gathering general data from a sample of the population (Byrne, 2001). Since this research attempts to explore how consumers potentially change attitudes of a brand and an influencer when being overexposed by marketing messages, a qualitative approach was chosen. Information was analysed from the consumers’ perspective of IM and the empirical study was gathered through individual interviews. By doing this, the authors gained valuable information about thoughts and opinions that could be used in order to expand a more profound understanding of the problem.

3.5.1 Qualitative Research Method
Qualitative research encompasses several approaches, techniques and methods, aimed to create an understanding and carefully documenting behaviour and attitudes. Generally speaking, this approach investigates the motivations and meanings behind a certain behaviour of an individual and provides a complementary perspective in human behaviour. One can choose to study individuals or a group of individuals using structured, unstructured or semi-structured interviewing methods. (King & Horrocks, 2010)

When the qualitative approach is properly used, researchers can obtain several benefits for conducting a research. Firstly, it allows the researcher to encounter the consumer, to go beneath the surface, and to gain a comprehensive view of consumer behaviour.
Secondly, this approach is often associated to a high-quality control, meaning that by using semi-structured interviews it was easier for the authors to control, manage and predict possible limitations. Conclusively, this approach is considered to be simple to organize and structure. Also to be completed relatively fast, compared to quantitative research approaches. (Mariampolski, 2001)

3.6 Methods of Data Collection

The data collected for this thesis consists of only primary data which is due to the restrictions and limitation on previous research made within the specific field area of the study. Primary data is first-hand data that has been collected for a specific purpose or situation (Saunders et al., 2009). The primary data collected has been specifically retrieved as empirical data for this study's purpose through semi-structured interviews. This becomes first-hand information about the phenomenon of IM since the researches have direct contact with the interviewees.

3.6.1 Pilot Interview

Prior to the primary interviews, a pilot interview was executed. It is beneficial for researchers to test the questions validity and ensure that the questions are not too difficult to answer. It is also a tool to test the ability to collect the data and record it. This pilot interview was held with a 24 year old male who follows different influencers on Instagram. The interview was held at Jönköping International Business School and was around 30 minutes long. This gave the authors knowledge about which questions were relevant to ask. The result was to dismiss a couple of questions and add certain questions to get saturation in the actual interviews.

3.6.2 Interviews

Interviews can be conducted different depending on the level of structure and formality. There are three approaches for interviews which are categorised as; structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews (Saunders et al., 2009). When using structured interviews, researchers are required to “read the questions exactly as worded to every respondent and are trained never to provide information beyond what is scripted in the questionnaire” (Conrad & Schober, 2008, p.173). However, when wanting to investigate an individual’s most important life events, such as experiences, life lessons or issues, researchers use unstructured interviews. These questions cannot be prepared in
advance and can only be answered by spending time with, and listening to the interviewee’s life story (Leavy & Brinkmann, 2014).

A semi-structured interview approach is chosen for this research since this study is an exploratory research. This approach allows for more dialogues and leeway for the interviewer, which provides him or her more control regarding the conversations on the issues that are important to the research topic (Leavy & Brinkmann, 2014). Questions for the interviews were prepared prior to the meetings, however, these questions may differ depending on the interview, such as asking follow-up question based on the given answers. It is a more flexible interview alternative where some questions might be excluded or added depending on the flow of the conversation. When using this type of interview technique, it is important to identify themes based on the research question and develop some key interview questions based on those themes. Moreover, semi-structured interviews are helpful when wanting to explain the respondents’ attitudes, opinions and feelings about a specific topic, which in this study is marketing overexposure (Saunders et al., 2009). The questions for this study was conducted based on IM and the researchers reviewed the research question and the data in the literature review to ensure the proper questions were asked. It was also important to choose questions that are not leading the respondent to an answer. Therefore, the interviewers used open questions which encouraged the respondent to answer more freely.

3.6.3 Interview Outline

The semi-structured interviews in this study were conducted with 10 carefully selected participants. All interviews took place in Jönköping, Sweden, and were with consent from the participants recorded and timed. Two of the authors lead the interview, asked the questions and was guiding the conversation, while a third researcher made insightful notes of the answers from the respondent. The choice of having two interviewers instead of one was to make the informant feel more convenient and to create a natural atmosphere of a normal conversation.

Since all participants have Swedish as their native language, the interviews were held in Swedish. However, all the quotes and notes presented in the empirical findings section are directly translated. Before the interview started, the participant was briefed about IM as a new marketing strategy as well as a definition of an influencer. Further, since this
study is to investigate consumer attitudes of IM on Instagram, the respondents was informed to answer all question from an Instagram perspective.

The interview started with some questions about the participants, such as name, gender and age, followed by questions of their Instagram usage and general questions of influencers on Instagram. Questions regarding what kind of influencers the participants are following, the primary reason for following them, as well as the thoughts of brands using IM as a strategy were asked in order to put the deeper and contextual questions about brands using too many influencers into context. The interview continued with questions regarding commercial messages, attitudes on sponsored posts on Instagram by influencers, and ended with questions about overexposure. Techniques such as probing and breaks in the conversation was made in order to gain as much information as possible about the research topic. Some of the opinions and comments from the interviewee lead to follow-up questions which were not in the interview outline, this made each conducted interview unique. The interview outline can be found and view in appendix A.

### 3.7 Sampling Method

When recruiting participants for a study one can use many various methods of sampling. To begin, the researchers need to determine if the sampling method to be used will be a probability sampling or a non-probability sampling. The difference between the two methods is that in the probability sampling method the individuals used as the sample population will have the same probability of being selected. Meanwhile in the nonprobability sampling method, the individuals does not have an equal chance of being selected (Shuttleworth & Blakstad, 2010). This report used the non-probability sampling method because of the time limit and resource restrictions did not make it possible to use probability sampling. The method can be further divided into narrower categories, such as judgemental-, snowball-, quota-, convenience- and theoretical sampling (Koerber & McMichael, 2008).

The method used in this study will be judgemental sampling, which is a technique where the sample is selected based on the researcher’s knowledge and professional judgment. This method is also known as purposive sampling and authoritative sampling and is used in cases where the researchers purposely handpicks the sample population on which the data analysis will be based. Judgemental sampling is usually practised when a limited number of individuals with specific traits that is of interest will be selected. However,
researchers’ needs to understand that there could be some setbacks when using this sampling method. These weaknesses could involve reliability and biasness, meaning that it is very hard to evaluate the reliability of the individuals chosen for the study. The selected individuals for interviews are biased since the sample out of the population is not randomized, this could lead to consequences such as misrepresentation of the whole population (Saunders et al., 2009).

This report could have used convenience sampling which conveniently selecting individuals willing to participate in the study. The recruitment of a sample when using the convenience method sampling is a shorter process since the method is to find participants wherever one encounters them out of convenience. The reason for the researchers not adopting this method is due to the disadvantages it can bring to the study (Saunders et al., 2009). These disadvantages include high selection biases and influences that will land out of the researchers control, it could result in an elevated risk of sampling error and it also retain low credibility as a theoretical sampling method.

This research sampling population consists of students, both female and male individuals, within Generation Y between the ages of 1993-1995 from Jönköping University, Sweden.

### 3.7.1 Generation Y

In modern society, the population can be divided into six different generations and this thesis will focus on generation Y. The age span varies depending on source, however this research considers individuals born between 1981-2000 as generation Y. (McCrindle, 2003; Crampton & Hodge, 2006), which accounts for approximately 25% of the entire world’s population (Branigan & Mitsis, 2014). Generation Y is known as the generation that grew up in a material welfare and with the revolutionary development of technology (Fregert & Jonung, 2010). With this development alongside technology, an almost addiction-like behaviour has been established where studies show that many within the population of generation Y devotes approximately 18 hours a day consuming different media types. Some examples of this is social networking, Television, Radio, Email and texting (Crowdtap, 2014). An attribute that differentiate generation Y from other generations is their ability to access information through the Internet on various electronic devices. This attribute generates a more extensive knowledge which establishes independence and also develops the capability to confront and question information. This
generation is usually more socially active, responsible and more critical of sources, due to the exposure of the vast amount of information on the internet (Tapscott, 1998).

Due to generation Y’s size as a customer segment, they have a high purchasing power. However, certain scholars’ state that generation Y is a difficult segment for companies to target since many within this population have built up a distrust against corporations (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004). Studies have shown that an efficient strategy to attract generation Y’s interest is by using celebrity endorsement or influencers for commercial purposes and marketing communication (Branigan & Mitsis, 2014; Morris & Higgins, 2010; Morris & Johnson, 2014).

### 3.7.2 Participants

The individuals for interviews have been selected from the age group 1993-1995 from Sweden who follows a wide range of influencers, between 2-100, and use Instagram for more than 30 minutes a day. The participants have all been selected from Jönköping International Business School since that allowed the researchers to get a larger geographical spread without leaving Jönköping. The authors chose to conduct individual interviews in order to collect thoughts on the attitudes towards IM. The authors do not think it would have been as effective with focus groups. From the information gained, the researchers received results that helped answering the research questions. It is vital to mention that all interview informants are business students with deep knowledge of marketing. Due to this, some of the answers could therefore be somewhat biased compared to individuals without this education.

### 3.8 Data Analysis

This thesis is written from a qualitative perspective with face-to-face interview interaction. Williamson (2002) highlights the importance of transcribing the collected data for a qualitative research. The interviews were audio recorded with consent from the informants, and the most important key point from the informants were written down by one of the authors. The informants were informed that their participation will be anonymous and given fictitious names in order for them to present their real opinions and feel comfortable. The recorded interviews were later transcribed into words and cross checked with the notes taken during the interviews. Since the interviews were held in Swedish, it was transcribed into Swedish and later direct translated into English.
To be able to interpret the data collected from this qualitative research, some steps are required (Saunders et al., 2009). Firstly, the authors read and interpreted the empirical findings individually before discussing it together. This was done in order to get different perspective so the analysis did not get a bias view. The authors looked for key words from the informants within the themes: attitudes, relationships, overexposure, trustworthiness, self-congruity and brand-image. Secondly, after interpreting the transcript respectively, the authors compared the identified categories and discussed the relevance and context of them. Lastly, a conclusion on which categories is suited to be included in the study was determined.

3.9 Quality of Data

In order to ensure the gathered information possesses the highest possible quality, it is of high importance to reduce errors and biases. Researchers’ objectivity is, among other terms, an essential concept in the data collection stage when assuring that the information is trustworthy and of high quality. Objectivity implies that the researchers’ need to put their opinions, thoughts and biases aside to correctly gather the data needed to the research (Saunders et al., 2009). In this study, the authors ensured objectivity in the data collection process by not asking any leading questions and to transcribe the semi-structured interviews from start to finish.

Healy and Perry (2000) argue that the quality and trustworthiness of a study can be measured by four components: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. Credibility is, according to several scholars, the most crucial factor when considering the trustworthiness of a study (Shenton, 2004; Suter, 2012; Cope, 2014). It can be measured depending on how the results from a study reflect the actual truth (Shenton, 2004). Since the interviews were recorded, the researchers had to consider the fact that the interviewees might have answered the questions differently than they normally would have done. When analysing the outcomes from the interviews, this was a crucial factor that had to be taken into consideration.

Further, dependability is important when it comes to trustworthiness since it establishes the findings of the research as consistent and repeatable. Researchers want to ensure that if others test the same data, they would end up at similar findings, interpretations and conclusions. This is of high importance in order to make sure that nothing is missing in
the research study, or that the researchers was not misguided in the final report (Suter, 2012).

Transferability is referred to as the ability to transfer and apply research findings or methods to other contexts in different fields. However, since there usually are smaller sample sizes in qualitative researches, it can be problematic to generalise the findings on other contexts and prove that the outcomes are appropriate in other situations (Shenton, 2004). In this thesis, there will only be an analysis of marketing overexposure on Instagram and how it affects different relationships. By combining the results from the theories and interviews used in this study, the researchers argue that it could be transferable to related studies in the field of IM.

Finally, confirmability refers to the importance for the researcher to be neutral and objective in order to acquire an appropriate understanding of the informant. However, it can be argued that it is impossible to be completely objective when dealing with humans. This is something the authors need to take into consideration since the information in this study is conducted through interviews. To escape from biases in the research, the researchers must have clear argumentation why the theories and methods are being used and argue how they will contribute to a trustworthy result. (Shenton, 2004)

3.10 Literature Review

In order to find literature best suited for the research purpose, the authors conducted a general search of the universities library database. To see if the subject previously had been studied, a second search was made on the digital archive “diva” where previously published articles exist. After these searches had been conducted, the researchers directed their pursuit of knowledge to Google Scholar using keywords such as: “Influencer Marketing”, “Consumer Trust”, “Electronic-Word-of-Mouth”, “Social media Usage”, “Overexposure”, “Avoiding Advertisement”, all related to the purpose of the thesis. Through these searches the authors built up a strong base of literature, such as books, previous academic research and articles, to use for the thesis. They were all validated to be trustworthy sources for the authors to base the research on.
3.11 Instagram

Instagram is one of the leading social media platforms in the world today, only surpassed by Facebook which has larger number of users (Statista, 2017). In September 2017 statistics showed that the platform had more than 800 million users throughout the month which makes Instagram the largest photo sharing platform in the world (Statista, 2017). Instagram is a free app where users share videos and photos for followers to see and interact with each other. On Instagram’s webpage, CEO Kevin Systrom states “…, Instagram has become the home for visual storytelling for everyone from celebrities, newsrooms and brands, to teens, musicians and anyone with a creative passion”, which describes how broad the categories of users are (Instagram, 2018). In 2016 statistics showed that 98 % of all fashion brands owned an Instagram account (Statista, 2016) and 80 % of all Instagram users follows at least one company because their brand is of interest to them (Instagram business, 2018).

The reason for Instagram’s success as an efficient marketing platform, that brands and influencers use to deliver marketing messages, is because its users spend more time on Instagram than they do on any other similar social media platform (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This study will focus on individuals born between 1993-1995 which falls under a group called Generation Y (McDaniel, McKinney & Kimsey, 2017), which is the second largest group of active Instagram users in Sweden with 81 % (Soi2017, 2018).
4 Empirical Findings

In this section, empirical findings will be presented, which is retrieved from semi-structured interviews and is divided into the three categories; consumer trust, a growing issue of marketing and relationships. The authors have extracted the most central findings of each category which will establish the foundation of the analysis section. To start this chapter, a schematic of the interviewees is presented in a table for the readers to get an overview of the participants. Furthermore, a brief description of the asked questions followed by quotes from respondents is provided to support the central findings.

For this research, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted including 5 males and 5 females, born between 1993-1995. The interviews were held between the 9th and the 13th of April 2018 and varied between 25 minutes and 33 minutes. All of the empirical data was gathered in Swedish in order for the interviewees to feel as comfortable and confident as possible. To protect the respondents’ identities, the authors have chosen to use fictitious names. The semi-structured interviews started with some general questions regarding the time they usually spend on Instagram every day and amount of influencers they are following. See Table 1 for more information about the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of participants</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Length of Interview (min)</th>
<th>Time spend on Instagram daily</th>
<th>Numbers of Influencers following</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>25.35</td>
<td>1-5 h</td>
<td>10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soraya</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>29.48</td>
<td>2-3 h</td>
<td>10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesper</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>30 min</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>32.38</td>
<td>2-3 h</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellinor</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>25.24</td>
<td>30 min</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emil</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>25.11</td>
<td>2 h</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilhelm</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>25.35</td>
<td>3 h</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>27.37</td>
<td>4-5 h</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pontus</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>28.51</td>
<td>1-1.5 h</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student (JIBS)</td>
<td>29.30</td>
<td>2 h</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Semi-structured interviews participants
4.1 Consumer Trust

4.1.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Regarding the trustworthiness of e-WOM on Instagram, the respondents were asked if the trustworthiness from an influencer’s recommendation is higher rather than a traditional advertisement on the same product. A majority stated that the trust was higher towards an influencer since they can illustrate how to use the product. Emil expressed that a sponsored post of a product was better because he would get a more personal understanding of the product and he could see how it is used in an everyday life. It is also argued that the influencer can increase its trust by mixing sponsored posts with non-sponsored posts.

Emil: “On the other hand, an influencer can do it better since they give another picture of it. How to use it in your everyday life.”

Additionally, some participants argued for a higher trustworthiness if the influencer has had a longer collaboration with a larger brand, compared to one who is constantly changing collaborators. Soraya argues that collaborations lasting longer than one or two years are more trustworthy since the influencers have been chosen because they are the right person for the job. It is also important for the participants that a brand has the same values as the influencer in order to believe the sponsored post is genuine. Jesper, for example, argues for a higher credibility and a positive eWOM if he knows that the influencer stands behind the product and the brand.

Soraya: “I think it feels real if the person [influencer] has worked with a brand for a longer time, and if you know that the person has had a collaboration with them for one or two years [...] rather than someone who always has new ones [...] If you see a fashion profile that has a collaboration with, let’s say an excavating business, then you know that they [the brand] has chosen a person just because, just because it is a channel, because it will be seen, but not because it is the right channel.”

Jesper: “If it is an influencer I have respect for and is looking up to in any way, it creates word-of-mouth and my trust is higher. But if I know that this
influencer really is behind the product or the brand, it will get a much higher credibility”.

Further, the respondents were asked if they believe influencers choose to collaborate with brands selling unethical products and all participants agreed. However, Pontus also argued that this is not an issue for the bigger influencers on Instagram, but rather on the upcoming influencers with a smaller following base. Pontus and Emil stated that the larger influencers really could nit-pick which collaborations they are going to do, while the less famous influencers might choose an unethical brand to gain economic profit and become a more successful influencers.

Pontus: “It depends on how big the influencer is, smaller influencers who strive to become big might do it to earn money, while the ones with many collaboration options can choose between companies”.

Emil: “Yes I think so, they do whatever it takes to climb the ladder of success”

Furthermore, all the participants argued for a higher level of trustworthiness if the recommendation instead came from another consumer, via customer reviews. This could be explained due to the reason of a larger group of individuals that have tested the product. It is also perceived as more authentic since the opinions are not bribed from receiving gifts or money. Mary and Robin valued customer reviews more than recommendations from influencers. They trust that customer reviews of products are not paid opinions and that it probably is ordinary people who have purchased the product.

Mary: “In that case I would have listened on customer reviews, because it is a larger group of people that has a higher voice. But then you know that more people has tried it and that it is ordinary people who has tried the product and not gotten paid for it.”

Robin: “I value it more because then I know that it is not sponsored and that the opinions are actually genuine. So I think consumer recommendations are stronger.”
4.2 A Growing Issue of Marketing

4.2.1 Sponsored posts

Something that emerged from the interviews about attitudes towards sponsored posts was a general positive perception when using it. Mary explained her positivity by saying that the posts developed a greater interest and awareness of a brand. Furthermore, all participants had knowledge about the concept of sponsored posts which was explained as paid collaborations between an influencer and a brand. The majority of the participants thought it was interesting to take part of sponsored posts on Instagram while a few considered this as interruptive in their feed. The participants who said it was interesting agreed with Mary and said it was positive since they gained inspiration and knowledge about new products. However Soraya, one of the participants who showed negative response, stated that sponsored posts was uninteresting and that she felt the marketing strategy overexpose her to these messages.

Mary: “You get inspiration, it might be about a product that you would not look at by yourself, but then they show it and you think, wow that one was nice, then you go to their homepage or something they represent.”

Soraya: “Not as interesting anymore. You get bombed by this marketing strategy.”

In regards of the participants’ reactions and feelings towards a post from an influencer saying, “In paid collaboration with…/ This is a sponsored post” the majority’s first reaction was negative and critical towards posts with this text. These negative feelings were mixed between irritation, scepticism and annoymt. Agnes stated that as soon as she read the sponsored heading the post immediately felt fake and not trustworthy. However, Pontus argued that it is positive since he easily can understand it as a sponsored post and thereafter ignore it.

Agnes: “Feels fake, not very trustworthy”

Pontus: “I don’t react much towards it, I like that it says [sponsored post], makes it easier to ignore it.”
Additionally, when using an influencer to recommend a product, half of the respondents argued it to be a positive strategy to use to a certain amount. Molly explained the reason for this as the message being perceived as more personal and the consumers can get inspiration from them.

Molly: “If they have a nice outfit, I can still go in and get inspiration, the inspiration part makes me more keen on checking it out. So it may be an advantage, you get your eyes on it.”

During the interviews, it was noticeable that the vast majority of the participants had at some point experienced overexposure of sponsored posts. Jesper argued that sponsored post on Instagram has risen considerably and Agnes felt overexposed by the 8 out of 10 sponsored posts she normally sees throughout her day. Further, a recurring statement made by the majority of the respondents implied that there is a rising issue of becoming too much. The same informants expressed that the amount of posts has increased in recent years which has led to an overload of sponsored posts.

Jesper: “Yes, you can clearly tell that is has been an incredible rise since Instagram started. I got Instagram almost directly from the start. Back then it felt like it [sponsored posts] was zero.”

Agnes: “I do not like sponsored posts overall so even the smallest amount is pretty much for me […] so let’s say that you might see 10 posts every day. That is 8 too much.”

In contrast, a few participants argued that it depends on the amount of influencers they are following. This is supported by Mary who stated that this is nothing disturbing since she can control the amount of sponsored posts on her Instagram by unfollowing the interruptive influencers.
Mary: “Yes, you can control that yourself, because you can choose to follow them [influencers] or not. So, I do not think it is something disturbing. If I feel there is an influencer that upload too much sponsored posts I can just unfollow them.”

4.2.2 Ad-scepticism

In this section, the aim was to find out if the participants noticed any differences in a sponsored post and a non-sponsored post by an influencer. The result revealed that sponsored post are perceived as more prepared, not as genuine and with a selling or impersonal caption. It was important for the respondents that the message of the post remained a natural part of their social media feed, otherwise the message would lack trustworthiness. In similar context, Jesper implies that the feed from an influencer needs to be in line with how they upload post in general.

Jesper: “It creates a higher value. If they [the influencers] get it more natural in the feed and in line with what they post in general.”

Several participants argued for scepticism toward posts that did not clearly state if it was sponsored or not. A feeling of a too persuasive message could confuse the reader, and it was not appreciated as a trustworthy source according to Molly. In contrast, if there is no selling message and the consumer has to ask about the product, the message is perceived as positive and more trustworthy which is confirmed by Agnes.

Molly: “ [...] sometimes when an influencer is at a restaurant and taking a picture where it says ´best brunch in the city´, all I can think about if it is a collaboration or do you really mean it? And it does not say ´payed collaboration with´, in a story for example”.

Agnes: “The best way of marketing a product is, now you need to write that it is a collaboration, but I get much more interested when I see that she is wearing a nice dress and someone is writing a comment and she answers. Because if it is a nice dress I will look up where it is from, by checking the comments or if she is answering it later.”
4.2.3 Overexposure

In regard of overexposure, the informants were asked how they would react when a brand would use multiple influencers on Instagram to promote a new product on the same day. The authors noticed varied responses where there was a mix between three different reactions towards the brand; negative, positive and neutral feelings. Soraya confirmed the negative feelings as a mix of being overexposed by sponsored post and irritation. Meanwhile, Jesper expressed positive feelings of the posts being interesting and exciting since he had such a high level of trust towards the influencers he follow on Instagram. Lastly, Agnes stated that she did not feel anything in particular towards the posts and would most likely just ignore them. She does express that the influencer is more likely to suffer from this, rather than the brand.

Soraya: “It becomes too much, then you get the feeling of it becoming bombed out with sponsored posts, it is just wrong. It has to be a diversity in the pictures that people put out. You lose credibility towards the company in particular, just because it becomes too much”

Jesper: “Then I would get super-interested because that product must be kickass. I would definitely think that. I follow them for a reason and then I would definitely be interested in that product.”

Agnes: “It feels like super fake. But I would stick with the feeling that the influencers is the one hurting from this, not the brand. Because my trustworthiness for the brand does not go up or down, it does not affect me positive since I feel it is fake. But it does not affect them negative either because I could possibly buy from them.”

Furthermore, a vast majority implied that their attitudes would change if all the influencers would repeat the pattern of promoting the same brand for several weeks. When this recurring sponsored post overload, Jesper expressed the most radical change of feelings. He stated that he would feel fooled when IM is overused in this way. This is also confirmed by Ellinor who consider this as negative if the influencers continue to push out the marketing message too often. In accordance with Jesper and Ellinor, most of the
participants felt that this could reflect badly on the brand. Meanwhile, Robin would not reflect badly on the brand but rather just unfollow the influencer.

Jesper: “Then I would feel really fooled and return what I have purchased. One time might work but if it would recur many times and it becomes a clear pattern, I would immediately think about the company really pushing out this.”

Ellinor: “More negative if it continues, foist on the advertisement”

Robin: “If it were so repetitive, I would probably stop following these influencers”

4.3 Relationships

4.3.1 Consumers Relationship towards Brands

In the interviews, the authors noticed that the majority thought brands using IM as a marketing strategy is a smart way to target a broader market and create awareness of a brand. Both Ellinor and Molly stated that they became aware of new brands as an effect of IM on Instagram. Further it was argued by Molly, as well as a few other respondents, that brands can reach a younger generation by using IM. Agnes explained why she thought NA-KD successfully uses IM when collaborating with influencers she likes, such as Hannalicious. The relationship grew stronger between Agnes and the brand since she already had a positive view of Hannalicious.

Ellinor: “I think it is smart. Because it makes people to actually see and notice someone who actually uses it”

Molly: “I think it is positive for brands and companies using this type of strategy to reach a much younger generation. Because it feels like there is a younger audience that follow, or is aware of influencers”

Agnes: “Very smart, I am thinking about NA-KD now with Hannalicious. I thought it was the most boring, cheapest brand, like a copy paste of Nelly. But after her collection and marketing with it, I have gone to think this is nice”.
However, even though the respondents considered IM as a smart strategy, the outcome effect shown in the interviews was a bad reflection on the brand if the influencer makes a big public mistake. Jesper argued that if an influencer does something bad there is a risk for the brand to be dragged down due to this mistake. For Pontus, IM was also considered more fake since he had a harder time finding the sponsored posts trustworthy, compared to a television advertisement.

Jesper: “Yes it is a risk that a brand can be hurt if the person/influencer does something bad. If the person is losing followers and gets uninteresting and the company might have been a synonym with the influencer, the brand might be dragged down”

Pontus: “In some ways, it feels a little fake, it is not as real as the television advertisement when you sneak in it. Because influencers are paid to promote it.”

In order to answer the research question, the respondents were asked if their relationship towards a brand would change when they felt a marketing overexposure of sponsored posts. The majority of the respondents experienced overexposure as a negative effect on this relationship. Willhelm confirmed this when he implied feelings of brands trying too much to push out their brand. He stated that the marketing message lost its uniqueness and with it, his interest.

Wilhelm: “It will be a little negative imprint because they [the brand] want so much that it is on the verge of too much, in the end it does not become interesting and unique. And then I don’t think they have gotten the desired effect they wanted.”

Molly and Jesper singled out the brand Daniel Wellington (DW) where their existing relationship towards the brand had been destroyed due to marketing overexposure. For example, Jesper thinks DW has overused the technique of IM and he does no longer want to use his watch he received as a gift. This is because he feels the exclusivity of the product has disappeared.
Molly: “DW, I do not really know why, but I got one when they came out and I thought it was nice. But then I thought it was too much and that their marketing was everywhere. Influencers just push push push the sponsored posts. So I can think that DW has gone down... I use my watch but would never buy one today.”

Jesper: “... for example DW, I have one of their watches that I got as a birthday present when I was 18 and have not used in since I was 18. And it is just because I know that so many has it and they were the first to start with IM and just puked out over all social media. So then I became very uninterested and thinks that it is unattractive to get those kind of products.”

In contrast to the negative views on the brand, several participants stated that if a brand uses IM properly it would not have a negative effect of that brand. The observation suggests that participants interested in a brand would also have a positive attitude towards the sponsored posts delivered. However, this attitude only stays positive if the brand or the product is of interest to the participant. As Soraya states in her interview, if the brand is important to her and something most people can use, she thinks IM is a great tool. However, she does not like it when for example the brand NA-KD pushes out a bikini that only young girls will think is pretty. She states that there needs to be a reason and a meaning of the product.

Soraya: “... If it is a good service, let's say the money-app Tink, it is awesome, everyone needs it. It is not something you get forced on but rather tips. It is not something bad to have control over your money, Petra Tunegården did something with them, she showed her reality in the app, her savings and costs. Which is really nice to get an insight in and that she is honest about it. Tips like ‘I have used it myself, this is good/bad about it’ This is much better than to just write ‘use this’. The company is important and that everyone can use, compared to a bikini from NA-KD that only young girls thinks is pretty, it is a difference on the meaning of the product.”

To conclude this section, in order for IM to be considered an effective strategy, two aspect have been discovered in the findings; a brand is required to be careful of the amount of sponsored posts they send out, and it must be of interest and importance to the consumer.
4.3.2 Consumers Relationship towards Influencers

In the following section, the focus will be on discussing if the participants experienced a relationship towards an influencer. It was revealed that all the informants had a relationship with influencers they follow on Instagram. However, Willhelm and Soraya stated that this relationship was limited to inspiration rather than wanting to be like them. Moreover, it was found that if an influencer posted a sponsored post, it would change the purchase intention in a negative way. Meaning, the participants did not purchase a sponsored product if they could not identify themselves with the influencer, despite if they already had decided to buy the product before they saw that influencer’s post. This happened to Jesper who wanted to buy a shirt he had seen on Instagram, but after seeing an influencer from Paradise hotel, that he does not like, wearing the same shirt he changed his mind and did not buy the shirt.

Wilhelm: “It is not like I worship them, it more that it gives me an interesting value”

Soraya: “I would not say that I would like to be like them, it is more that I can relate to them or be inspired to do the same”

Jesper: “The Italian shirt I thought was really good looking and then it was an influencer that irritates me or I do not look up to. I think he was in Paradise Hotel and then I saw him doing ads for this particular brand. I had thought of ordering but actively chose not to just because I saw this person wearing it”.

In contrast, Agnes expressed how she wanted to be like the influencers she is following. She explained that she looked up to these influencers and thinks they have interesting lives. Furthermore, a few participants positively changed their purchase intention and bought a product because an influencer promoted it. For example, Soraya purchased a face oil after a recommendation from an influencer she trusted. She explained that this influencer always gives her true opinions and would not hesitate to scorn a product.

Agnes: “Yes I kind of want to be like them...you look up to them, their life is really nice”
Soraya: “The other day I was going to buy a new face oil. And I was looking at them, and they had made a little collaboration with a girl named Nico [...] So yes I bought it then, she has been honest about everything else”.

To connect to the research question, the informants were asked if their relationships towards an influencer would change when they felt a marketing overexposure of sponsored posts. Some participants experienced a large amount of sponsored posts as negative which has resulted in them unfollowing influencers. The majority had at some point unfollowed at least one influencer on Instagram because of too many sponsored posts in their opinion. Agnes stated that when marketing overexposure occur, her relationship to the influencer is being damaged rather than her relationship to the brand. This is because the influencers are the ones getting paid to promote the product. These attitudes were also strengthened by Soraya and Robin who experienced negative views of the influencers rather than the brand itself. Robin implies that he does not follow the influencer to see sponsored posts, but to get inspired by their everyday lives. However, at a certain point he feels that the relationship to the influencer has lost its purpose.

Agnes: “I would say that it is more the influencer that gets a bad reputation, rather than the brand actually. I believe that it affects them more than the brand who offer the collaboration, it is sort of risk free. Unlike the influencer who receives money for sponsorship.”

Soraya: “So many, I can not deal with that. When it becomes too much [...] I do not enjoy watching it.”

Robin: “I started following the person to see their journey and their everyday life but, in the end, it was basically just marketing which meant that the purpose of why I actually followed that person was lost.”
5 Analysis

In this section, an analysis based on the empirical findings from the previous section is presented and is categorised in the same structure. Firstly, consumer trust, followed by a growing issue of marketing, and lastly different relationships in IM will be analysed. A model developed by the authors, based on the analysis is presented in order to clearly understand the impact of marketing overexposure. The analysis focus on providing a deeper understanding for the reader through linking the information gathered from the empirical findings and the theoretical framework.

5.1 Consumer Trust

5.1.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

In accordance with Abidin and Thompson (2012), the authors found that the trustworthiness from an influencer’s recommendation is higher than from traditional advertising on the same product. This observation is connected with the two-step flow of communication by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) who state that recommendations from an opinion leader is more valuable than traditional advertising. Throughout the interviews, the researchers acknowledged grounding arguments that these scholars’ statements are still accurate today. This was recognised during the interviews where a majority stated that the trust toward an influencer is higher because they can illustrate how to use the product in the sponsored post, which creates a more natural feeling than in a traditional advertisement. Emil implied that he received a more personal understanding of the product recommended by an influencer, which increases his trust. As quoted by Soraya, and further discussed by the other informants, the trustworthiness of the message is higher when the collaboration is with a larger brand that has lasted for one or two years. In similar context, Jesper, as well as Uzunoglu and Misci Kip (2014), argue that the best outcome for brands using influencers is when they find a person whose beliefs and personalities reflect the brands values. By doing this, the trust towards the sponsored post, the influencer and the brand is increasing as the message is perceived as more genuine (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014).
Furthermore, a contradiction occurred when all the participants concurred with the same conclusion that influencers might choose to collaborate with unethical brands to gain economic profit. Even though Pontus argued that it is not a problem for the more famous influencers, he stated that the level of trustworthiness from the upcoming influencers is considered doubtful. This statement is strengthened by the theoretical findings of the study where Gefen, Rao and Tractinsky (2003) as well as Santos and Fernandes (2008), highlight the importance of the seller behaving in an ethical and responsible manner in order to create trust and build strong long-lasting relations. Peters et al. (2013) also stress the importance of a trustworthy sender in eWOM as consumers first will analyse the source of the message before deciding whether to trust the source or not (Peters et al., 2013).

Additionally, findings from the interviews revealed that recommendations from peers is the most trusted source of information. In fact, all the respondents argued for a higher level of trustworthiness when it comes to sharing information among fellow consumers on the internet. This can be connected to Boerman, Willemen and Van Der Aa (2017) who argue that genuine comments and sharing of posts on the internet creates a positive eWOM since the opinions are not bought, which is supported by the findings of this study. This is further supported by Luo (2005) who states that opinions by other people online will affect a consumer’s willingness to purchase or not to purchase a product through accepting and agreeing with information given (Luo 2005).

5.2 A Growing Issue of Marketing

5.2.1 Sponsored Posts

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2013) explained engagement strategy as when consumers is being exposed to products on social media and will most likely click further on the advertisement. The majority of the interview informants agreed that it is interesting to take part of IM and is engaging in the posts on Instagram, to a certain extent. As quoted by Mary, when brands are using this marketing strategy on Instagram, she would get aware of products she otherwise would not have noticed. She argues for how this later leads her to clicking further on the sponsored post, visit the website and further look up the products.
Wojdynski and Evans (2015) explain sponsored post as native advertising that describe editorial content as any paid advertisement. Smit, van Reijmersdal and Neijes (2009) also describe that this type of advertisement could occur in a non-advertising matter which can be misleading. When a question regarding the feelings to the text “In paid collaboration with…/This is a sponsored post” occurred, the participants opinions about these sponsored posts created a critical and negative view. Agnes expressed her negative feeling about these posts as being fake which decreased the trustworthiness of the message. It was also found from other informants that opinions about a clear text stating a collaboration created feelings of irritation and viewed the messages as repetitive, since they immediately recognised it as advertisement. In accordance with Smit, van Reijmersdal and Neijes (2009), a clear collaboration text would lead to IM losing its non-advertising way of misleading a consumer. The authors argue that IM works best when the messages is camouflage since it is not considered an interruption in a normal Instagram feed.

Regarding overexposure, the authors can clearly see the same pattern of decreasing engagement of sponsored post as Burns et al (2014) state where brands are receiving less attention from consumers, even though they put more effort on their social media marketing than ever. This can be connected to this study since the vast majority of the respondents answered that they have felt overexposed by sponsored posts. This overexposure lead to the participants ignoring these posts and felt somewhat irritated as a result of this.

Furthermore, since the majority of the participants considers IM as a smart marketing tool to use in order to reach a larger audience, the authors argue for a balance in the Instagram feed to avoid feelings of social media overload. Gross (1964) explain overload as when information exceed human brain capacity which lead to consumers avoiding the marketing message. Therefore, when marketers are using strategies where the primary goal is to push out their messages (Geipel, 2016), the authors argues for a backlash if this is not handled correctly on Instagram. Findings in the interviews revealed that there is a rising issue of becoming too much sponsored posts on Instagram and Agnes implies that 8 out of 10 sponsored posts she sees throughout her day is too much. Others argue that their response to the overexposure is to unfollow the influencer. This could be connected
to the UK study by Bontcheva, Gorrell and Wessels, (2013), where two-thirds of the social media users have felt overexposure of sponsored posts.

5.2.2 Ad-scepticism

As discovered in the interviews, the authors found that when a sponsored post is not as genuine or personal as the influencers natural Instagram feed, it could lead to ad-scepticism. Informants expressed the importance of a similarity between a non-sponsored post and a sponsored post. This is in line with Wang and Chien (2012), who state that an emotional response differs depending on how the message is formed. When an influencer is uploading a sponsored post that varies from the natural feed, the informants will most likely create disbelief against that post which will have a negative effect on the marketing message.

However, the biggest ad-scepticism was aimed at posts where the respondents were confused if they were sponsored or not. This could occur when a message is perceived as too persuasive and not as genuine as previous non-sponsored posts. Molly expressed her scepticism towards a post when an influencer is taking a picture in a restaurant with a too persuasive message. As van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) explain, negative cognitions, such as the ones Molly felt from the picture, can arise when the recipient feel like they have been exposed to hidden commercial messages. In contrast, the informants described the best way to promoting a specific product was by allowing the consumers actively comment and ask where the product is from. In that way, the attitudes toward the message and the product are positive due to a more personal connection between the influencer and the follower. This is agreed upon by Wu and Wang (2011) who states that the trustworthiness is higher when the message is perceived as more genuine and real opinions from the influencer.

5.2.3 Overexposure

Throughout the interviews, the authors observed a pattern of how the response towards brands using many influencers to promote its products within a small time frame was mixed between positive, neutral and negative feeling. There was an excitement and a growing interest where the respondents felt the need to investigate the brand or the products further. A few informants argued for trust towards the influencer/s since they know how their usual collaborations is in line with their persona and image. An example is Jesper who stated that since he is following the influencers for a reason and has created
a bond of trust towards them, he would appreciate if many of the influencers he follows are starting to promote a specific product. Jesper implies that he would be very interested in the product and would consider buying it since his trust to the influencers is high enough to influence his purchasing decisions. This can be connected to Robert Cialdini’s (2005) fundamental principles of persuasion, the social proof. Cialdini (2005) states that if someone we trust or look up to endorse a product or service, they tend to show more trust towards that product and service. The authors have noticed that Jesper’s attitude is the result of a combination of social proof and SCT where Luo (2005) argues that consumers accepts and agrees with information being provided from an online source that someone share similarities or have something in common with.

Furthermore, the findings show that a vast majority expressed that their attitudes would change if all the influencers would repeat the pattern of promoting the same brand over several weeks. The opinions were straightforward and direct pointing to a negative change in the attitude and a dislike towards the brand and the influencer, which would affect the relationships. The informants expressed feelings such as irritation, disappointment and annoyance from this. From the gathered findings the authors noticed that almost all of the respondents did not like the brand as a result of using this technique over several weeks through multiple influencers. The respondent with the most critical change of attitude was Jesper who answered that he would feel fooled and would not be interested in the product anymore.

Reed (2016) argues that there is a risk of companies overexposing their brand when trying to attract consumers’ attention, which the authors also found when the informants felt overexposed. This was recognised since some of the participants at first showed appreciation towards the brands attempts trying to introduce themselves through IM. However, a balance was not found in order for the consumers to maintain a positive attitude towards the brand and most of the participants felt overexposed. This also connects to ad-scepticism where consumers can feel a resistance towards an advertisement if the goal of the message is to persuade the receiver. It also shows the same effect in negative reactions of ad-scepticism where the respondents feel a violation of freedom of choice (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016) and the result is a negative perception of the brand from the respondents.
5.3 Relationships

5.3.1 Consumers Relationship towards Brands

Findings from the interviews showed a positive view on brands using IM as a marketing strategy. This is due to the argumentation of IM creating awareness of brands and their products. Ellinor, for example, revealed to the authors that she thinks it is smart because it makes people aware of products through influencers who actually use them. Abidin and Thompson (2012) agree with Ellinor when they argue for a rising usage of IM to gain awareness of a brand. They argue that since IM is becoming an enormous part in people’s everyday life, it is more trustworthy than traditional marketing. Using influencers in different forms to promote a brand is shown to be successful and are used by 75% of marketers today (Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

However, the authors discovered a concern for brands that uses IM among the informants. Jesper stated that there is a risk for brands to associate themselves with influencers, especially in the events of an influencer making a major public mistake. One example of these kind of mistakes is if an influencer is promoting a product on Instagram but the opinion is later revealed as dishonest. As a consequence of this, the company image and reputation can be dragged down which will destroy three relationships. One is between the influencer and the brand, the second is between the influencer and the consumer, and the last relationship destroyed is between the brand and the consumer. Therefore, in order to establish a strong relationship between all three parties and to avoid this risk, Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) stresses the importance for the brand to find an influencer with the same values and beliefs as the brand.

Furthermore, the changed attitudes towards marketing overexposure were quite unanimous. Meaning that most participants did feel an overall negative perception of a brand that keeps appearing in their Instagram feed through influencers’ posts. There was a brand in particular that some of the respondents related this phenomenon to, which was the watch brand Daniel Wellington (DW). Molly said that she purchased a watch when the brand just came out, however due to them being a major player on IM her overall positive attitude towards DW has diminished. She stated that she would never buy a watch from them today. This reaction about DW was also identified from Jesper, who thinks that the brands exclusivity has disappeared due to their massive push marketing on Instagram. Jesper expressed that he would not wear his DW watch he received as a gift.
This is an evident example of reach strategy within push marketing where the brand wants as many people as possible to know about their products (Geipel, 2016). Certain scholars argue that pushing out a brand or product onto as many people as possible only will result in a positive outcome for the company (McDonough & Egolf, 2003; Rao, 2017). However, in contrast to these statements, the findings from the interviews suggest the opposite result and this effect is highly evident regarding the brand DW.

However, a majority of the respondents also answered, in defiance to their previous answer, that this would not at all have a negative effect on the relationship between them and a brand. In the conducted interviews a majority of the participants answered that they would not change their attitude if a brand uses multiple influencers to promote their brand or a specific product. The authors have observed, this is only true if the participants already have a good perception of the brand or if the product is of interest to them. This is connected to brand identity and how consumers perceive, evaluate and relate to a brand that strengthens the overall attitude towards that brand (Bartsch et al., 2016). In other words, if consumers can connect their identity to the brand or product, multiple sponsored posts from a brand would not inflict a negative mindset of that brand. Sirgy (1982) suggested with his self-congruity theory that a perception of a brand is closely related to the concrete value it adds to the consumer. This is still relevant today, since most participants have experienced negative overexposure of some sort on Instagram but contradict themselves in the case where they find a personal value from the sponsored posts. As Soraya mentions in her interview, if the service or product is good, everyone can use it and the company has important values, the sponsored posts are good and valuable to her. In fact, consumers look for a brand with an identity that matches their own to satisfy their needs. If the consumption of the brand helps them to form their ideal self-image, the need of satisfaction is fulfilled which creates a good relationship between the consumer and the brand (He, Li & Harris, 2012).

### 5.3.2 Consumers Relationship towards Influencers

Throughout the discussion about the relationship with influencers, it was found that the majority of the respondents do not see influencers as someone they worship. If a respondent has decided to purchase a product but then sees a sponsored post from an influencer he or she does not share the same values with, the decision could potentially change and resulting in no purchase. For example, Jesper argued that he turned down a purchase due to an influencers sponsored post who he did not feel a connection to. This
can be strengthened by scholars who argue about today's acceptance about influence from sources they identify themselves with or reject influence when they want to differentiate their image from the source (Berger & Heath 2008; Escalas & Bettman 2003; Ferraro, Bettman, & Chartrand 2009; White & Dahl 2006). It can be argued that individuals compares themselves with similar people in order to get confirmation about purchasing a product (Mussweiler & Epstude’s, 2004). However, in Jesper’s case he was comparing himself to an influencer that did not have the same image nor values as him which lead to a confirmation of not purchasing the product.

In contrast to Jesper, Soraya did purchase a face oil due to a sponsored post via an influencer she liked and trusted. This is connected to social comparison theory (SCT), which explains how individuals compare themselves to others (Festinger, 1954) which is what happened when Soraya compared herself with an influencer who she shares the same image with. The recommendation gave her the confirmation required and she purchased the face oil after seeing the sponsored post. The change in purchase decision is further supported by Cialdini (2005) who argues that social proof explains people's susceptibility to group pressure since many individuals desire to do the same things as individuals they bear a similarity with. When an individual trust a person who endorses a product or service, it is more likely for the individual to purchase the product or service (Cialdini, 2005). This case can also be applicable on the two-step flow of communication by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) who state that a message is easier for a consumer to interpret if it is conveyed through an influencer, rather than through mass media. If Soraya would have discovered the facial oil from a traditional advertisement, she probably would not have interpreted the message in the same way. Meaning, by seeing the facial oil in a sponsored post by an influencer she feels connected to, the more likely for her to interpret the message positively.

Certain scholars argue that in response to an increasing overexposure of marketing messages, the effectiveness of using influencers are decreasing due to the reason of consumers ignoring the sponsored posts (Terrelle, 2016; Griffith, 2015). Even though the participants argued that overexposure on Instagram would have a negative impact on the brand, they also said the effect would stretch to the influencers used in the marketing strategy. Agnes stressed that her relationship to the influencer got damaged when overexposure occur, rather than the relationship to the brand. Robin pointed out that he
started following particular influencers to see their journey and everyday life, however with too many collaborations and by posting too many sponsored pictures on Instagram the reason for following them lost its purpose. In other words, the majority of the participants have unfollowed an influencer due to overexposure of sponsored posts. Because their reason to follow the influencer from the beginning has diminished or the intriguing aspect of following the influencer has disappeared. When this happens, the relationship between the influencer and their followers is damaged. Without this relationship, where the followers trust messages the influencer is pushing out, the result will be an avoidance of the influencer on Instagram. This also portrays how important it is for the brands to investigate and research which influencers they choose collaborate with. Wu and Wang (2011) states that the opinions from influencers should convey the brands thoughts and experiences about products for the message to be interpreted as a trustworthy source.

5.4 Model for Influencer Marketing

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how consumers evaluate marketing overexposure via IM and if it has any effect on the different relationships between a consumer, a brand and an influencer. Even though the research was conducted through a consumer’s perspective, the authors found a third and equally important relationship which does not involve the consumer. This refers to the relationship between a brand and an influencer, since it was found that there needs to be trust and shared values between these two parties during a collaboration.

The findings made it possible for the authors to create a model to make it easier understanding the relationships of IM. The model is aimed to illustrate how a successful IM strategy would look like, and how it looks when it becomes overexposed. The marketing messages between the different parties are illustrated as arrows in the model. To further explain the three different stages of the model, a description of how the relationships change when brands collaborate with multiple influencers will be given. In this section, the authors present an answer to the research question as well as the sub questions.

The first sub question was regarding how overexposure through IM affects the relationship a consumer has towards a brand. Therefore, relationship 1 illustrates the components needed to make a successful correlation between the brand and the consumer.
From this research, it can be argued that the more alike the self-image and product-image are, the more likely it is to be a good relationship between them (Sirgy 1982). Relationship 2 highlight the importance of a strong connection between the brand and the influencer. If the personalities and beliefs between the two components are equal, the relationship is considered strong. Even though this study is made from the eyes of the consumer, the authors argue that in order for IM to be successful and trustworthy, this relationship is equally important as the two others. Furthermore, the second sub question regarding the relationship between the influencer and the consumer, relationship 3, stresses how individuals naturally compare themselves to other people (Festinger, 1954). When this relationship is strong, the consumer can identify themselves with the influencer and the message will be interpreted better (Case et al. 2004). This can also be seen in the findings where the participants decisions to purchase a product is influenced if they can identify themselves with the influencer.

Figure 1 displays IM when a consumer is exposed to only one influencer’s sponsored post, which demonstrates how the most effective IM strategy should look. This is because findings in the study reveal that this is the scenario where most participants are positive to IM. However, as we know, no brands are today using the strategy of only collaborating with one influencer since they do not reach the whole desired market. Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) argue that companies in recent years have acknowledged the opportunity to grow by using social media influencers. In order to make this work, it is of high importance for the different relationships to work in symbiosis.

Figure 1. Relationships in successful IM
The previous model shows an ideal connection between a brand, an influencer and a consumer for IM. As known today, brands collaborate with multiple influencers meanwhile the consumers follow multiple influencers. The updated model, see figure 2, shows a situation where the consumer is exposed to the same marketing message through various influencers. Considering this, the researchers realised a growing negativity in attitudes towards the brand. The majority, however, is positive or neutral towards sponsored post from a brand through multiple influencers if the sponsored messages are not too many. The benefit of this model, compared to figure 1, is the opportunity to reach a larger target market. Even though a minority of the respondents had a negative view of the brand, it might still be successful since it will reach a large audience. In addition, since the majority of the respondents did not have a negative attitude towards this scenario, the engagement would still be high from the consumers.

![Figure 2. Efficient reach and engagement through IM](image)

The third and last stage of the model, see figure 3, continuously develops and shows what happens when a brand uses multiple influencers. However, this model focus on when the strategy becomes ineffective due to overexposure from the perspective of the consumers. During the interviews, a noticeable change was recognised in the respondents’ attitudes towards a brand and an influencer. The authors identified a negative effect when influencers cross over from having a balanced feed of sponsored posts compared to when they post too much. What this means is that the brands technique of using multiple influencers in their marketing is losing its purpose and the engagement from the consumers diminishes. As seen in this study, a vast majority of the respondents
immediately changes their attitudes towards the brand as soon as they feel an overload of marketing messages from the brand. This results in ad-scepticism from the consumers since they start to question the purpose and genuinity of the messages received. The authors also observed that the built-up trust towards both the brand and the influencers is questioned by the consumer due to the imposing messages they receive. All three relationships are at risk of breaking due to the consumers’ awareness of overexposure of marketing messages. Furthermore, the difference between model 2 and 3 is that the negative consequences of using too much sponsored posts on Instagram has infested itself in Relationship 1. Therefore, the consumers no longer relate their self-concept to the brands personality and values (Keller, 1993; McQueen, Foley & Deighton, 1993).

![Figure 3. IM when marketing messages is being overexposed.](image-url)
6 Conclusion

In this section, a summary of the analysis and the answer to the research questions is presented which will fulfil the purpose of the study.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how consumers evaluate marketing overexposure through influencer marketing and how it affects the relationship a consumer has toward an influencer and a brand. The research identified a distrust of the marketing message when it is being overexposed by multiple influencers on Instagram. Three main relationships establish the structure for IM which are; the relationship between a brand and an influencer, the relationship between an influencer and a consumer, and the relationship between a brand and a consumer. Based on the findings from this research, the authors argue that all of these relationships are equally important in order to sustain an efficient IM strategy. However, an overexposure of the marketing messages on Instagram will weaken these relationships and the effectiveness of IM will decrease.

This study showed that IM in general is an efficient strategy for marketers to use since it easily opens up possibilities for companies to reach a larger audience. Nowadays, IM has come to be a significant part of digital marketing where brands are using multiple influencers to push out their messages. This has created a marketing overexposure, resulting in consumers showing scepticism and less engagement in the sponsored posts. It is therefore vital for marketers to find a balance when using IM to avoid this situation of over usage. This reveals that IM is not bulletproof since the general attitudes towards the brands reputation, as well as the influencer’s trustworthiness, is ruined if consumers feel overexposed by marketing messages.

It was found that marketing overexposure does have an effect on the relationship a consumer has with a brand and an influencer. Through the findings of the study, the authors have created a model of IM to easily understand the three relationships and how marketing overexposure effects these. In order for an efficient IM, all of these relationships need to be strong and there must be trust between the involved parties. However, despite how strong these relationships are, if a consumer is exposed to too many marketing messages the strategy will be inefficient.
7 **Discussion**

*In this section, the research will be concluded with a discussion about the empirical findings, limitation and suggestions for future research.*

7.1 **Discussion of Empirical Findings**

Referring back to the research question of this thesis, the authors wanted to investigate how consumers’ evaluate marketing overexposure through IM. Two sub questions were added in order for the researchers to get a deeper understanding of the subject and be able to answer the research question. Previously to this study it was known that consumers showed dislike and tended to avoid traditional advertisement (IZEA, 2018) due to overexposure (Ha & Litman, 1997). Findings of this research revealed that the same phenomenon is happening in IM on Instagram.

The respondents’ initial opinions about IM were that the strategy is an interesting and efficient tool for marketers to use. All the interviewees understood the reason for using it and would consider using it themselves in future businesses. Furthermore, Saravanakumar and SugantaLakshmi (2012) argued that this marketing strategy, in comparison to traditional advertising, is better due to its low costs, higher trustworthiness to the consumers, and increased exposure on social media platforms. However, the researchers found out that there is a risk for brands overusing the IM strategy which was confirmed when the respondents explained their rising scepticism when reviewing IM from a consumer’s perspective. In other words, all the informants had at some point felt overexposed by marketing messages on Instagram which created feelings of irritation, scepticism and annoyance towards sponsored posts. It can therefore be argued that marketers must find the right balance of when, how and through whom they should communicate a message on Instagram. Firstly, this study implies that sponsored post should not be pushed out too often from an influencer, as the findings points to 8 out of 10 sponsored posts as too much. Secondly, the marketing message needs to be genuine and not too persuasive. It is important for the consumers that the opinions from the influencer conveying the message is real. Lastly, it is of the brands best interest to find influencers whose personalities and beliefs are relevant to the brand in order to create trust to the consumer.
Based on the interviews, the authors found that the three relationships are equally important for IM to work. Relationship 1, between the brand and consumer, highlights the importance of the consumer seeing a value of the brand, for example considering the brand as important. Sirgy (1980) suggests that a strong connection of the level of congruity between a person’s attitudes towards a brand and the image they have of themselves is important. This was confirmed in our research where the participants argued for a need of self-congruity as the brand must reflect the consumer’s self-image. When these criteria’s are fulfilled, the relationship is strong. However, the researchers recognised that when brands are using multiple influencers who push the message too much, the relationship will be destroyed. In this case, overexposure has the power of making the consumer avoid advertising and ignore these brands.

Relationship 2, between the brand and the influencer, demonstrates how a brand and an influencer should be in line in the matter of image, values and beliefs. The trustworthiness of the message is perceived as high from the consumer when these aspects fit together. In situations where the collaborations did not fit these aspects, the respondent perceived these marketing messages as intrusive which resulted in a feeling of being overexposed.

Relationship 3, between the influencer and the consumer, emphasise the feeling of comparing the self-image to an influencer. IM is successful when the consumer can identify the same image, value and belief they have with the influencer. When a consumer admires an influencer and the level of trust is high, the chance of a purchase from a sponsored post by the influencer is higher, compared to if there is no trust. This study shows that when the participant could not identify themselves with the influencer, it would lead to a dislike of the marketing message and the consumer would lose their interest in the product. Additionally, when IM is pushed out too strong from the influencer, a feeling of distrust and greed occur. In worst-case scenario, the consumer chooses to unfollow the influencer which has been identified by most of the respondents in this study.

The authors developed a model based from this study which could be a beneficial tool for marketers to find the right balance when sending marketing messages through influencers. The authors noticed that many of the respondents did not have any initial negative views on IM, however throughout the interviews most participants started to
reflect on how they actually perceived this strategy. It was revealed that brands using IM on Instagram is a growing issue in terms of marketing overexposure. The researchers argue that IM on Instagram will end up in the same situation as traditional advertisement, where consumers’ will avoid marketing messages, if marketers does not take these findings into consideration. The authors suggest that these findings should be taken into consideration if IM should work in the future.

7.2 Limitations
The authors would like to acknowledge some limitations and shortcomings encountered when writing this research, even though precautions have been taken to ensure that this research would be reliable. The limited timeframe of five months was a restriction as well as the lack of resources and previous experience in writing a qualitative analysis. With an extended timeframe the authors could have, for example, gathered a larger sample group that did not solely consist of students. This limitation is the primary reason why all the empirical data was collected through interviews within the Jönköping region. The sampling method resulted in a sample with participants born between 1993-1995, however, generation Y ranges between 1981-2000, which makes it difficult to generalise the findings to the entire population. Furthermore, due to the choice of using the judgemental sampling method, when individuals with specific traits is of interest is selected, it could also lead to a misrepresentation of the population. As revealed from the interviews, the participants were very aware of both advantages and disadvantages for brands using IM as a marketing strategy on Instagram. Seeing as the results is solely formed from marketing and economic students, it can be perceived as biased and not entirely fulfilling. Therefore, the researchers stress that the findings could have been different with a sample without a higher education of the research topic. Additionally, as the findings are based on consumer perceptions, it needs to be taken into consideration that perceptions are personal and influenced by diverse individual factors. The findings can therefore, again, not be generalised to the entire population.

7.3 Future Research
Due to the limitations of this study, there are several suggestions on future research on this topic. Firstly, the aim of the study was to investigate how generation Y evaluate marketing overexposure via IM. However, since this study was limited to only participants between 1993 and 1995, the authors suggest to expand to a larger age group.
The interviews showed that the informants believed that a younger crowd looks up to influencers and is affected by sponsored post more than their generation are. A future research could study weather this is true or not and if they evaluate overexposure differently. A study about how people born in the 1980s could also present an interesting view upon the subject as well as non-students participants. Secondly, this research only focused on IM on the social media platform Instagram. The reality is that IM is a strategy that exists on other platforms such as Snapchat and YouTube. These are also sources that are very powerful regarding influencers and delivering marketing messages. The authors suggest that future research about marketing overexposure and consumers relationships to brands and influencers on other platforms is the next step in this subject. Lastly, this report has been limited to the consumer’s perspective of IM overexposure and the relationship they have towards brands and influencers. It could be of interest to investigate upon the influencer’s point of view regarding collaborations.
References


Kelly, L. (2014). An exploration of advertising engagement, advertising avoidance and privacy concerns on social networking sites.


Appendix A

Interview Guide

Intro
Out thesis is about consumers’ attitudes towards influencer marketing. It is a new type of marketing strategy that more companies are beginning to use since consumers has begun to avoid traditional marketing, such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube etc.

Due to consumers increasing presence on social media platforms, influencer marketing has become an important part of brand marketing. It is a digital marketing strategy that generate more trustworthiness through Word-of-Mouth. This strategy use social media influencers who, by sponsored or not sponsored posts, is promoting a brand. A typical trait of an influencer is that they have a niche theme, such as fashion, health or food. And we are focusing our thesis through the perspective of Instagram.

Is it ok for you if we record this interview?
We will not use your real name when we present the findings.

Name:

Year of birth:

Gender:

General questions about influencers on Instagram

1. How much time would you estimate that you spend on Instagram every day?

2. How many influencers are you following on Instagram?

3. What type of Influencers are you following?

4. What is the main factor of following these influencers on Instagram?

5. How do you look at the relationship between you and the influencers?

6. What do you think about brands that uses influencers as a marketing strategy?

7. Do you know any pros and cons?

8. Do you think it is interesting taking advantage of influencer marketing on Instagram?
Commercial messages

9. Are you familiar with the term sponsored posts on Instagram and what it implies?

10. What associations do you make when you hear the phrase “This is a sponsored post” on Instagram?

11. Do you find it clear when a post is sponsored?

12. What is the biggest difference that you experience between a sponsored post and a non-sponsored post?

Sponsored posts on Instagram by influencers

13. What is your attitude towards recommendations of products on Instagram? (Do you think it is interesting, awareness, inspiration, interferes, etc)

14. Is the trust higher towards a brand when it is recommended by an influencer, rather than a traditional advertisement on the same product?

15. Do you think your attitudes had differed if there were consumers who instead recommended the product? Via customer reviews for example

16. Do you think influencers chooses to collaborate with companies that is selling unethical products?

17a. Have you become more interested in a brand because an influencer has recommended it? Example of brand?

17b. If yes: Is it the personal message that attracts?

18. Does your attitudes differ between a collaboration with an influencer and a brand if you get something out of it? (From a promotion code etc)

19. Have you ever used a promotion code from an influencer sponsored post to purchase a product?

Overexposure

20. What do you think about the amount of sponsored posts on Instagram today?

21a. Have you ever felt that it is too much sponsored posts on Instagram?
21b. How much do you think is too much?
21c. If yes: What is your overall attitude toward a brand then? Pros/cons?

22. If yes: Have you ever unfollowed an influencer because of too many sponsored posts?

23a. Do you know any brands using many influencers to promote their products?

23b. If yes: Does it change your attitudes towards that brand?

24. Does the trustworthiness toward the company change?

25. If all the influencers you follow on Instagram post the same product from the same brand within the same week, what is your attitudes towards this?

26. Then consider the same thing happens the following weeks. What is your attitudes towards this now?

27. Have you ever been in this scenario where you’re interested in buying a product, then you see the same product in a sponsored post. Did it change you purchasing decision? How?

28. Would you like to share any other thought or opinions that you think would contribute to our research?

Thank you for your participation!