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Social media influencers – why we cannot ignore them

An exploratory study about how consumers
perceive the influence of social media
influencers during the different stages of the
purchase decision process

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Title

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Abstract

Social media is connecting individuals all over the world, where the power of interaction and information sharing has shifted from companies to consumers. Since companies now have a harder time reaching out to consumers, social media influencers have been used as a solution to influence the purchase decisions of consumers and thereby drive purchases. However, while social media influencers are said to have an impact on the purchase decisions of consumers, less is actually known about the influence on all stages of the purchase decision process. As the purchase decision is not solely based on its own but rather follows from a series of steps, also called the purchase decision process, more research based on this area is of importance. Therefore, the *purpose* of this thesis is to explore how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process. In order to gather consumers' perceptions about the influence of social media influencers, a *qualitative* study has been conducted where thoughts and experiences of participants have been studied. The *findings* of this study show that social media influencers ability to provide content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity and trust shows evidence of how the influence of social media influencers play an important role in each and every stage of the purchase decision process of consumers. The *implications* of this thesis is that the study could be of use to companies who seek to engage in influencer marketing and want to better understand how social media influencers affect consumers. *The original value* of the study is that it acknowledges how the influence of social media influencers affects all stages of the purchase decision process, as no previous study has explored this context.

Keywords

Social media influencers, purchase decision process, consumers, content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity, trust

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Kristianstad, 26th of May 2017

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1. Introduction

On Saturday evening, one of the bloggers I follow posted an Instagram post of a flamingo doormat and I instantly drug my roommate to Target with me to hunt down this doormat. After searching the aisles and asking an employee to look in the back for me, I found it!

(Taylor, 2016, April 28th)

Consumers make purchase decisions every day (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). How a purchase decision is made, has been explained as a long ongoing process, often referred to as the purchase decision process (Comegys, Hannula, & Väisänen, 2006; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). The purchase decision process has previously been said to be influenced by several social factors such as reference groups¹, family members and social class² (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). During recent years, a new type of social factor have emerged, claimed to influence consumers more than before (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). This social factor, is what we today call the *social media* (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016).

It is on social media, where individuals are connecting all over the world (Swan, 2012). With more than 3 billion users online (Internet Society, 2015), there is no concern that social media will be gone any time soon (Rosen, 2016). The rise of Facebook, Instagram, Blogs and many other social media platforms have changed the way the communication landscape works today as it is now consumers, instead of companies, who hold the power of information sharing (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Consumers can now, besides interacting with friends and family (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015), share experiences, opinions and information about several companies, brands and products with other users on social media (Song & Yoo, 2016). This shift of information sharing has created a certain difficulty for companies to reach consumers, which in turn, has forced companies to change their marketing strategies in order to be able to influence the purchase decisions of consumers. As a result, *influencer marketing* has been used as a solution (Jaakonmäki, Müller, & vom Brocke, 2017).

Influencer marketing concentrates on working with the key leaders in the market, leaders which can decode and forward the marketing message of the brand to their followers³ (Tapinfluence, 2017). These key leaders, also called opinion leaders, have long been recognized as traditional celebrities (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015; Davey, 2016). Although traditional celebrities have

¹ Groups of individuals that a consumer often compares itself to and shares a direct or indirect relationship with

² The role and status of an individual in a particular society

³ An individual who follows another individual on social media platforms

long been used in influencer marketing by companies, they have through time been said to be less influential with the reason that they often create unachievable ideals (Burgess, 2017). Instead, other key leaders with a high social status and strong social influence (Lu, Li, & Liao, 2010; Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014), have been recognized to better be able to communicate brands and products of companies (Hörnfeldt, 2015). These key leaders have grown essentially on social media throughout the years, now referred to as *social media influencers* (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2010).

Social media influencers are known as third parties which through their recommendations, images and other content on social media, can shape opinions, attitudes and actions of consumers and thereby influence their purchase decisions (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). The fact that social media influencers have started to gain more attention is due to the fact that they are considered more influential, authentic and experts at creating good and useful content (Burgess, 2017). It is this that later have been proven to have a great impact on purchase decisions of consumers as they, due to curiosity, easily embrace information other content that come from reliable sources (Boateng & Okoe, 2015). This information from social media influencers, recognized as the electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM), is the powerful tool that can persuade consumers to buy certain products (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). The quote shown in the beginning of this introduction shows a typical example of how a consumer can be persuaded by a social media influencer. As the social media influencer (in this case a blogger) posted⁴ a doormat, created the urge for the individual behind the quote to search for and buy the same doormat, which illustrates the influential power of social media influencers.

With the ongoing growth of users on social media and emergence of several new platforms, more social media influencers have started to gain ground (Carlson, 2017). This in turn arises the need for understanding the influence that these individuals have on consumers' purchase behaviors. Although, as it is quite clear that social media influencers are said to have a great impact on the purchase decisions of consumers (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014), less is known about the influence of social media influencers in the other stages of the consumer purchase decision process. As the purchase decision is not solely based on one step itself but rather follows as a result from several steps in an ongoing process (Comegys et al., 2006), it should be argued that more research based on this area is of interest.

⁴ An image, video or plain text, or a combination of all three on social media. Often referred to as a post.

1.1 Problematisation

Influencer marketing is far from a new concept (Brown & Hayes, 2008). The concept could be considered similar to the already known concept called word-of-mouth (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Many authors in previous research have shown that social media influencers (SMIs) do have an important role in shaping the purchase decisions of consumers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). It is through social media that SMIs engage with and influence the purchase decisions of consumers (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014). The ability of SMIs to interact with consumers on a deeper level, have throughout the years been more acknowledged by companies to use as a marketing strategy as a way to reach consumers (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017).

Through the years, many different types of SMIs have established their presence on social media (Abidin, 2016). Traditional celebrities have through time come to be considered SMIs, as they have been asked by companies to appear with products on their social media to create brand and product awareness and thereby drive purchases (Li et al., 2014; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015). Li et al. (2014) argue that celebrities enjoy to be publicly recognized by large amounts of people all over the world and has, due to their high reach in number of potential consumers, long been used to market products and brands to these masses of people. However, this kind of marketing have recently started to decrease since studies show that celebrities are not very influential anymore among consumers (Sammis et al., 2016). Though traditional celebrities are still used by companies to create awareness and drive purchases, many studies have recognized other types of SMIs to be more influential instead (Almutairi & Bennett, 2016).

Bloggers⁵ have been acknowledged as SMIs because of their ability to possess “*higher levels of enduring involvement, innovativeness, exploratory behavior, self-perceived knowledge, and more expertise within a product category*” (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 593). Bloggers are usually active on more than one social media platform at once (Abidin, 2016), where they are later referred to as Instagramers⁶, Facebookers⁷, Tweeters⁸, Youtubers⁹ and many others (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013; Sammis et al., 2016). Wang, Yu and Wei (2012) have acknowledge friends and families as influential individuals as well, often referred to as peer communicators.

⁵ SMIs that are active on Blogs

⁶ SMIs that are active on Instagram

⁷ SMIs that are active on Facebook

⁸ SMIs that are active on Twitter

⁹ SMIs that are active on Youtube

However, peer communicators do not count as SMIs due to the fact that they do not obtain the high social status such as the other previously mentioned SMIs (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012).

How social media influencers (SMIs) influence the purchase decisions of consumers, have previously been approached by several authors in quantitative research. Kamtarin (2012) states that it is the e-WoM provided by SMIs that have created their ability to influence consumers, since the e-WoM of SMIs are considered more reliable in comparison to the information generated by companies themselves. Jakonmääki et al. (2017) further imply that it is indeed the e-WoM that creates the possibility for individuals to share their opinions on products among themselves. This means that when SMIs are paid to appear with and share their opinion and personal experience of different brands and products, consumers are given a direct access to online reviews of these brands and products as a result (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Cheung, Xiao and Liu (2014) continue by arguing that e-WoM has been proven to shape the purchase decisions of consumers far more than ever before. Kim and Johnsson (2015) agree by underlining the fact that e-WoM has a greater impact on purchase decisions than the traditional WoM, as messages online can reach a larger amount of individuals quicker than the traditional WoM that is provided outside the social media era. Yet, it should be argued that even though SMIs are paid to share information about brands and products to their followers (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014), consumers still deem them reliable due to different reasons, which will be explained more profoundly in the following paragraphs.

Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) describe how the content that SMIs post about their everyday lives, have had an essential impact on consumers. The authors further explain that the high social status of SMIs has been acquired mainly by the content that the SMIs provide. This is because the content contain more personal information about their personal everyday lives, which in turn gives followers the opportunity to feel a closer connection to the SMIs (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013). Li et al. (2014) support this fact by further stating that the purchase decisions of consumers are mainly influenced when consumers interact with people that have similar interests to their own. As SMIs share information about their personal lives on social media (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015), consumers with similar lives can get a sense that they can better relate to these SMIs (Forbes, 2016). This in turn, has set the standards for the self-image and identity that consumers have, as consumers often purchase products based on the fact that they want to become more similar to the person that they aspire to be more like, such as an SMI (Nejad, Sherrell, & Babakus, 2014; Kapitan & Silvera, 2015).

Li et al. (2011) further indicate that trust has become an important factor when searching for information online. According to Forbes (2016), SMIs are considered more reliable in comparison to companies, and have therefore become an important source of information. Kim and Sristava (2007) continue by arguing that purchase decisions are often influenced by friends, family or other people who the consumer knows and trusts. Li et al. (2011) continue by implying that as an SMI engages with its followers, they receive more attention and engagement from the followers, which in turn gives the SMI its influential power. Valck, Hoffman, Hennig-Thurau & Spann (2013) further claim that it is the level of expertise that an SMI has that is essential for influencing the purchase decisions of consumers. SMIs are often known for having knowledge in several categories of products (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015), which later determines their influential power over consumers (Burgess, 2017). Kapitan and Silvera (2015) also argue that the attractiveness of an SMI could decide whether the purchase decision of a consumer is affected or not. If an SMI is not liked by a consumer, then the consumer will not buy the product recommended by the SMI nor adopt any information provided by the SMI about any product or brand at all (Li et al., 2014; Kapitan & Silvera, 2015).

While previous researchers have proved SMIs to have played an important role in consumers' purchase decisions, most of the studies have concentrated on studying only one type of SMI and one type of social media platform at a time. Previous research also only addresses how the purchase decision has been affected due to the influence of SMIs. Comegys et al. (2006) imply that there is a whole process that consumers go through when they purchase something, which begins long before and continues long after the actual purchase is made. This means that the purchase decision is not solely based on its own but rather follows as a result from the decisions taken in the previous stages of the process (Comegys et al., 2006). Due to this, it is essential to provide more research on how the SMI affects all stages of the purchase decision process, and not only the purchase decision stage itself. Freberg et al. (2010) continue to argue how it is essential to understand the influence of SMIs from a consumer perspective, so that companies could understand how to better work with SMIs in the future. The authors further argue that if companies understand how the influence of social media influencers is perceived by their audiences, it could help companies better understand how consumers' purchase decision processes are affected in a more deeply manner. Hence, this dissertation aims to explore how the influence of social media influencers affects the other stages of the purchase decision process, from a consumer perspective.

1.2 Research Question

How do consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process?

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how the influence of social media influencers is perceived during the different stages of the purchase decision process, from a consumer perspective. This exploration will be done in order to establish a deeper understanding of how consumers are affected by the influence of social media influencers in each stage of the process, since previous research only addresses the so called purchase decision stage.

1.4 Limitations

The first limitation of this dissertation was that the studied participants were limited to students. The results from this dissertation can therefore not be applied to consumers in general. The results could further not be applied to consumers that do not follow SMIs nor are active on social media. Another limitation for this study is the number of social media platforms that were considered in this dissertation. Since there are many different social media platforms and several others emerging, only the most popular social media platforms were included in this dissertation. These platforms were limited to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube and Blogs.

1.5 Outline

This dissertation consists of six chapters. In the first chapter the background, problematisation, research question and purpose are presented. The chapter ends with describing the limitations of the study followed by the outline of this dissertation. In the second chapter the research philosophy, research approach, research design and research strategy are presented and followed by a description of the chosen methodology and theory used in this dissertation. The third chapter presents the theoretical framework that consist of previous literature on the studied topic of this dissertation. The theoretical framework has in turn set the base for the creation of the conceptual model that will later be used in order to explore the influence of social media influencers. Chapter four introduces the empirical method that presents how the study has been conducted and what methods that were used in order to collect data. The chapter continues to describe the reliability, validity, trustworthiness and authenticity of the collected data which is followed by ethical considerations. In chapter five, an analysis of empirical findings from the

study is presented together with a discussion which completes the analysis. The sixth and final chapter introduces the conclusions of the dissertation followed by a critical review. Theoretical contributions and practical implications of the results of the study are further presented in the final chapter. The chapter ends with describing the societal and ethical aspects of the results of the study together with suggestions for future research.

2. Method

There are several methods to choose from when conducting a research. As different research studies requires different types of methods, each choice behind which method that has been deemed the most appropriate to use in this study has been considered and argued for carefully. Therefore, this chapter presents the research philosophy, approach, design and strategy that has been used throughout the construction of this dissertation in order to gather knowledge about the studied topic of this dissertation. This is later followed by a brief description of the choice behind these methodologies followed by the choice of theory used in this dissertation.

2.1 Research philosophy

The research philosophy forms the basis for how theoretical and empirical knowledge is approached by a researcher (Saunders, Thornhill, & Lewis, 2012). There are three main research philosophies that explains how individuals perceive their surroundings and the world as a whole. These philosophies are interpretivism, positivism and realism (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Interpretivism is a philosophy where one sees individuals and their actions in a complex matter. This means that this philosophy tries to understand how individuals experience and behave around a certain phenomenon in their social world (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The interpretivism philosophy further implies that individuals behave and experience things differently from one another, which means that it is difficult to draw any generalizations about their individual behavior (Saunders et al., 2012). In this thesis, the aim is to explore how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) at each stage of the purchase decision process, by which interpretivism has been chosen as the most convenient research philosophy. This in turn means that as this thesis concerns gaining a deeper understanding of how the social behavior of certain individuals is portrayed in a certain context, interpretivism is the research philosophy that could mainly contribute to that purpose (Saunders et al., 2012). Through interpretivism, a deeper understanding could be gathered on how consumers experience and percieve the influence of SMIs and how this later affects each stage of the purchase decision process.

2.2 Research approach

There are types of research approaches, namely the deduction, induction and abduction (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The conceptual model that has been used to explore how consumers

perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process, illustrated in section 3.5, has been created by reviewing previous theories regarding the studied topic in this dissertation. This way of using existing theories to develop a model would require a deductive research approach (Saunders et al., 2012). Since, new empirical data has been collected with the help of this conceptual model, the creation of entirely or modified new theories have been able to be formed, which normally requires an inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2013). As this dissertation has focused on a combination of both approaches, an *abductive* research approach has been applied instead (Saunders et al., 2012). An abductive approach allowed me as a researcher to analyze the new collected empirical data about consumers' perceptions of the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process, in the light of already existing theories about the influence of social media influencers and the purchase decision process. This intermediation between new data and existing theories creates the opportunity for me to be able to develop new or modified theories as a result (Saunders et al., 2012).

2.3 Research design and strategy

In order to understand the perception of consumers regarding social media influencers and the purchase decision process, an exploratory research design was required and applied. Saunders et al. (2012) imply that using an exploratory research design creates the possibility to gain a deeper understanding of a specific subject or topic that is studied, such as in this dissertation. Also, conducting a research with an exploratory design allows the possibility of acquiring a rich amount of data that contributes to new insights about the studied topic (Saunders et al., 2012).

The research design later decides the strategy that is chosen and as this thesis follows an exploratory research design, a qualitative strategy is the most suitable research strategy to apply. Moreover, implementing a qualitative strategy will allow me as a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' perceptions and experiences of a certain phenomenon that arises in their social surroundings (Saunders et al., 2012), such as how the consumers perceive and experience the influence of SMIs during the different stages of the purchase decision process.

2.4 Choice of methodology

The choice of methodology should be determined depending on the research question as well as the resources that are available for when the research is conducted (Allwood, 2012). Social

media influencers (SMIs) have previously been researched using many quantitative methods and few qualitative methods, although in different contexts. The purchase decision process has previously been researched as well, but in this case also in different contexts. However, no qualitative research has combined these two concepts and tried to understand them in a deeper sense, especially from a consumer perspective. This dissertation therefore applied a qualitative research method so that the consumers' perceptions of the influence of SMIs during the different stages of the purchase decision process, could be explored and understood in a more deeply manner. As the perceptions and experiences of consumers' on the research topic are not clearly stated, conducting a qualitative research is appropriate as it reaches for an understanding of a phenomenon in the social world that cannot be generalized such as in quantitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Hence, conducting focus groups is one suitable qualitative method to use in order to understand the researched topic on a deeper level (Saunders, Thornhill, & Lewis, 2012). Using focus groups further allows the gathering and understanding of consumers' thoughts, feelings and experiences on the influence of SMIs during the different stages of the purchase decision process. The guideline of the focus groups and how they were conducted are explained further in details in section 4.2.1.

2.5 Choice of theory

To fulfill the purpose of this dissertation, already existing theories has been used which sets the basis for chapter three that presents the theoretical framework of this dissertation. Firstly, theories within the field of the purchase decision process (Comegys et al., 2006; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015) and social media influencers (Lu et al., 2012; Li et al., 2014; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Jaakonmäki et al., 2017) were used throughout the study in order to explain how previous research addresses these subjects. Previous research that combines the two, presents several different factors that have been deemed crucial in deciding the power of the actual influence that SMIs have on consumers. These factors were found to be five different factors, which have also been explained and used as essential theory in this dissertation. It is later the combination of the mentioned theories above that has created the conceptual model, presented in section 3.4, which has been used to explore and gain a deeper understanding of how consumers perceive and experience the influence of social media influencers during each stage of purchase decision process.

3. Theoretical framework

In order to explore how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process, this chapter will provide descriptions of relevant theories and concepts related to this study. The theories include definitions of social media, social media influencers and the purchase decision process. How previous research has addressed the influence of social media influencers during the stages of the purchase decision process, will also be described. Moreover, theories about which factors that are essential for understanding the influence of social media influencers are discussed as well. Lastly, a conceptual model is presented which will later be used in order to explore the researched topic.

3.1 Social media

Social media consists of several online-based platforms that allow consumers to search for, interact with and share information about anything and everything with other users on a daily basis (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016). According to Abidin (2016), the most popular social media platforms today are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Blogs. The rise of social media have not only enabled consumers to interact with other users online, but also created the ability for individuals to democratize all the information that is shared on social media platforms by letting every user have the freedom to express their own opinions (Heinonen, 2011).

Due to the growth of social media, consumers now have access to tremendous amounts of information online at all times (Abidin, 2016). Previous research has indicated that these large amounts of content that is shared on social media, have had a significant impact on the behavior and the purchase decisions of consumers (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016). The interaction with other users online has indeed had a great impact as well, since consumers can now have a direct contact with the users behind the created content (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016). Within the social media platforms, the influence of other groups is the main reason that has affected consumers' purchase decisions throughout time (Kembau & Mekel, 2014). The fact that consumers can now access information, previous experiences and other relevant content from other people online, helps consumers to move faster and more convenient through their purchase decisions (Kembau & Mekel, 2014). However, within the social media platforms some groups of people have been deemed to be more influential than others, now referred to as the social media influencers (Kembau & Mekel, 2014; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Burgess, 2017).

3.2 Social media influencers

While social media is claimed to be all about conversation (Wright, Khanfar, Harrington, & Kizer, 2010), social media influencers (SMIs) are claimed to be all about interaction (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). An SMI is often referred to as a third-party individual with high social status (Lu, Li, & Liao, 2010) and strong social influence (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014). Social influence means that individuals can adapt or change their decisions, thoughts and actions as a result of the interaction made with people they believe have the same interests as themselves, such as SMIs (Li et al., 2014). Abidin (2016) argues that as the popularity of social media increases, so does the number of SMIs. Through time, SMIs have grown to become an important marketing tool for companies to be able to advertise their products to consumers (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017).

There are different types of SMIs, such as celebrities or bloggers, often operating on one or more social media platforms at once (Abidin, 2016). Other SMIs are people with high social status on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Twitter (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These SMIs usually post content several times a day on their social media accounts, which contain more personal information about their everyday lives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). At times, SMIs share their opinion and personal experiences of different brands and products that they have been sponsored with by companies, which in turn gives consumers a direct access to online reviews (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Celebrities have through time come to be considered social media influencers as well (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015), since they also appear with and share information about different brands and products to their followers (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014). What differs celebrities from other SMIs is that celebrities are claimed to be produced through traditional media, while SMIs acquire their fame and create some form of “celebrity” status by putting a lot of effort into creating an authentic brand for themselves through their social media networks (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015).

As SMIs are considered to be very influential when it comes to the purchase decisions of consumers, next section of this chapter will more specifically explain how previous research has addressed this matter. Since this dissertation will not focus on studying only one particular type of SMI and while celebrities are still used by companies in influencer marketing, celebrities will therefore be included in the concept of *social media influencers*.

3.2.1 The influence of social media influencers

Forbes (2016) claims that a social media influencer (SMI) can shape the attitudes, opinions, actions as well as purchase decisions of its followers. The author explains that this is due to their influential power and their ability to participate in conversations and interactions with their followers. SMIs are also known to have the ability to master the e-WoM, which has been found to have a great impact on the purchase decisions of consumers (Freberg et al., 2010; Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014; Nejad, Sherrell, & Babakus, 2014). The reason behind this is that the e-WoM that comes from an SMI is considered to be more powerful and convincing than the e-WoM that comes from companies themselves (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). While SMIs have the ability to master e-WoM, researchers have acknowledged several factors that have emerged as a result. These factors are also claimed to be reason why consumers see SMIs as very influential individuals. These factors are *content*, *expertise*, *attractiveness*, *social identity* and *trust* after which their importance will be explained more profoundly in the following sections.

3.2.1.1 Content

Aside from traditional media, SMIs can customize their content and make it more desirable for their followers online who will read it later (Song & Yoo, 2016). According to Li et al. (2014), social media influencers (SMIs) are known to create and spread good content on their social media platforms. This is done in forms of providing recommendations, images and other content that encourages a consumer to purchase a certain product (Forbes, 2016). The user-generated content that comes from SMIs have long been perceived as more favorable, trustworthy and personalized in comparison to the marketer-generated content that comes from companies themselves (Valck et al., 2013). Valck et al. (2013) further claim that the content provided by SMIs are considered to be more useful as it reduces the effort of searching for additional information about products and instead increases the probability to make a better choice of product as a result (Valck et al., 2013). The fact that SMIs can add value to their content by making it more personalized (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014), allows followers to have an insight of the personal lives of the SMIs (Forbes, 2016). The personalized content is in turn said to work as a persuader for the consumer who will adopt the information behind the content due to the fact that the consumer believes that its interests, attitude and opinions are similar to the SMI's (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). However, Nejad et al. (2014) indicate that how a consumer shows attention to and interprets the information behind the content can depend on the consumer's current interests, attitude and motivations. It is why it is essential that the

information provided by SMIs is created in a more personalized way than the information that comes from companies, so that consumers feel that the content is directed to them personally (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Doing this will create a stronger trust towards the SMI, since consumers consider the content provided by SMIs to be non-commercial and in that sense more desirable (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013).

3.2.1.2 Expertise

Expertise is another factor that is highly desirable among consumers when they choose whether to adopt the content that comes from SMIs or not (Valck et al., 2013). Expertise in this matter is often referred to as the consumer's perception of the SMI's ability to create accurate and credible content due to the consumer's relationship with the SMI from the beginning (Nejad, Sherrell, & Babakus, 2014). If an SMI is perceived as an expert in his or her area of content, it is highly likely that the consumer will adopt the information that is provided by the SMI (Valck et al., 2013). Kapitan and Silvera (2015) claim that SMIs are known for having particular knowledge and expertise in several product categories such as makeup or fashion, not just one product. This knowledge and expertise is what later makes the SMI more credible since he or she knows what he or she is actually talking about when recommending a product (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). Nejad et al. (2014) imply that the level of expertise affects the level of a consumer's attachment to the information provided by the SMI, while credibility rather impacts the consumer's interpretation of the information provided in the content. Expertise in general can enhance the considerations made of a brand, where the attractiveness of the SMI leads to a more favorable attitude towards the product that the SMI is advertising (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). The level of expertise and trustworthiness that an SMI has later decides the attractiveness which means that the more likeable the SMI is, the more willing the consumer is to adopt the information provided by them (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014).

3.2.1.3 Attractiveness

A consumer's associations and perceptions of a social media influencer (SMI) is possibly the most powerful factor that can affect the consumer's attitude towards an SMI (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014). A good association between a consumer and the SMI as well as between the SMI and the recommended product, can capture the attention of the consumer and increase awareness of the product which could also result in making a purchase (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014). For instance, a consumer can browse through its social media feeds and suddenly spot an advertisement of a

piece of clothing made by a familiar and likable SMI. The attractiveness of the SMI in the advertisement can influence the consumer to feel like he or she can achieve the same look as the SMI by having the same product. This influence can occur even if the consumer was not searching for a particular piece of clothing from the beginning. As a result, the attention of the consumer is drawn towards the brand behind the product that the SMI advertises, which might result in a purchase of the product. Also, when a consumer visits a clothing store, he or she will take the brand that was introduced by the SMI into consideration while deciding among clothing products (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). This example illustrates that consumers who see people they like wear, use or display products, are more likely to adopt and purchase these products from that particular brand above products from other brands (Forbes, 2016). In addition, a well-known SMI is seen as a more attractive and trustworthy and has, due to that, a greater impact on the product choices of consumers (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016).

3.2.1.4 Consumer social identity

The social identity of a consumer is often determined by the group that the consumer is a member of or want to be a member of, as the consumer often compares itself to these groups (Nejad et al., 2014). Due to this, a consumer often embraces the opinions, behavior and actions shared in this group so that he or she can form a certain self-image to resemble the other group members (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). The group that the consumer wants to be a member of, often referred to as the aspirational group, will introduce the consumer to new lifestyles, trends and behaviors which in turn can influence the consumer to imitate these things as a result (Kembau & Mekel, 2014). This kind of influence has later been proven to set the standards for how consumers purchase products, as consumers often buy products that symbolizes their ideal self and makes them more similar to the person they aspire to be more alike, such as an SMI (Nejad, Sherrell, & Babakus, 2014; Kapitan & Silvera, 2015).

According to Hearn & Schoenhoff (2015), an SMI works as an idol of consumption since they illustrate what their successful life as an SMI can look like. As SMIs connect with consumers by sharing insights to their personal lives (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015), consumers get a sense that they can better relate to the lives of SMIs (Forbes, 2016). When a consumer relates to an SMI, there is a higher chance that the consumer will buy the products that the SMI recommends, even if the consumer is not in need of the product itself. This often depends on the fact that consumers feel like they have similar personalities with SMIs which in turn motivates them to buy the same products that SMIs display on their social media (Cheung, Xiao, & Liu, 2014).

Furthermore, that a consumer feels similar to and inspired by an SMI can in turn force an even higher motivation to imitate the SMI and thereby be persuaded to buy a certain product that the SMI recommends (Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016). This connection that a consumer feels towards an SMI is referred to as parasocial interaction which illustrates how consumers identify themselves with social media profiles that has high social status (Lu, Li, & Liao, 2010; Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016). When a consumer strongly identifies with an SMI, the trust towards the SMI increases which means that the consumer is more likely to buy the product that SMI recommends, often done impulsively (Luo, 2005; Liu et al., 2015). However, Xiang et al. (2016) stress that it is important to understand that even if a consumer does not have a direct face-to-face contact with the SMI, the consumer can still be motivated to imitate the SMI by for example buying the product that the SMI recommends. The fact that consumers are willing to imitate SMIs is simply because consumers often see SMIs as role models (Forbes, 2016).

3.2.1.5 Trust

Trust can impact the degree of influence between a consumer and an SMI (Liu et al., 2015). Trust is a perception of how much the consumer believes in the content that is directed towards him or her (Nejad, Sherrell, & Babakus, 2014). Al-Oufi, Kim & Saddik (2012) further define trust as the future, positive outcome of an action based on the opinions, shared information and actions made by another individual. A trusted SMI can influence consumers to more easily accept the recommendations about a product that the SMI recommends (Liu et al., 2015). However, in order to keep the trust of consumers, the SMI is required to keep their expertise in their area of content, like for example fashion or fitness (Liu et al., 2015). SMIs who share information about what they know in a certain category of products are seen as more trustworthy and credible than those who express their opinions about products that are not in their area of expertise, hence the credibility of these SMIs decrease as a result (Forbes, 2016).

Trust also plays a critical role for considering whether the recommendations and opinions of an SMI are useful (Liu et al., 2015). Li et al. (2014) argue that it is important that companies select the right SMI in order to generate the biggest impact on consumers. Liu et al. (2015) further imply that it is the SMI with a great amount of trust (as well as expertise), that should be highly considered to be targeted by companies. The trust towards an SMI increases whenever consumers interact with an SMI that shares the same personal interests and preferences of brands and products (Liu et al., 2015). As a result, recommendations that comes from a trusted source may increase the effort of the consumer to make a purchase (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013).

3.3 Consumer purchase decision process

Throughout the years, many theories and varieties of the purchase decision process model have been developed in order to illustrate how consumers make their purchases (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988). What is common among all theories and models is that they basically describe the same process that consumers go through when they start their path to purchasing a product. Although previous research presents numerous of models with various numbers of stages, the most common and original purchase decision process model suggests that a consumer goes through the following five stages on its path to purchase: *need recognition*, *information search*, *evaluation of alternatives*, *purchase decision* and *post-purchase behavior* (Comegys et al., 2006; Sakkthivel, 2010; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). These five stages were firstly introduced in 1910 by John Dewey, which illustrates the oldness of the model (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988; Korhonen, Lauraéus, Saarinen, & Öörni, 2011). It is also this model that is the most original model that illustrates the purchase decision process, which has also throughout the years been heavily developed and adapted into certain buying situations today (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988).

In fact, the actual process that a consumer goes through depends on what buying situation the consumer is in (Comegys et al., 2006). For instance, a consumer might skip several stages as the effort in each stage often varies, especially if the consumers makes a repurchase of a product (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). In these situations, the consumer's involvement becomes crucial as it could determine the length, complexity and structure of the purchase decision process (Sakkthivel, 2010). What is interesting here is that the traditional five-stage model introduced by Dewey (1910) has often been related to when consumers buy offline, such as in physical stores (Sakkthivel, 2010). However, it has been stated that consumers do go through a similar kind of process when buying products online, such as on company websites (Sakkthivel, 2010). The original five-stage model has also been used in studies like for example the study of Comegys, Hannula and Väisänen (2006), who presents the model of the purchase decision process in the context of the influence of Internet. In this dissertation, I have chosen to present the five-stage model in the new context of social media influencers (SMIs) since SMIs can influence consumers to buy both offline in physical stores and online from websites. Therefore, as this study will take into account both online and offline purchasing of products after the influence of SMIs, all five fundamental stages of the traditional purchase decision process will be used and described in the following sections. The five stages are presented in figure 1.



Figure 1: The five-stage purchase decision process model of consumers (based on: Dewey, 1910; Comegys, Hannula & Väisänen, 2006; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015).

3.3.1 Need recognition

The need recognition stage is the first stage of all stages in the purchase decision process. In this stage, the consumer evaluates the need that it has, in order to identify what product he or she seeks to satisfy this need with (Park & Cho, 2012). How the consumer perceives its need, later affects the other stages of the purchase decision process (Workman & Studak, 2005). A need is acknowledged whenever there is a change in the ideal state or actual state of consumers, or in both states (Workman & Studak, 2005; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). The ideal state is how the consumer want the situation to be while the actual state is how the situation is at this exact moment (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). The changes between these two stages occur when internal or external factors stimulate a desire within the consumer's mind (Valck et al., 2013). Internal stimuli refers to when a consumer is for example hungry or thirsty, while external stimuli is when a consumer for example sees an advertising of a restaurant that creates the feeling of being hungry (Comegys et al., 2006; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). Other external stimuli can be the social influence that comes from people in a consumer's surroundings, such as the influence of SMIs (Li et al., 2014). On social media, a consumer is exposed to more external stimuli than internal stimuli. This occurs because the consumer sees visual attributes and advertisements to a greater extent due to the tremendous amounts of shared content, often provided by SMIs (Comegys et al., 2006; Valck et al., 2013).

Moreover, a need can also be divided into physiological needs or psychological needs. While physiological needs include the necessity of food or shelter, the psychological needs are instead generated within the social environment of the consumer such as on social media platforms where consumers interact with other users (Comegys et al., 2006). The physiological and psychological needs often arise from some sort of motivation, where a physiological need might involve for example losing weight because the clothes do not fit anymore. In contrast, a psychological need has its motivation in when the person feels the urge have the same product

that another person has (Workman & Studak, 2005). Products are often designed and advertised in a way to fulfill the psychological needs of consumers, which in turn lets the consumers achieve their ideal state more easily (Workman & Studak, 2005).

In this stage of the purchase decision process, SMIs can create a sense of need among consumers by simply exposing and recommending a product on their social media accounts (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). Moreover, SMIs focus on providing relevant content about the product that they display on their social media accounts (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). This content includes sharing their personal experiences of a range of products that they have tried and been sponsored with by companies (Kembau & Mekel, 2014). This in turn, increases brand awareness among consumers as well as urges them to purchase that particular product that the SMIs are recommending (Kembau & Mekel, 2014; Jaakonmäki et al., 2017).

3.3.2 Information search

The information search is the second stage of the purchase decision process. When the consumer has understood what need it has, the consumer starts to search for information on different channels about the item that could best solve and satisfy the consumer's identified need (Park & Cho, 2012). The information searching can be done in two steps. Firstly, the attention of the consumer increases and starts to develop an interest towards all possible and different products that might be appropriate in order to satisfy the need. This means that the consumer only pays attention to the content, advertisements and conversations about potential products that the need concerns (Comegys et al., 2006). Secondly, the consumer engages in these conversations to gain more information about different models, brands and other features that products have so that the consumer finds the right product that could potentially solve its need (Comegys et al., 2006). On social media, consumers can easily access large amounts of information about all kinds of different products from other sources besides the seller of the product, sources that the consumer considers to be more reliable (Bronner & de Hoog, 2014).

Information search can be done both internally and externally (Lee & Cranage, 2010). The internal information is mainly gathered through a consumer's own memory which means that when a consumer stands before a decision, he or she goes through its own mind to remember previous information about brands and products that the consumer can choose from (Lee & Cranage, 2010). It is this information that later determines whether the consumer has to collect

further information about a brand or a product or if the information in the consumer's memory is enough to make a good choice of product (Lee & Cranage, 2010). External information search on the other hand, is when information can be gathered outside the consumer's memory, that is, information that is provided by sellers or other sources in the consumer's surroundings such as the online users on social media (Lee & Cranage, 2010; Bronner & de Hoog, 2014). Moreover, these types of sources that the consumer gathers information from are called commercial sources, public sources, experiential sources or personal sources (Park & Cho, 2012). Wang, Yu and Wei (2012) address commercial sources to be advertisements, websites of companies and salespeople, while public sources refer to the mass media and the Internet. Furthermore, the experiential sources are when a consumer tries out the actual product by seeing, touching, feeling and using it. In addition, personal sources include peers such as family, friends, neighbors and other people close to the consumer (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012).

According to Wang et al., (2012), commercial sources are mainly used to inform the consumer about a certain product, while personal sources are used to evaluate and see if the product is worth buying or not. It is here where the e-WoM works as a persuader, since a consumer is said to be more influenced by personal sources rather than commercial ones (Wang et al., 2012). Valck et al. (2013) agree with this argument by further implying that consumers nowadays turn to social media when they search for information about products as they want to gather information and opinions provided by other people who have experiences with the products. The authors further state that the information that comes from users on social media is deemed to be more trustworthy, as it is generally shared to help other individuals through their purchase decisions by sharing their own experiences and thoughts of certain products (Valck et al., 2013).

In this stage of the process, an SMI works as an information provider (Liu et al., 2015). Escalas and Bettman (2003) argue that when a consumer lacks certain information, experience or knowledge about a particular product that they are interested in, they tend to turn to SMIs to gain the information that is needed for them to move closer to making a purchase. The authors further state that consumers accept the recommendations of an SMI with more confidence, as consumers see their recommendations as more credible and accurate (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Lu et al. (2010) agree with this argument by further implying that consumers turn to SMIs to find information due to the fact that they find SMIs to be experts in their area of content. This is explained by the fact that SMIs usually share their opinions on products that they know very much about, which allows consumers to consider the SMIs as reliable and honest since

they are sharing their expert opinions on the products (Lu et al., 2010). However, the trust towards the SMI becomes crucial in whether the consumer decides to settle for the information provided by the SMI or not (Liu et al., 2015). SMIs that are considered trustworthy have a higher chance at influencing a consumer's choice of product, than those SMIs who are not considered trustworthy at all (Liu et al., 2015).

3.3.3 Evaluation of alternatives

After the information about several products has been collected, the consumer now evaluates the various options of products that he or she has found. Before the consumer even considers purchasing a product, a minimum of acceptable requirements have to be met (Comegys et al., 2006). The consumer starts by evaluating each product option by comparing possible benefits of the product such as price, product information, brand, warranty and size, with the need that the consumer has (Park & Cho, 2012). The consumer then decides which option that would best satisfy the need of the consumer and excludes the other alternatives of products (Park & Cho, 2012). Zhang and Benyoucef (2015) imply that the consumer not only evaluates products and brands but also which platforms to choose and find the best options of products and information from. Kembau and Mekel (2014) argue that for a consumer to even consider purchasing a product, the consumer needs to feel that the product has high reliability which means that the information shared about the product comes from a reliable source. This is supported by Valck et al. (2013) who continues to argue about the importance of the experience and opinions about products shared by other people on social media platforms and how this information becomes crucial to the consumer when he or she considers buying one particular product over another.

The main goal for consumers of this stage of the purchase decision process, is to understand what alternative there is that could possibly satisfy the need better than those alternatives that have been selected during the beginning of the purchase decision process (Valck et al., 2013). As SMIs recommends many different products on their social media accounts, a consumer often stands with several alternatives to choose from as a result (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Therefore, consumers rely on the information that comes from SMIs in this stage of the process, so that the consumer can easily evaluate the product that the SMI recommends and whether the consumer should buy it (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). As mentioned before, trust towards an SMI in this stage of the process becomes essential as well in whether a consumer decides to take the product recommended by SMIs into consideration or not (Liu et al., 2015).

3.3.4 Purchase decision

When a consumer is satisfied with the gathered information and has evaluated which product that could be worth buying, the consumer continues to the fourth stage of the process which is the purchase decision (Comegys et al., 2006). Comegys et al. (2006) imply that it is in this stage where the consumer has evaluated which product that best fits the consumer's need and performs the actual purchase of the product. However, the authors argue that there is two things that can affect the actual purchase decision, where the opinions of other people play an important role. The authors continue by drawing the difference between the purchase *decision* and purchase *intention*, further claiming that several factors can come between the decision and intention and later affect whether an actual purchase is made or not (Comegys et al., 2006). This is supported by Valck et al. (2015) who mention how the information shared by other individuals play an important role in whether a purchase is made or not. Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) agree by further implying that the opinions and recommendations made by other sources, such as SMIs, can also affect the outcome of this stage of the purchase decision process.

In this stage of the process, impulsive purchases can also occur, which are unplanned purchases that do not follow from previous stages in the purchase decision process (Luo, 2005). Yu and Bastin (2010) argue that impulsive purchases are more difficult to resist than regular planned purchases as the impulsive purchases are seen as less conscious and more exciting. The authors further explain that a consumer can act on an impulse when influenced by external factors in their surroundings, like for example how a product appears or the consumer's time limit. Internal influences on the other hand, rather affects the inner emotions or knowledge of a consumer (Yu & Bastin, 2010). A consumer's motivation to buy a certain product on impulse can also increase if the consumer sees itself in a situation where he or she can identify itself with other people that share likeminded thoughts (Luo, 2005). However, Comegys et al. (2006) state that if consumers know what product they want from the beginning, they are less likely to act and make an impulsive purchase.

Moreover, when a consumer decides on whether to finalize the actual purchase or not, the influence of SMIs becomes essential (Yand, He & Lee, 2007; Valck et al., 2013). SMIs are in this stage of the process often seen as advisors, whom consumers seek advice from when they are deciding on whether to make a purchase or not (Valck et al., 2013). When a consumer is unsure of what product to purchase, the consumer turns to SMIs to find final information that

can be the last step to perform the actual purchase (Hsu et al., 2013). Consumers also often make impulsive purchases when purchasing another product over the one that was intended from the beginning, simply because of the influence of SMIs (Kembau & Mekel, 2014).

3.3.5 Post-purchase behavior

After finalizing the actual purchase, the consumer moves to the last stage of the purchase decision process which is the post-purchase behavior (Comegys et al., 2006). As previously said in this study, it is important to understand that companies want consumers to return and therefore the purchase decision process is said to continue long after the actual purchase has been made (Comegys et al., 2006). For instance, before a purchase is made, a consumer has throughout its process developed several expectations of how the product would satisfy the need of the consumer (Park & Cho, 2012). It is in this stage of the process where the consumer now reviews these expectations and decides on whether the product has fulfilled its purpose and stimulated the need, as well as whether the consumer would consider future purchases of the same product (Comegys et al., 2006). Ha and Stoel (2012) imply that companies want their consumers to be satisfied with their experience of the product and that it is therefore important to earn the trust and loyalty of consumers in order to keep them as future consumers.

Additionally, Park and Cho (2012) argue that consumers in this stage of the process also turn to external sources to search for information. However, in this last stage of the process, the information gathered is rather done in order for consumers to get the affirmation that the best choice of product has been made (Park & Cho, 2012). Comegys et al. (2006) imply that there are two kinds of post-purchase behavior; the post-purchase *satisfaction* that emphasizes the satisfaction received from the purchased product, and post-purchase *action* which concerns the level of loyalty produced as a result. The authors explain that when a consumer is satisfied with a purchase, their loyalty to the brand behind the product increases which later affects if the product will be considered for a repurchase or not (Comegys et al., 2006; Park & Cho, 2012).

As consumers try to make themselves more similar to SMIs, their post-purchase experience of the product can result in loyalty if the outcome of the expected satisfaction of the product turns out to give the same result as it gave the SMI who recommended it (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). That means that if the actual performance of the product is highly similar to the experience shared in the review made by an SMI, the consumer will more likely be confident enough to

feel that the most suitable product has been purchased (Forbes, 2016). Valck et al. (2013) mention that not only can this increase the loyalty towards companies behind the recommended product, but also loyalty towards SMIs in the sense that consumers will continue to follow their advices and recommendations in the future. Consumers can then share their experiences and opinions on the social media platforms of SMIs to thank for the advice and help other consumers in their purchase decision processes. However, consumers that do not invest any time in writing and sharing their opinions and experiences of the product that they have bought are often considered to be unsatisfied with the resulted experience of the product (Valck et al., 2013). Li et al. (2010) address this matter as well by indicating that SMIs are said to have a bigger impact on consumers that are willing to share their feedback on the product that they have just bought, than those consumers who are not willing to share their feedback about a product at all.

3.4 Conceptual model

To the best of my knowledge, no previous research has constructed a suitable model for exploring how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) during the different stages of the purchase decision process. Therefore, with the theoretical literature review in mind, I propose a new framework for exploring the influence of SMIs which is illustrated in *figure 2*. As previously mentioned, it is the SMIs ability to master the e-WoM (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014), that contributes to the five factors that have been located as important in how the influence of SMIs is perceived by consumers. These five factors have been divided into categories in their own names which are: *content*, *expertise*, *attractiveness*, *social identity* and *trust*. It is important to notice that one factor could arise as a result of another, where this matter and the different categories will be explained more profoundly in the following sections by summarizing the most important attributes of the factor in each category.

Firstly, *content* could be seen as a tool that is connected to the SMI and that the SMI uses in order to capture the attention of its readers and followers. The content that is provided by the SMI (Valck et al., 2013), is personalized and created in such way that followers and readers wants to engage with it and with the SMI (Song & Yoo, 2016). In this case, the content of the SMI refers to the images, texts and videos that the SMI posts on its social media accounts and the message that stands behind the content. More clearly, the content is related to what the image, video or text consists of and what message the SMI is trying to send to its followers and readers through its particular content.

Secondly, *expertise* is a factor that is also connected to the SMI. This category refers to the knowledge that SMIs hold, especially about the products that they advertise and recommend to its followers (Nejad, Sherell & Babakus, 2014). For example, one SMI that focuses on providing its social media feed with posts about fashion and makeup, is believed to be an expert in the category that concerns different brands and products of clothing and makeup. The expertise of an SMI is in simpler words referred to that the SMI knows what he or she is talking about when referring to or sharing information about certain things (Nejad et al., 2014), such as the products that they are recommending. The expertise that an SMI has and shares, could later contribute to how the attractiveness of the SMI is portrayed.

Thirdly, *attractiveness* is another factor that is connected to the SMI. However this category emphasizes how a consumer perceives the SMI and associates it with (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2014). The attractiveness category rather refers to the status of an SMI, namely their popularity and reputation as SMIs (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016). The attractiveness could also be related to how a consumer feels or thinks about an SMI and whether the consumer finds the SMI likable (Forbes, 2016), on a more personal level by considering the SMI to be a friend. The attractiveness of an SMI could also include as to how the consumer feels about the physical appearance and other characteristics of the SMI.

Moreover, *social identity* is rather connected to the consumer and concerns how a consumer chooses to see itself as well as how the consumer wants to be seen by others. A consumer can define and create its identity and self-image, simply by identifying itself with other people such as SMIs (Nejad, Sherrell, & Babakus, 2014; Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). This could occur in situations where the consumer chooses to imitate the behavior or appearance of an SMI, or sometimes both, simply because he or she finds the life of the SMI to be appealing. This means that social identity is rather connected to the personality, interests and character of the consumer, and perhaps also to the SMI. How one portrays itself and wants to be seen by others becomes important to the consumer in relation to SMIs. The SMI could indeed influence the consumer to adapt to the self-image and lifestyle of the SMI, especially if the consumer sees the SMI as some sort of role model (Forbes, 2016).

In addition, the category of *trust* emerges as a result of the interplay between the four categories of content, expertise, attractiveness and social identity. It is the trust that could be crucial to the

amount of influence that an SMI actually has over its followers (Liu et al., 2015). The four previous factors are what together determines the strength of the trust and credibility that is created between the SMI and the consumer. For example, if a consumer; believes in the message behind the content provided by the SMI (Nejad et al., 2014); appreciates the level of expertise that an SMI has about certain products (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015); finds the SMI attractive and likeable (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016); and is able to identify itself with the SMI (Liu et al., 2015), then trust is created as a result of all these factors (Nejad et al., 2014; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016).

In conclusion, these five categories of factors have been acknowledged to be crucial to a consumer as he or she moves further along its purchase decision process. None of the authors provide how, nor where in each of the stages of the process that these factors are crucial to the consumer. That means, how each factor influences the consumer during the *need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase decision* stages of the purchase decision process. As the aim of this dissertation is to explore how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process, a conceptual model has been created based on the summaries and interpretations of the descriptions of the five factors and their connection to the purchase decision process. The model, which is illustrated in *figure 2*, will later serve the base for the data collection and analysis of empirical findings presented in chapter 4 and 5.

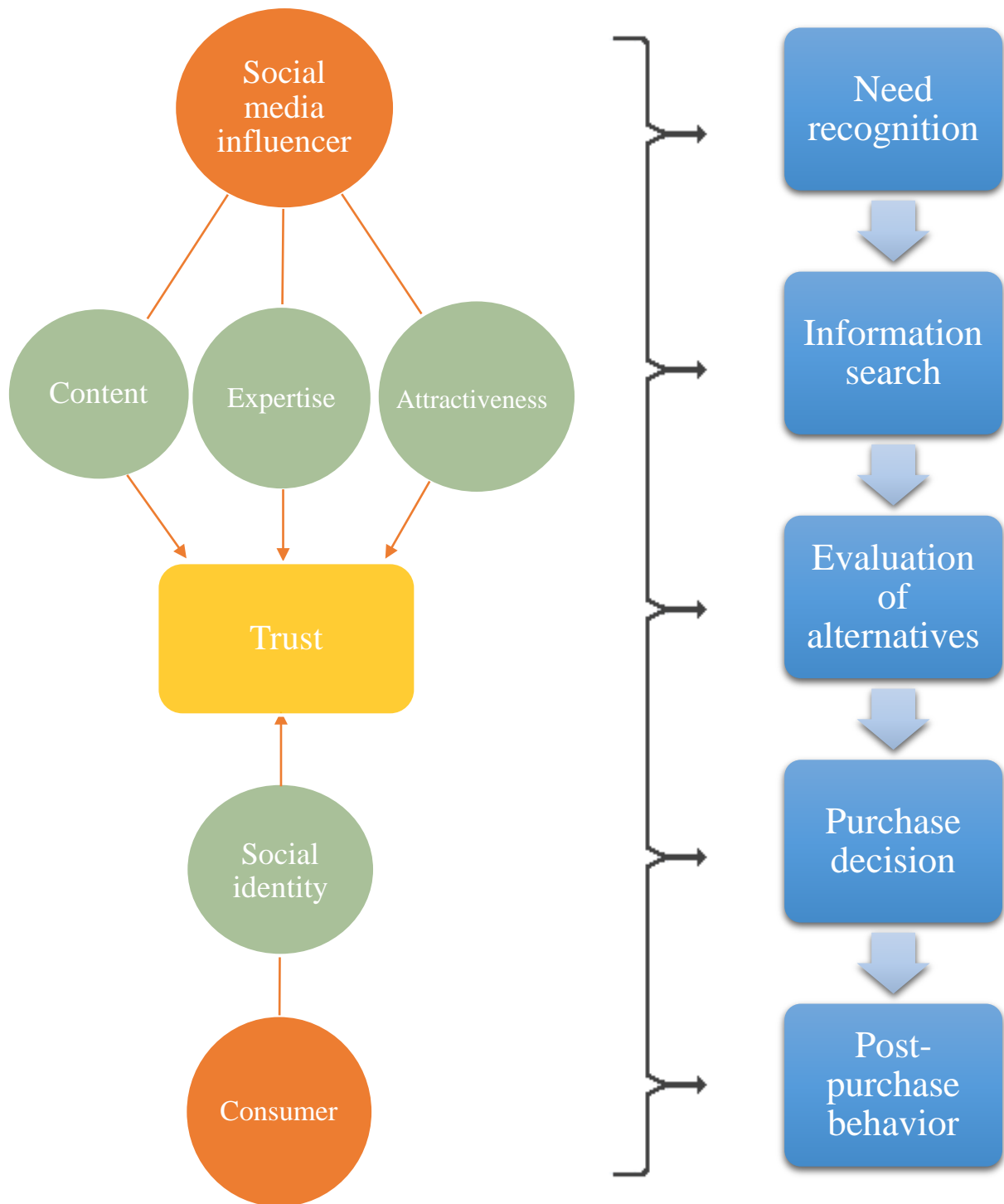


Figure 2: Conceptual model for exploring how consumer perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the consumer purchase decision process.

4. Empirical Method

This chapter presents the methods that were used to collect the necessary data for exploring the researched topic of this dissertation. Guidelines of how the data in this study has been collected and organized as well as how participants have been chosen, are described thoroughly. These parts are then followed by an explanation of the how the collected data has been analyzed and how the reliability, validity, trustworthiness and authenticity of the data was increased. The chapter ends with a discussion of the ethical considerations that emerged during the time of the data collection.

4.1 Time Horizon

Saunders et al. (2012) describe two types of time horizons; the longitudinal and cross-sectional. The longitudinal time horizon studies the change of a phenomenon over a long period of time, while a cross-sectional time horizon studies a specific phenomenon over a short period of time (Saunders et al., 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this dissertation, the cross-sectional time horizon was applied. This is simply motivated by the fact that this dissertation focuses on exploring how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers, over a limited period of time since this dissertation was supposed to be constructed during 14 weeks. Another reason to why the cross-sectional time horizon was applied is because it is considered to be the most appropriate time horizon when focus groups are used to collect data (Hansson, 2011), such as in this study.

4.2 Data collection

There are two types of empirical data to collect when conducting a research; primary data and secondary data. Primary data is collected in research where no previous data exists, which means that the data is gathered from new sources. However, secondary data is already existing data that comes from old sources (Saunders, Thornhill, & Lewis, 2012). For this study, primary data was collected as no previous data exists on how consumers perceive and have experienced the influence of social media influencers during their purchase decision process. The data was gathered through focus groups where the opinions and experiences of the participants was of utmost interest. Conducting focus groups in order to collect data contributes to getting an insight of what consumers think, feel and have experienced, as it was believed that this information could not be obtained through other data collection methods.

4.2.1 Focus groups

In focus groups, a number of people are organized together to discuss a specific subject or theme (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Alvehus, 2013). The main reason to use focus groups is to observe how the discussion between participants evolves as they interact with each other. Using focus groups also provides an insight to the development of opinions, thoughts and feelings of participants about the subject that is discussed in the group (Alvehus, 2013; Ahrne & Svensson, 2016). The interaction between participants can influence them to relate, agree or disagree with each other's opinions and experiences, and thereby create a richer image of their reality (Kitzinger, 1994). This in turn, enables participants to somehow act as co-researchers as participants can move the direction of the discussion to new areas and give the actual researcher behind the study new insights on the researched topic (Kitzinger, 1994; Ahrne & Svensson, 2016). Focus groups can also reveal how participants motivate their answers which later creates a deeper understanding of their supposed underlying logic behind their answers (Denscombe, 2016). Therefore, it is important that I as a moderator, encourage the group discussion without guiding the participants towards certain opinions or expressions (Saunders et al., 2012).

How many focus groups that should be conducted varies dependent on the size of the study as well as time scheduling and convenience among participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Since this dissertation was limited by time and loss of participants occurred due to the difficulty of trying to set a date and time that suited everyone, the number of focus groups were limited to two groups. Bryman and Bell (2015) argue that as focus groups are time consuming to prepare and transcribe, students will not be able to carry out several focus group sessions as larger research projects normally could. They further argue that using a smaller number of focus groups is therefore suitable in a less extensive research such as in this dissertation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Collecting data through interviews were excluded as a data collection method since it can limit the image and understanding of a certain phenomenon (Ahrne & Svensson, 2016), such as the perceived influence of social media influencers. Instead, conducting focus groups was considered as the most suitable method for this study as focus groups give a richer amount of information in a short period of time (Morgan, 1996), something that was needed in this dissertation. Ahrne and Svensson (2016) argue that experiences of a certain phenomenon are rarely individual but often shared with many other individuals, which is why the interaction that is created in focus groups allows participants to relate to each other's experiences. This in turn, means that a richer amount of information could be gathered as participants could, simply by

interacting with others, discover things they have not thought of before. This discovery could not have been obtained through single interviews (Ahrne & Svensson, 2016), which is why conducting focus groups was chosen as the data collection method as it gives the opportunity to obtain a richer image of participants' view of how their purchase decision processes has been influenced by social media influencers.

4.2.2 Participant selection

According to Saunders et al. (2012), it is suitable to select participants in a study that have similar interests or factors. The number of participants depends on the size of the research and the topic that is being researched (Saunders et al., 2012). However, most authors claim that at least four but a maximum of 10 participants are enough to use in focus groups as it allows everyone to have a chance to express their opinions during the focus group interview, which is often limited to one or two hours (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Ahrne & Svensson, 2016). By following the recommendations of Saunders et al. (2012), students at a university in Sweden who follow social media influencers (SMIs) and has in one way or another been influenced to purchase something recommended by an SMI, was chosen as participants for the focus groups. Students were approached with an invitation to the focus group interviews by the author of this dissertation. Students were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they would be kept fully anonymous throughout the study.

In total, 18 participants were willing to participate but due to unexpected turndowns in the last minute, a loss of participants occurred due to convenience and time scheduling as previously mentioned in section 4.2.1. This led to that only eleven participants in total could participate in which two focus groups could be formed with five participants in the first group and six participants in the second group. Out of the 11 participants, ten were females and one was male. Some of the participants knew each other from before while other participants did not know any of the participants in the group. The fact that some participants did not know the other participants, did not interfere with the discussion as all participants felt confident enough to speak freely and interact with all the other participants in the group. The participants were in the ages between 20-27 years old and all participants were Swedish students which allowed for language complications to be avoided, as the focus group sessions were conducted in Swedish.

4.2.3 Guideline of the focus group sessions

Before the focus groups took place, a semi-structured interview guide was prepared in forehand and consisted of 11 main questions that were used in both focus groups, see Appendix 1. The participants received details about place, time and what they were to expect from the focus group sessions. The participants were also asked to prepare themselves in advance by thinking about their three favorite SMIs that they follow and their most recent purchase that they have done due to a recommendation made by an SMI. This was done so that the conversation would flow more easily and allow for the participants to be more comfortable with the questions and the topic of discussion. By preparing the participants, less time would be spent on thinking about their answers, especially if it has been a long time since the participants purchased something because of an SMI. Both focus group sessions took place on the 5th of May 2017, in a quiet room at Kristianstad University. The participants received food and beverage before the session begun and both focus group sessions lasted for approximately 75 minutes each.

4.2.4 Interview-guide

The construction of the conceptual model and the topic of discussion created the necessity of flexibility during the focus group sessions, which is why a semi-structured interview guide was constructed. By conducting a semi-structured interview guide, the order of the interview questions could be changed and follow-up questions could be asked when further explanation was needed on a certain matter. Since participants were also allowed to bring up whatever they wished during the focus group sessions, some questions were answered automatically which led to that some questions could be excluded or only asked for further clarification of something. Moreover, open-ended questions were used so that participants could carefully think through and develop their answers before replying (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Denscombe, 2016).

4.2.5 Execution of focus group sessions

Both focus group sessions begun by asking the participants to introduce themselves and share what SMIs they follow and how long they have followed these particular SMIs. These questions were asked to have the participants introduced to and become comfortable with the topic of discussion (Denscombe, 2016) . The questions were also asked to ensure that each participant felt comfortable enough to speak with the other participants in the group (Denscombe, 2016), since the core strength of focus groups is to achieve interaction (Ahrne & Svensson, 2016).

When participants had become comfortable and familiarized themselves with the topic of discussion, participants were further asked to explain in what main area they would categorize the content of the SMIs that they followed. In this case, the area of content of SMIs meant what SMIs post on their social media accounts, which shows their area of profession and knowledge. These areas of knowledge and profession could refer to areas such as fashion, fitness, beauty and other. From this question, a deeper insight could be gained in whether participants followed SMIs due to similar interests or simply by basic matters, so that associations in the group could arise (Alvehus, 2013). Thereafter, open-ended questions were asked so that the participants could share their own reflections, experiences and thoughts such as to give examples of their previous experiences of how they have been influenced by SMIs. During the first focus group session, some follow-up questions were asked whenever a further explanation or understanding of something particular was needed. As the focus groups were done one at a time and on different times, questions could be slightly modified if needed and new questions could be asked during the second focus group session. This later allowed me as moderator to review what has previously been discussed in the first group and thereby modify the questions so that the reliability of data collected in the second group could be strengthened (Denscombe, 2016).

Furthermore, the discussion was intended to proceed on its own without interference from me as a moderator. It was only when needed, that I stepped in and prevented the discussion from moving into new irrelevant areas that did not include the intended topic of discussion (Denscombe, 2016). The quality of the results relies heavily on me as a moderator, as my presence can have had an influence on the behavior of the participants which is why it is important that interest, respect and attention is shown to what the participants has to say. Additionally, the moderator should encourage participants to present both positive and negative opinions and make sure that everyone gets a chance to express themselves. If respect towards the participants is showed and if the participants are listened to, judgement can be avoided and more qualitative results can be achieved (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In addition, small notes were taken during the session when needed to ensure that the intended and correct data was collected.

4.3 Data analysis

Richards (2005), implies that it is rather easy to collect data in a qualitative research, but that certain difficulties also comes with the easiness of this matter. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), there is a condition called *analytic interruptus*, which refers to the difficulty of

analyzing qualitative data due to the richness of it. This in turn means that the collected data, which contains large amounts of information, is difficult to process as it often needs to be done in a short period of time. Because of this, it could become difficult to later construct the analysis of the processed data which is why a certain structure has to be followed to prevent this difficulty from happening (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It is also important to make sure that the data collection, like focus groups, is recorded so that no important data is lost. The recorded data should thereafter be transcribed to ease the analysis process by revealing each and every word that was said (Richards, 2005). Before the focus groups took place, recording devices were prepared and tested to make sure they worked, so that the process of transcript could be eased as a result. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed very accurately afterwards. The whole process of transcribing took approximately two days and resulted in a total of 44 pages.

Later, when the transcripts were done, the coding process started. By coding, qualitative data can be divided into small parts that belongs to certain categories (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Richards (2005), there are different ways of coding and every study has their own method. In this study, coding by topic was applied since several different topics occurred during the sessions (Richards, 2005). The relevant questions were analyzed together with what was said during the discussion in the focus groups. As the questions were mainly predefined based on the conceptual model, patterns could be created by connecting the topics brought up by participants, with the five factors that impacts the influence of SMIs and the purchase decision process. Thereby, the coded data could be linked to the relevant step in the purchase decision process and the relevant factor that the topic belonged to. In appendix 2, a short example is illustrated of how the coding and categorization of the different topics brought up during discussions, was done.

After coding, it was revealed that several participants in both focus groups discussed and responded similarly about many questions, which meant that many of their answers could be grouped into a common factor. Normally in focus groups, similar words are used to describe similar attributes but at some occasions certain interpretations had to be made in order to clarify the identified topics. Ahrne and Svensson (2016) explain that participants can explain a phenomenon or experience in different ways by using different words and phrases. Yet, these words and phrases could in the end still refer to the same phenomenon or experience. However, many differences were also brought up during the discussions which made it hard to categorize these differences into a common factor. It should therefore be noted that data in the transcripts

has been interpreted carefully throughout the construction of the analysis that is later presented in chapter 5. Therefore, both focus groups were analyzed together where differences in opinions were highlighted and discussed further whenever needed. The data was analyzed and summarized under each stage of the purchase decision process and further linked to the relevant factor that was deemed important in this stage. The data was also validated by comparing the empirical data to what has been acknowledged in previous literature regarding the same topics. By doing this kind of data validation, it could be concluded that conclusions and interpretations was not solely based on individual reflections and interpretations (Ahrne & Svensson, 2016).

4.4. Reliability, validity, trustworthiness and authenticity

Bryman and Bell (2015) mention reliability and validity as two important measurements of quality in research studies. Reliability refers to whether a study can be duplicated and provide the same results while validity refers to that the researcher will observe, identify or “measure” what the researcher is studying. However, it is notable that using reliability and validity in qualitative research have been criticized as these concepts are more suitable to use in a quantitative study instead. This is motivated by the fact that reliability is difficult to achieve as real human beings are observed in qualitative studies where everyone behaves differently, which means that there is no absolute truth to social reality. Moreover, validity refers to observations and generalizations of large amounts of data which is not the case within qualitative studies, and is the reason to why validity as a concept becomes questionable as well. Bryman and Bell (2015) further explain that when validity and reliability is measured in qualitative studies, there are two important criteria that need to be taken into account: the level of *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*.

Bryman and Bell (2015) divide trustworthiness into four sub-categories: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *conformability*. Firstly, credibility refers to how the researcher has described social reality through the gathered results, and if this description is in accordance with the perception of reality of the studied participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015), in this case the participants in the focus groups. To make sure of this, all participants have been provided with a document of the transcripts so that they could comment on faulty expressions or interpretations that have been noted during the transcribing. Secondly, transferability refers to if the results from a research could further be transferred into a similar study, which is why it is essential to provide thick descriptions of details in a social context (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In this study, thick data is provided through the use of focus groups, as it is known that focus groups are a suitable method to receive a rich amount of data in a short period of time (Morgan, 1996). The focus groups were also recorded and transcribed to ensure that the words of the participants could be understood and analyzed carefully with room for transparency. The recording and transcribing also allowed me as a researcher to make sure that no important data was lost during the data collection, enabling the possibility of thick data to be provided. This in turn, has strengthened the transferability of the results and thereby increased the ability to transfer the results to other environments that uses other methods (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Thirdly, dependability refers to keeping consistent and transparent records of all documents used in the study such as interview guides, transcripts, field notes and other drafts that would be deemed important for other individuals who would like to review the material (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Dependability ensures that records of documents have been saved and shared with other individuals who have had the opportunity to further examine and comment on the quality and application of the used methods in this dissertation. Lastly, confirmability means that the researcher has conducted his or her research in good faith so that the study and results have not been affected by a personal agenda (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To ensure confirmability, each section in the dissertation and all other records and documents have been shared, discussed and reviewed by a supervisor throughout the time that this dissertation has been conducted.

However, authenticity has more general criteria such as *fairness* and *ontological authenticity*. Fairness implies that it is important to select the correct participants suitable for the study in order to collect the correct and necessary data. Ontological authenticity means that the selected participants should contribute to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the researched subject in a study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this dissertation, the selected participants for the focus groups had similar interests with SMIs and experiences of purchasing a product recommended by SMIs at one or several occasions. This in turn, created the possibility to obtain a deeper understanding of how the influence of SMIs have affected the participants in this study.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Throughout the time a research is conducted, different ethical dilemmas can arise. It is thereby important that these ethical dilemmas are addressed since they have a strong connection to the level of integrity of the research as well as to the involved participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Two ethical dilemmas that emerged during the study were confidentiality and anonymity. In order to not harm the participants in any way, confidentiality and anonymity were applied throughout the whole focus group session during the analysis of the results. Doing this, could prevent a result from being associated with a certain participant, thereby protecting them.

A third dilemma that appeared throughout the research was consent. In order to receive the consent of participants to participate in this study, it is important to provide them with enough information about the researched topic of this dissertation as well as information about what is expected of them when they choose to participate in focus groups. By providing the participants with such information, it will give them the opportunity to decide whether they still want to take part in the study or not (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this dissertation, each of the participants received information about the purpose of this dissertation, the topic that it concerns, what was expected of their participation in the focus groups and how their participation would contribute to the study. Also, before the focus group began, all participants were asked to give their consent to allow themselves to be recorded during the focus group session. Asking for their consent to be recorded was necessary so that no data would be lost as well as to validate the reliability of the data when it was later transcribed.

5. Analysis of empirical findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of how the participants perceive and experience the influence of social media influencers (SMIs). The empirical findings are analyzed to illustrate how the five factors: *content*, *expertise*, *attractiveness*, *social identity* and *trust* are portrayed in each step of the purchase decision process. The structure of the analysis is divided by each step of the purchase decision process in its complex order, namely: *need recognition*, *information search*, *evaluation of alternatives*, *purchase decision* and *post-purchase behavior*. The chapter ends with a discussion to create a comprehensive understanding of the analysis.

5.1 Analysis of focus groups

Some general background information about each of the eleven participants in the two focus groups have been gathered to create a better understanding of the participants' backgrounds, interests and how they are connected to SMIs. Information about gender, age and personal interests is illustrated in appendices 3 and 4. It was found during the discussion that the participants followed many different SMIs, of which they were asked to present the names of the SMIs that they favored the most, also illustrated in appendices 3 and 4. The SMIs that the participants mentioned are all active on the social media platforms included in this dissertation such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube and Blogs. However, it was noticed that the participants only followed their SMIs on Instagram, Youtube and Blogs since they found these platforms the most favorable to follow their SMIs on.

The following sections of this chapter illustrates the analysis divided into the different stages of purchase decision process; *need recognition*, *information search*, *evaluation of alternatives*, *purchase decision* and *post-purchase behavior*. Questions that were asked during the focus groups have been marked in italics, while the five different factors; *content*, *expertise*, *attractiveness*, *social identity* and *trust*, have been marked in bold to easily distinguish the questions from the factors and the rest of the text.

5.1.1 Need recognition

In the need recognition stage, a consumer discovers what need that he or she has (Park & Cho, 2012). A need is acknowledged when the consumer discovers a change within their ideal or actual state (Workman & Studak, 2005; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). Valck et al. (2013), state that external influences, such as social media influencers, have a higher chance of creating the

change between the ideal and actual state by creating a desire within the consumer's mind. This created desire was clearly shown whenever participants were asked about *what meaning SMIs have in their life and why they choose to follow them*. This created a deep discussion as the participants had different reasons to why they followed SMIs. Most participants agreed on that they follow SMIs because they find it entertaining and as a way to find inspiration, often for new products where clothing, cooking, food and workout recommendations was brought up as examples. The fact that the participants follow SMIs as a way to get inspiration for individual reasons could be interpreted as that the **content** is of high importance for the participants. Some participants mentioned how they often scroll through the social media feed of their SMIs several times a day, in hope that the SMI had posted some new content that the participants would find inspiring and entertaining as well as relevant. The fact that the participants get to follow the everyday lives of their SMIs (Forbes, 2016) could explain why the participants find the content, provided by SMIs, enjoyable and of high value to them (Li et al., 2014).

Celebrities were mentioned during the discussion, in which participants agreed to follow at least one or more. Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) claim that celebrities have through time come to be SMIs as well, something that was brought up amongst participants. However, many participants mentioned how celebrities differed from other SMIs due to the fact that other SMIs had built their brands through many years and earned their audiences in a more authentic way than celebrities, who were claimed to be known for something else rather than their status as an SMI. Moreover, all participants agreed on that they are not affected by, nor do they adopt the information or recommendations made by celebrities. This was mainly argued by the fact that celebrities were claimed to have more resources and that they were not the ones who ran their own social media accounts. Instead, participants claimed that their **content** was often written and posted by someone else, and because of this, the participants claimed that they did not **trust** the recommendations of products made by celebrities. As one participant mentioned:

It does not feel like she posts the content herself. There is obviously someone who is running her Instagram-account and that feels very impersonal to me, especially since Instagram is a platform that seems to be very personal and close. But I like to follow her, although I do not embrace the things that she is recommending. I only like her photos because she is pretty nothing else, because I do not believe that she is the one who sits behind her mobile phone and posts her own pictures. But I know that influencers, they do run their own Instagram-accounts and posts their content themselves.

Female participant 1, focus group 1

As the discussion around celebrities evolved, participants further discussed how celebrities were considered less trustworthy due to the fact that they had a substantial amount of resources. It was however noted that participants were aware of the fact that other SMIs are indeed paid to advertise products, but that they still considered them more reliable than regular celebrities. This was explained by the fact that participants felt that they could better relate to other SMIs because of their way of creating more personalized content than celebrities do. This fact was later explained as the main reason to why the participants were open to adopt several products that the SMI recommended, which in turn, could be connected to both **content** and **social identity**. Park et al. (2007) together with Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) imply that when SMIs personalize their content, consumers can feel that the content is directed towards them personally, hence the connection to content. This in turn might explain why participants felt that they could better relate to the SMIs, since they are now given the opportunity to feel like they can step into the personal lives of the SMIs (Forbes, 2016), hence the reference to social identity. Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) indicate that consumers who are given a personal insight to the lives of SMIs through their content, are highly likely to relate to the SMIs as a result. The fact that a consumer relates to an SMI could in turn could have a positive effect on whether the consumer later adopts the product recommended by that particular SMI or not (Cheung, Xiao, & Liu, 2014). Xhiang et al. (2016) also explain how a consumer can get the motivation to buy what the SMI recommends, simply because they find them inspiring, which points further to **social identity** as participants shared that they see SMIs as a source of inspiration, as previously mentioned. To gain inspiration of new lifestyles was also mentioned among participants, as they were impressed by what many of the SMIs had achieved in their life and after which the participants later became eager to imitate this lifestyle as a result. As one participant said:

You get inspired to do the same things and achieve the same goals as these influencers have achieved. I believe that many people think that “oh she did that, I want to do that too!” And I think that is why influencers are so inspiring, even if they sometimes have not done anything special in particular really.

Female participant 3, focus group 1

The fact that the participant expressed how she wanted to achieve what the SMI had achieved could show how the SMI had created a desire within the participant’s mind, where a need had been identified (Valck et al., 2013). However, in this case the need was the urge to imitate the lifestyle of the SMI rather than the need for a product itself. This statement from the participant could thereby further show connections to the importance of **social identity**. Forbes (2016),

indicates that consumers are often willing to imitate the image of SMIs due to the fact that consumers see SMIs as role models. Since the participant saw what the SMI had achieved in its life, she felt the necessity of adopting those actions which could show indications of that the participant perceive the SMI as a role model. Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) further state that an SMI works as an idol of consumption by illustrating how their life as an SMI can look like, which can later be imitated by the consumer and influence the consumption behavior of the consumer such as in the case of the participant's. However, as the discussion evolved, some participants instead claimed that the reason why they follow SMIs is to mostly because it has become some form of routine and a way to expel time, as one of the participants expressed:

It has become some kind of routine. Whenever I lay in bed and before I am about to go to sleep I usually scroll through all of my influencers' feeds and I get so disappointed whenever they have not updated their feeds. It is almost like reading the newspaper in the past where you just, whenever you are bored, browse through all of your influencers on every social media channel.

Female participant 2, focus group 2

All participants agreed on that they browsed through the social media feeds of their SMIs several times a day, since the SMIs usually updated their feed several times a day. Many participants also agreed on that the main reason behind this was that the participants were often bored and therefore searched for ways to expel time, where browsing through the feeds of their SMIs were one way to do this. As the participant expressed in the quote, she was disappointed whenever the SMIs that she followed had not updated their feed after several times of browsing through it, something that the other participants agreed with. This fact could be interpreted as if the **content** is of high value to the participants. Li et al. (2014) indicate how consumers highly value the content created by SMIs. That the participants browse through the feed of their SMIs several times a day, could indicate that the participants consequently hope and seek for new content to be shared by SMIs. This in turn, could explain how the content is of value to the participants, as they were disappointed whenever no new posts have been uploaded.

Meanwhile, participants who followed SMIs to get inspiration of new products revealed how they have previously been persuaded to buy something that was recommended by an SMI. Jaakonmäki et al. (2017) state that when an SMI appears with a product on their social media accounts, consumers can develop a need to have this product as a result from the exposure. One participant explained how one of her SMIs appeared with a product and thereby created the urge for the participant to buy it. This urge resulted in that the participant purchased a product

she had no previous experience from which points to a psychological need, that emerges whenever an individual feels that he or she has to have the same product that another person has (Workman & Studak, 2005). One participant namely shared:

I have started to work out a bit during this spring. And I follow this influencer called Malin, who posted an image of a certain protein powder and I have never drank any protein powder and I do not know much about it either. But, since she said that it was really good, I ordered it as well. She also shared how she uses it when she drinks it and that kind of eases the whole process than if I were to go to a store and ask to get help to find a good protein powder.

Female participant focus group 1

The fact that the participant mentioned how the SMI shared information about how to use the product and that it eased the whole process for the participant could show significant connections to how the **content** is of importance in this matter. Valck et al. (2013) mention that the content created by SMIs are considered very useful to consumers as it reduces the effort of searching for additional information and increases the probability of making a better choice of product. In this case, the participant seemed to value the fact that she could easily order the protein powder home in seconds without having to spend significant time on searching for a product she had no previous experience from and knew almost nothing about. Moreover, the participant had earlier mentioned that this SMI was oriented in the category of fitness and that the participant followed her mainly because of the fact that the participant had started to work out herself. Nejad et al. (2014) indicate that SMIs often have knowledge in several product categories, where this SMI was claimed to have knowledge in the category of fitness. The fact that the participant were willing to purchase the protein powder that the SMI recommended could therefore point to the role of **expertise** in this matter. Valck et al. (2013) state that when the SMI is perceived as an expert in his or her area of content, then it is highly likely that a consumer will turn to and adopt the information that comes from this source. This seemed to have been the case for the participant as she might have thought of the SMI to be an expert when the SMI were recommending a product that was included in her area of content, which was fitness. The statement from the participant could also point to **social identity**, as the consumer could have purchased the product simply because she relates to the SMI due to the similar interest of fitness and working out. Cheung et al. (2014) further address this with the fact that when consumers relate to an SMI, there is a higher chance that the consumers buy the recommended product made by the SMI, such as the participant had done in this case.

As the discussion evolved, the participant further shared that she followed the SMI called Malin because the participant could relate to her. This connection that the participant has to the SMI is referred to as parasocial interaction, and explains how consumers can identify themselves with SMIs (Lu et al., 2010; Xiang et al., 2016). Cheung et al. (2014) state that when a consumer relates to an SMI, he or she is more willing to adopt the product recommended by the SMI, even if the consumer is not in the need of the product itself, which is what happened for the participant. The fact that the participant relates to and shares the same personal interests with the SMI could further point to **trust**. Liu et al. (2015) claim that when a consumer shares the same personal interests and preferences of products like the SMI, the recommendations from the SMI about products would be considered more trustworthy and could increase the effort to make a purchase. As the participant chose to follow the recommendations from the SMI could depend on the fact that participant and the SMI shared the same personal interests. Forbes (2016) also explains that SMIs who share information about what they know in a certain category of products are considered more trustworthy than those who share their opinion about products that are not in their area of content. This could later show connections to the importance of **expertise**. Valck et al. (2013) address that an SMI that is perceived as an expert in his or her area of content, has a higher chance at influencing a consumer to adopt the recommendation of the SMI. This means, that while the participant thought of the SMI as an expert of protein powders due to the fact that the product is in the SMI's category of knowledge, it could explain why the participant trusted the SMI in its recommendation as a result.

In contrast, another participant showed how the **attractiveness** of an SMI, created the need to purchase a product recommended by the SMI, in this case a watch. Li et al. (2014) explain how the perceptions and associations that a consumer has of an SMI can make the consumer purchase a certain product. The authors further argue that even though a consumer might not look for a certain product, the attractiveness of an SMI can still influence the consumer into considering buying a particular product. Forbes (2016) also implies that when a consumer see someone they like wear, use or show a product, the consumer is more likely to purchase that product as a result. In this case, the SMI called Amanda was a classmate of the participant whom she had a personal relationship with. The participant expressed:

This Daniel Wellington watch, I have wished for it as a graduation present. I do not use watches and I swear on my life that I will never use watches either because I actually only check the time on my telephone. But then Amanda posted it and sent it to me on Snapchat and I just had to have it! And as I said before, I do not use watches but after seeing it on her I somehow just wanted to have that particular watch.

Female participant 1, focus group 1

Kapitan and Silvera (2015) address this matter with that when a consumer spots an advertisement of a product made by a familiar and likable SMI, attention could be drawn to that particular product which could later result in a purchase. In this case, the SMI called Amanda was a familiar and particularly close friend to the participant. This matter was also brought up in the second focus group, where a female participant also had a personal relationship with one of the SMIs that she followed, also revealed to be a friend of the participant. The participant further mentioned how she saw SMIs in general as friends, which might be further addressed to the importance of **attractiveness**. Once again, the familiarity that the participant has with the SMI could determine whether a product will be considered for a purchase or not (Kapitan and Silvera, 2015). This statement is followed by Forbes (2016) who claims that a consumer is more willing to adopt the product that is recommended from an SMI that the consumer highly favors and find likable. Many of the participants further discussed how it was a matter of whom they should give their money to. The participants explained how they knew that SMIs lived off the money they earned by collaborating with a range of companies and promoting products. It was further mentioned how the work of an SMI was considered a job too, simply because of this. Since the both female participants had personal relationships with the SMIs that they follow, they were more eager to somehow help these SMIs in their career by using their offered discount code and buy the products that these SMIs recommended. This occurred both when the participants themselves were in need or not in need of the products that were advertised.

5.1.2 Information search

When a consumer has identified its need, the consumer starts to search for information about products that could best satisfy the need (Park & Cho, 2012). Comegys et al. (2006), explain how a consumer can search for information in two steps. Firstly, the consumer starts to develop a higher interest towards the advertising, content information and conversations made about brands and products that could best satisfy how the identified need could be stimulated. Secondly, consumers later actively engage in these conversations to obtain the information about different products and brands that could best satisfy the need (Comegys et al., 2006). Whenever participants were asked about *how they perceive the sponsored posts of social media influencers*, most participants shared that they mostly ignore the advertising of products that is of no interest to them, such as tooth whitening, and paid more attention to the sponsored posts of products that suited their identified need. The participants further explained this as how their

own interest in the recommended product, was important in whether they would pay attention to a certain product offering or not. One participant namely expressed:

I am not interested in makeup at all, it is the most boring thing I know really and it may be why I never want to try it out. I mean, I really hate it to be honest. But if I had had more interest in it, I would have followed more make-up oriented influencers. If Kenza were to post more content about make-up, I would only scroll past it but if she posts content about clothing or fitness, then I would be more interested in that of course. But make-up, it is only because I am bad at it and think it is boring that I would scroll past it.

Female participant 1, focus group 1

Whenever the participants paid attention to a sponsored post made by an SMI, it was generally because they were looking for that particular product or because they felt that the product was beautiful. They later turned to other sources on the Internet to search for information, such as online websites with several reviews made by other individuals. These sources online can be referred to as public sources (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). However, many participants brought up how they would rather believe the advice of a friend, also referred to as a personal source (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012), or an SMI since they believed that many of the reviews made online have previously been bought or created by the companies themselves. The participants further discussed how the **content** of SMIs was more personalized and favorable (Valck et al. 2013), as they believed that SMIs had to keep their reputation and therefore would not give a dishonest opinion about a bad product. This could in turn be linked to **trust**, where Nejad et al. (2014) describe that trust decides how much the consumer believes in the information provided by an SMI about a recommended product. However, the participants further explained that some SMIs would give a dishonest opinion dependent on if they were SMIs who were trying to build their career by doing collaborations with companies that would pay off good money. Nejad et al. (2014) further imply that if there is no trust towards an SMI, the consumer will not believe in the information behind provided in the content. This matter occurred as well since participants further explained that they could easily tell if it was a dishonest opinion made by an SMI, especially as many of the recommended products were not used by the SMI itself.

Most participants in both focus groups also agreed on that the well-known SMIs rarely did any sponsored posts or collaborations with companies outside their area of knowledge. This could be further linked to **expertise**, which refers to the consumer's perception of the SMIs' ability to create accurate and credible content (Nejad, Sherrell, & Babakus, 2014). The participants further agreed on that the well-known SMIs often worked with well-known companies and brands with large market shares, which in turn made the SMIs even more credible. This could

later be linked to **attractiveness**, as a well-known SMI is said to have a greater impact on purchase decisions as these SMIs will seem more trustworthy and attractive to consumers as a result (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016). The participants in both groups further mentioned the importance that an SMI had to expose a brand several times and work with the same companies over and over again in order to be seen as credible individuals. Most participants in the second focus group further claimed how the SMIs that have been around for several years often only recommended products from companies that they have invested in themselves. This in turn, could be connected to **content** but also the **trust** that consumers have towards these SMIs. This meant that, whenever the SMIs made recommendations about a product they had no connection with or have never recommended before, the participants' view of the SMI was negatively affected. As a result, the product would not be considered for a purchase and the trust towards the SMI would decrease which was clearly shown through one particular SMI that was mentioned. This was also considered whenever the SMI recommended a product that they themselves did not use.

One thing that I noticed with Petra's blog is that she made this collaboration with Desenio, but she does not even have their posters herself anywhere in her home. At least, I have not seen that she has one. But she brought up the company to the sky like "they are so awesome!" and that makes me lose a lot of faith in her.

Female participant 2, focus group 2

The fact that the SMI recommended product that she did not use herself, could be connected to **trust**. As the participant shared that this matter decreased the credibility of the SMI due to the fact that the participant did not believe in the message behind the content (Nejad et al., 2014). This matter could maybe even be referred to as a certain loss of **attractiveness**. Li et al. (2014) share that a consumer's perceptions of an SMI could affect the consumer's attitude towards the SMI and the product that the SMI is recommending. As the participant lost faith in the SMI, a negative attitude was created towards the SMI and the product.

Moving on, information search can further be done both internally and externally, where external information is often gathered from the consumer's social surroundings such as from SMIs or on social media (Lee & Cranage, 2010; Bronner & de Hoog, 2014). When participants were asked about *how they thought one could be affected by social media influencers* and *how they thought that they themselves had been affected*, participants shared that they were rather subconsciously influenced by SMIs. Participants explained how when they look for a certain product or information about that product, they normally pay attention to a product that has

previously been recommended by one of their SMIs. Several participants brought up the how the SMI that they follow should be good at selling the product to their followers, where the **trust** towards the SMI plays a critical role. Several participants further mentioned how they had been following SMIs for several years and therefore considered SMIs as friends, after which a large amount of trust was directed towards these SMIs as a result. These SMIs, could therefore be counted as personal sources which Wang et al. (2012) claim, can influence consumers far more than commercial sources such as advertisements from companies. The fact that the participants see SMIs as friends, although they have never been in contact with them, could be connected to the statement of Li et al. (2014), about how a consumer's good associations and perceptions of an SMI can increase the consumer's willingness to adopt a particular product exposed by the SMI. Seeing SMIs as friends could also be linked to **social identity**. Xiang et al. (2016) state that although a consumer does not have a direct face-to-face contact with SMIs, consumers can still feel close to them. Liu et al. (2015) also describe how selecting the right SMI becomes crucial for companies in order to generate the biggest impact on a consumer, as SMIs with a great amount of **trust** and **expertise** is highly favored by consumers. Especially in this case, where it could be understood that the information provided by the SMI that the participant had had a long relationship with and followed for a long time, turned out to be the right SMI for her in order to adapt and trust the information coming from this particular SMI.

After discussing how participants had been affected by SMIs, they were further asked on *how they felt about the information about products that comes from social media influencers and whether that information was enough for them to proceed to make a purchase*, where many participants answered no. Valck et al. (2013) explain how consumers turn to social media when searching for information provided by other individuals. This was shown when participants shared that they often turn to Youtube to see visual videos of how the products could be used. Other participants shared that they turned to other websites where online reviews of products existed, made from other consumers. Some participants mentioned that if they see a product they want, they instantly remember whether one of their SMIs had recommended it before and thereby turns to the social media account of the SMI to find more information about the product. This can be referred to Escalas and Bettman (2003) who mentioned that when a consumer lacks certain information, knowledge or experience about a product they are interested in, turn to SMIs to receive the information that will move them closer to a purchase. This was clearly shown as the participant further explained how she wanted to see how the fabric moved and how the product that she was interested in, suited the SMI. The participant had previously

mentioned that the SMIs that she follow was similar to herself, so that she could easier decide whether for example a certain piece of clothing could fit her or not in both size and color, by simply seeing the SMI wear it. This in turn could be tied to **social identity**, which means that since the participant strongly identified with her SMIs she is more likely to adopt the product offerings and information coming from them (Luo, 2005; Liu et al., 2015).

The participants were also given a scenario where they were to *think about how they could be affected as a consumer if all social media influencers one day decided to shut down their whole presence on social media*. Participants mentioned how they would not be very affected by this more than that they would now have to do more of their information search by themselves. This in turn could be tied to **content**. Many participants expressed how they could generate a rich flow of information about several brands and products by simply following SMIs. Other participants also explained how SMIs often eased the process of looking for information as they were often good at writing detailed descriptions in their recommendations. Valck et al. (2013) address that the content provided by SMIs is considered very useful by consumers, as it reduces the effort of searching for additional information about products, just as the participants claimed.

5.1.3 Evaluation of alternatives

When the consumer has gathered enough information about possible products that could satisfy the need, the consumer starts evaluating which option of these products that should be considered for a purchase. Comegys et al (2006) state that a minimum of acceptable requirements have to be met before considering a product for purchase. Park and Cho (2012) further address that the consumer evaluates each alternative by comparing the possible benefits of the product. Participants in both groups mentioned how the price of the product was an essential part for purchasing a product recommended by the SMI or not. Park and Cho (2012) claim that price is one factor for evaluating the benefits of purchasing a product. When the participants were asked *to think of a scenario in which they had been wanting to purchase a certain product for a long time. The social media influencers that the participants follow suddenly recommend a similar product from another brand that fills basically the same function as the product they intended to purchase from the beginning*. The participants were later asked *how they would respond to this situation*. Many of the participants agreed that price was an essential factor to even consider purchasing the recommended product. Another mentioned:

If it is more expensive than the product I had been looking for from the beginning, then I would have just excluded it right away. I would not even consider looking further into the product. But if the product would be cheaper than the one I had looked at previously, then maybe I would consider it more.

Female participant 6, focus group 2

One participant mentioned how several of the SMIs that she follow has posted discount codes several times of the same product, in this case a watch, often at the same time. However, the participant still has not bought the watch where other participants agreed to have had the same experience. Several of the participants engaged in the conversation about the watch where one participant shared that she started to develop an interest towards the watch as she had noticed the watch on several accounts of the SMIs that she follow. This could be tied to **attractiveness**, which Kapitan and Silvera (2015) address that when a consumer is deciding among products, the attractiveness of an SMI could make the consumer feel that he or she can achieve the same look as the SMI by having the same product. This in turn draws attention to that certain brand or product that the SMI recommends, even if the consumer is not in need of the product from the beginning (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). This statement was also clearly shown whenever participants discussed how the product was portrayed in the picture, which could easily make them more eager to purchase the product to achieve the same look. However, after trying the watch out she excluded it as it did not fit her requirements for a watch, where she later mentioned:

It was a little smaller than what I have imagined. So I continued looking for another watch in kind of the same model. And then I bought this one (shows the watch for the other participants). Without discount! I first wanted the Daniel Wellington watch because I thought it was beautiful. But I still did not buy it even though it was cheaper, since I actually wanted a bigger watch such as this one I have now.

Female participant 4, focus group 1

Park and Cho (2012) also address that size can be a factor that is evaluated as a possible benefit of the product whenever a consumer considers a purchase. In this case, the participant was considering a purchase of the recommended watch by the SMI. But due to evaluation of the size of the watch, the participant excluded the watch and further searched for another that met her requirements. What is notable here is that price was not something that the participant was concerned about, since the watch that she actually bought had no discount code and costed more than the watch that was recommended by the SMI.

One participant explained a scenario in which she would be interested in a protein powder and that it would be easier to purchase the exact same product that one of her SMIs that is oriented in fitness, has recommended. She explained this to be easier than to walk through the “a million alternatives” on a website that sells protein powders. Liu et al (2015) mention how the **trust** towards an SMI is essential to if the consumer chooses the recommended product, when evaluating alternatives. The fact that the consumer turns to an SMI oriented in the fitness-profession, can be a sign of that the participant has established a certain trust towards the SMI and therefore chooses what she recommends. This could further be addressed through Escalas and Bettman (2003) which mean that as consumers often have many similar alternatives to choose from, they rely on SMIs by taking the alternative that the SMI is recommending into consideration.

The participants also discussed how the product category decided whether they take the recommended product by an SMI into consideration or not. Price was also namely discussed again. One participant expressed:

These photographer-influencers that I follow. If any of these starts to post pictures of Samsung and promote Samsung all the time... I mean, I have an iPhone already. And I have had it for a while and I am very satisfied with it. And I have a camera as well. There is no chance in the world that I would buy a Samsung just because one of my favorite photographer have bought or been sponsored by one. In addition, it is not in the price frame because if you already have a mobile phone what would you need another one for?

Male participant 2, focus group 1

Other participants in the group joined the discussion and further argued how choosing the alternative over the one they had intended, depended on the product category, where clothing could result in an easier adaptation of the recommended product by the SMI, as long as the product would fill the same function. One participant also mentioned how the size of the loss of money was not significant when trying new products such as clothes, hygiene products and food. Participants further discussed how they would be more open to adopt a recommended product if it fits in the category of their other products. One participant mentioned how she uses a certain brand of beauty products, and if one of her SMIs posted a recommendation of a product from this brand, the participants would evaluate to stock this recommended product onto her other line of other products from the same brand.

The level of **trust** was further found important when participants discussed the degree of exposure of products. Escalas and Bettman (2003) mentions how an SMI in the evaluation of

alternatives stage of the purchase decision process, focuses on exposing many different and similar products maybe at once or in many individual occasions. Participants clearly showed that the amount of **trust** could decrease as a result, dependent on what product it was. One namely mentioned:

If they recommend sunglasses once a week and it is different brands, it is not credible. But if they were to post and recommend the sunglasses once and really put all effort on this post as well as stick to the same brand, makes it more reliable.

Female participant 6, focus group 2

One participant instead mentioned that whether she would consider the product or not, depended on which social media platform that the product is recommended, for her to even consider to evaluate the product for purchase or not. The participant drew the difference between Instagram and Youtube, where she claimed that it is easier to manipulate the photos on Instagram and which is why she would never buy a product that is recommended by an SMI on Instagram. Instead, she claimed Youtube to be a better platform to see a visual picture of the product and that this made it easier for her to consider buying that product instead. Other participants agreed by further implying that they **trust** a video more than a simple image or text. Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) further means that when a consumer evaluates alternatives, he or she also evaluates different platforms to choose from to find the best options and information on. The fact that the participant drew the difference between reliable platforms could indicate the importance of **trust** as the participant considered images less influential than videos. The participant also mentioned how many recommendations from SMIs had been made about a shopping website called Zalando. Due to this, the participant felt the urge to choose this site as the best optional site to shop from:

Many influencers are talking about Zalando. Blondinbella for example have said that it will be the new online site to shop from since they have such a large assortment. I have never bought anything from Zalando before, but a week ago I ordered four pair of shoes from there. That is because I needed some new shoes and then I thought that Zalando is said to be a very good site. And I think, since you hear so many people talk good about something, you do not go to this new FeetFirst store to buy shoes, no you turn to Zalando because they have a big assortment.

Female participant 1, focus group 2

Valck et al. (2013) argue how the information and experience shared by other individuals on social platforms are important for a consumer to consider purchasing a particular product or

not. Participants namely discussed the importance of seeing the visual feature of the product before buying it, mainly again dependent on the product category that the product belonged to.

5.1.4 Purchase decision

When a consumer is satisfied with the gathered information and has evaluated what product to buy, the consumer moves to the purchase decision (Comegys et al. 2006). In this stage, the consumer performs the actual purchase. Comegys et al. (2006) argue that the opinion of other individuals in the consumer's surroundings play an essential part. It was expressed during the discussion that the participants often turned to gather a final opinion from friends or other acquaintances before finalizing a purchase. Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) claims that opinions and recommendations made of other sources can influence whether a purchase is made or not. As mentioned in previous stages, participants brought up several factors that could affect whether a purchase was made or not, mostly dependent on the product category itself, price or possible benefits. Therefore, participants were instead asked to explain *in which situations that they would not buy anything that a social media influencer recommends*. Participants mainly answered this question with that they would not buy products that resulted in a decreased **trust** towards the SMI, such as tooth whitening. Forbes (2016) imply that SMIs who express their opinions about product that are not in their category of **expertise** are seen as less credible to the consumer, thus the trust towards the SMI decreases. This was mainly shown in the example of the tooth whitening, as it was brought up several times by the participants and how they became upset with SMIs who promoted products such as tooth whitening.

Tooth whitening... That is something I would get irritated by really much, these tooth things. That is when I think "have you really sunk so low to that level?" When it is someone I really like who does it, then I just think "no!"

Female participant 1, focus group 1

The fact that the participant got irritated by the fact that an SMI that she favored might make a promotion of, in this case, the tooth whitening could show indications of how the **attractiveness** of the SMI could be affected negatively as a result of this. Li et al. (2014) imply that a good association between the SMI and the product could increase the attention of the consumer towards the recommended product. Forbes (2016) further imply that when consumers see people they like wear, use or display product, then consumers are more likely to purchase these products as a result. However, this was not the case in this situation as the attention of the

participant rather decreased and resulted in no purchase. By reading from the quote, it seemed that it was the matter of the product itself that the participant had a negative attitude towards of which this negative attitude was later directed to the SMI as a result.

In addition to this, participants also discussed how they would not buy anything recommended by an SMI if it was not a product that they had previously had in mind to purchase before. Participants shared that they would never purchase anything recommended by an SMI on impulse. Comegys et al. (2006) also argue that if consumers know what they want from the beginning, they are less willing to act on an impulse. However, as the discussion evolved, some participants revealed experiences of having purchased something after the recommendation of an SMI which could be interpreted as an impulsive purchase. Luo (2005) argues that it is in the purchase stage that impulsive purchases can occur. Yu and Bastin (2010) further explain that a consumer can make an impulsive purchase when influenced by external factors, such as how the product appears on the SMI. This was clearly shown in the previous example of the Daniel Wellington watch, where one participant expressed how she felt the desire to purchase the watch after seeing the SMI that she followed to recommend it. Song and Yoo (2016) address this fact with that SMIs can customize their **content** and make it more desirable for users online who will read it later, which seemed to have occurred in this experience explained by the SMI.

In addition to the matter of making impulsive purchases, only one of the participants actually admitted to making impulsive purchases on several occasions due to the influence of SMIs, especially when a discount code was offered as well. However, the participants who claimed that they had never done an impulsive purchase after the recommendation made by an SMI, mentioned how age was a contributing factor which meant that the older they would get, the more they would resist impulsive purchases.

I think it has to do with who you are as a person too. I am a person who needs to search for additional information, while another maybe does not. Then its age too. I think younger people tend to do more impulsive purchases and the older you get, the less interested you are in doing impulsive purchasing. I spend my money on other things instead and I maybe save more money now than I did when I was younger. You think differently when you get older, and I think this matters very much for how one acts on impulses and whether it is short-term or long-term.

Female participant 3, focus group 2

As the discussion evolved among what could affect whether a purchase would be made or not, one participant mentioned the size of the discount codes provided by SMIs. The participant

explained how one of the SMIs that she followed recommended a tooth whitening product and how the credibility in both the SMI and the product itself fell as a result of the size of the discount code.

I can also feel that these discount codes, it depends a little bit on how big they are. For example, I follow some guy who is very much into makeup. He was promoting a tooth whitening product and he wrote: “this costs 228 dollars but with my discount code you can get it for only 28 dollars”. I mean, 200 dollars? Come on! All my faith in him sunk because of this.

Female participant 5, focus group 1

Kembau and Mekel (2014) defines the importance that for the consumer to consider purchasing a product, the consumer need to feel that the product has high reliability, which means that the information provided by the SMI about the product has to be credible. This fact could be tied to the **attractiveness** of the SMI as Li et al. (2014) address that a good perception and association between the SMI and the product could increase the attention and awareness towards that product, after which a purchase can occur as a result. However in this case, the opposite happened as the participants instead created a bad perception of the SMI, where the attractiveness of the SMI decreased as a result. This experience told by the participant could also be linked to **trust**. Nejad et al. (2014) explains how trust decides how much a consumer believes in the information provided by an SMI about a recommended product. In this case, the participant felt no credibility in the recommendation about the product due to the size of the discount code.

Lastly, participants once again discussed the matter of whom they should use the discount from and thereby give their money to. The participants who had personal relationships and friendships to their SMIs once again mentioned how they would use the discount code and give their money to these SMIs. Other participants who had no personal relationship with their SMIs, instead mentioned how they were more eager to finalize a purchase if they used the discount code of an SMI with less followers. This was later explained by the fact that participants believed that well-known SMI were paid enough anyways by the companies for simply promoting the product on their social media accounts, which is why the participant felt that they would not need the participants' money.

5.1.5 Post-purchase behavior

When the consumer reaches the last stage of the consumer purchase decision process, the consumer evaluates whether the purchased product has met the previously recognized need or not, also referred to as the post-purchase behavior (Park & Cho, 2012). Comegys et al. (2006) address the post-purchase behavior stage as where the consumer decides whether future purchases will be made again of the same product or from the same brand. The participants claimed to have never been particularly dissatisfied with a product that they have purchased after the recommendations made by an SMI, where some repurchases had occasionally been made as a result. Comegys et al. (2006) refer to this behavior as the post-purchase satisfaction, as the participants implied to have reached satisfaction in most cases from their purchased products. One participant namely said:

The only thing I have bought is Isabella's own products. I mean, the hair and facial products and all this. I tried one and I was satisfied with that product, so I tried one more and I was happy with that one too. I then tried a third one and was happy with that as well, so it is because I am satisfied with one product that I choose to continue buying the rest of her products.

Female participant 2, focus group 2

Escalas and Bettman (2003) further imply that if the expected satisfaction turns out to give the same results as it gave the SMI who recommended it, loyalty towards the SMI could increase as a result. The participants explained how they had done several repurchases as a result of previously accepting the recommendations of products made by SMIs. Comegys et al. (2006) address this as the post-purchase action, which means that whenever a consumer is satisfied with a product, their loyalty towards the brand increases. Valck et al. (2013) further address this matter by implying that when a consumer is satisfied with its purchase, the loyalty towards the SMI could increase as well where the consumer could continue to follow the advices of the SMI in the future as a result. The participants clearly expressed that whenever they were satisfied they continued to follow the advices of SMIs and thereby purchase more products recommended by them. This matter could be linked to **trust**, since the recommendations and opinions of the SMI could be considered useful in the future as well (Liu et al., 2015).

But you...you said that you had bought an LCC product and that you can imagine buying several other products from that brand and I feel that too! I mean, if you get that first faith of confidence in the SMI, then it is really easy to just continue. So, I think it is enough with that first time, to then continue buying from them.

Female participant 2, focus group 2

The paragraph of the participant could be linked Forbes (2016) statement about how the actual experience of the product determines the **trust** and loyalty towards the company behind the product as well as the loyalty towards the SMI. In this case, the participants further expressed how their loyalty towards the particular brand called LCC, increased as a result of having a positive experience of the product. The participant also shared that the trust towards the SMI behind the product increased, by stating the fact that this particular SMI had done products in her area of **expertise**. Kapitan and Silvera (2015) imply that SMIs are known for having certain expertise in several product categories rather than just one product, which makes the SMIs more credible in return. Furthermore, participants expressed that their trust in the SMI would only decrease if they as a consumer were dissatisfied with a recommended product, but that the level of decreased trust mainly depended on whether the product had been created by the SMI itself.

If I do not like a product that I know Blondinbella has been in on and worked with, maybe a small part of my trust towards her is affected. And the same goes with when you buy something that you are dissatisfied with, you just simply do not buy the next product after that.

Female participant 5, focus group 2

Participants further mentioned how the images posted by SMIs could in many cases seem misleading, as the images had often been manipulated and edited to look more desirable for their followers. Workman and Studak (2005) address this with the fact that products are often designed and advertised in a way to influence the psychological needs of consumers. The participants therefore highlighted the importance of gathering enough information before finalizing a purchase. They further explained that whenever they were dissatisfied with a product, they could not always blame the SMI, especially not if they as consumers had not done their information gathering about the product in advance. However, when the recommendation came from an SMI that the consumer strongly **identified** with and **trusted**, a bad experience of the recommended product could lead to that the trust and loyalty towards the SMI could decrease as a result. This means, that whenever the participants had actually made a purchase that they were dissatisfied with, they chose to ignore sharing their opinions and experiences on social media and simply avoided a repurchase of the product again. Recommendations of similar products made by the SMI would therefore not be paid attention to in the future.

Due to this, participants were asked on *whether they engaged in the comment section of the SMIs they followed after having made a purchase of a recommended product that they were satisfied or dissatisfied with*, where none of the participants claimed to do so. Valck et al. (2013)

mention that consumers that do not invest any time in sharing their opinion and experience of their purchased product, can be considered to be unsatisfied consumers. However, this was not the case among the participants as all of them agreed on that they actually had considered sharing their opinion and experiences of their purchased products, but have never managed to do so afterwards due to different reasons. Therefore, participants were asked to further explain why, since they had previously mentioned that they favor the opinions and reviews made by other individuals online, especially on social media. This was answered with that since there are other individuals who share their opinions and experiences on social media, the participants did not feel the urge or need to do so themselves. Another participant mentioned that her reason for not sharing her opinions and experiences was due to lack of time. Instead, participants agreed on sharing their opinions and experiences further on to their closest friends as they believed that they would get more out of this than by posting a comment in the comment section of the social media feeds of SMIs. This was applied to both when the participants were satisfied or dissatisfied with their purchased product.

5.2 Discussion of analysis

The analysis of empirical findings show that social media influencers (SMIs) do play an evident role in each stage of the purchase decision process. The five factors: *content*, *expertise*, *attractiveness*, *social identity* and *trust* were all found important to the participants in the study, in one way or another. As the participants moved further along the purchase decision process, certain factors disappeared which could be explained by the fact that they might not be needed in those stages of the process. All five factors were found to be highly valued in the first two stages of the purchase decision process, where the influence of SMIs was found evident, especially in the creation of a need within consumers' minds. One interesting aspect was that participants first claimed to turn to SMIs after already having identified a need. However, as the discussion evolved many participants shared experiences of how the SMI had developed a need among several of the participants on several occasions. Jaakonmäki et al. (2017) address that SMIs can indeed create the need for consumers by simply appearing with the product. The information searching, on the other hand was mostly done outside the help of SMIs. This in turn, is in line with Escalas and Bettman (2003) who argue that a consumer seeks information that they lack about a product, mainly from SMIs. However, some participants instead claimed that they wanted the opinion of other peers and therefore turned to other sources such as friends, also referred to as personal sources (Park & Cho, 2012).

Another thing that was found during the analysis was that the participants seemed to think that they had a personal relationship to their SMIs. Even though they had never had a face-to-face contact with the SMIs, participants still claimed SMIs to be their friends and which is why they often followed their recommendations of purchasing certain products as a result. Forbes (2016) implies that consumers see SMIs as role models and thereby identify with them. This could explain why the participants considered SMIs to be friends, as they were often well-informed about the personal lives of SMIs. Jaakonmäki et al. (2017) explain how SMIs can interact with consumers on a deeper level. However, there was no interaction in this case as the participants had never had a direct contact with their SMIs. Yet, they continued to trust them in their recommendations of products. Also, during the post-purchase behavior where participants shared that they did not engage in the comment section of SMIs, could further question how participants see SMIs as friends as they do not even try to reach out and contact the SMIs at all.

In contrast, some participants did have a personal relationship with one of their SMIs who were close friends to the consumers. This in turn, highly affected whether a purchase would be made or not, as participants said that it was a matter of whom they should give their money too when purchasing a product recommended by an SMI. Participants also discussed these friends to be smaller SMIs, where they said that they were more eager to help these individuals in their career by using their discount codes, as they claimed that it is through the collaborations with companies and discount codes that these SMIs make money for a living. The *relationship* towards the SMI was therefore found as a sixth factor that might have affected both the amount of influence and the willingness to purchase the recommended product, as participants tended to many times trust them more in their actual recommendations. This occurred both when the participants were in need or not in need of the recommended products itself.

Another thing that was found was how participants excluded celebrities from the categorization of SMIs as they shared that they were not affected by them due to their impersonalized content and great amount of resources when posting content on their social media feeds. However, Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) claim that celebrities too are considered SMIs due to their high social status and public recognition. Yet, participants did show indications of being aware that other SMIs, such as celebrities, were also paid to produce certain content about products and brands. However, the fact that SMIs are paid to appear with and recommend products (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014), did not affect the participants perception of seeing other SMIs as more reliable than celebrities. This was explained by the fact that other SMIs had worked hard and

built their own brand during many years by themselves, while celebrities are known for something else where they later have become SMIs due to their presence on social media.

It was further found that only one participant agreed to make impulsive purchases because of the influence of SMIs. Workman and Studak (2005) address that products are often advertised in a way to stimulate the psychological needs of consumers, which means that they urge consumers to feel like they need to buy that particular product because the SMI has it. All other participants agreed on that they never make impulsive purchases due to the recommendations of an SMI. These participants claimed that they due to age, have become more resistible to what the SMI is recommending and that they often think through their purchases more by searching for more information before finalizing a purchase. Though this might be true, some participants who agreed on this matter did further into the discussion share experiences that clearly showed how SMIs had in some occasions driven these participants to make an impulsive purchase. Therefore, *age* could also be a contributing factor to whether the impact of the SMI proves itself powerful in the context of impulsive purchases.

Furthermore, an interesting fact that was found during the study, was the structure of the purchase decision process. Szmigin and Piacentini (2015) claim that a consumer can skip several stages of the purchase decision process, dependent on the effort that is put into each stage and in the purchasing of the product. It was found during the discussion that some of the participants tended to skip some of the stages, such as searching for information or evaluating their alternatives. This often relied on the effort and motivation that the participants' would put into their buying situation. Other participants chose to skip several stages of the process and move directly to the purchase decision, simply due to the influence of the SMI and their trust in them.

Lastly, it has been clear that the SMIs' ability to provide content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity and trust shows evidence of how the influence of SMIs play an important role in the purchase decision process of consumers. Although some mentioned that they would not be highly affected if the SMI shut down their presence on social media, SMIs do play a big role for consumers when they buy, especially in the young age such as of the participants. Therefore, it is clear that this study is highly in line with previous research that states how social media influencers play an important role for consumers and their purchase decisions (Lu et al., 2012; Li et al., 2014; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Jaakonmäki et al., 2017).

5.2.1 Review of the conceptual model

To conclude the findings from the analysis, the conceptual model shown in figure 2 that was used to conduct the study, has to be revised. As it was found from the analysis, the participants did perceive the influence of SMIs accordingly to the five factors: *content*, *expertise*, *attractiveness*, *social identity* and *trust*. In addition to this, a sixth and a seventh factor were found to influence the purchase decision process of the participants.

The sixth factor that was found was *relationship*. Some of the participants had close and personal relationships with their SMIs, while other participants had no form of relationship to the SMIs that they followed. However, the participants who had no contact with their SMIs, chose to still see these SMIs as some sort of close friends. This kind of established relationship seemed to be a result that occurred because of the interplay between the other factors: content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity. As the participants often enjoyed the content, expertise and attractiveness of SMIs as well as were able to socially identify themselves with the SMIs, made the participants feel that they could trust their SMIs and thereby established some sort of relationship where the consumers saw the SMIs as friends. The relationship factor will therefore be put into the category of trust, since trust together with the other four factors decided whether a relationship would be established between the SMI and the consumer, or not.

The seventh factor that was found during the analysis was *age*. While the relationship factor is a factor that develops between the consumer and the SMI as a result by the other factors, age is instead connected to the consumer and seemed to mostly have to do with the maturity of the consumer. As participants claimed to be more rational in their purchase decisions where they would not always rely on the information provided by the SMI during their purchase decision, did in fact affect the level of trust towards the SMI. Therefore, the age of a consumer could be a contributing factor to how much a consumer perceives the influence of an SMI to be convincing enough to follow their recommendations and make a purchase. As the age has to do with the person itself, this factor will fit in to the category of social identity. It could be argued that the age determines the social identity, which means that the older that a consumer gets, could indeed determine how much a consumer is willing to adapt to or identify itself with SMIs.

Moreover, as I have previously mentioned, previous research had not located where in the stages of the purchase decision process that the five factors: *content*, *expertise*, *attractiveness*,

social identity and *trust* were crucial to the consumer as he or she moved further along its purchase decision process. It was found during the study that I was able to locate all five previous factors, and the two new ones, to the stages that they belonged to in the process. Although, it was possible to locate the different factors and fit them into the different stages of the purchase decision process, it should be noted that one factor could still arise due to another factor and that the results could possibly differ depending on when, where and on what type of participants the study is conducted. To conclude this chapter, a new model for exploring how consumer perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process has been created, illustrated in figure 3. In this model, I have chosen to present the factors that were located in each stage of the process so that one could understand which factors that were deemed most influential and important in each particular stage.

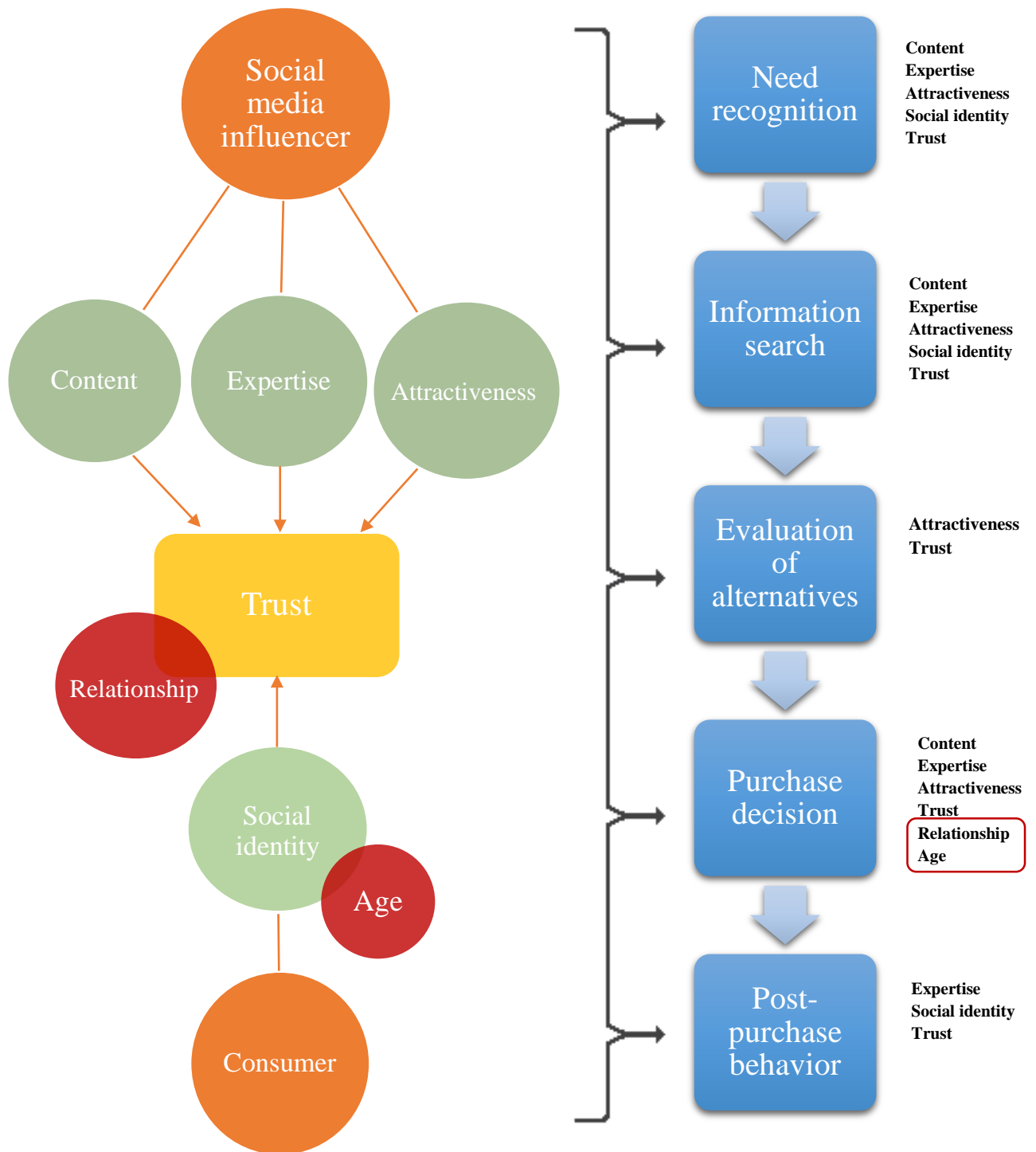


Figure 3: The new model for exploring how consumer perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the consumer purchase decision process.

6. Conclusions

In this last chapter, conclusions are summarized followed by a critical review of the study. Descriptions of how the results of the study of this thesis could be implicated both theoretically and practically are further presented, followed by suggestions for future research. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to answer the previously developed research question of this thesis.

6.1 Summary of the thesis

This dissertation aimed to explore how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) during the different stages of the purchase decision process. Several individual theories about the influence of social media influencers and the consumer purchase decision process, have been combined and applied throughout the study to explore the following research question: *How do consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process?*

The research question was motivated by the interest of learning about the impact that SMIs have on all stages of the purchase decision process of consumers, and not only on the purchase decision itself. Through a qualitative study with an abductive approach, consumers could be studied which led to finding two new factors combined together with the previous five factors found from previous research. The factors; *content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity, trust, relationship* and *age*, later showed how each factor portrayed itself from the influence of SMI. While previous research set the foundation for the conceptual model who supported the data collection in this thesis, the model had to finally be revised in order to better fit into the context of the influence of SMIs and the purchase decision process. Furthermore, the data was collected through two focus groups and analyzed thoroughly in the light of previous research so that a wider image and deeper understanding could be gained on how consumers perceive the influence of SMIs during their purchase decision process.

The main results of this study showed that the influence of SMIs do indeed have a significant impact on each and every stage of the purchase decision process of consumers, in one way or another. The amount of influence that affected each stage of the purchase decision process namely depended on the consumers' perceptions of the SMI and how the five factors: content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity and trust interacted with one another. The relationship that the consumer had with its SMI and the age of the consumer was also found as the two new

factors that could further contribute to the amount of influence that an SMI has on its followers. These two new factors, might further determine the future of the consumption habits of consumers, and whether they will continue to follow advices and purchase products based on the recommendations of SMIs.

6.2 Critical review

By reviewing the study from a critical point of view, it could be argued that the five factors: content, expertise, attractiveness, social identity and trust, were repeated many times throughout the study. It was noticed during the creation of the conceptual model that one factor could arise due to another factor which was clearly noticed during the analysis of the empirical findings. This means that the answers from participants could sometimes refer to two different factors at the same time, which means that the factors would interweave as a result. Therefore, it was difficult to avoid repetition of the factors throughout the study as participants could sometimes explain a phenomenon or an experience in similar ways using different terms (Ahrne & Svensson, 2016). This in turn could contribute to why some factors could refer to the same phenomenon or experience and why they were difficult to keep apart during the analysis.

However, it should be argued that the connections between participants' answers and the factors provided a deeper image of how the participants perceived the influence of SMIs and how this influence unfolded itself during the different stages of the purchase decision process. Using focus groups as a data collection method did contribute to obtaining a richer image of the participants' reality (Morgan, 1996), which for example was noticed when factors were combined due to the fact that the interpretation of the participants' answers could refer to more than one factor at once. This means, that even though repetition and combination of factors have occurred throughout the study, it allowed the exploration of a more in-depth view of how consumers perceived the influence of social media influencers. This in-depth view might not have been possible if the factors were not combined or repeated throughout the study.

In addition to this, the use of an old and complex model of the purchase decision process (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988; Comegys et al., 2006; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012), and its applicability in the new context of SMIs, should be taken into consideration when reviewing the study. The use of an old model in a new context did contribute to the realization of that the model itself is too complex and linear as previous authors have already stated (e.g Smzigin,

2015), especially in the context of SMIs. However, this realization would might not have been noticed if another more modern type of model would have been used in the study. Either way, one could indeed argue that another and more modern type of purchase decision process model could be more suitable when studying the influence of SMIs, since it mostly occurs in the online world as on social media. This in turn, creates the urge for a new model to be created and adapted so that it better fits into the image of the new context of SMIs and their influence.

6.3 Theoretical contribution

The aim of this study has been to explore how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) during the different stages of the purchase decision process. Previous research has only focused on studying the influence of social media influencers on the purchase decision stage, often in quantitative studies (Kamtarin, 2012; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Liu, 2014; Kim & Johnsson, 2015; Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). Previous research has also only studied one SMI on one type of social media platform at a time. Since it is known that the purchase decision process is not solely based on its own but rather follows from a series of actions in an on-going process, namely the purchase decision process (Comegys et al., 2006), this study can be considered to be of academic value as it has studied how the entire process is affected by several types of SMIs on several different social media platforms. With that said, the theoretical contribution to the academic field is therefore a new proposed model for exploring the influence of SMIs during the different stages of the purchase decision process of consumers. The inclusion of several types of SMI and several social media platforms, has also contributed to a more detailed description of how different SMIs and social media platforms can impact how well and differently a consumer moves further along its purchase decision process.

6.4 Practical implications

There are many practical implications and contributions found in this thesis. Firstly, the practical implications of this thesis in the field of SMIs is that this study could be of use to companies who seek to engage in influencer marketing. As the numbers of SMIs and social media platforms are growing, while traditional media is slowly disappearing (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Meraz, 2009), it is becoming substantially more important for companies to be where the consumers are, namely on social media. Therefore, this study contributes with a deeper understanding of how the purchase decision process of consumers can be affected by the influence of SMIs on social media platforms. Not only will this thesis contribute to a deeper

understanding of the power of influence that SMIs hold but also, as mentioned by Freberg et al. (2010), give companies who choose to engage in influencer marketing a better understanding of knowing how to better work with SMIs in the future.

Secondly, the *societal* contributions of this thesis emphasizes the aspect of consumers. Consumers, which in this case are the participants in the study, seemed to not be very affected by the fact that SMIs shut down their presence on social media. However, this study shows that SMIs do play an evident role on consumers' consumption of products. Using SMIs in marketing would therefore contribute to an environmental and cost-effective society, as companies do not have to waste any more money, paper and energy on printing flyers and creating advertisements on billboards. Furthermore, the use of SMIs could also contribute to a more environmental society outside the world of traditional marketing, namely in the world of news where news can be obtained through social media rather than from printed newspapers (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Lee & Ma, 2012).

Moreover, the *ethical* contributions of this thesis emphasizes the aspect of consumers once again, but in a more general sense. Since social media is constantly growing in both numbers of users and platforms, more SMIs are gaining ground as a result. Later, when consumers begin to follow the new masses of established SMIs, the consumers will be even more exposed to advertisements of products whenever companies starts to work with these SMIs. The ethical aspect of this study thereby concerns the online privacy of consumers which could be compromised due to the fact that the actions of consumers are being traced and consumers will be exposed to a great amount of advertising from companies on social media platforms that should be non-commercial (Caudill & Murphy, 2000; Juels, 2001) However, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) published guidelines in 2013 on how social media should be used for promotional matters and how FTC could control false advertisement towards consumers. False advertisement in this case refers to advertisements that are misleading in any way for a consumer. The Swedish authority called Konsumentverket has also published similar guidelines to prevent consumers from being misled by advertisements as well as to prevent any laws from being broken (Konsumentverket, 2017a; Konsumentverket, 2017b). For instance, the guidelines suggest that SMIs should be transparent with all information that they share about a promoted product or an advertisement (Myers, 2016). This could be done by forcing SMIs to mark their advertised content as with hashtags or links containing the word; *sponsored* (Federal Trade Commission, 2015; Konsumentverket, 2017b). This means that as long as SMIs and the

companies that they work with are honest about their advertised posts of products and does not make any false or misleading statements in the promotion of the brand, advertising through SMIs is acceptable (Myers, 2016; Federal Trade Commission, 2015). With that said, these guidelines could help to ensure that consumers are not misled by the advertisements that are shared through SMIs, which in turn strengthens the ethical contribution of this dissertation. Moreover, that companies want to understand their consumers by studying them through the purchase decision process is far from new (Comegys et al., 2006). Therefore, it should be argued that companies will to try and understand the purchase behaviors of consumers have many times contributed to benefit the consumer in the end, often in terms of improved products.

Lastly, another *ethical* aspect of this dissertation is that many SMIs have younger audiences that are minors and therefore cannot always tell when an advertisement is misleading or not. As Workman and Studak (2005) addressed, products are often advertised in a way to stimulate the psychological needs of consumers, which means that they urge consumers to feel like they need to buy that particular product that an SMI recommends. Since it was found during the study that SMIs often manipulated their posts and images, younger consumers could indeed feel tricked into buying something that might not be suitable for them in that age, even if the SMI provides the information that the advertisement is sponsored. Therefore, in order to maintain a good image of a brand and the trust of consumers, companies should try to identify and distinguish the type of followers that SMIs have, from the type of target groups that companies want to reach.

6.5 Future research

The study in this dissertation have been conducted with two focus groups including consumers. Future research could examine whether there is a difference in perceptions of influence of social media influencers in specific groups, by focusing on factors such as gender. While this study only had one male participant, it would be interesting to conduct focus groups with a greater variance in people where one focus group could include only men while another focus group could include only women, and a third group involves half of the participants of each gender. Since participants claimed that age was a contributing factor for having an easier time to resist the advertisements and recommendations of SMIs, differences in perceptions could be further examined by conducting focus groups with participants in different ages. This means that one group could consist of participants in the ages of 15-20 years, another group with participants

in the ages of 30-40 and a third group of people in ages over 40 years old. Moreover, future research could also conduct case studies on certain companies that engages in influencer marketing and further examine how much of the advertising that can be integrated in the social media feeds of SMIs, before consumers respond negatively. Furthermore, the perspective of SMIs could be studied and how they perceive their influence on the purchase decision process of consumers. Lastly, studying the influence of SMIs on social media platforms that are less popular than the chosen ones in this study could also be of interest to see whether the choice of platform has a clear impact on the purchase decision process of consumers or not.

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Appendix 1 – Focus Group interview guide

Hi everyone! We would like to begin to thank you all for participating in our focus group. We are excited to hear about your opinions about social media influencers and their impact on you as consumers. You will be in a group of 5 to 6 participants and this session will last approximately 75 minutes. You and your responses will be kept anonymously throughout my study, even though your responses are recorded. This is done so that the reliability of the answers can be kept and so that any important information is not lost. I am going to ask you a few questions in order to start the discussion on the topic. I appreciate honesty and a positive attitude where you allow all room for others to comment. There may be some disagreement on certain subjects, which I value since everyone has their own opinion and sees things differently. I am excited to hear what you have to say, so let us begin!

To start the focus group, some general questions were asked in order to introduce the participants to the topic as well as make them comfortable with it so that the discussion could continue smoothly. The general questions were:

- ♣ *What social media influencers do you follow and how long have you followed them?*
- ♣ *In what main area would you categorize their content?*

After these questions were asked, additional questions were added to create a deeper discussion and receive more profoundly answers on how participants had experienced the influence of social media influencers on their purchase decision process. Some follow-up questions were added whenever further explanation of something in particular was needed. The main questions were the following:

- ♣ *Why do you follow these social media influencers, more specifically what function or meaning do they have for you?*
- ♣ *How do you think that celebrities differ from other social media influencers?*
- ♣ *How do you think that one is affected by social media influencers? How would you say that you have been affected by the social media influencers that you follow?*
- ♣ *How do you feel about the information about products that comes from social media influencers? Is the information always enough for you to proceed and make a purchase?*

- ♣ *What makes social media influencers trustworthy and honest in its recommendations?*

The participants were also given a few scenarios in order to further develop a discussion of how the participants had been influenced by social media influencers, now with a stronger focus on the influence during the different stages of the purchase decision process. The questions were the following:

- ♣ *Think of a scenario in which you had been wanting to purchase a certain product for a long time. Suddenly, the social media influencer that you follow recommends a similar product from another brand that fills basically the same function as the product you had intended to purchase from the beginning. How would you respond to this?*
- ♣ *In what situation would you not buy anything that a social media influencers recommends?*
- ♣ *Suppose that all social media influencers one day decide to shut down their entire presence on social media. How do you think that this would impact you, especially as a consumer?*
- ♣ *Do you engage in the comment section of the social media influencers after having made a purchase of a product recommended by them? Motivate your answer.*

Appendix 2 – Categorization of empirical findings of focus groups

The section below presents a small example of how the different topics brought up in the focus groups have been combined and categorized under the relevant factor that the topic belongs to, and further categorized the relevant stage of purchase decision process.

Need recognition

Content

- ... hon verkar vara inspirerande även om hon specifikt kanske inte har gjort någonting jättespeciellt.
- Underhållande. Liksom sitter man hemma kanske sjuk eller inte har plugg eller bara har ingenting så kan man slå på Youtube. Jag är väldigt mycket på Youtube och kollar på deras bloggar och man blir inspirerad på att göra liknande saker och uppnå dessa mål som faktiskt dessa människor uppnått.
- De är såhär lite rutiner. Ja, jag ligger i sängen och ska sova du brukar jag gå igenom allas flöden och så blir jag så besviken när de inte uppdaterat.
- Det är nästan som dåtidens läsa i tidningen känner jag, när man såhär lite betar av alla sina influencers lite på alla sociala kanaler, när man har tråkigt.

Expertise

- ... följer ju den där Malin då, och så visade hon upp något proteinpulver. Och jag har inte druckit det, vet inte så mycket om det. Men i och med att hon sa "mm det här är ju riktigt bra"... Då beställer man ju hem det.
- I och med att jag jobbar på ett gym... jag orkar inte sitta igenom alla proteinpulver de har på gymgrossisten och bara läsa "den här passar". Nja du vet, då hade jag kanske tagit vilket hon fitness tjejen, Bring har. Alltså, då hade jag nog hellre gjort det än och läsa alla miljoner som gymgrossisten har.

Social identity

- Man kan relatera till henne för att hon är i samma åldersgrupp.
- ... sådana som lever nästan ett likadant liv som man själv gör

Appendix 3 – Presentation of participants, focus group 1

Gender, age, personal interests and what social media influencers (SMIs) each participant follows are presented in each column.

Participant 1

Female, 25 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, beauty and fitness.

SMIs: Kenza Zouiten, Amanda Claesson and Natasha Oakley.

Participant 2

Male, 22 years old.

Personal interests: photography, fashion and interior.

SMIs: Alex Strohl, Edisley Manf and Claes Juhlin.

Participant 3

Female, 20 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, beauty, make-up and fitness.

SMIs: Kenza Zouiten, Tammy Hembrow, Natasha Oakley and Sofia Ståhl (PT-Fia)

Participant 4

Female, 27 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, beauty and fitness

SMIs: Kenza Zouiten, Isabella Löwengrip (Blondinbella) and Sofia Ståhl (PT-Fia)

Participant 5

Female, 22 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, travelling, beauty, fitness

SMIs: Kenza Zouiten, Isabella Löwengrip (Blondinbella) and Malin Björk

Appendix 4 – Presentation of participants, focus group 2

Gender, age, personal interests and what social media influencers each participant follows are presented in each column.

Participant 1

Female, 23 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, beauty, photography and interior

SMIs: Anna Kubel, Isabella Löwengrip (Blondinbella) and Petra Tungården

Participant 2

Female, 25 years old.

Personal interests: Beauty and fashion

SMIs: Hana Pee, Kakan Hermansson and Brita Zackari

Participant 3

Female, 20 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, beauty and fitness.

SMIs: Zazan Hendricks, Isabella Löwengrip (Blondinbella) and Tammy Hembrow

Participant 4

Female, 22 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, beauty and fitness

SMIs: Isabella Löwengrip (Blondinbella), Bella Fiori and Jenna Lovisa Nevrin

Participant 5

Female, 24 years old.

Personal interests: fashion and beauty

SMIs: Kenza Zouiten, Isabella Löwengrip (Blondinbella) and Angelica Blick

Participant 6

Female, 24 years old.

Personal interests: fashion, beauty, makeup and fitness

SMIs: Kenza Zouiten, Angelica Blick and Denise Moberg