

The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Brand Image and Brand's Trustworthiness in the Fashion Industry

Submitted to Marion Garaus

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Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this Bachelor's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

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Abstract

Social media has completely changed the way one interacts and communicates with one another and has integrated itself into the daily life. As social media continues to grow and becomes a crucial aspect of business marketing activities, it is important for businesses and individuals to understand how social media may affect a brand's image and brand's trustworthiness. Social media has an impact on both individuals and organizations since it provides a platform for communication between users and allows companies to connect with customers. In addition, social media influencer marketing has become a powerful tool in marketing to promote fashion brands. Social media influencers are well-known and powerful people who manage their social media networks and have a sizable fan base. This thesis aims to answer the question of how influencer marketing impact brand image and brand trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

A survey was conducted to test how social media users perceive influencer marketing and how influencer marketing affects a brand's image and brand's trustworthiness. The four constructs of interest, namely brand image, influencer authenticity, brand trustworthiness, and quality of content, were analyzed using regression analyses, which revealed that there is a positive correlation between the variables. The authenticity of social media influencers and the content that influencers promote have a positive effect on brand image and brand trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

Keywords: social media, social media influencers, brand image, brand trust, fashion, influencers' authenticity, social media marketing.

Table of Contents

AFFIDAVIT.....	2
ABSTRACT	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
LIST OF TABLES.....	5
LIST OF FIGURES.....	5
1 INTRODUCTION	6
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 A DEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEDIA	8
2.1.1 <i>Instagram</i>	10
2.1.2 <i>Facebook</i>	11
2.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND BRAND IMAGE	12
2.3 TRADITIONAL MARKETING	13
2.4 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY	14
2.5 SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT: CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT	16
2.5.1 <i>User-generated Content</i>	18
2.5.2 <i>Electronic Word-of-Mouth</i>	19
2.6 SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS	20
2.7 BRAND TRUST AND BRAND AUTHENTICITY	23
2.8 THE AUTHENTICITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS.....	24
2.9 THE QUALITY OF CONTENT.....	26
3 METHODOLOGY.....	27
3.1 SURVEY DEVELOPMENT AND MEASUREMENTS	29
3.2 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS.....	31
3.2.1 <i>Sample Characteristics</i>	31
3.2.2 <i>Reliability Analysis</i>	34
3.2.3 <i>Hypotheses Testing</i>	35
4 CONCLUSION	42
4.1 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS.....	43
4.2 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH	43
5 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	44

6	APPENDICES	56
6.1	APPENDICES 1: ONLINE SURVEY	56

List of Tables

Table 1: Measurement of constructs	30
Table 2: Sample Characteristics.....	34
Table 3: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test - Influencer authenticity	35
Table 4: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test – Brand Image	35
Table 5: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test – Brand’s Trustworthiness.....	35
Table 6: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test – Quality of Content	35
Table 7: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 1	36
Table 8: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 2	38
Table 9: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 3	39
Table 10: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 4	41

List of Figures

Figure 1: Social media usage per day	31
Figure 2: Most popular social media platforms among participants.....	32
Figure 3: Influencer type	33

1 Introduction

In the past years, various digital technologies have changed the way how consumers interact with brands, and one of these new technologies is social media. Social media is a virtual network platform, that became a crucial component in entertainment and in business purposes (Appel et., 2019). There are various social media platforms that became popular among people in recent years, such as Instagram, Facebook, and many others. Social media allows users to exchange their ideas, opinions, feelings, and information through engaging with other users (Dollarhide, 2021). Social media is used for different purposes, such as seeking and sharing information, entertainment purposes, or establishing a favorable image, which works for individuals and businesses (Gao & Feng, 2016).

Recently, businesses started using social media as a marketing tool to promote their products, services, and most importantly their brand image. This way of marketing gives businesses the opportunity to establish communication with potential consumers, receive direct feedback, and collect data, through viewing, liking, commenting, and reposting (Eslami et al., 2021). According to a study made in 2019 by Buffer (2019), 73% of marketers, that participated in the study, claim that social media is the most effective marketing tool for companies to promote their products. Moreover, social media is as well a relatively cheap and easily accessible marketing tool, therefore businesses chose this type of promotion more and more frequently (Gao & Feng, 2016).

Another important aspect of social media is social media influencers. Social media influencers are famous and influential individuals that run their own social media pages with a large number of followers (users). Social media influencer marketing became a fast-growing trend, where businesses chose to collaborate with social media influencers to promote their brand (Cheung et al., 2022). Social media influencer marketing is very effective since influencers share their beliefs and opinions, which builds trust and relationships with their followers. Users of social media look up to influencers, which later can help to promote a positive brand image (Nafees et al., 2021). In addition, social media influencer content was found to be 6.9 times more effective than professional shot content (Ki and Kim, 2019) and an

industry report (Linqia, 2019) showed that 86% of brand marketers preferred influencer marketing in their campaigns in 2017. Influencer marketing is preferred more since it is more effective as compared to traditional marketing. Consumers tend to trust social media influencers and/or celebrities rather than a hired salesperson, that does advertisements through TV or magazines (Masuda et al., 2022).

In order to have a good understanding and close the existing knowledge gap on the issue of social media and its effects of it on brand image in the mass-market and high-fashion industry, this thesis seeks to see if there is a positive or negative impact of social media influencer marketing on brand image and trustworthiness in the fashion industry. Social media is an important part of life and business in today's world (Dollahide, 2021). People and businesses have begun to use social media as a means of communication. There are different ways for different brands (mass market or high fashion) to establish or improve their brand image in the fashion industry, therefore if this issue is not investigated, there will be a lack of understanding, which may lead to the choice of ineffective, costly, or incorrect marketing methods in the future (Gao & Feng, 2016).

The main purpose of this thesis is to look deeper into the topic of social media marketing, especially if there is an impact of social media on brand image in the fashion industry. The questions that this thesis aims to answer are as follows:

- *To what extent does influencer marketing have an impact on brand trustworthiness and brand image in the fashion industry?*
- *What is the role of influencer marketing in shaping brand image and trustworthiness in the fashion industry?*
- *What are customer perceptions of influencer marketing in the fashion industry, and how do these perceptions affect how brand image and trustworthiness are perceived?*

The research paper is divided into four main sections. The literature review discusses topics, such as types of social media platforms, types of social media marketing, influencer marketing, and social media influencers. The understanding of these topics is relevant to the study since it can help understand the research topic even better and help to analyze data. Next comes the methodology section with the type of

research method, that is used for data collection. Following comes the results section where collected data is presented and analyzed by the researcher. At the end, comes the conclusion section that covers all the crucial points in this thesis and the evaluation of the relevance of the research, that was done.

2 Literature review

2.1 A Definition of Social Media

To provide a common understanding of the relevant terms of this thesis, it is important to define what social media is and explain how social media affects individuals and businesses. Social media is a virtual network platform that allows users to share their ideas, thoughts, and information and communicate with each other through websites and/or apps (Appel et., 2019). Social media is internet-based and can be accessed through electronic devices, such as computers, tablets, or smartphones (Dollarhide, 2021). Social media is culturally significant because social media became one of the most dominant sources for the circulation of information in today's world (Appel et al., 2019). Social media is used in different ways, which include (1) information seeking: sharing information through social media platforms, which allows users to access and use information freely; (2) for entertainment purposes: looking and sharing interesting content, such as experiences; (3) social interactions: communication among users, such as sharing content, sharing feelings, supporting; and lastly (4) impression management: individuals that use social media deliberately to share personal information in social media in order to establish positive image/impression of themselves (Gao & Feng, 2016). However, it is very important to understand that social media network is constantly changing. With more and more innovation taking place, the more likely it is that social media will be different with each year. In general, it is seen that with time, different social media platforms have greater liking than others. For instance, at one-point MySpace was the most popular platform, which switched later to Facebook, and later to Instagram. Social media changes affect the technological side, for instance, updating or inventing new features. Likewise, user behavior is changing, for example, people start to be interested in more things and new information on social media (Appel et al., 2019).

Furthermore, statistics show that social media became a part of everyday life. In January 2022, there were 4.95 billion active internet users around the world and 4.62 billion of them are active social media users. There are different social media platforms, a couple of the most popular social networks are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Statista, 2022). Individuals that use social media show strong “socialness” on the internet that influences their social life through online communication with other people and brands. Consumers tend to expect businesses to hear, communicate and respond to their feedback on social media platforms (Park, 2017). With consumer-brand relationships, businesses are able to understand consumer needs and wants, which allows them to build stronger connections with the consumer, leading to the attachment to the brand (Hudson et al., 2016). Different social media platforms are designed for different types of engagement, long-term or short-term. In order to have an effective consumer-brand relationship, brands need to set clear objectives and make a decision on the network that is suited best for communication with consumers (Killian & McManus, 2015). Additionally, the consumer-brand relationship gives businesses an opportunity for consumers to distinguish them from their competitors. With the use of this strategy, brands are able to emphasize their uniqueness, building a strong identity in a competitive market (Coelho et al., 2018). Consumers play a huge role in building the brand’s identity; by sharing information, feedback, opinions and just speaking about the brand (Gamboa & Gonçalves, 2014). Overall, the whole concept of the consumer-brand relationship is being actively researched and used by businesses, hence consumers do not buy products just because they like them (Hudson et al., 2016). Consumers tend to buy something due to an established relationship with the brand, and their emotional connection (Robertson et al., 2022).

Moreover, social media affects individuals and as well businesses by giving an opportunity for people to communicate with each other and businesses to reach out to consumers (Dollarhide, 2021). Since social media has been invented, it took different turns and changed throughout the years. Nowadays, it is important to think of social media as a marketing tool that can help to evaluate consumer behavior and be used as a communication channel. Social media is a platform for businesses to show their products and to increase brand visibility, which can increase familiarity among customers (Appel et al., 2019). According to studies made by Buffer (2019) on

the topic of engagement on social media, the majority of marketers (73%) believed that the most effective marketing is through social media platforms, which allows promoting of products, target customers, and received feedback (Eslami et al., 2021). The following sections provide more detailed elaborations on two prominent social media platforms, namely Instagram and Facebook.

2.1.1 Instagram

Instagram has become the most popular online platform among young users and fashion brands (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Instagram was first launched in 2010 through App Store, where in one week Instagram received 100,000, and two months after the launch, over one million users (Latiff & Safiee, 2015). Today, the number of shared photographs on Instagram reaches to 95 million daily, with over 1.28 billion users on the platform (Menon, 2022). Instagram allows users to analyze information visually, without the need of analyzing long texts (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Nowadays, Instagram became a tool for business, which offers a free business account for brands to promote their products and engage with users. The content on Instagram spreads very fast and can reach a lot of people, therefore brands that work in the fashion industry use Instagram very frequently (Cheung et al., 2022). Business accounts have more features than normal individual accounts. Companies with business accounts can access impression metrics and engagement levels (Augustinus & Agnes, 2020). Instagram gives users an opportunity to share information, through mobile apps, in the form of photograph or series of photographs, short or long videos. Additionally, people can add hashtags, captions, locations, filters, and music and tag other users in their posts (Augustinus & Agnes, 2020). Furthermore, Instagram offers private messaging between users. It could be a chat between two people, or a group of people. Another feature of Instagram is stories. Stories can also be private among “close friends” and public to all the people, that follow the user. Stories can come in a photo and video that are visible for 24 hours only, with less formality than a post on a user’s page (Carpenter et al., 2020). Moreover, Instagram started to provide shopping services, as a separate section on the app, as of 2018. This service allowed retailers and brands to sell directly to Instagram users without the need for their original brand website (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Instagram is one of the most popular social media networks today, which allows users to create content, share it

with others, and get feedback, however, there are other networks that are similar to Instagram, which businesses can also work with (Appel et., 2019).

2.1.2 Facebook

Another well-known social media platform is Facebook. Facebook was created in 2004 and has over 2.95 billion registered users today. Facebook is a platform, where people can create their accounts, and social media pages free of charge (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Facebook is available in 37 different languages, which allows more people to use Facebook as means of communication (Augustinus & Agnes, 2020). People started to use Facebook to satisfy their need of being heard, by sharing their thoughts and opinions on the platform (Laor, 2022). Features that Facebook provide to the users are for instance visible profiles, friends list, status, events, photos/videos, messages, chat with multiple people at the same time, sharing and liking of posts, and lastly, the wall, where people can share their thoughts, pictures, and videos, and news feed (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Facebook can be said to be a platform for the online representation of offline relationships between people (Haenlein et al., 2020). Facebook is an established social media platform, that has worked for many years. Facebook has the highest number of monthly sessions, meaning that one user visits Facebook about five times a day. Additionally, Facebook has the highest monthly usage of approximately 13 hours and the highest number of posts from users (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Moreover, businesses tend to use Facebook accounts to notify customers about different promotions, products, and messages of the brand. With the use of Facebook, businesses are able to collect and analyze feedback right away, without the need for any special tools (Chawla & Chodak, 2021). Facebook offers public features such as a marketplace, events, and presence technology (Augustinus & Agnes, 2020). A strong presence on social media platforms, such as Facebook, gives brands an opportunity to encourage users, their potential consumers, to share and emphasize the brand image they have or the brand image they try to establish (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015). However, before Instagram was invented, Facebook was a great social media platform to use for digital marketing. Since 2010, Instagram became the main platform for digital marketing. Instagram was created to capture important moments and is not used to check the company's office opening hours (Augustinus & Agnes, 2020).

Facebook now has the lowest satisfaction score, the highest number of users that want to leave Facebook, and the highest drop in engagement between the years 2016 and 2019 (Haenlein et al., 2020).

2.2 The Relationship between Social Media and Brand Image

Brand image, in simple words, can be described as how consumers perceive the brand, what associations individuals have with the brand, and how popular the brand is (Shahid et al., 2017). Consumers shape their cognitive image of the brand by looking at the beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions the brand projects (Jung et al., 2020). Brand image has a direct impact on a brand's success, sales, market share, and overall performance of the brand in a specific industry. A positive brand image attracts new customers, which may lead to the development of the brand and an increase in profits, hence an increase in sales (The Investopedia team, 2021). A positive brand image helps brands to position themselves on the market, increase brand performance and make the brand stand out from their competition (Jung et al., 2020). Brands with a brand page on social media allow them to have updated information about consumers and exposure to the brand. A brand social media page gives an opportunity for the brand to promote a positive brand image by posting content, collaborating with famous influencers, and communicating with consumers through comments, likes, and reposts (Gao & Feng, 2016). Consumers use social media to learn about specific brands and brands' services or brands' products. Using social media consumers can form their perception of the brand image, whether it is positive or negative, depending on how dedicated the brand is to social media marketing (Park, 2017).

Nowadays, researchers investigate factors that influence the success of branding on social media. The studies include many different factors, specifically position, size, vividness, variety of social media platforms that are used, and interactivity (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021) with the overall objective to find ways for more efficient marketing of brand image on social media (Gao & Feng, 2016). Brand image is a mix of different aspects, such as brand knowledge, brand awareness, and brand loyalty. A crucial aspect of the promotion of brand image on social media is brand recognition. Brands with a high number of customers have better brand recognition, which, therefore, leads to higher earnings (Shahid et al., 2017). Brand recognition goes hand in hand

with social media engagement. Brands are able to establish a relationship with their consumers and potential consumers, in order for the brand to stand out and be recognized in comparison to their competition (Coelho et al., 2018).

2.3 Traditional Marketing

It is essential to consider how and where digital marketing originated in order to have a better understanding of the topic. Marketing is all possible activities that businesses can do in order to get their product or service into the hands of the consumer. To have effective marketing strategy businesses must know everything about their consumers and competition. There are different types of marketing tools that exist today. It is crucial to differentiate traditional marketing tools and social media as marketing tool (Todor, 2016). Traditional marketing is a form of marketing that is done offline to reach out to consumers. Traditional marketing tools are business cards, print advertisements (businesses may choose to send out catalogs to people's houses), newspapers/magazines, billboards (if the billboard is placed in the right location, for instance in a location where there is a lot of traffic all the time, then many people might see the advertisement and respond to it), brochures, etc. (Lawrence et al., 2018).

There are advantages and disadvantages to traditional marketing tools. The advantages are high reach levels and direct feedback from the consumer, but only in some tools, such as cold calling. Another advantage is the possibility to reach out to a specific audience. However, the disadvantages are, for instance, the cost of traditional marketing tools can be costly, renting or buying space for billboards/printed advertisements or hiring employees for cold calling, in an attempt to sell the product. Another disadvantage is only a few traditional marketing tools accommodate a direct response, therefore there is no consumer-brand relationship (Taherdoost & Jalaliyoon, 2014). Furthermore, businesses started to use social media more and more frequently as a marketing tool to reach out to customers and have two-way communication, rather than just receiving feedback, where consumers can reach out to the brand and the brand can respond in different ways, for example by improving what the consumer is concerned about or answering to the consumer directly (Appel et al., 2019). With a lot of new big data analysis, metrics, and forecasting, businesses cannot analyze everything by themselves. This is where digital marketing comes in,

with all the important features and analytics being included in social media platforms by the creators (Todor, 2016).

2.4 Social Media Marketing in the Fashion Industry

Social media marketing can be defined as “*methods for advertising products, services, or brands using the internet, by attracting the interest of groups of people who discuss them, make suggestions about them, etc. online*” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Digital marketing was first developed in the 1990s and 2000s, and since then fashion brands have started to make use of digital marketing more and more frequently (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Social media combines two response marketing, direct and indirect (Taherdoost & Jalaliyoon, 2014). Direct marketing in social media comes from the brands themselves, by engaging with their customers, for instance with the use of user-generated content of liking and commenting on brand-generated content. Indirect marketing, on the other hand, encourages customers to approach the brand. Indirect marketing is all about building brand awareness and spreading it on social media, for instance with the use of social media influencer marketing (Todor, 2016). Social media marketing is constantly changing, specifically how content is created, shared, consumed, and how the brand image is spread (Gordey et al., 2016). Constant work done on social media marketing activities can improve consumer trust, intimacy, relationship equity, brand equity, value equity, brand preference, brand awareness, and loyalty from consumers and allow brands to put higher prices for their products (Khan, 2022).

Social media is potentially one of the most effective and useful channels for targeting consumers, spreading brand awareness, and promoting products and services (Öztamur & Karakadilar, 2014). Although traditional marketing tools, such as TV advertisements, billboards, and radio are effective channels, that were verified over many years, social media makes it possible to perform the same advertisements but with less effort, cost, and greater exposure to a larger audience (Kim & Ko, 2012). Moreover, social media is a relatively costless tool in terms of any other communication channels in marketing, which gives all businesses, from small start-ups to large established enterprises, equal opportunity to establish their presents and reputation on the internet (Gamboa & Gonçalves, 2014). However, creating a business page is not enough for effective marketing. Brands need to be actively working on

their social media pages (Chawla & Chodak, 2021). Social media marketing is a crucial aspect of a brand's operating activities (Öztamur & Karakadilar, 2014). The era of digital marketing forces businesses to find new ways of interacting, reaching, and communicating with customers (Gordey et al., 2016). Basic social media marketing requires brands to operate brand fan pages, make promotions, keep public relations, and most importantly do market research (Öztamur & Karakadilar, 2014). This allows businesses to analyze data and find the right approach to have consistent social media engagement in establishing a positive brand image (Taherdoost & Jalaliyoon, 2014).

Over the years, social media has changed the way fashion is presented and consumed (Hsiao et al., 2020). Social media is the most popular marketing tool that creates links between fashion brands and their consumers (Ahmad et al., 2015). With two-way direct communication, fashion brands are able to work together with consumers to create new products, improve existing products and develop business models (Kim & Ko, 2012). Another reason why social media marketing became a popular marketing tool for fashion brands is because social media marketing has a significant positive impact on the consumer-brand relationship, where brands are able to get to know their consumer needs better and consumers are able to build attachment and loyalty to the brand (Hudson et al., 2016). With the use of social media marketing, brands are able to enforce some familiar emotions and feelings associated with the brand, making their brand more memorable in the eyes of consumers. In addition, social media marketing activities allow brands to decrease any misunderstanding that occurs in the news, social media, or in comments. Brands can improve their brand image by addressing any issues on their social media pages and showing some action following the issues or any accusations (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Furthermore, social media, particularly Instagram is a perfect tool for brands that are related to the fashion industry (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Social media, like Instagram, attract younger users. In the United States, 60% of Instagram users are younger than 34 years old, therefore social media marketing is the most reasonable form of marketing communication for fashion brands (Haenlein et al., 2020). Instagram is a very visual social media platform, which is great for the fashion industry. Consumers tend to first look at the photograph of the product they want to purchase and if they like the visual presentation, they will go into more detail about the product

(Augustinus & Agnes, 2020). Another reason why brands use social media is social media influencer marketing. Influential people who have amassed a sizable following on social media platforms are known as social media influencers. They have the power to affect how the public perceives goods, services, and anything else they may think is important. Influencers have a significant impact on consumers' purchasing decisions (Freberg et al., 2011). The fashion market is very competitive; therefore, it is crucial for brands to make brand-generated content memorable and interesting at the first glance (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Brands have different means of creating creative products that allow them to have memorable content on social media and show brand awareness and improve brand image, one of them is co-branding. Firstly, fashion brands are divided into two distinguished groups – luxury and fast fashion (Mrad et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to identify differences between luxury fashion brands and fast-fashion brands. Luxury is correlated with pleasantness, richness, and leisure (Kong et al., 2021). Luxury or premium brands are those brands that ensure the highest level of quality and high prices for unique products (Mrad et al., 2020). The luxury fashion market sector has grown substantially in the past years, specifically around 13-15 percent in 2021 (Xia et al., 2022). Contrary to luxury brands, there are fast-fashion brands. Fast fashion is associated with fast response, matching of supply and uncertain demand, and highly fashionable designs. The fast-fashion brand is relatively cheap, trendy clothing that usually, but not always replicates luxury fashion brands' design and monitors closely their consumers for quick response to changes in demand (Mrad et al., 2020).

2.5 Social Media Engagement: consumer engagement

Social media engagement or in other words, consumer engagement is an essential feature of measuring how successful the promotion of brand image on social media is (Trunflo & Rossi, 2021). Consumer engagement can be defined as the level of connection between individuals and businesses (Eslami et al., 2021). Consumers who engage demonstrate better brand loyalty and satisfaction and are more likely to help brands improve and develop new production, services, and marketing (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). For these reasons, marketers need to understand and know their consumers and consumers' willingness to engage with the brand. With an

understanding of consumer engagement, brands can find the right channels for social media marketing activities (Khan, 2022). Social media allowed businesses to communicate with consumers directly, which gave them the opportunity to collect more information, and feedback, and develop consumer engagement further (Eslami et al. 2021). With the use of social media as a marketing tool, brands can easily find new clients and have greater exposure (Lawrence et al., 2018). Moreover, businesses have the possibility to have different consumer engagement strategies in order to establish efficient engagement. There are three types of strategies: persistent, customized, and triggered. Going into more detail, persistent customer engagement is plans, that businesses have for a long-term discussion. An example of persistent engagement is businesses can share a video on a YouTube channel or a photograph on Instagram which gives consumers an opportunity to communicate with businesses through likes, comments, or impressions. Customized customer engagement is communication with customers that is shaped by prior knowledge of the individual or individuals, such as their preferences, interests, and views. For instance, if a person is checking into a hotel, the hotel staff could ask for their personal information like email or ask to give a person's Facebook page. With the use of this information, hotels could see if you ever checked in before, what your interests are, and what you expect from the hotel (Cabiddu et al., 2014). Finally, triggered customer engagement is a strategy, that is used by businesses for plans for initiated events by the customer to dig deeper into "new-value creation opportunities" (Eslami et al., 2021). An example of this engagement could be monitoring social media posts that are related to the business, where the brand was tagged or mentioned. This engagement strategy allows businesses to react to feedback in a fast and organized manner (Cabiddu et al., 2014).

Social media engagement can be seen through different actions from customers, such as customers' viewing, liking, commenting, reposting, and sharing the content of a specific brand. These parameters can be used to determine the level of consumer engagement with a brand's social media (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). There are two types of sharing information and interacting with other individuals on social media: textual, which is posts and written messages; and non-textual, which is images, videos, and voice (Liu et al., 2021). Through analyzing this brand-related content among customers, brands can establish their strategies for customer engagement (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). Businesses depend a lot on the users and algorithms of specific social

media, that are being actively used (Chawla & Chodak, 2021). Social media engagement among consumers is a concept with multiple aspects, such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Liu et al., 2021). Social media engagement can be measured using social media analytics, such as NLP – natural language processing techniques or FE – fixed-effects model (Liu et al., 2021), which was created due to the increase in the use of social media in the past years. This tool allows businesses to quickly collect and effectively analyze data (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021).

2.5.1 User-generated Content

Furthermore, consumer engagement can be recognized in user-generated content, which is done in social media. Many mass-market fashion brands, such as H&M, and luxury fashion brands, such as Balmain use user-generated content as a marketing tool. Brands encourage their customers to share their experiences with their company through posts of photos and videos (Kim and Johnson, 2016). User-generated content is now a highly recognized marketing tool, which is highly discussed by business media, such as in Forbes Magazine (Mayrhofer et al., 2018). Reposts of user-generated content done by the brand itself can be seen as a more reliable source of advertisement since it comes directly from consumers' own personal experience and their social media pages. With the use of user-generated content, brands can enhance their brand image, because user-generated content can be spread very easily and quickly with other people that share similar passions (Kim and Johnson, 2016).

Brands increasingly rely on user-generated content, since it is a much cheaper and more successful marketing tool than any other traditional media (Roma & Aloini, 2019). Furthermore, user-generated content is a valuable tool that is used by businesses to create a consumer-brand relationship (Roma & Aloini, 2019). Users create user-generated content not only to show their experience with the product provided by the brand but to show how they associate with the brand image, that the company projects (Mayrhofer et al., 2018). Consumer engagement goes hand in hand with user-generated content since it is a channel that allows consumers to communicate with the brand and other clients of the brand (Eslami et al., 2021). Furthermore, along with increased interest in user-generated content, interest in electronic word-of-mouth also has been amplified (Yoo et al., 2013).

2.5.2 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Electronic word of mouth can be defined as *“any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”* (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Electronic word of mouth has developed and today is a lot more effective in reaching larger customer segments rather than traditional word of mouth, which is diminished by time, space, and connections. This type of word-of-mouth is available always available and can be viewed at any time by any other person (Yoo et al., 2013). Electronic word of mouth allows customers to go beyond the brand image, messages, or advertisements that the brand is trying to provide, which influences customers’ perception of the brand (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018). Brands try to encourage their customers to share more positive electronic word-of-mouth. This marketing strategy is effective because it creates trust between current and potential customers (Yoo et al., 2013). With electronic word of mouth, customers are able to get unbiased information about the brand. Customers tend to use and search for different sources to form their opinion, the image of the brand and electronic word-of-mouth is one of the biggest sources (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018). According to the statistics, 70% of consumers visit social media page that business owns to seek information, 60% of these consumers said that they were more likely to communicate information to other consumers through social media and 45% of them encouraged the use of word-of-mouth (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Additionally, electronic word-of-mouth can be a very helpful tool for potential customers to build an idea of the brand image a business is trying to promote. However, on the other hand, it can be a disadvantage to the brand (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018). The problem with negative publicity is it is spread way faster than positive publicity (Kim et al., 2016). Negative electronic word of mouth can lead to the loss of potential customers as well as current customers (Yoo et al., 2013). Brands are not able to control electronic word of mouth. They can take electronic word of mouth as feedback and react by changing their marketing strategies and improving products/services. However, it still can damage the brand’s image (Dalman et al., 2020). However, if the company responds appropriately during the unfavorable electronic word-of-mouth crisis, the situation may even work to its advantage.

Appropriate responses can lead to an increase in satisfaction and trust from customers, which will lead to an improved online reputation (Kim et al., 2016). With the thought that electronic word of mouth cannot be controlled by the brands, brands try to find other channels, where customers can be reached and influenced – one of them is social media influencers (Yoo et al., 2013).

2.6 Social Media Influencers

Influencer marketing in social media is widely used by the fashion industry, both fast-fashion and luxury brands (Kim & Kim, 2021). Fashion has long been seen as a significant social force that shapes consumer behavior and is strongly connected to the social and economic life of people. Therefore, social media influencers have gained a lot of attention, as a brand marketing tool (Cheung et al., 2022). Social media influencers are influential individuals that have gained a large audience through social media platforms and can shape the audience's perception of products, services, and anything, that they believe in (Freberg et al., 2011). Social media influencers chose a niche area in which they feel most comfortable and where they are experts. Some examples of niche areas of expertise on social media are beauty (fashion or beauty products, such as makeup), health (lifestyle or cooking), sport (workouts or body improvement), and video games (Argyris et al., 2020). Influencers are a powerful force in the decision-making of the consumer. Social media influencers can create "trends" and "must haves", which would make consumers believe that they need these "must haves" since consumers judge social media influencers as experts in the product industry (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). The number of influencers on Instagram grew enormously in the past few years, 39% of all Instagram accounts are owned by 500,000 influencers with more than 15,000 followers on their accounts (Nafees et al., 2021). Brands tend to collaborate with social media influencers to promote brand image, brand products, or services, which now as well has its own term "social media influencer marketing" (Cheung et al., 2022). Influencer marketing is being used by many fashion brands, for example, Gucci. In 2019, fashion house Gucci decided to use influencer marketing, partnering with different fashion influencers on Instagram, specifically 23 influencers, to promote the new fragrance line "Gucci Bloom". The campaign included 135 pieces of content that significantly increased brand awareness and reached up to 750,000 people following the campaign (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Social media influencers are believed to be professionals with deeper knowledge in a specific area, for example in the fashion industry, hence, brand marketers prefer social media influencers in marketing rather than traditional celebrities (Cheung et al., 2022).

Moreover, using social media influencers is relatively cheaper than creating a banner advertisement, TV advertisement, or any similar advertisement (Nafees et al., 2021). Statistics show that in 2018 there were 3.7 million brand-sponsored influencers' posts on social media compared to 2019 with 4.95 million posts (Statista, 2019). Brand image promotion through social media influencers is very effective, since influencers create content as part of their real life, for example, how a brand's products can be used in everyday activities (Cheung et al., 2022). Through social media posts done by influencers, consumers can process information about a promoted brand with no effort, since the posts are short, simple, and clear. Influencers share their moral beliefs, views, and behavior, which builds trust between them and potential consumers, therefore, trust or favorability towards promoted brand or brands by influencers (Nafees et al., 2021). Important aspects that help influencers to build trust with consumers are valuable informational content. Valuable information plays a big role in creating interest in the promoted brand. Influencers educate and share posts about trending products, such as beauty products or new technological products, and share their thoughts about them. Another aspect that needs to be considered when creating a promotion of brand image is design quality. Influencers focus on the quality of the text, graphics, audio, and video in their posts, to have effective and interesting promotion (Cheung et al., 2022). Overall, all that influencers do, have, and share contributes towards a positive perception of influencers and the brands they promote. Influencers are being looked up to and therefore, social media influencers can influence individuals to mimic their positive attitude toward the specific brand (Nafees et al., 2021).

Furthermore, social media influencers have gained enormous popularity in recent years in promoting products, services, and brand image in general (Belanche et al., 2021). People trust social media influencers more than they trust advertisements made by the brand itself (Zhou et al., 2021). However, social media influencers are another channel of digital marketing, that is used by businesses. Brands send social

media influencers what they need to promote on their social media page. Brands either pay influencers to make posts or give away free products that the brand creates. Influencers only choose how to present content/product, that is given by the brand, on their social media pages (Cheung et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to look at both the positive and negative sides of social media influencer marketing. Influencer marketing can cause negative consumer response, because of low-quality, unethical, or just inauthentic content, that is being posted about the brand (Zhou et al., 2021). An example of such a negative consumer response is Chriselle Lim. Chriselle Lim is social media influencer with 1.5 million followers, that promotes her lifestyle on Instagram. Her posts usually are related to beauty, fashion, and family. However, Chriselle got an offer from Volvo to promote their toxic-free car cleaner. The consciences of this post were negative feedback from her followers, saying that the post had nothing to do with her established image on social media and Volvo spent their resources on useless advertisements in partnership with the influencer (Belanche et al., 2021). Social media influencers create content that encourages consumers to follow them and build a relationship (Cheung et al., 2021). From this example, it can be concluded that social media influencers need to maintain high-quality, authentic social media pages for the right brands to have a successful partnership with them (Zhou et al., 2021). On the other hand, brands need to consider as well with whom they want to partner with. It is important for fashion brands to partner with the right social media influencer, that makes a post related to fashion (Cheung et al., 2021). With the appropriate campaign created by the appropriate influencer, the brand, and influencer can get positive responses from consumers (Belanche et al., 2021). Social media is now flooded with all kinds of influencers, such as celebrities, athletes, artists, musicians, and many others. Therefore, it is crucial to identify what the brand promotes, and who the brand needs and find the right timing for the marketing campaigns (Arora et al., 2019). Unfortunately, even with appropriate influencers being chosen, there are other risks - one of them being ethics. Many social media influencers can falsify data, such as the number of “real” followers – actual people, engagement rates of posts, and likes (Belanche et al., 2021). Brands tend to promote their products and brand image through influencer marketing because social media influencers build strong relationships and connections with their followers. This marketing tool gives brands a boost in social media engagement

(Coelho et al., 2018). However, when the data presented by the influencer is falsified, the brand will not receive the required consumer engagement (Belance et al., 2021). Another problem that can occur with influencer marketing is influencers are not aware of the product that they are promoting and brands keep back important information about the product (Cheung et al., 2021). An example of this negative influencer marketing is Kim Kardashian promoting the drug Diclegis in 2015. Kim Kardashian promoted pregnancy sickness drug, by making a review of it on her Instagram page, which lead to questions from FDA (food and drug administration). FDA made Kim Kardashian take down her promotion post from her page because this drug had a lot of side effects, which she was not aware of (Haenlein et al., 2020). In order for brands to choose the appropriate influencer and not get into situations that can harm the campaign and brand image, brands make use of the social influencer index. The social influencer index looks at social media influencers' total engagement, total reach, total sentiment, and total growth (Arora et al., 2019).

2.7 Brand Trust and Brand Authenticity

Brand trust can be defined as *“the willingness of consumers to trust a brand and expect positive results even in the face of risk”* (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 2). However, usually, consumers do not expect or think about any risks that could take place when selecting a brand, they believe in and trust (Zhang et al., 2022). Brand trust can grow exponentially when consumers believe and feel that the brand is authentic (Benedictus et al., 2010). Brand trust is formed by consumers' brand knowledge and their experiences that come from different channels, such as adverting, word-of-mouth, and user experience that are shared on social media (Zhang et al., 2022). Brand trust has also positive effects on marketing, for instance by reducing marketing costs (Kocak & Kabadayi, 2012).

Brand trust became a key factor in building long-term relationships between consumers and brands in the fashion industry. Trust has positive effects on brand loyalty and on the brand image (Alhaddad, 2015). It is important to know that consumers do not form their perception of the brand before actually trying it out. Consumers form their perceptions based on their experiences. Therefore, brands need to prioritize the creation of the product and the experiences the consumer can get by using the product. For example, some elements that may influence consumer's

experience with the product are packaging, price, advertising channels, and logos (Kocak & Kabadayi, 2012). Consumers' trust is what leads to consumers' loyalty, by creating positive relationships. As a result of consumers loyalty, brands can gain a competitive advantage, increase positive word-of-mouth, and increase sales, which leads to higher profits (Nadeem et al., 2020).

Furthermore, brand trust goes hand in hand with brand authenticity, resulting in consumers' loyalty (Södergren, 2021). Brand authenticity can be defined as *“the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves”* (Morhart et al., 2015, p. 202). Brand authenticity became a main focus in the past decade, because businesses showed no connection between their objectives, values, and actual actions, and accomplishments, which damages the brand image and brand trust. Research shows that brands that stay authentic, have better relationships with their consumers, are trustworthy, and have better profits (Eggers et al., 2013).

Additionally, many brands use influencer marketing as one of many marketing channels (Audrezet et al., 2020). Research shows that people (users of social media) are more likely to follow more authentic influencers that promote brands, which leads to an increase in consumer engagement and improvement of brand image on social media (Yang et al., 2021). Authentic and trustworthy brands now face many issues with finding authentic social media influencers, which will be discussed in more detail further in this research (Audrezet et al., 2020).

2.8 The Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

Social media became a tool for brands to engage with social media influencers in creating content to promote the brand and the brand's image, through various platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and others in the form of videos, photographs, and stories (Gao & Feng, 2016). With the use of social media, influencers are able to gain a large audience in a short period of time and share information attractively and interactively, where users (consumers) can share their thoughts through reposts and comments (Cheung et al., 2022). An example of a popular social media influencer that gained an enormous number of followers, around 8.2 million on Instagram in a short period is Chiara Ferragni. Chiara Ferragni is a fashion blogger,

known for her blog “The Blonde Salad”. Influencers can supplement conventional corporate communication by incorporating their unique style and dress preferences. Therefore, brands often practice “influencer marketing” where they partner up with social media influencers and take advantage of the content that social media influencer creates and shares (Audrezet et al., 2020). Research shows that social media influencers are seen as more trustworthy and authentic by social media users than traditional celebrities, such as musicians and actors because traditional celebrities tend to have publicity teams behind them (Yang et al., 2021).

Authenticity can be defined as being true to yourself, your values, personality, and feeling (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022). There are two types of authenticity: indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity refers to “the original” or “the real thing” (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). For instance, a painting is “the original” and any other similar-looking paintings are inauthentic copies of “the real thing” (Audrezet et al., 2020). And iconic authenticity refers to “*something whose physical manifestation resembles something that is indexically authentic*” (Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 298). In other words, iconic authenticity is a precise representation, a copy of something else (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Brand relationships with social media influencers are not without risk. A social media influencer’s followers are first drawn to the opportunity to access content created by the “ordinary” individual in the role of influencer because it is believed to be noncommercial and, therefore, more reliable than marketing-initiated communication. In other words, social media influencer’s content is perceived as real and authentic, however, partnerships with brands can put authenticity into question (Audrezet et al., 2020). Social media influencers’ authenticity could be at risk when creating content for commercial purposes for fashion brands because the advertisement could push away the content that the influencer creates based on the influencer’s beliefs and passions (Audrezet et al., 2020). It is extremely hard to stay authentic in social media since the digital world requires idealized content, which could be photoshopped or presented differently on social media rather than in real life, which is done for a reason, for followers to stay always curious and interested (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022). “*Social media display hyper-real representation of the world, exploiting audience’s attention*” (Maares et al., 2021, p. 1). Social media

influencers are being pressured by brands, followers, managers, and others to post content that will catch attention and be interesting to look at. Therefore, it is challenging for social media influencers to sustain authenticity while creating commercial or non-commercial content to satisfy followers and others, who are involved in the content (Audrezet et al., 2020).

2.9 The Quality of Content

Meanwhile, social media marketing started to become more and more popular among businesses, the main point of social media is to spread information and connect with consumers through content. There are different types of content that were also mentioned before in the literature review, such as brand-related content, user-generated content, influencer-generated content, and others. The quality of content is an important issue, that businesses need to take into consideration when promoting a brand's image and brand's trustworthiness. Social media content marketing is crucial in the fashion industry when creating effective content to attract consumers (Ahmad et al., 2016). Content marketing is *"a contemporary marketing paradigm with many long term benefits such as building loyalty by engaging with the target audience with valuable content"* (Du Plessis, 2017, p. 1). Social media content marketing is what keeps the brand health score high. Brand health can be defined as the image of the brand or the reputation of the brand. Brand health is an important aspect in determining the performance of the business based on the demand from the consumers, interaction from the consumers, and the number of sales (Ahmad et al., 2016). The main purpose of social media content marketing is to find the ideal content to attract consumers to visit the brand's social media page, to engage with the brand, to make frequent purchases from the brand, to like and repost content from the brand and communicate to other people about the brand through the use of word-of-mouth (Ansari et al., 2019). Social media content tends to be more and more aesthetic quality which can be identified as *"the perceived aesthetic quality and attractiveness of the visual content (pictures or videos) posted on social media"* (Bazi et al., 2020, p. 228). Fashion brands, such as Chanel, Gucci, or Louis Vuitton tend to focus on aesthetic quality content, by use of graphical design, high-quality pictures and videos, various colors, and icons, which attract the consumer's eye. The content with aesthetics is more likely to be shared and draw attention to the brand (Bazi et al., 2023).

H1: An influencer's authenticity has a positive impact on brand image in the fashion industry.

H2: An influencer's authenticity has a positive impact on a brand's trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

H3: The quality of an influencer's content has a positive impact on brand image in the fashion industry.

H4: The quality of an influencer's content has a positive impact on a brand's trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

These are the four crucial hypotheses that need to be addressed. In this research, the researcher's main objective is to find if there is a correlation between social media influencer's authenticity and brand image, as well as the quality of content and the brand's trustworthiness.

3 Methodology

The collection of data can be done through different research approaches. There are three types of research approaches; the first one is qualitative, the second one is quantitative, and the third approach is mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research focuses on the "why" type of questions rather than the "what" type of questions. This type of research method focuses on everyday real-life experiences from people, which allows one to get an in-depth understanding of the data collected (Ahmad et al. 2019). The data is collected through expert interviews, focus groups, consumer (in-depth) interviews, observation, and case studies, which required answering open-ended questions (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, quantitative research test different theories (hypotheses) by looking at the relationship between different variables, the dependent variables and the independent variables. After the research is conducted, the null hypothesis can be rejected or accepted. This research approach requires numeric data, however, can also include open-ended questions. The data collection can be done through surveys or experiments (Ahmad et al. 2019). Lastly, there is mixed methods research approach. This method includes both qualitative and

quantitative research forms. A mix of two approaches gives in-depth research and gives an opportunity to analyze more data for accurate results (Creswell, 2014).

Quantitative research makes use of a postpositivist worldview. This worldview focuses on empirical data, which is observed and measured directly through real-life personal experience. The postpositivist worldview allows one to observe an individual's reality and behavior, as well, it takes into consideration, that there is no right or one answer to the question (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, a quantitative research approach was chosen as a data collection method. The study required both open-ended questions and numeric questions, which will be collected through the use of online surveys (Lo et al. 2020). Surveys allow the collection of data in terms of trends, attitudes, and opinions from a population sample. Through the use of this data, information can be analyzed, and conclusions can be drawn. Convenience sampling method, a non-probability sampling, would be used to collect data, since individuals in the population sample, which would be around 80 individuals, will not be chosen by specific characteristics, such as age, gender, etc, but will be chosen based on the access to the participants, which gives unbiased results about the influence of social media on brand image in the fashion industry (Creswell, 2014). However, the two main requirements for the participants are they need to be social media user and follow at least one social media influencer. The survey is conducted online since this approach provides several advantages. The use of an online survey allows the research to have a large sample size, that can be easily found by sharing a link. With a link, people do not need to share any personal information and can stay anonymous. Moreover, this method of data collection is inexpensive and very flexible, the design can be adapted, and the formatting as well (Lo et al. 2020). However, a couple of disadvantages to the online survey are that participants who received a link may not use social media or may not follow social media influencers, and another disadvantage may be that people who want to participate do not have access to Wi-Fi, therefore cannot participate in the survey. Another crucial disadvantage to online surveys is technical issues that could lead to poor respondent experience and could lead to incompleteness of the survey. Another disadvantage is a lack of control over the environment and personal interaction. If any interruptions happen, such as the influence of other people or poor connection, that

are not controlled by the interviewer, as it could be controlled during face-to-face interviews, then participant can be distracted, and the quality of responses can decrease. It is important for the researcher to take all the disadvantages and advantages into consideration when deciding whether or not to conduct an online survey.

3.1 Survey Development and Measurements

The online survey was conducted to collect the required data in order to answer the research questions of the study to accept or reject proposed hypotheses. The survey was sent out to participants (population sample) by a link and the link was posted on social media (Instagram), as well as sent out in groups on WhatsApp. The data collection is done after the research on the topic of the impact of social media influencers on brand image and brand trustworthiness in the fashion industry, for the purpose of including only relevant questions in the survey. The non-probability sampling method was used, which does not require to collect personal data, such as name, but at the end will collect data, such as age and gender, and the highest level of education the participant received until now, which allows participants to stay anonymous and gives enough information for the researcher to analyze the data.

The survey was created using Google Forms in English and the link was distributed through various platforms and groups such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and email. The survey consists of 17 questions, multiple-choice questions at the beginning, where participants need to choose one answer for the questions “do you use social media?” with choices “yes” or “no”. Second question “How often do you use social media?”, with choices “1 = Rarely (less than once a day)”, “2 = Occasionally (once daily)”, “3 = Sometimes (2-5 times a day)”, “4 = Frequently (6-10 times a day)”, “5 = Always (I am signed in all the time)”. And there were multiple choice questions, where participants were able to choose one or more answers, for instance, “Which social media platform do you use more frequently to follow fashion brands?”, and the answers were “Instagram”, “Facebook”, “Twitter”, “TikTok”, or “Other (please specify)”. In the end, 7-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree), 7-point semantic differential scale (where 1 was, for instance, dishonest and 7 was honest), and an open-ended question about the age of the participants. In order to participate in the survey, participants were required to use social media and follow at least one

influencer. Individuals that participated in the survey and answered “no” to the question “do you use social media?” and to the question “do you follow influencers on social media?” were not able to go further and the survey was terminated. The reason for the termination of the survey at these two questions was that the responses provided by participants that do not follow influencers and do not use social media did not give the research relevant information that could have been used in the research to make conclusions and accept or reject the hypotheses. All the findings and the online version of the survey are provided in the Appendix. The questions were adapted from existing research on similar topics. Table 1 provides an overview of the measures used in the survey.

Table 1: Measurement of constructs

Construct	Survey Question	Source
Brand Image	Well-known and prestigious. Fashionable and trendy. Having reputation for good quality.	(Cretu & Brodie, 2007)
Brand Trustworthiness	Untrustworthy ---- Trustworthy Dishonest ----- honest Unethical ---- Ethical Phony ---- Genuine	(Michaelidou et al., 2015)
Influencer Authenticity	Influencers actively communicate with consumers. Influencers value the relationship with their followers. Influencers should be honest without lying. Influencers must broadcast with sincerity. Influencers have their own special content. Influencers have their own personality and characteristics.	(Ryu & Hank, 2021)

	Influencers must fulfill their promises with followers well.	
Quality of Content	<p>Influencers well explain the relationship between content, product, and brand.</p> <p>Influencers clearly communicate information about a product or brand.</p> <p>Influencers know and understand a product or brand well.</p>	(Ryu & Hank, 2021)

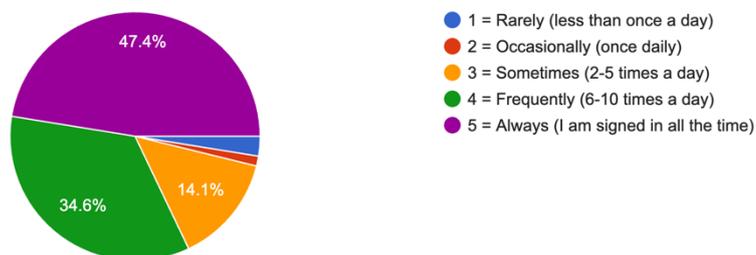
3.2 Data Analysis and Results

3.2.1 Sample Characteristics

The number of participants that took the survey which answered “yes” to the question “do you use social media?” turned out to be 78. Out of 78 participants, 47.4% are always signed in social media (signed in all the time), 34.6% use social media frequently (6-10 times a day), 14.1% use social media sometimes (2-5 times a day), 1.3% occasionally use social media (once daily) and 2.6% rarely use social media (less than once a day). The data shows that most of the participants are frequent social media users.

Figure 1: Social media usage per day

How often do you use social media?
78 responses

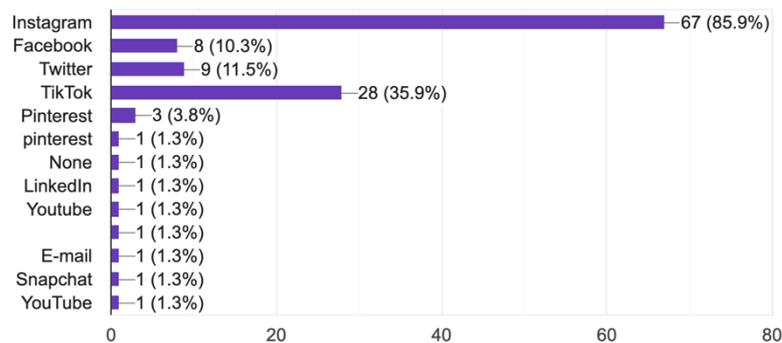


The most frequently used social media network is Instagram, around 85.9% out of 78 participants use this social media platform to follow fashion brands. The second most frequently used social media by the participants is TikTok with around 35.9%. Twitter

is being used by 11.5% and Facebook is in fourth place with 10.3%. Other social media that some participants use are Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Snapchat. From the data in Figure 2, it can be concluded that most of the participants use Instagram, which shows that Instagram is the most popular social media platform among young users.

Figure 2: Most popular social media platforms among participants

Which social media platform do you use more frequently to follow fashion brands?
78 responses



Moreover, out of 78 participants, 55 (70.5%) follow social media influencers and 23 (29.5%) do not follow any social media influencers on social media platforms. 22 participants follow professional social media influencers, for instance, bloggers. 11 participants follow celebrity influencers, such as actors/actresses. Only 1 participant follows other types of influencers, which are professionals such as health experts. And 21 participants follow both celebrity influencers and professional social media influencers.

The reasons for participants to follow more professional social media influencers, as seen in Figure 3 could be for entertainment purposes, inspiration purposes, knowledge and expertise of an influencer in a specific field, being connected with the influencer and other users that follow that influencer, and last but not least, product or service recommendation. These are the most frequent reasons why social media users follow professional social media influencers. Therefore, it can be concluded that professional social media influencers have better knowledge in specific fields and create more content that interests social media users compared to celebrity influencers.

Figure 3: Influencer type

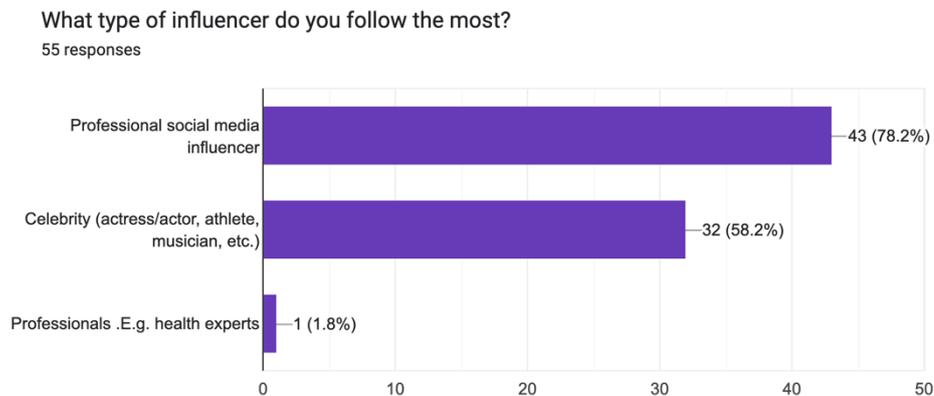


Table 2 – sample characteristics, refer to general information about participants that was recorded at the end of the survey, from participants that answered all questions in the survey. In general, gathering sample characteristics during a survey assures accurate representation, gives an opportunity for analysis and generalization, makes it easier to conduct subgroup analyses, accounts for any confounding variables, and allows to make comparisons between researches. It is a crucial component of survey research that improves the findings' validity, dependability, and utility. Out of 55 participants, 33 (60%) were female, 21 (38.2%) were male and 1 (1.8%) other. The participants' age range is from 16 years old up to 32 years old. The mean age turned out to be 22 years old. Most of the participants (54.5%) had high school or equivalent education level and 30.9% of participants had bachelor's degree education level. From this, it can be concluded that the survey was completed by young participants, which is reasonable since the average age which shows most activity on social media platforms are people ages of 19 and 29 (Zhou, 2023).

Before conducting any further hypotheses testing, a reliability test was conducted. A statistical technique - reliability analysis is used to evaluate the reliability and accuracy of each construct (influencer's authenticity, brand image, brand's trustworthiness, and the quality of content) that was used in the data collection process. Cronbach's alpha was used, where an alpha of 0.6 can count as acceptable – a low internal consistency, 0.7 and above are good, 0.8 and above is even better, and lastly 0.9 and above is the best – excellent internal consistency (Raharjanti et al., 2022). In research, Cronbach's alpha is an indicator of internal consistency and dependability. It is

frequently used to evaluate a scale's or survey's consistency or reliability when it has several items meant to measure a specific construct or area (Amirrudin et al., 2021).

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Sample Characteristics	(N = 55)
Mean Age	22
Gender (%)	
Male	38.2
Female	60
Other	1.8
Prefer not to say	0
Education (%)	
High school or equivalent	54.5
Bachelor's degree	30.9
Master's degree	12.7
PhD degree	0
Other	1.8

3.2.2 Reliability Analysis

From the tables below, it can be concluded that all four constructs (influencer's authenticity, brand image, brand's trustworthiness, and the quality of content) are above 0.6 (influencer's authenticity – 0.8, brand image – 0.73, brand's trustworthiness – 0.82 and the quality of content – 0.86), meaning the Cronbach's alpha is acceptable. Low standard deviation values show that all data are grouped together around the mean. With data being clustered together, one can see that most of the participants had similar answers to the questions in the survey. Less response variability is indicated by a low standard deviation, while great internal consistency is indicated by a high Cronbach's alpha. When the scale's items consistently measure the same construct and there is a great general agreement or general consensus among the participants, as indicated by both a low standard deviation and a high Cronbach's alpha, as can be seen in Table 3, Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6, the results are considered to be reliable. This often signifies the scale's high reliability and internal consistency (Amirrudin et al., 2021).

Table 3: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test - Influencer authenticity

Scale Reliability Statistics			
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
scale	5.67	0.80	0.80

Table 4: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test – Brand Image

Scale Reliability Statistics			
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
scale	5.20	0.99	0.73

Table 5: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test – Brand's Trustworthiness

Scale Reliability Statistics			
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
scale	4.44	0.95	0.82

Table 6: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test – Quality of Content

Scale Reliability Statistics			
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
scale	5.13	1.25	0.86

3.2.3 Hypotheses Testing

For hypotheses testing the most appropriate analysis was regression analysis (linear regression). Regression analysis is “a statistical technique for estimating the relationship among variables which have reason and result relation. Main focus of univariate regression is analyse the relationship between a dependent variable and one independent variable formulates the linear relation equation between dependent and independent variable” (Uyanik & Güler, 2013, p. 234). For the linear regression, the four constructs – brand image, brand’s trustworthiness, influencers’ authenticity, and the quality of content were computed into composite scores. By computing

composite scores, the researcher can get one single score for multiple observed variables, to reduce measurement error and to make the regression model easier to analyze. To compute each construct, the researcher took each construct, for instance, brand image, which is composed of the items: (1) well known and prestigious, (2) fashionable and trendy, (3) having reputation for good quality used the mean function to compute the average. The same process was done for the other three constructs, influencers’ authenticity, the brand’s trustworthiness, and the quality of content.

Each tested hypothesis had the null hypothesis (H0) and the alternative hypothesis (H1). The null hypothesis (H0) states that there is no correlation or impact between the independent and dependent variables. It is assumed under the null hypothesis that any detected variations in the data are the result of random chance or sampling variability and that no effect was seen. In other words, it suggests that there is no actual or appreciable connection between the variables. On the other hand, there is alternative hypothesis, the researcher's verdict, or assertion that certain effects or correlation exist between the variables. According to the alternative view, any observed differences in the data are not only the result of chance but rather are the result of a real relationship (Streiner, 2003).

H0: An influencer’s authenticity has no impact on brand image in the fashion industry.

H1: An influencer’s authenticity has a positive impact on brand image in the fashion industry.

Table 7: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 1

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²
1	0.39	0.15	0.14

Model Coefficients - Average_Brand_Image

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	2.45	0.89	2.76	0.008
Average_Influencer_Authenticity	0.48	0.16	3.11	0.003

The first hypothesis aims to test if there is any correlation between social media influencers' authenticity and brand image, and if the correlation is positive or negative. For the testing, the dependent variable is brand image, and the independent variable is influencer's authenticity. In regression analysis, the R-value (the correlation coefficient) is used to determine the linear correlation between two variables. The R-value range is from -1 to 1, where -1 is a perfect negative linear relationship, 0 means that there is no relationship between the variables and 1 is a perfect positive linear relationship. In table 7, the R-value is 0.39, meaning that there is a moderate positive linear relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable. Moreover, the R^2 value is a measure that is used in statistics to show how much of the variance in the dependent variable can be accounted for by the independent variable. The R^2 value ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 means that none of the variance is defined by the regression model, and 1 means the variance is well defined by the model. The R^2 value of 0.15 or 15%, as seen in Table 7, can be described as the relatively weak relationship between two variables. 0.85 or 85% of the variance is not influenced by the factor presented in the model, however, is affected by other external factors. The adjusted R^2 value represents a better version of the R^2 value, where number of independent variables is being considered and regulated for the degree of freedom. However, in Table 7 the adjusted R^2 value is 0.14, which still means that there is a relatively weak relationship between the dependent and the independent variables. Therefore, it is important to look at other data to make the decision whether to accept or reject the null hypothesis.

Furthermore, the SE-value (standard error value) "*quantifies uncertainty in the estimate of the mean*" (Barde & Barde, 2012, p. 114). In simple words, the standard error value explains how dependent variable varies from the regression model determined by the independent variable. The t-value or t-statistic is "*also based on the ratio of explained variance against unexplained variance or error*" (Field, 2009, p. 204). Overall, the t-value of 3.11 and SE-value of 0.16 mean that there is a strong statistically significant correlation between the variables. Additionally, the p-value is "*the probability of rejecting or failing to reject the null hypothesis... The smaller the P value, the stronger the evidence against H_0* " (Thiese et al., 2016, p. 928). In Table 7 the p-value is 0.003, which is smaller than 0.05, meaning that the p-value is statistically significant. Even though the R-value, R^2 value and adjusted R^2 value

suggest that there is a weak correlation between the variables, the t-value, SE-value, and the p-value together in table 7 suggest that the results are significant, and the null hypothesis should be rejected, and H1 should be accepted.

H0: An influencer’s authenticity has no impact on a brand’s trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

H2: An influencer’s authenticity has a positive impact on a brand’s trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

Table 8: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 2

Model Fit Measures			
Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²
1	0.30	0.09	0.07

Model Coefficients - Average_Brand_Trust					
	Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
	Intercept	2.45	0.89	2.76	0.008
	Average_Influencer_Authenticity	0.35	0.15	2.27	0.027

The second hypothesis aims to test the correlation between two variables, the dependent variable – brand’s trustworthiness and the independent variable – influencers’ authenticity. For the second hypothesis, as well, regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between variables. The R-value is 0.30 as shown in Table 8. The value of 0.30 is relatively low based on the range from 0 to 1 for the R-value, where 0 means that there is a weak relationship and 1 means that there is a strong correlation between the two variables. An R² value of 0.09 shows that the independent variable in the regression model can account for 9% of the variance in the dependent variable. This indicates that the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable is somewhat weak. When determining the adjusted R² value, the number of independent variables in the regression model is being considered. An adjusted R² value of 0.07 in Table 8 suggests that the independent variable in the model can explain 7% of the variance in the dependent variable when the number of the independent variables and their degrees of freedom

are thought about. According to an adjusted R^2 value of 0.07, one can suggest that there is a weak correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

Moreover, the p-value for the second hypothesis is 0.027, which is less than 0.05, which suggests that the null hypothesis needs to be rejected and the H2 should be accepted. This is also proven by the t-value which is 2.27 and the SE (standard error) value of 0.15 because a large t-value suggests that there is a strong relationship and suggests strong evidence against the null hypothesis. Therefore, the researcher can conclude that there is a statistically significant correlation between the influencers' authenticity and the brand's trustworthiness, and the second hypothesis can be accepted, and the null hypothesis can be rejected.

H0: The quality of an influencer's content has no impact on brand image in the fashion industry.

H3: The quality of an influencer's content has a positive impact on brand image in the fashion industry.

Table 9: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 3

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²
1	0.55	0.30	0.29

Model Coefficients - Average_Brand_Image

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	2.96	0.48	6.18	<.001
Average_Quality_of_Content	0.44	0.09	4.79	<.001

The third hypothesis tries to test the relationship between brand image and the quality of content made by social media influencers while promoting the fashion brand. For the third hypothesis, the researcher chose to conduct a regression analysis. The R-value of 0.55 in Table 9 suggests that there is a moderate positive linear

relationship between the dependent and the independent variables. An R^2 value of 0.03 illustrates that the independent variable in the regression model can account for 3% of the variance in the dependent variable. This indicates that the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable is close to weak. It is crucial to recall that a regression model's suitability depends on the particular context and the type of data being evaluated, therefore a low R^2 value does not always imply that the model is insufficient. When considering the number of independent variables and their degrees of freedom, an adjusted R^2 value of 0.29 in Table 9 indicates that the independent variable in the model can explain 29% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Additionally, the third hypothesis' p-value is less than 0.05 (<0.001), indicating that the null hypothesis should be rejected and the H3 should be accepted. This is further supported by the fact that the t-value is 4.79 and the SE (standard error) is 0.09, both of which indicate a significant association and strong evidence against the null hypothesis, respectively. In this case, based on the information provided in Table 9, the researcher can come to the conclusion that H3 should be accepted and there is a positive correlation between the dependent variable – brand image and the independent variable – the quality of content. Meaning that the quality of content created by social media influencers has a positive effect on the brand's image in the fashion industry.

H0: The quality of an influencer's content has no impact on a brand's trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

H4: The quality of an influencer's content has a positive impact on a brand's trustworthiness in the fashion industry.

Table 10: Linear Regression for Hypothesis 4

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²
1	0.61	0.37	0.36

Model Coefficients - Average_Brand_Trust

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	2.06	0.44	4.72	<.001
Average_Quality_of_Content	0.46	0.08	5.64	<.001

Last but not least, is hypothesis number four, which suggests that the quality of content made by social media influencers has a positive effect on a brand's trustworthiness in the fashion industry. With the regression analysis, the researcher aims to test if there is a correlation between the two variables and if the relationship is positive. In comparison to the other three hypotheses testing, one can see that the results are slightly higher than in the previous tables above. The R² value reveals that approximately 37% of the variability of the dependent variable is explained by the independent variable included in the model, despite the fact that an R-value of 0.61 indicates a moderate positive correlation. The adjusted R² value provides a somewhat lower estimate of the explanatory power and takes model complexity into consideration.

Further, the p-value for hypothesis four is <0.001, again, implying that there is a strong correlation between the quality of content and the brand's trustworthiness. Additionally, a high t-value of 5.64 and a low standard error value of 0.08 also suggest that there is a relationship between the variables. Therefore, based on the analyzed data in Table 10, it can be said that there is a positive relationship between the brand's trustworthiness (the dependent variable) and the quality of content created by the influencers (the independent variable). The null hypothesis, therefore, is rejected and the H4 is accepted.

All in all, the hypotheses testing with the use of the regression analysis showed that all four hypotheses can be accepted and there is a positive impact of social media

influencers and the content that influencers create on brand image and brand trust in the fashion industry.

4 Conclusion

This section summarizes the survey's findings and provides an overview of them. These findings are then contrasted with the assertions made in the thesis. The researcher will next discuss managerial implications. In addition, this part will address any potential weaknesses in the research report and propose how to fix them for future studies.

To conclude, social media has cultural significance since it has emerged as one of the most important channels for the communication of information in the modern world (Appeal et al., 2019). There are many different social media platforms, that are used by 4.95 billion active users (Statista, 2022), which are Facebook, Instagram, and many others (Park, 2017). Social media as well is a powerful tool in today's marketing activities (Park, 2017). With the use of social media as a marketing tool, brands are able to reach out to their current and potential consumers with the use of different channels (Hudson et al., 2016). Brands tend to promote positive brand image using social media. Positive brand image has a direct influence on a brand's success in terms of sales, market share, performance, and profit (Jung et al., 2020). Consumers use social media to learn about a specific brand and brand's products (Park, 2017). Consumers' perception of the brand can be built upon electronic word-of-mouth, which is created by other consumers where they share their opinions and attitude towards the brand and the brand's products, which can be positive and negative (Hennig Thurau & Walsh, 2003). The fashion industry is a competitive market, which is why it is very important for brands to create memorable and extraordinary content to attract consumers and have a positive brand image (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). One of the most popular sources that are frequently used by fashion brands to spread content such as user-generated content and brand-related content is social media influencers (Cheung et al., 2022). Social media influencers are influential individuals that have a large following on social media platforms, where they create specific content that interests their followers (Ferberg et al., 2011). In the past couple of years influencer marketing started to be used more and more frequently by fashion brands

in order to share and improve the brand's image (Cheung et al., 2022). Influencer marketing in social media became a crucial aspect of the marketing activities of the brand, because consumers tend to trust social media influencers and try to mimic the same positive attitude toward the brand that is being promoted (Nafees et al., 2021).

4.1 Managerial Implications

The findings of the research that were done through existing research on similar topics and the survey that was conducted by the researcher suggest that fashion brands need to utilize social media marketing through the use of social media influencers to promote the brand's image and build brand trust among current and potential consumers. However, fashion brands need to always take into consideration which social media influencer they partner up with, because as data analysis showed there is a positive correlation between the quality of content that is produced by the social media influencers and influencers' authenticity on the brand's image and brand trust. Fashion brands need to partner up with authentic and trustworthy influencers to promote the brand image, in order for consumers to have trust in the brand. The evidence for this statement can also be proven by the accepted four hypotheses that were tested.

The findings, also show that it is crucial for fashion brands to choose the appropriate content strategy, where brands need to create content that is relevant to their brand, as well as content that is interesting for their consumers. With content strategies, fashion brands can develop brand image and brand trustworthiness. Through content, fashion brands can establish consumer-brand relationships, which will help to increase consumer trust. Consumer trust could be built through transparency, engagement with consumers, connection to specific authentic influencers, and keeping the promises to the consumers.

4.2 Limitations and Further Research

Despite the findings and accepted hypotheses, there could be a couple of limitations, which could affect the results in future research. There are general and more specific limitations that could be discussed. Firstly, a limitation of response bias can occur, which means that instead of giving the participant's genuine ideas and thoughts, the participant may give socially acceptable answers to the questions, in a way the

participant believes is anticipated. The authenticity and dependability of answers that are gathered from participants may be impacted by this bias. Another limitation is sample representativeness and self-selection bias, where it could be hard to allow for generalization. It is especially difficult in the research done on the topic of social media and social media influencers, since the survey results (sample characteristics), in Table 2 showed that there are more younger participants rather than individuals that are older than 30 years old. This could affect the results because the older generation is not as familiar with social media and social media influencers as the younger generation. Additionally, individuals that participate in the survey may have different opinions and views on the topic compared to people who do not participate in the survey. Another limitation could be limited response options. In the survey that was conducted, the questions were made based on existing Likert scales and semantic differential scales, which gave limited answers to the participants. The use of questions with limited answers could lead to oversimplification and loss of important information and perceptions from the participants. And last but not least, a crucial limitation in future research may be generalizability. The results of the survey might only be appropriate to the particular situation or time frame in which it was carried out. Depending on the industry, location, and timing, influencer marketing may or may not have an impact on a brand's image and brand's trustworthiness.

Overall, there are still many aspects that need to be studied on the topic of social media influencers and influencer's marketing. All the limitations that were mentioned need to be considered in future research in order to have reliable results.

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6 Appendices

6.1 Appendices 1: Online Survey

1. Do you use social media?

Yes

No

→ if the answer is no, then the survey will be terminated.

“Your participation is greatly appreciated in our survey, but your response does not provide the information we were looking for. Thank you for your participation.”

Page 2

2. How often do you use social media?

- 1 = Rarely (less than once a day)
- 2 = Occasionally (once daily)
- 3 = Sometimes (2-5 times a day)
- 4 = Frequently (6-10 times a day)
- 5 = Always (I am signed in all the time)

3. Which social media platform do you use more frequently to follow fashion brands?

- Instagram
- Facebook
- Twitter
- TikTok
- Other (please specify)

Page 3

4. Do you follow influencers on social media?

- Yes
- No → if the answer is no, then the survey will be terminated.
“Your participation is greatly appreciated in our survey, but your response does not provide the information we were looking for. Thank you for your participation.”

Page 4

5. What type of influencer do you follow the most?

- Professional social media influencer
- Celebrity (actress/actor, athlete, musician, etc.)
- Others (Or I do not know, etc.)

6. Please think on the influencers you are following and evaluate the following statements RELATED to the influencers you are following.

(1-strongly disagree – 7-strongly agree)

Influencers I am following actively communicate with consumers.

Influencers I am following value the relationship with their followers.

Influencers I am following should be honest without lying.

Influencers I am following must broadcast with sincerity.

Influencers I am following have their own special content.

Influencers I am following have their own personality and characteristics.

Influencers I am following must fulfill their promises with followers well.

7. Again, please think on the influencers you are following and evaluate the following statements RELATED to the influencers you are following.

(1-strongly disagree –7-strongly agree)

Influencers I am following well explain the relationship between content, product, and brand.

Influencers I am following clearly communicate information about a product or brand.

Influencers I am following know and understand a product or brand well.

Page 5

8. Please indicate how you perceive the brands that are promoted by influencers and evaluate the following statements.

(1-strongly disagree – 7-strongly agree)

Well-known and prestigious

Fashionable and trendy

Having a reputation for good quality

9. Please indicate how you perceive influencer-generated branded posts on social media.

(7-point semantic differential scales)

Ineffective	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Effective
Untrustworthy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Trustworthy
Dishonest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Honest

Phony	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Genuine
Unethical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Ethical
Unenjoyable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Enjoyable

Page 6

10. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say.

11. What is your age? _____

12. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- High school or equivalent.
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- PhD degree
- Other