



CAN I TRUST YOU @INFLUENCER? REASONS WHY FOLLOWERS BUILD A TRUSTED RELATIONSHIP WITH INFLUENCERS

Master's thesis by Lina Heming

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Can I trust you @influencer? Reasons why followers build a trusted relationship with influencers

Final thesis for the Master of Science in Communications Studies Digital Marketing.

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1 Abstract

In recent years, the social media platform Instagram has become one of the most important marketing and communication tools. Online opinion leaders, also called influencers have built large networks on this platform. Through their large reach, influencers can rent out their communication channel as an advertisement platform and thus bring the latest trends to their network. Figures show that this new way of marketing is highly effective. This successful existence appears to be based on the relationship and trust-building between influencers and followers.

Through a qualitative approach, this study wants to broaden the knowledge of factors that influence trust in an influencer-follower relationship on the social media platform Instagram. To reach this goal, 29 digital natives were interviewed using the critical incident technique to ensure a rich data set. To gain more insights, the wording used by the participants was analyzed and discussed during the interviews. Further, the causes for unfollowing were investigated and if that decision emerges from mistrust.

The results of this study show that the interviewed digital natives are all heavy users of the Instagram platform and have all a closer relationship with one or more influencers. Trust does not always seem to be a primary consideration when deciding whether to follow an influencer. However, the results of the interviews indicate that trust is necessary for influencing buying behavior and building a loyal relationship with the influencer. This study suggests that authenticity and similarity are most important to develop trust in an influencer. This helps to predict an influencer's intention and behavior which eventually leads to uncertainty reduction in the relationship. Besides, trust is significant for creating in- and out-groups to differentiate between influencers. Lastly, the interviews showed that repetition and very commercial content frequently led to unfollowing. Based on the study findings, a model explaining the process of building a trusted relationship with an opinion leader on social media is proposed. This model can serve as a starting point for further studies on this topic.

Keywords: Instagram, social media influencers, para-social relationship, trust, Influencer marketing

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2 Introduction

To generate new users, Instagram as a social media platform advertises with the following slogan: “Bringing you closer to the people and things you love” (Instagram, n.d.). This very simply describes the main goal of the most popular social media platform at present. Through daily videos and photos which can be uploaded, ambitious social media users get the opportunity to expand their reach and generate a network. These people are often defined as influencers and are characterized by a high number of followers who are informed about the person's daily posts and stories by subscribing to the influencer's channel. This works so well that many opinion leaders can rent out their communication channel as an advertisement platform and thus bring the latest trends to their network. Within this process, brands discovered the far-reaching impact of cooperative partnerships with these social media influencers to promote their products (De Veirman et al., 2017). The endorsements by influencers, which can be described as a type of electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), are highly credible and successful since the paid content is often seamlessly integrated into the daily stories on an influencer's Instagram account (Abidin, 2016).

Their persuasiveness and credibility make influencers one of the most important advertising instruments of today (Ternes & Hagemees, 2018). A current legal case in Germany shows how influential a single influencer can be. The case has led to great uproar and deals with a German beauty influencer who made use of her popularity on Instagram by introducing herself as a trained beauty specialist and offering treatments for her followers. She advertised several beauty treatments on her Instagram channel, one of them lip injections. This resulted in hundreds of women receiving lip fillings with hyaluronan in the influencer's living room which led to serious complications due to a lack of experience and hygiene. Several women complained about swellings and deformations of their lips. Finally, the influencer has been put on trial and has received a prison sentence for bodily harm and tax fraud (“Beauty Influencerin muss ins Gefängnis”, 2019). This case shows how trustworthy many influencers seem to be and raises the question of why someone builds up trust in an influencer on Instagram.

Therefore, the following research question was formulated: ‘What are the trust influencing factors in influencer-follower relationship building and the possible outcomes of (non-)trusting behavior?’. To answer this question is the main objective of this thesis. This influencer-follower relationship within social media is an important subject to study since many of the traditional ways through which people establish bonds (for example through physical contact and socializing) are absent or limited in virtual interactions and other factors are influencing the perceived trustworthiness of online communication (Cheng, Fu, & de

Vreede, 2017; Grazioli & Jarvenpaa, 2000). In this work, 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify and investigate these factors.

Mainly female Instagram users who follow at least one famous online user, participate in the present study. They are asked to describe a critical incident in which they felt that they could trust or not trust an online opinion leader. The critical incident either describes a product or service recommendation which the participant evaluated as (not) honest and trustworthy. Furthermore, it is discussed how that affected the general perception of the influencer in question.

To gain a deeper understanding of the follower-influencer relationship two subordinated research questions are formulated to specify the answer to the main research question. It is important to understand the meaning of the term influencer and the different connotations behind it to reproduce the relationship that followers have with the influencers they are following. By analyzing the wording of the participants, deeper insights could be gained on the perceptions of followers towards influencers. This helps to draw conclusions about possible para-social relationships on Instagram. So, sub question 1 reads as follows:

SQ1: How is the common term influencer evaluated by the participants and what does the choice of words reveal about the relationship to the influencer?

Sub question 2 is related to the process of unfollowing an influencer on Instagram. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been published so far investigating which factors cause the process of unfollowing on the social media platform Instagram. Therefore, the following research question is formulated:

SQ2: Why does a follower decide to unfollow an influencer on Instagram and to what extent is this decision dependent on a loss of trust?

The qualitative approach of this study is important to gain new insights into the topic of trust in social media. The insights gained from the interviews with digital natives are used to propose a new theory of trust within the context of virtual relationships between opinion leaders on social media and their audience. This model extends the existing knowledge on this topic and can serve as a starting point for future studies.

So far, all relevant research dealing with trust on the social media platform Instagram has focused on factors influencing trust in social-commerce (Che, Cheung, & Thadani 2017; Yahia, Al-Neama, & Kerbache, 2018; Din, Ramli, & Abu Bakar, 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). The research results of previous studies emphasize the importance of key opinion leader

endorsement as significant factors explaining trust but did not research why these opinion leaders are valued as trustworthy. Furthermore, all conducted research within this field has been of quantitative nature. However, since previous quantitative studies offer only limited possibilities of exploration and flexibility (Boeije, 2010) this research will make an important contribution to the research area described above. By introducing a new model that illustrates the process of trust-building between influencer and follower, this study will offer new insights and broaden the knowledge of trust on the platform Instagram.

3 Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework is divided into two main parts. The first section defines the term influencer and explains the corresponding sector called influencer marketing. An understanding of these terms is of importance as the relationship between the average social media user and the influencer is the focus of this study. This phenomenon also called para-social relationship is another subchapter of the present theoretical framework.

The second part introduces the concept of trust and the trust influencing factors that have been identified in previous research. Furthermore, possible outcomes of a trusting relationship are discussed.

3.1 Influencers & Influencer Marketing

Certain users of social media can be described as opinion leaders due to their active creation of content for a given audience (Chau & Xu, 2012). These opinion leaders are better known as influencers (Zhu, Su, & Kong, 2015). They can be defined as individuals who have built a considerable social network of social media users following them or to be more precise “[...] everyday ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in ‘digital’ and ‘physical’ spaces, and monetize their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events” (Abidin, 2016, p.3). Usually, a distinction is made between micro and macro influencers (Dhanik, 2016; Hatton, 2018; Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Micro influencers can be defined as individuals with 1000 to 100 000 followers and macro-influencers as those who have between 100 000 and one million followers. Unlike classical celebrities (as actors or musicians), influencers are believed to be more accessible and trustworthy as they share publicly private aspects of their life and interact with their followers personally (Abidin, 2016).

This popularity of influencers has given rise to a new form of marketing called ‘influencer marketing’. Influencer marketing can be defined as a procedure that identifies influencers in a market to find the ideal match between a brand and an individual. This cooperation enables the brand to place its products within the influencer’s content to promote their products in an authentic and unobtrusive way. Influencers are selected based on their field of expertise and with whom the potential customer can identify. This approach of marketing enables companies to spread their advertisement message to the right target group and to generate many views within a short time (Alassani & Göretz, 2019). The main platform for influencer marketing, especially in the fashion sector, is called Instagram (Casaló, Flavián, Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Released in 2010, the app allows users to share photos and videos with their social network. In addition to posting content, the so-called engagement is important for the continued existence of the social media platform. By liking, commenting, and sharing selected content, user profiles can grow and gain importance. Meanwhile, there are already numerous individuals who have been able to generate an enormous reach through their profile (Faßmann & Moss, 2016). Well-known names for Germany include Caro Daur and Pamela Reif who are among the biggest influencers in the fashion and lifestyle sector with a network size between two and five million followers. These kind of influencers can be described as mega influencers due to their extensive reach.

This study focuses on Instagram and influencers within the lifestyle and fashion sector because this branch is one of the most visible and successful domains of digital production and therefore makes extensive use of influencer marketing (Garland & Reed, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018). The insights that can be gained with this study can be of great importance for brands and influencers. As a brand, it is important to understand the influencer phenomenon to make successful investments and influencers need more insights to work more effectively while embedding product placements into their daily content and therefore persuading their followers (Hollebeek, 2011).

3.2 Influencer-follower relationship

The interaction between influencer and follower can be described as a para-social or quasi-social relationship depending on the follower’s usage behavior. The former kind of relationship is defined as the illusion of direct face-to-face communication with an opinion leader or performer. The definition was developed by Horton and Wohl in 1956 to illustrate the seeming face-to-face relationship between a performer and their audience. Typical for a para-social relationship is the fact that the follower, earlier “fan”, believes that they “know” the performer on a very personal level (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Besides that, a typical

characteristic of a para-social relationship is the lack of effective reciprocity which means that only one person expands time and emotional energy. Usually, the performer is unaware of the other and therefore the viewer can withdraw the relationship at any time without informing the opinion leader about it. Horton and Wohl (1956) also highlight the importance of intimacy within a para-social relationship. "A bond of intimacy is developed with media personalities through shared experiences existing only through viewing of the personality or persona over time. As time goes on, predictability over the character is increased. The character is reliable." (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 280). A common shared experience is a question-and-answer exchange between the performer and their audience. Already in the past, this technique enabled the opinion leader to get in touch with his studio audience. Today, a Q&A session is still a popular method for influencers to stimulate an exchange with their followers and thus increase the level of intimacy.

As shown by a study by Chung and Cho (2014), the original concept of para-social relationship can be transferred to today's media use. Their research explored the para-social relationships with media characters via social media and reality TV and its implications for, inter alia, purchase intention. The findings made clear that the new media ensures a strengthened para-social relationship due to the personal approach of social media. However, due to the emergence of many new media, such as social media, there are also discrepancies between the understanding of an imaginary social relationship at that time and today. Today, such a relationship is more interactive since Instagram users can comment and send messages to their favorite influencers. This means that the follower feels more than ever that they have established a personal relationship with the opinion leader (Bond, 2016).

Furthermore, the shared insights of an influencer and the interactive moments are less controlled and planned as in the past when celebrity management companies took care of the public appearance of the opinion leader (Chung & Cho, 2014). This ensures a more spontaneous and interactive content that feels more authentic for the follower. Also, the internet as a multifaceted communication tool enables the influencers to share more private insights at regular and frequent intervals which means that the follower can access new content from his favorite opinion leader at almost any time. However, influencers can usually not engage in a real conversation with most of their followers due to the high number of reactions on their content (Sokolova & Kefi, 2018). This development of an apparent intimate relationship makes users more receptive and vulnerable to the influencer's opinion (Knoll et al., 2015). Studies showed that para-social relationships are of great importance when influencing followers on social media. If the para-social relationship is established, it can also influence purchase-intention (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Lee & Watkins, 2016). That is because, through repeated viewing, social media users would feel a bond of intimacy with the media

characters and therefore develop loyalty toward their favorite media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

As mentioned in the beginning, the relationship between influencer and follower can also be described as a quasi-social relationship. This kind of relationship is defined as a “two-way communication under an artificial and pseudo social setting” (Lin, 2002, p.14). Depending on the network size of an influencer and their interest, followers can enter a quasi-social relationship with an influencer meaning that they engage in regular discussions.

This study aims to give more insights into the follower-influencer relationship and to complement the so far, few publications on para-social relationships in the digital age. To explore this, specific questions regarding the wording will be asked during the interview as well as questions referring to the relationship the participants have with the influencers they follow.

3.3 Trust

Trust has been studied in various disciplines such as philosophy, economics, and sociology (Yahia et al., 2018; Kim, Xu, & Koh, 2004) and various thematic areas. Therefore, an extensive body of literature exists on this topic. In general terms, trust can be defined as a person's willingness to become vulnerable to another person's actions (Rousseau et al., 1998; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). This paper will focus on trust in online contexts and therefore a more specific definition of trust is needed. Trust in social media is already widely studied in human behavior research as the use of social media platforms has grown exponentially during the course of the last decade (Warner-Söderholm et al., 2018). As previous studies dealing with a similar topic, this paper conceptualizes trust as a set of specific beliefs about the other party dealing with convictions about its benevolence, integrity, and competence, which can be referred to as dimensions of trust(worthiness) (Gefen, 2002). Prior studies mainly interpret trust as having these three sub-dimensions: benevolence, ability, and competence (Hwang & Lee, 2012; Kim et al., 2008; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). This study also assumes that these dimensions are important core components of trust. According to other studies, however, there are also more factors that can influence trust. These will be discussed in more detail in a further chapter.

In this paper, trust is operationalized as the understanding that an online personality performs a behavior, which is beneficial to the other party. Further, the trustor believes in the reliability, truth, and ability of the trustee (Warner-Söderholm et al., 2018). That means the construct trust can be defined as an individual's confidence in the trustworthy characters of individuals, here the influencer (Wang, Min, & Han, 2016).

Trust is a vital concept for online activities because it can help moderate users' uncertainties and reduce the risks associated with following recommendations voiced online (McKnight et al., 2002). To be more precise, besides risk, trust has been theorized and empirically approved as the most influential factor influencing individual behavior toward social media platforms (Wang, Min, & Han, 2016). Many studies dealt with trust and risk on these platforms and showed that perceiving an online platform as credible, honest, and low-risk is essential for building trust and sharing information with the online vendors or other members on a social media platform (Bélanger & Crossler, 2011; Ou, Pavlou, & Davison, 2014).

Numerous studies show that when a speaker was perceived to be trustworthy, an opinionated message is more effective, sales increase and users are more likely to share information and interact with others (Lim et al., 2006; Ohanian, 2013; Miller & Baseheart, 1969; McKnight et al., 2002). As mentioned before, recent studies have already dealt with trust in social media but have focused on social-commerce (Che et al., 2017; Cheung & Lee, 2006; Yahia et al., 2018). Social-commerce is a subcategory of e-commerce, which can be described as online trading, that uses social networking sites like Instagram to promote buying products and services (Chen & Wang, 2016; Astuti & Putri, 2018). The studies dealing with s-commerce demonstrate with empirical evidence the importance of trust for social media shopping. These studies also highlighted the importance of trusted influencers who actively support Instagram shops or brand accounts offering their products on social media (Che et al., 2017). Therefore, research should be conducted which focuses on Influencers and the trust influencing factors regarding influencer-follower relationship building.

3.4 Factors influencing trust

Besides the existence of many definitions conceptualizing trust, there are just as many theories and models that deal with the emergence of trust and the factors responsible for this process. A frequently used theory that explains the cognitive mechanisms that are accountable for building trust, is the social exchange theory, which states that a relationship only lasts if the benefits outweigh the costs (Homans, 1958; Wu & Tsang, 2008; Kim et al., 2004). The theory claims that the most basic trust-building principle is the experience that the individual has with the trustee (Blau, 1964). When the truster feels that the trustee cares about the benefits of both parties and the benefits of both parties overlap, it is more likely that trust will be formed (Doney et al., 1998). This strengthens the importance of trust in social media exchange since rewards cannot be guaranteed (Blau, 1964). The follower invests time in

watching the newest stories and liking actual posts of the influencer and by doing so they give a leap of faith.

Another important model which is used in recent studies (Che et al., 2017; Wu & Tsang, 2008; Din et al., 2018) is the integrative model of organizational trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Mayer et al. (1995) suggested that the main factors affecting trust in an organization are cognitive trust beliefs of competence, benevolence, integrity, and the individual's tendency to trust. These factors are based on research that analyzed the most frequently cited attributes of trustworthiness. A trustee who owns these traits is a very popular exchange partner because it can be assumed that they will act ethically, kindly, and consistently in a relationship (Mayer et al., 1995).

In addition to the three factors based on Mayer et al. (1995) research, a further literature analysis was carried out showing that three other factors influence the development of trust. These factors and the three previously mentioned ones are summarized in Table 1. This table serves as a starting point for this study and can also be found back in the Codebook.

Table 1

Most important trust factors in (recent) studies

Factors	Authors
Perceived Benevolence	Che et al., 2017; Din et al., 2018, Mayer et al., 1995, Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Cheung & Lee, 2006
Perceived Integrity	Che et al., 2017; Din et al., 2018; Mayer et al., 1995, Lieberman, 1981; Moorman et al., 1993; Cheung & Lee, 2006
Perceived Competence	Che et al., 2017; Mayer et al., 1995; Li et al., 2008; Cheung & Lee, 2006; Din et al., 2018
Shared values/ Similarity/ Familiarity	Sokolova & Kefi, 2018; Gibreel et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2018, Cheng et al., 2016
Authentic Transparency	Schmäh et al., 2018; Popova et al., 2019; Audrezet et al., 2018
Attractiveness	McGuire, 1985; Ohanian, 1990; Lou & Yuan, 2018
Propensity to trust	Che et al., 2017; Din et al., 2018, Abdul-Rahman & Hailes, 2000; Mayer et al., 1995

3.4.1 Perceived Benevolence

The following three dimensions can be described as the three main components of the integrational model of organizational trust developed by Mayer et al., which serves as a foundation for many studies in the field of trust. The researchers used 'perceived benevolence' as one of the major pillars to define trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Benevolence can be described as the extent to which a trustor believes that the trustee is doing something good and does not act from egocentric profit motives (Mayer et al., 1995; Cheung & Lee, 2006). Regarding influencer-follower-relationship, that means the follower believes that the influencer acts altruistically and simply wants to share knowledge and advice. Furthermore, benevolence has a positive effect as time and commitment time growth (Warner-Söderholm et al., 2018). Trust based on benevolence can motivate followers to perform acts of reciprocity (Ou et al., 2014).

3.4.2 Perceived Integrity

According to Mayer et al. (1995), 'perceived integrity' can be described as the belief of a trustor that the trustee has a firm set of principles and that their actions are guided by them. Important characteristics that serve as a foundation for integrity are honesty, decency, and respect (Mehok, 2010). These principles should correspond with those of the trustor. Furthermore, the communication of the trustee should be perceived as credible (Cheung & Lee, 2006) meaning that there should be a consistent display between personal values, social values, and behavior in daily life, especially in difficult situations (Tullberg, 2012). If this is applied to the context of this study, it means that perceived integrity refers to the perception that an Influencer shows consistent actions within their content and the messages they send (Din et al., 2018).

3.4.3 Perceived Competence

Perceived competence can be equated with perceived ability, perceived capability, and information quality. Further perceived competence is another dimension of trust. This factor indicates the extent to which the trustor perceives the trustee as a source of valid allegation (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). The domain in which the trustee is perceived as competent is specific (Mayer et al., 1995). If an individual perceives the influencer as trustworthy and skilled in one certain domain, as for example health and nutrition, it does not mean that they would also follow a recommendation regarding beauty treatments.

3.4.4 Transparent Authenticity

Providing fact-based information while recommending a product or service is transparent authenticity. It is related to sponsorship disclosure since this information has to

be given to guarantee a transparent communication between influencer and follower (Audrezet et al., 2018). According to a study by Audrezet et al. (2018) trust increases if the trustor perceives the trustee's behavior as intrinsically motivated and therefore as authentic.

This is especially of importance in the context of social media since a huge amount of information is available for every social media user and the assessment of a certain public online person or website can be difficult (Popova et al., 2019).

3.4.5 Similarity

Similarity refers to the perception of having shared values with an influencer, which leads to an identification process. According to Borgen (2001), a strong identification with a group is essential for establishing trust. Furthermore, perceived similarity is decisive for the decision-making process whether to follow a certain influencer or not (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019) and refers to holding common goals, norms, values, and beliefs (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, & Winograd, 2002). Studies dealing with the celebrity's trustworthiness showed a high correlation between their trustworthiness and the respondent's perceived similarity to the source (Ohanian, 2013). This process can be explained with the social identity theory which states that individuals categorize people into groups and classify themselves into those groups they can identify with to simplify the social world (Edwards, 2005). If a follower can identify with an influencer, trust in influencer-generated branded content is positively affected (Lou & Yuan, 2018).

3.4.6 Attractiveness

Attractiveness refers to an influencer's physical attractiveness or likeability (McGuire, 1985). This trust indicator is a component of McGuire's source credibility model, which includes also trustworthiness and expertise. This trust indicator can be explained with the halo effect, which states that the first impression of the attractiveness of an individual can affect the holistic perception of this person (Eagly et al., 1991).

3.4.7 Propensity to trust

This term describes an individual's tendency to trust another person or institution (Mayer et al., 1995). Therefore, this factor refers to a person's characteristics regardless of the context in which trust is needed. That means this disposition is stable across different situations and over time (Che et al., 2017). It can be assumed that a person who would trust more easily in an offline setting would also be more willing to depend on a social media influencer (Wu & Tsang, 2008).

3.5 Outcomes of trust

When trust is established, several kinds of outcomes are possible and proven by research. This overview strengthens the importance of trust because it is a prerequisite for a long-lasting, interactive, and promotional relationship which can be described as the main motivation of professional influencers (Raven, 2017).

3.5.1 Loyalty

Loyalty can be defined as an attitudinal commitment to an individual or a brand (Day, 1969). This means “taking the form of a consistently favorable set of stated beliefs towards the brand” (Uncles, Dowling, & Hammond, 2002, p.300). Several prior studies (Wu & Tsang, 2008; Pavlou & Chai, 2002; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) demonstrated that trust leads to loyalty. In this context, it can be described as frequently visiting the influencer’s profile and evaluating the content positively. Furthermore, loyalty is essential for a long-term relationship and reduces relationship maintenance costs (Astuti & Putri, 2018; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

3.5.2 Sharing personal information

Previous research on online vendors showed that if consumers trust a seller, they will be pleased to repurchase and share valuable information personally to other consumers or the seller (Astuti & Putri, 2018, Wu & Tsang, 2008; McKnight et al., 2002). In the context of social media, it means that a trusting social media user is inclined to share personal information with the trusted influencer and their network meaning the companies the influencer cooperates with.

Older studies used the term "sharing personal information" to refer to the voluntary provision of personal data. Because Instagram automatically passes on all user data to the influencers (age, gender, usage behavior), shared information here refers more to the additional data like e-mail addresses that are not visible through the Insights-option on Instagram.

3.5.3 Para-Social Relationship

If a public persona is perceived as trustworthy, the emergence of a para-social relationship is more likely (Chung & Cho, 2014). This is plausible because the para-social relationship can be perceived as a real friendship by the follower and therefore the basic requirements of a personal relationship should be fulfilled. Of course, further factors are necessary to create a long-lasting para-social relationship as discussed in the chapter dealing with influencer-follower relationships.

3.5.4 Purchase Intention

Trust has a significant impact on the buying intention of social media users (Nurlaily, Noermijati, & Hussein, 2017; Ng, 2013; Gibreel, Alotaibi, & Altmann, 2018; Che et al., 2017). Increasing trust within a business relationship is accompanied by reducing risk and therefore the most important mediator to be considered aiming for increased sales figures. The study by Pentina, Zhang, and Basmonova (2013) has made a very interesting discovery that is line with earlier study findings (Till, 2001). The results show that trust within social media platforms is transferable. Their research showed that the trust in Twitter as a platform transfers to businesses hosted on the same platform. That phenomenon of transference can be described with carrying over the effects of past relationships into future relationships, which is based on the activation of a cognitive schema triggered by a stimulus. This process originates from social psychology and was first described by Andersen & Baum (1994). Based on these findings, one can suppose that trust in an influencer can also "rub off" on a recommended brand and thus can lead to an increased purchase intention for a certain brand product.

However, some agile studies have shown the opposite: the trustworthiness of an opinion leader on social media influenced brand awareness and purchase intention negatively and results demonstrated that traditional marketing methods are as effective as influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2018; Djavaarova & Rushworth, 2017). Hence, it is interesting to get more data on this topic.

This qualitative research investigates in how far factors influencing trust and outcomes discussed in previous research are reflected in the interviews conducted with digital natives and if new insights can be gathered.

Based on the theoretical framework presented, it can be assumed that an influencer who is competent, altruistically motivated, transparent, attractive, and represents a similar system of values and norms appears to be most trustworthy. Besides, based on previous research, it can be assumed that once trust is established, the purchase intention of the followers increases, loyalty to the influencer is established and a higher willingness to provide personal information is given.

3.6 Unfollowing

As mentioned earlier, the social media network is the main capital of any influencer. Based on engagement and numbers of followers the value of each influencer is estimated. Followers can follow or unfollow accounts on Instagram at any moment. If followers have negative attitudes toward an influencer, they can unfollow the influencer immediately, which then influences the influencer's own brand effect (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, followership loss could mean a decrease in face values and that, directly and indirectly,

influences business (Maity, Gajula, & Mukerjee, 2018). The current state of research on this subject is very limited. A study by Maity, Gajula, and Mukerjee (2018) identifies the reasons for follower loss among Twitter users. This quantitative study proposes a feature-based model that anticipates a possible loss of followers. They focused on language usage and content in the tweets posted by opinion leaders. The most influential factors affecting the loss of followers are repetitive content, topic diversity, and frequency of tweets. Since the platform Twitter is specialized in the spread of short messages (in contrast to the visual focus has Instagram has) the results can only be used to a limited extent. Though, the study makes clear that unfollowing is an actual topic within social media and should be addressed more frequently. This study is mainly interested in the question if follower loss is also related to a loss of trust. Targeted questions that address this specific topic during the interview intend to provide new insights.

4 Methods

In this research, a qualitative approach is used to find out how trust emerges, and which factors influence the influencer-follower relationship. This chapter describes the participants interviewed and explains how the interviews have been designed to get a rich and informative dataset. Further, the procedure, as well as the critical incident technique used for the main part of the interview, are discussed. In the end, the coding procedure as well as the methods used to ensure validity and reliability are introduced. Twenty-nine interviews have been conducted to gather the data on trust influencing factors. These interviews have been semi-structured to get a true understanding of the phenomenon. According to Wainwright (1997), interviews help to get an in-depth understanding of the experience and perceptions of participants, and therefore it is a reliable method to get rich and detailed information.

4.1 Participants

Twenty-nine people participated in the study, 24 of whom were female. This is due to the study topic, which mainly dealt with influencers in the fashion sector. All participants are digital natives which means they either belong to generation Y or Z and are between 18 and 33 years old. This age group belongs to the heaviest users of social media platforms (Bolton et al., 2013; Prakashyadav & Rai, 2017) and is also described as digital natives since they are the first generation that has spent their whole life in a digital environment (Aksoy et al., 2013).

The average age of the participants was 24 years ($SD=3.38$) and they studied either at university or applied university.

The participants have been recruited via the Test Subject Pool system SONA, a participant management program from the University of Twente, and a snowball sampling procedure, which means that the first participants of this study have been asked to approach their contacts to participate in this study. It is noticeable that a large proportion of the participants study communication sciences or psychology. This is due to the test subject pool, which is only used by bachelor students of the Behavioral Management and Social Sciences faculty (BMS).

Before being interviewed a small survey had to be filled in to make sure that the recipient was suitable for this research. The questions of the pre-survey aim to ensure that the participant uses the app Instagram at least weekly and that they are of legal age. Furthermore, a question was asked to ensure that the recipient follows at least one Instagram user in the fashion or lifestyle branch with more than 10.000 followers.

4.2 Procedure

The interviews took place in a neutral and calm surrounding at the University of Twente or the participant's home. At the outset of the interview, the participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, permission was asked to record the interview and it was pointed out that they may stop the interview if needed. The interviewer highlighted that the participant's opinion and experience are relevant for answering the interview questions. Then, if not done before, the recipients were asked to fill in the pre-survey that has been described above and asked if they understood the briefing which was sent at least 24 hours before the interview took place.¹ If the interviewer was in doubt, the briefing was verbally summarized again, having ensured that every participant had similar conditions.

In the introductory part of the interview, the participants were invited to introduce themselves and to describe their usage behavior of Instagram. Follow-up questions ensured that all necessary information was gathered. In the following part of the interview, the critical incident technique was used to get more information about the factors which influenced the participant's decision to trust an influencer. The use of the critical incident technique is very useful to get insights into the thinking processes of the participants and how and why they trust influencers. When asking participants to describe a critical incident the definition of it was made clear. Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990) defined a critical incident as a situation

¹ The briefing and the pre-survey can be found in Appendix A

that makes an essential contribution, which can be positive or negative, to a phenomenon. That means participants have been asked to describe situations in which the behavior of other actors or their behavior has had positive or negative consequences regarding their experience with trust in an influencer.

After having described a critical incident important to the participant, the interviewer asked follow-up questions to get a more detailed picture of the incident. That included questions about the outcome of the situation, external factors that could have played a role, the personality of the influencer, and the participant's knowledge about influencer marketing.

The second section of the interview was used to analyze the wording used by the participant when describing the influencer. Follow-up questions helped to understand why the term influencer was (not) avoided and if the word has a negative connotation for the participant. Furthermore, this part of the interview was used to discuss the relationship the participants have with the influencer described in the critical incident. Besides that, questions have been asked to understand how, according to the participant, well-known social-media personalities can build up and lose trust. The last part of the interview focused on previous research results. The interviewer asked the participants to evaluate the six most important factors identified from older studies and to give their opinion on them. Finally, the recipients were asked to assess their propensity to trust.

Each interview took approximately 35 to 45 minutes and was conducted in English or German, depending on the nationality of the participant. The topic list used is shown in table 2.

Table 2
Topic List

Subject	Explanation	(Possible) Follow-Up Questions, referring to
Demographics	Nationality, Age, Education	
General Usage Patterns	Daily, Weekly	
Purpose of Usage	Entertainment, Inspiration, Boredom etc.	
Critical Incident	Concrete Situation in which the participant felt they could (not) trust an influencer	- Reasons why the participant felt they could (not) trust

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outcomes of the situation - Details of the incident - Details of the product/service recommendation (if mentioned)
Influencer-follower relationship	Relationship with the influencer described in the critical incident before	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strength and duration of the relationship - Interactiveness and intensity of the relationship - Characteristics of the influencer
Wording	Wording used to refer to the influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reasons why the participant chose a certain term to describe the individual - Connotation of the word influencer
Trust-building factors	Factors (in the view of the participant) that can increase the trustworthiness of an influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The factors mentioned by the participant - Concrete situations
(Not) trust-building factors	Factors (in the view of the participant) that can decrease the trustworthiness of an influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The factors mentioned by the participant - Concrete Situations
Unfollowing an influencer	Factors or situations increasing the probability of unfollowing an influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concrete situations in which the participant

		unfollowed an influencer
Previous studies on factors influencing trust	Discussion on the factors introduced in table 1	- Concrete situations
Additional information	Possibility to add relevant information that was not mentioned before	

4.3 Data analysis

After all interviews have been conducted, the recordings have been transcribed and coded with the program ATLAS.ti. A deductive approach to coding was taken since a large amount of research is already available on trust influencing factors. The results of previous mostly quantitative research have been collected, analyzed, and transferred into possible codes for this research. Even if some of these studies had different emphases within the same topic (for example the trust in commercial accounts on Instagram or trust in traditional celebrities), it can be assumed that the factors influencing trust are similar and can, therefore, serve as a base for the codebook used for this study. This codebook can be found below in table 3. During the coding process, new codes have been added to enable the most accurate data evaluation possible. After two rounds of coding, the final codebook consisted of 55 codes, of which 16 belong to the initial one. To ensure that the initial and new codes are comprehensible and reliable, an independent judge was asked to code 10% of the data. The Cohen's kappa has been calculated for three out of the 29 transcripts. The first calculation (0.53) did not match the expected reliability standard (0.6). Therefore, the codes were discussed with the second coder, which resulted in 5 codes being defined more precisely to avoid misunderstandings and to achieve a higher level of reliability. These codes were expectations, experience, group promotion, authenticity, and transparency. All these codes have been defined in more detail since the coding process with the second coder made clear that these codes have not been clear and distinct enough. After the codebook was revised and both coders agreed on the same codes, Cohen's kappa was calculated again. With a value of 0.67, the expected reliability standard has been fulfilled and the codebook was used for further coding.² For methodological accountability, the topic list used for the interviews has been added to this paper to retrace what has been asked during the interviews.

² The calculation of the Kohen's Kappa can be found in Appendix B

For further analysis, second-order codes have been created. These codes retrace citations which have been coded with the same code combinations and enable the researcher to find links in the data set. Therefore, codes have been created that did not indicate concrete content alignments but just serve as an instrument to organize the data. These codes are 'reasons to trust', 'reasons to not trust', and 'related to buying'. Another feature of the program ATLAS.ti, the co-occurrence table helped to identify code groups meaning codes that have been used in combination more frequently and which are not identified by the second-order codes.

Table 3
Initial Codebook

Category	Description	Source
Influencer's characteristics	All statements about the influencer's characteristics regarding the trust-building factors	
Attractiveness	Statements about the attractiveness of a certain influencer	Source Attractiveness Model; Halo theory; McGuire, 1985; Ohanian, 1990; Lou & Yuan, 2018
Perceived competence	Statements regarding the knowledge and expertise of a certain influencer	Source Credibility Model, McCorskey, 1966; Che et al., 2017, Mayer et al., 1995, Li et al., 2008 source astute, Cheung & Lee, 2006; Din et al., 2018
Consistency	Statements regarding the consistency of an influencer's behavior	Butler, 1991
Similarity/ Shared values	Statements about the similarity between follower and influencer	Sokolova & Kefi, 2018; Gibreel et al.2018, Lou & Yuan 2018, Cheng et al., 2016
Relevance	Statements about how relevant a product/service recommendation is for a	Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017

	certain influencer (e.g. someone who suffered from overweight, is more trusted when recommending a certain diet)	
Perceived benevolence	Statements about the goodwill of the influencer	Che et al., 2017; Din et al., 2018, Mayer et al., 1995; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Cheung & Lee., 2006
Perceived integrity	Statements about the consistency of the influencer's behavior	Che et al., 2017; Din et al., 2018, Mayer et al., 1995; Lieberman, 1981; Moorman, 1993; Cheung & Lee, 2006
Authenticity	Statements regarding the authenticity of the influencer's content	Audrezet et al., 2018; Popova et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2017
Channel characteristics	Statements about Instagram and regarding the content of the influencer's stories and posts	
Network Size	Statements about the number of followers an influencer has	De Veirman et al., 2017
Price	Statements about the price of the recommended service/product	Din et al., 2018; Rafinda et al., 2018; Yahia et al., 2018
Transparency	Statements regarding the transparency of the influencer's content	Audrezet et al., 2018
Sponsorship Disclosure	Statements about the influencer's willingness to disclosure sponsorships	Hwang & Jeong, 2016
Personal Factors	Statements about the influence of personal factors on trust	

Experience	Statements about prior experiences that influence trust	Scott, 2015
Individual's Tendency to trust	Statements about the propensity to trust	Che et al., 2017; Din et al., 2018, Abdul-Rahman & Hailes, 2000, Mayer et al., 1995
Para-Social Relationship	Statements regarding the relationship with the influencer	Sokolova & Kefi, 2019

5 Results

In this chapter, the results of the qualitative study are introduced. The section is structured as follows: firstly, an overview of the participants usage patterns is given. The reasons for usage are explained as well as the types of influencers the interviewees referred to. Secondly, a short overview of the described critical incidents is provided which serves as an introduction to the subsequent subchapters. These subchapters present the findings related to the influencer-follower relationship, the reasons to unfollow, the factors influencing trust, and the outcomes of trust. The findings derive from the critical incidents described as well as the follow-up questions asked during the interviews.

5.1 Overview of usage patterns

All participants indicated that they use the app Instagram daily. The majority of all participants also stated that they open the app several times a day and that the usage time is above an hour. When analyzing the reasons for using Instagram, gender differences are noticeable. For the female participants, entertainment and inspiration are the main motivation for following influencers. Three of the female participants also stated that they use the app specifically to be informed about new products and to make online purchases.

Another striking feature among female users is that Instagram is described as a dream world. The influencer symbolizes the dream life as illustrated by the following comment:

[1] *"I really just look for the opposite because for me I always say Instagram is not my real life. So, I just follow things that I would like to wear or what I would like to buy or what I would like to have but I won't have because Instagram is a different life than real life. Actually,*

she's like my dream life because she travels, she dresses up really nicely. She uses high-end clothing and she has this sense of fashion.” (Participant 22).

For the male participants, entertainment is also one of the main motivations. Furthermore, almost all male participants stated that they use the app as a distraction. Only one participant named inspiration as one of the main reasons for using Instagram. It is conspicuous that all five male participants stressed that Instagram is not a serious advertising platform for them. Participant 26 described this as follows: [2] *“If I was looking for a product, Instagram would be the very last place I would look at something because I have the feeling that you're being ripped off.”*³.

In addition to the main motivation, it was also investigated what kind of influencers were mentioned. Only three participants stated that they subscribed to mega influencers like Kim Kardashian. The majority of all female participants follow micro and macro fashion influencers as well as accounts that show a sustainable or healthy lifestyle. Only one participant mentioned beauty as an interesting topic. Further, influencers focusing on sport and mental health predominate when discussing the participant's favorite influencers. The male participants were mainly interested in influencers dealing with mental health, sports and travel and did not follow any fashion influencers.

5.2 Critical Incidents

As described in the previous chapter, the basis of each interview was a critical incident that was well remembered by the participant of the study. This situation was the starting point for in-depth questions, which served to learn as much as possible about the background and influencing factors that eventually led to (non-) trust. A total of 16 situations were described in which an influencer was trusted and 13 in which an influencer was deliberately not trusted. It is noteworthy that 19 situations were mentioned in connection with a purchase recommendation/advertisement. This shows that the majority of participants associate trust with purchase intention. However, it must be mentioned that no situation ultimately led to a purchase. Most participants stated that this was due to their general willingness to spend money. They indicated that as students they have to make careful and conscious choices on what to spend their monthly income on. Based on this result, a separate chapter will deal in detail with statements regarding a possible purchase decision.

Despite the 13 critical incidents that responded to a negative experience, only two participants unfollowed the influencer because of the negative experience they had. One

³ Original Quotations can be found in Appendix C

participant stated that she followed the person again after a short time. However, some questions dealing with unfollowing have been asked detached from the critical incident described by the participant. Besides that, all findings could be derived through the critical incident and follow-up questions dealing with that incident. It should be mentioned that participants also referred to other situations to underline some of their statements.

5.3 Influencer-follower relationship

In this section, the findings regarding the influencer-follower relationship will be illustrated. It will first be discussed how the participants evaluate the term 'influencer' in general. Further, it is shown which terms and associations are used when the participants refer to the influencers they are following.

In the third part of the interview the participants were asked to evaluate the term 'influencer' in general. It is noticeable that, with a few exceptions, all of them used the term influencer continuously through the interview to refer to the well-known personalities on Instagram. The two participants who avoided the term influencer used the term 'celebrity' or 'blogger' instead. Furthermore, about half of the interview partners indicated that the term is associated with the aspect of selling as illustrated with the following statement:

[3] *"I associate it mainly with a person who has made it his main job to live from Instagram and does this by posting interesting posts but also by doing product placements. Sure, you can also "Influence" without advertising products, but for me this term is linked to the sales aspect."* (Participant 7).

Due to the sales aspect, the term has negative connotations for the majority of participants. The participants who did not respond to the sales aspect rated the term negatively due to the estimated amount of work and the superficial content that is conveyed. Participant 15 describes this as follows:

[4] *"I think the influencer should be a person that is a bright person and inspires the society and does something very beneficial for society. These Instagram influencers don't have a real job or don't have a real thing to do. They are not smart but come from a wealthy family and they want to use that lifestyle to show up to get even more money. [...] If they have the money to travel, they travel and they take some pictures and they post it. They don't have real jobs; they don't have real insights to inspire people. They're called influencers but I don't think that that term represents these people."*

The following aspects are further reasons for the study participants to have negative perceptions of influencers: search for recognition; enticement of young social media users to purchase and acting out a superficial lifestyle; misuse of the position as being a role model, and how the term is pictured in society. 'Search for recognition' is the reason why influencers share most of their lives, according to one participant. The personal and private insights into the life of an influencer are exchanged for feedback and appreciation of the followers. There are also several participants who considered influencers to be a questionable influence on the younger social media audience. Especially young girls are given a false body image due to influencers posting perfect pictures without any flaws. Another interview partner stated that influencers misuse their position as role models to introduce harmful products and services to their followers as for example e-cigarettes. In this interview as well as in others, it became also clear that influencers are negatively portrayed by the traditional media and that this opinion was partly adopted by the study participants. This is illustrated with the following statement: [5] *"It is negatively connoted for me because press also portrays influencers as not having a real job. And therefore, I mainly associate influencers with something negative."* (Participant 12). It should be noted that all male participants expressed explicit negative opinions about the term and professional image of influencers. However, this observation must be viewed critically, as only a few men were interviewed.

Besides the participants expressing their negative thoughts about influencers, two respondents had a neutral view towards influencers. They claimed that this is merely a new form of advertising and that influencers are simply a sort of celebrities used for marketing purposes on social media channels. Another group of participants had positive attitudes or differentiated more in their opinion of influencers. The participants who differentiated, indicated that the profession appears interesting and cool but is accompanied by superficiality and falsity: [6] *"Yeah and it's a pretty cool job. [...] But I don't like the shallowness that comes along with it, how they all pretend like oh my life is amazing."* (Participant 1). These group of participants also stated that influencers have to be divided into good and bad influencers depending on what they use their reach for and if they act based on altruistic or profit motives. Only two participants were entirely positive towards the term influencer. One participant valued the vulnerability an influencer accepts in order to share as many private insights as possible with their followers: [7] *"So as an influencer I see a person that has her or his life on tape most of the time which is a sign of vulnerability and he's not afraid to do that. And that's what I appreciate about them."* (Participant 11).

In summary, it can be said that an influencer needs to be empowered to become influential. Further, the section above shows clearly that most of the participants make

generalizing statements about influencers as a whole and do not differentiate much when talking about them. However, as the following section shows, the participants in the study do distinguish and often take very different positions when they evaluate and describe the influencers that they follow out of personal conviction.

For some participants, it is noteworthy that the opinions on the term itself seem to be very detached from the opinions the participants have on the social media personalities they follow and whose posts and stories they regularly watch. This is particularly noticeable in the case of two participants who used a strong wording during the interview to strengthen their opinion about influencers in general and the ones they follow. One participant consistently avoided the term influencer when talking about her favorite social media users and used only the term blogger to describe a typical macro-influencer named *marylauren* from America. She posts and shares her life exclusively on the Instagram platform and has no blog on which she has published articles, which would explain why the participant would avoid the term influencer. It seems that the participant differentiated between influencers and bloggers. Bloggers are all influencers she follows and sympathizes with. She stated that she is quite willing to buy products that are presented and that she has great trust in bloggers, which is due to their willingness to share their private lives. It becomes clear that the participant identifies qualitative differences in the term, which can be deduced from the following quote:

[8] *"I don't think I've ever followed a person to use them as an influencer for me. I've never looked for an influencer who presents me with things I could buy, but I've always been interested in bloggers who write and talk about things."* (Participant 27).

This clear differentiation is also evident in another interview. The participant drew a clear line between the typical mega influencer, *chiaraFerragni* as an example, and the influencer she has been following for years called *florencegiven* – awarded with "Cosmopolitan influencer of the year 2019", whom she repeatedly referred to as "Just a cool girl" and whom she spoke freely of the "bad" characteristics of influencers which she described as doing sponsored content, selling products, and sharing an unrealistic lifestyle:

[9] *"I think Chiara is really a pretty girl and wears pretty clothes but yeah since she's wearing everything that is sponsored and she has then her own brand and most of the stuff she wears for example is from her own brand to sell it even more. And I think Florence just wears what she wants because she is this nice person."* (Participant 2).

The two examples mentioned above describe participants who are particularly striking because they also clearly differ in their choice of words. But also, the majority of the other interview partners show that the perception of influencers in general and that of influencers whom they follow and whose content they consume regularly, clearly differ. Even though the term 'influencer' has negative connotations for most of the participants, the second part of the interview (which dealt with the relationship one has with the influencers one follows) makes clear that the "own" influencers are mainly seen as role models. It seems as if an in- and out-group are being created, which is even partly underlined with other titles so that it becomes clear that the "own" influencers are excluded from the common opinion about influencers in society.

This was also evident during the interview with participant 4, who had a very clear opinion about influencers in general and stated that these opinion leaders mainly take advantage of Instagram to receive recognition. Nevertheless, she took a very different point of view while talking about her favorite influencer which became famous on social media because of her dancing skills. She admitted that the influencer, called *gretaelizondo*, is not different to other influencers but since she admires her, she loves all the content she creates, as illustrated by the following statement: [10] *"I love her posts and she's always sharing stories and I really love all what she's posting."* (Participant 4). The same is valid for participant 10, who took the position that influencers post and share their private life based on profit motives. However, the following comment makes clear that she did not assign this motive to one of her favorite influencers: [11] *"I saw that she's really here because she wants to share like what she's thinking about her state of mind in general but I think that the majority of influencers is actually just there for the money-making part or is taking great advantage of it."* (Participant 10). The participant referred to a video the influencer named *mirellativegal* posted on YouTube, in which she revealed how much money she could make if she would accept every cooperation she was offered. This transparency made the follower trust more. Based on these cases, it can be concluded that influencers are separated into in- and out-groups based on their behavior which has to be unique or of a high value for the follower.

When analyzing the interviews with regard to the influencer-follower relationship another interview stands out in giving interesting insights. The participant is one of the few who regularly contacts the influencers and sends comments and short messages, which, according to her own statements, sometimes lead to a conversation with the influencer. The follower states the following during the interview: [12] *"So I thought: It's not who you are in your normal posts. It's just obvious you're getting paid for this and that makes me think: If you're going that way, it makes me less interested in you since I just followed you because of your funny personality."* (Participant 8). The comment is characteristic for a para-social

relationship, as the follower clearly has the feeling of knowing the influencer personally and therefore develops a feeling of disappointment, as the influencer does not act as the participant was used to from previous posts and stories.

Concerning the influencer-follower relationship, it should be noted in this chapter that the interviews give clear indications that the act of following does not automatically mean that the influencer is trusted. One participant even points out that she does not like the influencer but follows her, nevertheless. She describes being one of Kim Kardashian's followers as her "Guilty Pleasure". She also describes the motivation to follow the influencer as follows:

[13] *"They are more posting pictures, but they make videos and I'm just curious about - again - what is real life for them. Because they post like being in the gym or buying stuff or getting ice cream and I'm just curious about that but I hate them."* (Participant 22).

This seems to be mainly the case for mega influencers. From this, it can be concluded that another reason to follow an influencer is curiosity. As this was only an occasional topic of the interviews and is not the focus of the study, this statement was not discussed in detail.

In short, the opinion leaders who are consciously chosen for their specific characteristics are assessed as more positive, because they support the follower in achieving certain goals. These goals range from being entertained through acting out a more sustainable lifestyle, and the discovery of new and interesting consumer goods.

5.4 Unfollowing

As already mentioned in the beginning, this study also aims to deepen the knowledge about reasons for unfollowing influencers on Instagram. Therefore, the participants were asked specifically about situations in which they unfollowed an influencer. To begin with, it is noteworthy that all participants in this study already unfollowed an influencer's account. The factors responsible for unfollowing certain influencers are introduced in more detail in the following section.

5.4.1 Promoting brands and products

Twelve participants indicated that an influencer who constantly promotes products or services is someone they would unfollow. The decisive factor here is that the commercial content predominates and is not compensated with content that shows private insights or other content that is not based on profit motives. Another participant stated that she would

unfollow someone if that person would advertise too many items she cannot afford. That is because she would constantly compare herself to the influencers which would make her feel unsatisfied eventually. Based on several comments, it can also be concluded that influencers who do many advertisements are perceived as inauthentic, as illustrated with the following statement: [14] *"She already does a lot of advertising and hence she doesn't look as authentic as she used to."* (Participant 19). One of the two critical incidents that dealt with unfollowing was also linked to the fact that the influencer was promoting too many products. The female participant followed the respective influencer because she already built a connection through a popular German tv-show and perceived the person as authentic. As the content of the influencer did not match with her first impression the participant had through television, she unfollowed.

5.4.2 Repetition

Eleven participants in this study commented on the repetition factor, stating that they already unfollowed an influencer or would unfollow someone because of too many repetitions in their content. That means either that the content appears too monotonous and the influencer has no varied content. One participant referred to a beauty influencer, who would only post about new beauty products and new make-up techniques, which was not of interest to the follower because she wanted to see more diverse content. Another participant indicated that she would unfollow someone if the influencer only talks about themselves without sharing more valuable content that would also address topics outside the influencer's own life. Repetition as a factor can also refer to the frequency of the posts. According to one participant, too many posts within a day can also lead to a follower loss. This is illustrated by the following comment:

[15] *"If my start page consists only of posts from this influencer or the stories are incredibly long, where you have to click your way through and somehow everything repeats itself. Then I'm not interested anymore."* (Participant 25).

It is striking that the topic 'unfollowing' was addressed in only two of the 29 critical incidents. However, specific inquiries made clear that all study participants had already unfollowed one or more influencers. Based on the given arguments for unfollowing a person on Instagram, an explanation can be derived. It seems that the study participants are more likely to unfollow someone if they have not yet built up a relationship with them and therefore have not yet built up trust or a low level of trust. Because of this, the decision is easier to

unfollow someone, and this explains why such a situation was not often perceived as a critical incident.

5.5 Factors influencing trust

In this chapter, the factors which are mentioned in relation to trust are introduced and described. It is limited to the factors that are most frequently mentioned. It is noticeable that factors referring to the influencer's characteristics meaning the behavior and actions by a particular influencer are most frequently mentioned

The following table shows which codes were used when referring to a situation in which an influencer was trusted.

Table 4
Codes applied together with the code "reason to trust"

Meta categories	Used codes	Frequencies	Percentages of participants who used the code (29=100%)
Influencer's characteristics	Authenticity	78	82.8%
	Similarity and shared values	24	58.6%
	Perceived competence	18	44.8%
	Perceived Benevolence	13	4,81%
	Perceived Integrity	9	44.8%
	Youtube/ TV connection	8	20.7%
	Role model	5	17.2%
	Humor	5	17.2%
	Attractiveness	5	17.2%
	Style	4	10.3%
	Relevance	19	48.3%
Channel characteristics			

Personal factors	Sponsorship	15	37.9%
	Disclosure		
	Transparency	11	34.5%
	Results	7	20.7%
	New knowledge	6	17.2%
	Network Size	6	20.7%
	Argument Quality	6	13.8%
	Price	1	3.4%
	Length of relationship	12	34.5%
	Confirmation offline world	6	17.2%
	Interaction	5	17.2%
	Fit needs/interests	4	13.8%
	Experience	3	10.3%
	Familiarity with brand	2	6.9%

5.5.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is the most often cited factor regarding trust. Authenticity was continuously mentioned with four other factors, which are named: originality, holistic picture, private insights, and perceived honesty. These can be described as important aspects of authenticity. In the following, the four factors will be discussed separately in order to explain their significance in more detail.

It seems that authenticity is often used as an umbrella term to describe a person who owns all character traits that make someone trustworthy. That can be illustrated with the following statement: [16] *“I think authenticity is very important and I think basically all the questions you have asked come down to this.”* (Participant 3). This statement makes clear that for this participant authenticity equals trustworthiness. The fact that authenticity is crucial in order to be trustworthy is repeatedly mentioned by several other interview partners. Besides equating authenticity with trustworthiness, authenticity was also equated with transparency by several other participants. This assimilation will be further explained in the course of this paper.

As already stated above, originality is a part of authenticity and describes the extent to which an influencer is perceived to display a realistic lifestyle which means showing more than one aspect of their life, as illustrated by this statement:

[17] *"You should just be a regular person like my life is also not perfect so their life cannot be perfect. You should not picture it as if your life is perfect because it's just not possible. [...] So, I think it's also nice that you show that some things were not great, or your day was not that perfect."* (Participant 2).

The participants would like to get insights into a different lifestyle – which they may never be able to live in this way and which partly represents their dream life – but they would still like to be given a realistic picture and also be informed about aspects that are not ideal. Another participant in the study concretized this and made clear that it is important for her to experience imperfect moments but that she quickly gets the impression that this is only published by influencers to present themselves more authentically. So, it seems to be a balancing act, and too much negative content is also critically perceived by some participants. Further, continuous exposure of the private life seems to be important for the participant to assess an influencer as trustful as demonstrated by the following comment:

[18] *"Which is good that they're at least opening up about that but I think it makes someone more trustworthy if they just share more like constantly how they are feeling so not always their extreme lows or just their perfect pictures. But everything that's in between there as well. I would like it if someone says: Actually, I had a rather boring weekend. [...] Because sometimes I feel like a lot of influencers know that the followers know that the influencer world is pretty fake. So, to get rid of that image they share their weaknesses or their fears."* (Participant 1).

During the interviews, it became clear that followers do not want to see perfection but authenticity. An important part of that concept is showing the "holistic picture" of someone's lifestyle and therefore impart credibility, as already stated above. An influencer should be someone whom millennials can identify and compare themselves with. Followers seem to look for an individual who appears human and hence natural as illustrated by the following statement:

[19] *"When I feel like I'm somehow close to real life. I think that's where the trend generally goes a bit, not just in the fake world. That you can see people without make-up and*

just see them in a funny situation or it's a spontaneous story that doesn't seem staged to me. I also like listening to stories from time to time, where people just talk about what moves them. And if so, it makes me trust more when they're not trying to sell me something all the time.” (Participant 7).

The interviews also showed that the participants appreciate it if influencers remain authentic when recommending products and respond to all aspects in order to give the follower an authentic overall picture of the product and thus ultimately ensure greater reliability. One participant summarizes this as follows:

[20] *“Maybe be authentic but this word it's used so many times that it lost essence. By authenticity I mean if something is not OK just admit it. First of all, try the things you promote. Then if you think they are not okay don't promote them or at least let the people know "For me the product didn't work but you can try it and see" whatever.”* (Participant 11).

Another important aspect mentioned during the interviews is giving private insights. This complements the desire of the followers to get a holistic picture of the life of their favorite influencer. It is noticeable that many influencers mentioned during the interviews are also frequent vloggers which means they post vlogs on Youtube or IG TV, which can be described as a visual diary recording most of their private life. The difference between vlogs and stories is the length of the uploaded video and the edit of the material. Stories are short real-time videos whereas vlogs are edited and usually a summary of a selected time period, which is usually a week or a whole day. The provision of a lot of visual material enables the followers to learn more about the influencer and thus build up trust, as illustrated by the following comment: [21] *“She's very chatty and an open person and she also makes YouTube videos and I find her like trustworthy because she's just this kind of person that shares a lot.”* (Participant 29). Another participant explained that the private insights she gets, show her that the influencer is vulnerable, and accepts this risk in order to take the followers with them through their private life. This act of exposing private life can be understood as a reciprocal act since both parties are willing to become vulnerable to the other person's actions: [22] *“She also shares stuff with her family and when she visits something. I like that she lets the door open and we can see a bit in her personal life. So, she's showing vulnerability and I appreciate that.”* (Participant 11).

According to another participant, the insights into the private life of the influencers seem to compensate for the advertisements the follower is exposed to. This statement is interesting because it indicates that influencers who show a lot of private impressions may

be given a leap of faith and therefore many product placements are evaluated less critical by the follower: [23] *"Most of the time, it's because they share personal stuff and I find them pleasant and its more likely that I follow them even though they do many ads."* (Participant 20).

Perceived honesty is also a part of authenticity and strongly related to the factor "holistic picture" which makes an influencer appear more human. It seems easier for the participants to assess a person if they have the impression of getting realistic and honest insights into the influencer's life.

With regard to the perceived honesty of an influencer, it is noticeable that this characteristic is mentioned much more often in connection with distrust than trust. Some critical incidents were about situations in which an influencer appeared dishonest. This had a lasting effect on the followers by questioning the following stories and product recommendations much more as illustrated by the following comment: [24] *"My trust went down. And she was posting some stuff on some promotions, but I wasn't feeling like following that at all."* (Participant 4).

To conclude, authenticity is a very broad concept which, according to the participants, consists of four parts. An influencer should show private insights that are realistic, holistic, and honest to ensure that followers perceive them as authentic since this seems to be the most significant factor for trustworthiness.

5.5.2 Similarity and shared values

Among authenticity, the similarity between influencer and follower is the most frequently cited reason why to trust an influencer. Based on several statements, it can be concluded that this similarity does not refer to a comparable lifestyle but to a similar set of values and norms and, to quote one participant, „how they handle things“ and if the follower can identify with how the influencer approaches life detached from tangible goods, as illustrated with the following comment:

[25] *"There's a big difference, I'd say. That she flies back and forth all the time and has a flat in Paris and a flat in Hamburg. Then that makes a certain difference because I know I'm on a completely different level when it comes to that. But yes, through things like broccoli, which I also love to eat, or through humor I have a certain connection to her, and I think that it plays a bigger role than earning the same salary."* (Participant 12).

The same seems to be true for similarity as for transparency: it helps the followers who were interviewed to better assess an influencer and build up trust. That also explains why similar preferences are more important than comparable everyday life. During the interviews, it became clear that completely different approaches to life have a certain appeal but are not content that the participants want to see every day. One participant pointed out that she obtains this kind of input from the platform YouTube instead of Instagram. Another interview partner described it as follows: [26] *"I think I'm more likely to follow people who are similar to me. Yes, it is exciting to deal with people who have different norms and values, but on Instagram I don't follow people who are so different from me. Because you don't want to look at that every day."* (Participant 7).

5.5.3 Perceived Competence

The factor 'perceived competence' is another quality of an influencer that increases trust among the followers interviewed and is part of the frequently cited trust model by Mayer et al. (1995). Competence can be described as having knowledge and being well educated about a certain subject area. In addition to the fact of providing knowledge, study participants appreciate it if they can also evaluate the quality of the information provided on the basis of shown results. This seems to be particularly important for the sports, health, and beauty sector. A participant stated that she trusts the influencer and its competence because the influencer posts before/after pictures showing a development. In this case, it was about a beauty treatment that the influencer advertised to reduce acne scars. Another participant referred to an influencer who shares effective fitness exercises with her audience. The followers have the opportunity to be present during the training. According to the participant, this has strengthened her faith in the competence of the influencer, as it has given her the opportunity to compare her knowledge with that of the influencer.

If an influencer is perceived as competent, this also seems to justify product placement, as the following comment shows: [27] *"So I would say that if someone promotes something then I would assume that the person knows what he is talking about. If the person is not competent in the topic, then they should not promote it, it would be useless."* (Participant 9). For another participant that seems less relevant and for her, even though it might be the influencer's core business, she states: [28] *"Well I mean if it's sponsored, I also just kind of take it with a grain of salt. You never really know if they would also recommend it to you without being sponsored."* (Participant 17).

5.5.4 Perceived Benevolence and Integrity

Perceived benevolence and integrity are also part of the integrational model of conceptual trust by Mayer et al. (1995). Compared to 'perceived competence', it is noteworthy that these two components are much less frequently expressed in the participant's reasoning about trust influencing factors. Nevertheless, as part of the topic list, the two factors have been discussed with every participant. The findings are summarized in the following abstract.

Perceived benevolence can be described as an altruistic behavior driven by passion and non-profit motives. Further, during the interviews, it was referred to benevolence when talking about actions that have been evaluated as doing good and which did not seem related to sponsored content.

As already mentioned, and also visible in table 4, it is not the most important factor influencing trustworthiness but once it becomes apparent that an influencer is acting out of charity, it is viewed positively. The participants seem to appreciate content which they perceive as passionate and helpful without having the feeling of being tricked into a sales pitch, as demonstrated in this quotation: [29] *"It is important, for my interest. I have the impression with many people that they only want to make money with it. Then it is really only a job. I prefer to follow people for whom it is not only a job. Where I have the feeling at least that it is not because of that."* (Participant 7).

During the interview, perceived integrity was discussed as well. According to relevant literature, it is also one of the core concepts of trust (Mayer et al. 1995). The statements gathered during the interview sessions show slightly different opinions among the participants.

It seems to be important for the participants that as soon as a certain attitude of the influencer can be determined, it also shows continuity. Nevertheless, it is also expected that the influencer deals critically and reflexively with this attitude and adapts it if necessary, if, for example, new findings on the topic in question becoming known. The following comment illustrates that:

[30] *"I think that to a certain extent it is important to be able to assess the person somehow. Especially when you go somewhere and you expect to see a certain content, that it's not like that today and different tomorrow. Such a baseline is somehow important, but I also think it's important that people are critical of their own principles. If the vegans would say now, somehow 50 new studies came out, which prove that eating meat is great and therefore we question now what we do, I think that's good."* (Participant 7).

Similarly, integrity gives the follower a certain degree of certainty about the character of the influencer. The better the influencer and his actions can be assessed, the more likely it is that the influencer will be trusted.

5.5.5 Relevance

Relevance describes how well the content matches the influencer's image. According to the participants, a fit between advertised product and influencer is evaluated and important for the building of trust. Ten statements refer explicitly to relevance when talking about factors that can increase trust. According to the participants, sponsored content is more accepted when the product is within the influencer's niche they present, as demonstrated by the following statement: [31] *"Especially if someone is doing advertisements for a lot of products and then different products and they don't seem to match with their profile, then I don't trust them."* (Participant 20). This factor is related to 'perceived integrity', whereby the focus with 'perceived integrity' is on behavior and not related to products introduced by the influencer.

If the influencer shows consistent behavior in regard to product choices and recurrent topics, the participants perceive them to be more trustworthy. Returning product recommendations to the same brand seem to show the follower that a conscious decision has been made and that the influencer supports the brand and its message. Product recommendations that do not appear authentic because they are only used once by the influencer might be seen critically and might weaken the trustworthiness of that person in the long-term. This is especially criticized in the case of an influencer because in addition to her well-known Instagram account called *rienne.meijer*, she regularly uploads popular vlogs on YouTube. Because of this, the followers get a good insight into her daily routine and become mistrustful when products and rituals are presented on Instagram that are not in line with her everyday life.

5.5.6 Sponsorship Disclosure

Among the others, sponsorship disclosure is also an important factor influencing whether an influencer is perceived as trustworthy or not. The following quotation illustrates this: [32] *"I think it is good that I can trust the influencer in this sense. Like you tell me now if you got money for this and then I know your opinion may have been paid. Before I buy this product, I should consider this fact."* (Participant 3). However, the interviews made clear that the opinion regarding sponsorship disclosure is very complex and that in some cases very different positions are taken. In the following, an overview of the different opinions is given in order to reflect and clarify the participants' views as accurately as possible.

One participant stated that he would believe a product recommendation more if no sponsorship was apparent, but that this would only strengthen credibility in the long term if it was true. The following statement makes this clear:

[33] *"I think it's good to show people that you're actually getting paid for it or not paid definitely. But if they wouldn't say it, I would maybe trust a little bit more on the product, but I would also kind of feel like yeah why would they hide that? I think it's nice and good to state that you're getting paid for certain things."* (Participant 14).

However, it does not seem to be relevant how much the influencer received as compensation, but only if compensation has taken place.

In addition to the popular belief that sponsorship disclosure is important for building trust, it became apparent that there are conflicting opinions. A participant stated that as long as the overall picture appears authentic, transparency regarding sponsorship is not always necessary. Another participant indicated that due to the tightened advertising laws in Germany, the label "sponsored content" has lost its credibility, as influencers have started to label almost every post as an advertisement to not fear criminal prosecution. Because of the fact that nowadays also posts that only show other well-known personalities are marked as sponsored content, the term lost its usefulness for the identification of advertisements. This is demonstrated in the following comment:

[34] *"The right to advertise was tightened and then all influencers were totally anxious and simply wrote 'advertising' under each post. You can no longer see if it is now advertising or if they just write that out of fear although it is their own opinion and usually is written in a post like that: 'I write advertising now because of the advertising law but it is actually my own opinion' Even then I'm not so sure if it is really their own opinion."* (Participant 3).

Based on the interviews conducted, it is also clear that sponsorship disclosure only strengthens the trustworthiness of an influencer if the number of sponsored posts is moderate. This finding goes in a similar direction as the previously mentioned statement. One participant described this as follows: [35] *"So she was already very famous and everything she posted like if it's a story or just a regular post I think everything is sponsored. She doesn't have to pay for anything and it's just a really quick picture with it and then that's it. So, I would never really trust anything she would say."* (Participant 2).

5.5.7 Transparency

Transparency is often referred to in connection with sponsorship disclosure, but transparent communication is also important for the participants of this study to build up trust in an influencer, even if it is not linked to the sales aspect. A participant explains that transparent communication gives him the feeling of being able to assess the person's personality more accurately and increases the willingness to trust. As already mentioned, it is striking that transparency is also frequently mentioned together with authenticity, as illustrated with the following statement: [36] *"If the person is not transparent the person is not authentic and then I think: Why should I follow this person at all? Why should I trust this person at all?"* (Participant 9). One participant appreciated the transparency of the influencer, especially with regard to the use of the platform itself. She referred to a particular influencer, in whom she has a high degree of trust, as she provides insights into the *Insights* option of Instagram, which is only available to business accounts and shares these insights with her network. Through this transparency, which can also be seen as altruistic behavior, the trust of the participant has increased. The following citation reveals her statement in detail:

[37] *"She once did a story about the Instagram platform and specifically about the Insights of Instagram, for example what means "reached users", all these terms of the Insights option and what she thinks about it. I thought it was really great that she gave a little bit of transparency and really interesting and it kind of increased my trust."* (Participant 12).

Based on earlier study results, it was expected that attractiveness and the participants' general tendency to trust would be factors influencing trust in an influencer. According to the interviews, it can be stated that attractiveness is often mentioned when talking about reasons to follow certain influencers but for most of the participants, it seems not to be decisive for the trustworthiness of an opinion leader on social media. It is noteworthy that male participants do talk more often about attractiveness in the sense of conforming to beauty ideals for women and do also refer more often to attractiveness when explaining why they follow certain influencers, as shown by the following statement: [38] *"With women, it is quite primitive the attractiveness which makes me simply press the follow button."* (Participant 24).

Five participants do state that they assess an influencer as more trustworthy when they are also attracted by the appearance of the influencer, as illustrated by the following comment: [39] *"Because I think when I hear someone's voice and the way how a person talks it could really influence my perception of that person."* (Participant 21). Female participants refer more often to the voice, the aura, and the looks instead of physical appearance.

To conclude, attractiveness is important as it is a crucial factor in deciding whether or not to follow a particular influencer's account, but it does not seem decisive for building trust.

The factor 'individual's tendency to trust' is not mentioned in table 4 since it was discussed separately, and no participant referred to their own tendency to trust when talking about factors influencing the trustworthiness of influencers. During the interviews, it became clear that most of the participants have difficulties to realistically evaluate their personal tendency to trust. This became obvious when people indicated that they would evaluate themselves as skeptical but in the earlier stages of the interview indicated that they would follow product recommendations without seeking further opinions. Some other participants stressed that the individual's tendency to trust is highly dependent on the context and topic, as illustrated by the following comment: [40] *"It depends also of course with my finances I'm not going to just trust someone from the street or I'm gonna do better research and see where can I save my resources."* (Participant 11).

After the results of the study have been discussed, it becomes clear that not all previous research results have been expressed in the participants reasoning dealing with factors that are decisive for trusting an online opinion leader.

5.6 Outcomes of Trust

The following section introduces two of the outcomes of trust which were most frequently mentioned during the interviews. Besides, an explanation is given why outcomes from previous literature could not be confirmed with the data collected.

5.6.1 Purchase Intention

As already mentioned earlier, the participants of this study indicated that the probability of buying a product introduced by the influencer is linked to the trustworthiness of an influencer. However, this trust is dependent on other factors that influence the purchasing behavior of the followers. The following overview shows which factors were most frequently mentioned in connection with a possible purchase. Only factors that were mentioned more than five times in connection with a possible purchase were included. It was also ensured that factors not discussed here are not related to the other factors.

Table 5

Codes applied together with the code “related to buying”

Meta categories	Frequent used codes	Frequencies	Percentages of participants who used the code (29=100%)
Channel characteristics	Price	14	34.5%
	Ease of Access	10	31%
	Group promotion	7	20.7%
Influencer's characteristics	Similarity and shared values	5	13.8%
Personal factors	Fit needs/interests	24	48.3%
	Benefit	6	17.2%

One of the most important product characteristics for purchase intention is the price of the introduced item. It was most often cited as the reason why a product or service recommendation was not considered. This is since all participants are students and therefore have a limited income. All participants made the same statement regarding the price of a product. If the price is considered low, the probability that they will trust a product recommendation and purchase the product is much higher. Another characteristic that seems to play a role is the extent of professionalism of the linked product website. However, if the product is considered to be of a higher price level, other criteria must first be met, such as the necessity of the product. The above statements are supported by the following statement: [41] *“I think I was in that period thinking about getting a Fitbit but I was like it's kind of expensive. And I found these in-between options. So, I was like: I'm gonna order these, looks nice. So, the site was professional I was like OK.”* (Participant 11).

Another important reason to actively follow or not follow a product recommendation is the availability of the products. Therefore, it was often referred to the nationality of social media celebrities. Product recommendations from influencers who live on other continents are not considered by the participants, as access for them as European followers is much more difficult. Several participants argued that product recommendations are more effective if they are available in stores for testing, especially for beauty and sports articles. One participant explicitly mentioned that she appreciates collaborations between influencers and large platforms and that this has influenced her buying decision, as it simplifies the buying

process, as illustrated in the following comment: [42] *“Because I follow her and she pointed it out several times, it was almost the only option for me because it was also available on a big platform like Douglas. Actually, the main reason for my purchase decision was that it was easy to get it in the end.”* (Participant 12).

The factor ‘Fit needs/interest’ is the most decisive for purchase intention and behavior. Nonetheless, all comments on this topic show how closely all factors are related to each other. One participant stated that her purchase intention is most likely to be influenced if the item presented is a product she has been considering buying for some time, if it is presented authentically, and if an influencer provides a discount code. For another interviewee, two other facts were important for her to purchase an item that was introduced by an influencer. She has been looking for a specific product for a long time, here a fitness tracker, and an influencer offered a cheaper alternative to the popular Fitbit watch. These two factors led the follower to make a purchase eventually. Other statements also made clear that sponsored content is perceived less critically if it supports the follower in making a purchase decision for a product they need. If products are advertised that are not of interest to the follower, this does not seem to have any influence on the trust relationship with the influencer. According to the participants, irrelevant advertising will be ignored or clicked away. Though, this conclusion is only valid for a limited amount of advertisements. If participants experienced the content to be too commercial it influences the trust relationship.

The only characteristic of the influencer that seems to influence the purchase intention of the follower is ‘similarity and shared values’. Four participants made concrete statements referring to the similarity between them and the influencer. Nevertheless, everyone highlighted a different aspect of similarity. One participant stated that it is important for him that the influencer and he have the same attitude towards nutrition and that he has therefore trusted a product recommendation. Another participant has a special bond with an influencer because they like the same musical style and therefore wear the same outfits. Because of this similarity, she trusted a product recommendation. Besides, equal values in terms of women's eligibility and sustainability seem to reinforce trust and are decisive factors for purchase.

Another interesting result regarding the factors that influence the purchase intention and thus the trust in an influencer are group promotions. According to seven participants, it positively influences the purchase intention if more influencers advertise the same product, the following statement is reflecting the opinion of the participants: [43] *“And then it appeared, and several people said it's amazing. I was like OK, maybe she's lying. It's OK, but if several*

people are lying then maybe it's not true. So maybe they are not lying. Maybe they are honest. So, I was like OK I'm going to get it and see myself." (Participant 11)

This factor also seems to polarize as six of the other participants took a contrary view and explicitly stated that the fact that several influencers advertise the same product seems very suspect and untrustworthy. One statement is representative of all opinions: [44] *"Yeah. It's just when someone does one thing it's trustworthy but when a lot of influencers are doing the same thing then it gets again less trustworthy."* (Participant 1).

5.6.2 Loyalty

According to the statements that dealt with the length of an influencer-follower relationship, twelve participants do follow an influencer for several years and trust the influencer because of this circumstance. It is interesting to investigate which fact influences the loyal behavior of the followers. After analyzing all the responses regarding the reasons for their loyalty, there were three different response categories. A part of the study participants follows and trusts the influencer for a long time because the influencer has a constant behavior and despite an increased degree of popularity, no changes in behavior are noticeable. The main reason for the participants seems to be the fact that they have already followed a large part of the career and want to stay informed about other stages of the influencer's life. They are curious about the new developments the influencer is going through and want to stay up to date. This reason goes in line with the last answer category, in which the followers state that they are taking an interest and are proud to follow the career of the influencer. One of the participants also stated that she is very positive about the advertisement due to this fact, which is illustrated in the following comment: [45] *"I have two or three pages that I follow for a really long time and they grew a lot during this time. I think I wouldn't unfollow them. If you see them growing. It makes me happy that they are now able to do these advertisements."* (Participant 20).

Analyzing all comments referring to the length of the relationship between influencer and follower, it becomes clear that this factor correlates with trust, meaning that loyalty is indeed an outcome of trust, but a long relationship does also influence the perceived trustworthiness of an influencer.

5.6.3 Sharing personal information

Based on previous research results, sharing personal information was included in the theoretical framework as a possible outcome. However, none of the statements made during the interviews suggested that trust in the influencer increases the probability of sharing personal information with the influencer or the brands they cooperate with. A possible explanation for this result is that the participants were not aware of the fact that they disclosed

additional information as for example (e-mail) addresses when participating in raffles or free product samples and therefore did not mention any of those situations when being interviewed.

To summarize, the factors authenticity and shared values are the most crucial factors influencing trust in an influencer-follower relationship building. Authenticity is a concept consisting of four components referring to the perceived originality and honesty of the content. Further, being perceived as authentic requires sharing private insights and giving a holistic picture of one's lifestyle. The interviews with the participants indicate that if the influencer fulfills the most crucial factors over a certain period of time, trust is established and can lead to purchase intention and loyalty towards the influencer. Here, loyalty was partly expressed through creating in- and out-groups. The out-group consists of influencer who do not fulfill the criteria to be trusted or who posted content in which the sales aspect predominated, or if the content was perceived as too repetitive. These two factors are usually crucial for the decision to unfollow a popular opinion leader on Instagram. The interviews have revealed, that content that is perceived as highly commercial is evaluated positively when the criteria relevance and perceived competence are met. Further, if the product recommendations fulfill certain needs and interests of the follower, it is evaluated as more positive.

6 Discussion

The objective of this study was to deepen the knowledge of factors influencing trust. Therefore, the main research question and two sub-questions were developed. The answers to these questions will be discussed in the following section. The results obtained by this research are contextualized theoretically and compared with previous research results. These results are used to propose a new theory of trust within the context of virtual relationships on social media. Besides, the practical implications of this study are clarified and suggestions for marketers are derived. To conclude, the limitations of this study are explained and few directions for future research are mentioned.

6.1 Theoretical implications

Answering the following research question was the main aim of this given study: 'What are the trust influencing factors in influencer-follower relationship building and the possible outcomes of (non-)trusting behavior?'. This study indicates that there are a set of factors that

influence trust in an influencer. Authenticity has been revealed as the most decisive factor influencing trust for the participants interviewed. This is a very interesting finding since authenticity was scarcely discussed in previous studies and therefore also not included in the theoretical framework. A possible explanation is that previous research mainly focused on the authenticity of traditional brands or did not investigate authenticity as a factor influencing trust (Audrezet et al., 2018). A mixed-methods study by Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) studied the relationship between customers and celebrities on social media. Focus groups revealed similar findings regarding authenticity. During the focus groups, the female participants stated that they enjoy authentic posts and some suggested that the authenticity of celebrities can foster emotional attachment. The study did not discuss trust in this context, but emotional attachment can be compared with a feeling of trust. It can be concluded, that authenticity was studied before and discussed as an important factor influencing relationships and perceptions of individuals and brands but was not explicitly linked to trust. Analyzing recent magazine and newspaper articles indeed show that authenticity is already perceived as one of the most important factors influencing trust (Starting-up, n.d.; Influencer MarketingHub, n.d.).

According to the interviews conducted, the second most important factor for trust-building is the similarity between influencer and follower in terms of shared norms and values. The similarity enables the social media user to identify with the target person. This finding is in line with previous research results. The social identity theory developed by Taifel and Turner (Hogg, 2016) explains this phenomenon. The theory claims that every individual has a social identity through their assignment with a social group. This membership is based on characteristics that all group members share, and which facilitates a distinction between this and other social groups. According to Giles and Coupland (1991), in-groups can be defined as social affiliations to which individuals feel they belong to. The creation of in- and out-groups became also visible when discussing the wording of the participants. The perception of influencers did significantly differ depending on the relationship the follower had with the influencer. Though it should be noted, that for assessing oneself and an influencer to one group, more criteria have to be fulfilled. This is illustrated in the conceptual model which can be found at the end of this chapter. Another important factor influencing trust is 'sponsorship disclosure' meaning that an influencer who discloses sponsored content is evaluated as more trustworthy than content without any labels. Although the majority of the study participants expressed a positive attitude towards this factor, it must also be noted that six participants explicitly stated that sponsorship disclosure would weaken their trust in the influencer. This kind of reaction to reviews can be explained by the Persuasion Knowledge Model. According to this model, consumers have knowledge about persuasion tactics. When an individual

discovers that a certain tactic is used to persuade their behavior, the meaning of the message changes from neutral to persuasion goal oriented. This leads to a negative reaction by the consumer, who has then a lower motivation to process the message. Whereas, if the message is perceived as an “honest opinion”, sponsorship disclosure has no negative effect (Hwang & Jeong, 2016) and according to the study participants is an important factor for building trust. Another important finding is that the well-known model of trust by Mayer et al. (1995) is only partly confirmed through this study. Only the component ‘perceived competence’ of their model was still evaluated as one of the most influential factors concerning trust. This is plausible inasmuch as the study findings also revealed that trust is frequently associated with following purchase recommendations, also called eWOM. So, it seems evident that the competence of the source giving purchase recommendations is required.

Another factor that refers to eWOM is relevance. As described above, ‘relevance’ refers to consistent and authentic behavior in terms of the use and promotion of products. This means that someone appears to be more trustworthy if they limit their advertising to one product category such as fitness/nutrition and maintain long-term cooperation. This finding is in line with the study results by Djafarova and Rusworth (2017), whose qualitative study also showed that relevance is important for the study participants to perceive an online celebrity as credible. As previously mentioned, consistent actions and choices by the influencer help to assess their personality and minimize risk in a relationship which is an important part of a trusted relationship (Mayer et al., 1995).

Concerning factors influencing trust, it is striking that the majority of factors revealed in previous research did not play a role in participant’s reasoning. This can be explained by the novelty of this research area and the limited amount of comparable work in this field. This study indicates that the often-cited model by Mayer et al. (1995) is not fully applicable to the field of social media. It seems that content on Instagram is mostly perceived as commercial and image-cultivating and therefore not often evaluated as altruistically motivated. Therefore, the behavior of the influencer does not necessarily need to be perceived as benevolent as long as authenticity is conveyed.

Further, the literature analysis in advance suggested that attractiveness and one’s own propensity to trust would be two important factors influencing trust. Concerning these factors, the approach of this study is not ideal for gaining insights into the significance of these two factors. The majority of the participants had difficulties in expressing their disposition to trust and their attitudes towards attractiveness truthfully. Concerning attractiveness, it may be that the attractiveness of a person is often subconsciously assessed and thus it was difficult to evaluate this factor. The same applies to evaluating one’s own propensity to trust in the context of social media as this character trait is one that one gets hardly feedback on since

the relationships that are maintained on social media are usually unilateral. That means users might not reflect their own tendency to trust regularly.

Another important part of the present study is the first sub-question which reads as follows: 'How is the common term influencer evaluated by the participants and what does the choice of words reveal about the relationship to the influencer?'. This part of the interviews revealed interesting insights into the perception of influencers in general and the ones followed by the participants of this study. The influencer in general was perceived as more negative than the influencers the participants followed. Partly, this distinction was underlined by a different wording when referring to the favorite influencer. It seems that the participants who had a very negative opinion about influencers adopted the opinion of the German press which still spreads the opinion that influencers do not have a serious job. It was observed that the participants created in-groups for themselves and their favorite influencers. Thus, a clear distinction between influencers in general and the opinion leaders who were favored was observable. This is in line with the social identity theory which states that individuals tend to classify themselves and others into in- and out-groups. Individuals strive to maintain positive self-assessment. This is partly made up of the membership of social groups. This membership of the group is usually only maintained as long as it serves the positive self-assessment. If one's own group is no longer perceived as more positive towards other groups, the feeling of belonging decreases (Hogg, 2016). This also explains why influencers are rated differently depending on whether they are defined as an in-group or an out-group. The study shows that the participants' wording does not always indicate the relationship with the influencer. In the end, only two participants consistently used different wording. For other participants, it became clear that they also clearly differentiate but not in their choice of words. A strong para-social relationship between influencer and follower was only evident for one participant. This was also the only person from this study who regularly engaged with influencers. This could mean that a para-social relationship in today's age requires more interaction between opinion leaders and spectators. Since the number of participants who actively interact with influencers was too low, this approach needs to be further explored. Nevertheless, several indicators for a para-social relationship could be noticed during the interviews. According to Horton & Wohl, loyalty is caused by repeated viewing of an individual which creates a bond of intimacy and is a strong indicator of a para-social relationship. Further, the results of this study support the findings by Hwang & Zhang (2018), that show a correlation between para-social relationship and purchase intention as purchase intention is another frequently cited outcome of trust within this study. The theory developed based on the results (Figure 1) shows that loyalty is one of the main outcomes of trust. Therefore, the study by Chung and Cho

(2014) can be confirmed with the conducted data. Their study showed that the original concept of para-social relationship can be transferred to today's media use. This seems to be true for the participants of this research but as mentioned above, it seems that needed more interaction between influencer and follower is needed to ensure a stable and long-lasting relationship.

The following sub-question was another objective of this study: 'Why does a follower decide to unfollow an influencer and to what extent is this decision dependent on a loss of trust?

The data conducted through the interviews revealed that two factors are crucial for unfollowing an influencer. Firstly, content that is perceived as being very repetitive leads to unfollowing. This finding is understandable as one of the main motivations mentioned during the interviews was the desire for entertainment. This finding confirms the study results by Maity et al. (2018) which stated that unfollowing on the platform Twitter is caused inter alia by repetitive tweets. More in-depth research is required to confirm that the findings of this study can also be applied to Instagram. The second factor causing unfollowing is 'promoting brands and products' and is related to the factor discussed beforehand. Overstimulation of similar messages irritates the study participants and leads to dislike towards the responsible person, in this case the influencer. However, too many commercial posts and stories by the influencer can be mitigated or perceived as positive by three factors. The factors are: 'perceived competence'; 'fit needs/interests'; and 'relevance'. This means that if the follower has purchase intentions or their individual tendency to spend money is high, commercial content can have a positive effect on the trust in the influencer. This factor has not yet been discussed in previous literature. This is due to the fact that the unfollowing is rarely investigated yet and the study by Maity et al. (2018) focused on the platform Twitter. This platform is well-known for spreading short messages and is not frequently used for eWOM.

Further, the interviews indicate that unfollowing is not correlated with a loss of trust since unfollowing appeared to happen more frequently when trust was low or not built yet. Therefore, it can be assumed that trust has to be established to prevent a loss of followers.

The preceding considerations are the basis for Model 1, which shows the relationships of trust and the influencer-follower relationship.

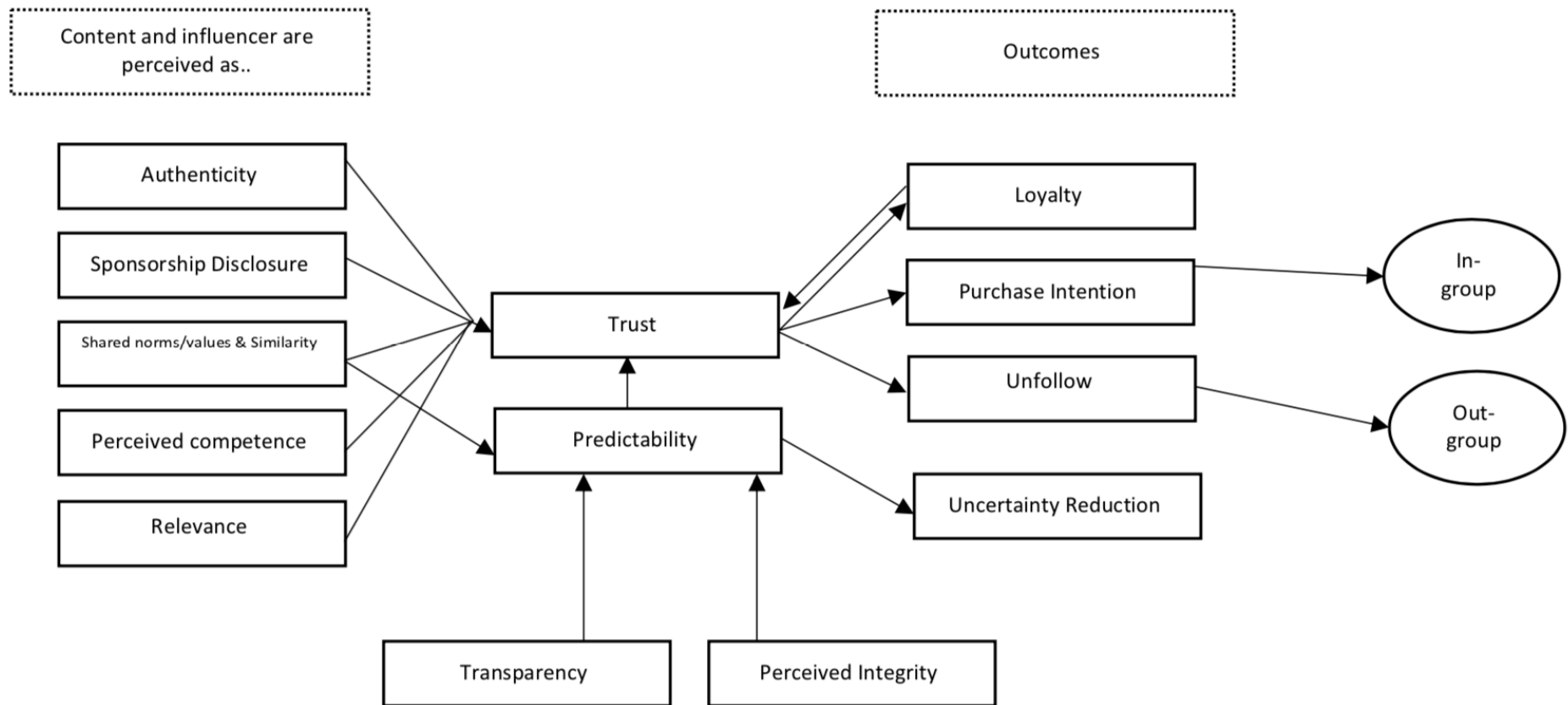


Figure 1 "The development of trust within a influencer-follower relationship on Instagram"

To summarize, the results of this study suggest the following as illustrated in figure 1: if the influencer and the content are perceived as authentic and competent trust increases. The same is valid for disclosing sponsorship and actions taken by the influencer which reflect the follower's norms and values. Finally, the model suggests that congruity between content and the influencer's preferences and personality must be given in order to build trust. If a high level of trust is built, two outcomes can be expected: loyalty and increased purchase intention of the promoted products and services by the influencer. The outcome 'loyalty' has a reciprocal effect, which means that if an influencer is perceived as trustworthy, the follower tends to act out a loyal behavior and maintains the relationship. Maintaining the relationship over a longer period of time, in turn, leads to increased trust. A long-lasting relationship is also essential for the follower to create an in-group with the influencer. In a relationship in which no trust or a low level of trust is built, unfollowing as the outcome is expected, which eventually leads to creating an out-group for the influencers who do not fulfill the criteria for a trusted relationship as discussed above. Based on the interviews, it became clear that the factor of being predictable is also an important component of trust. An influencer who is perceived as similar to the follower themselves, transparent, and to act with integrity, can be assessed better by the follower which helps to build up trust and reduces uncertainty.

6.2 Practical implications

Besides the fact that this study contributes to the so far limited existing literature on trust influencing factors on social media platforms, the results also have practical relevance. Based on the findings, helpful conclusions for companies and influencers themselves can be drawn. Firstly, the insights gained, highlight the importance of micro and macro influencers in social media marketing. This means, cooperating with so-called niche influencers who are specialized in one subject area and who might still have another profession than social media business can be very beneficial for companies. Influencers who are not perceived as celebrities like Kim Kardashian are assessed to be more human, authentic, and similar to the users themselves. Secondly, similarity and authenticity are by far the most important factors influencing trust among influencers and their followers. Therefore, influencers should analyze their audience regularly to ensure that the content matches the interests of their network. Further, honest and holistic insights into their daily business as well as private life encourage a trust-based relationship between the influencer and follower who eventually become a loyal supporter through the connection they could build.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This study was subject to several limitations. First, all members of the sample were higher educated students and a large part of them studied communication science or psychology. Familiarity with social media marketing strategies or knowledge about persuasion tactics could have caused more reflective and distanced handling of the platform Instagram. This could also be an explanation of the more passive behavior of the participants towards the communication with the influencer. The fact that the sample only consisted of students with limited sources of income could have also caused the more restrained purchase decisions and the more critical approach when reflecting the content of the influencer in question. Therefore, it would be interesting to compare the gathered data with interviews conducted with millennials having a full-time job.

Second, this was an interview-based study, causing the participants to be aware that their statements will be recorded and used for research. This may have led to biased statements and shifts in their opinion because they wanted to please the researcher and wanted to contribute to a rich data set.

Third, even though the sector was already limited to the fashion and lifestyle branch, it was still a very broad subject area the participants could discuss. It should be further investigated if the revealed factors are only applicable for lifestyle influencers or vice versa.

Fourth, the total sample consisted only of five male participants. This group is too small to draw conclusions based on their statements. Nevertheless, the interviews with the male participants revealed clear differences in the perception and evaluation of influencers as well as in user behavior. Future research should focus more on gender differences and try to find the causes for the different approaches on social media use and proof if there is indeed a deviating tendency to trust caused by gender.

Fifth, it should be strengthened that this research only indicates what might be true for a broader sample. Even if not all previous research results were mentioned by the participants, it does not imply that they are no more valid. Further studies have to be conducted in this subject area to be able to make a general statement.

Lastly, some remarks have to be made regarding the coding process and the codebook. Since authenticity was identified as an umbrella term and included a wider range of terms it was coded significantly more often. Therefore, future research should research the different components of authenticity to investigate the meaning of authenticity in more detail.

7 Conclusion

In summary, this study extends research by introducing new factors influencing trust in the context of follower-influencer relationships within the social network called Instagram. This study suggests that authenticity and similarity are most crucial in predicting trust in an influencer. Besides similarity, transparency and perceived integrity help to assess an influencer and their actions which positively affects trust. Another finding of this study is that unfollowing is not related to mistrust but seems to be an outcome of no trust or a low level of trust. Unfollowing seems to be primarily caused by boredom due to one-sided content. Further, this study indicates that users tend to create in-groups with the influencer they could build a relationship, partly strengthened by a different choice of words to underline the special significance selected opinion leaders have. However, to expand knowledge on factors influencing trust and to better understand the relationship social media users have with opinion leaders more research with broader samples is needed.

The theory introduced in this work can serve as a starting point for future research and gives new insights into the development of trust in a follower-influencer relationship on the social media platform Instagram.

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9 Appendix A: Briefing & Pre-Survey

Dear ...

With this email, I would like to prepare you for our interview, which will take place on the First, I would like to give you more information about my study and then explain to you what I would like to discuss with you during the interview, respectively what kind of questions you can expect.

My study is of a qualitative nature, i.e. I will collect my data through interviews with about 30 different participants. I would like to find out which factors influence trust in a famous online celebrity on Instagram. That's why it's important for me that you as a participant regularly visit the Instagram platform and follow at least one famous user from the fashion & lifestyle industry. This person should have at least 10,000 followers and not belong to your (offline) family and friends. The Fashion & Lifestyle industry is one of the most profitable sectors and therefore specialized in influencer marketing at an early stage.

During the interview, I will ask you several questions about your daily use of Instagram. In addition, I want you to remember one or more situations where you trusted or didn't trust a famous user. This may be that you have tried something the person recommended or that you trust the person to tell you the truth. We will talk about these situations during the interview.

Further, I would like to ask you to fill in the following survey before the Interview starts: https://utwentebbs.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1LXI2pbnWRDGBv

If you have any questions about the process or content of the interview or my study itself, don't hesitate to contact me.

I look forward to our interview.

Many greetings,

Lina Heming
l.b.heming@student.utwente.nl

Pre-Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 What is your age?

Skip To: End of Survey If Condition: What is your age? Is Less Than 18. Skip To: End of Survey.

Q2 What is your gender?

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

Q3 Since when do you use Instagram?

☐ Couple of weeks (1)

☐ Couple of months (2)

☐ Couple of years (3)

Q4 How often do you use Instagram a week?

☐ 0-1 times (1)

☐ 1-3 times (2)

☐ 3-5 times (3)

☐ > 5 times (4)

Q5 Do you follow someone with at least 10.000 followers on Instagram?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ Maybe (2)
- ☐ No (3)

Skip To: End of Survey If Do you follow someone with at least 10.000 followers on Instagram? = No

Q8 Does this person post frequently fashion or lifestyle related content?

- ☐ Yes (4)
- ☐ Maybe (5)
- ☐ No (6)

Skip To: End of Survey If Does this person post frequently fashion or lifestyle related content? = No

End of Block: Default Question Block

10 Appendix B: Cohen's Kappa Calculation

Variables	Researcher 1	Researcher 2	Expected to be agreed by guessing	Agreements	Total	Total Agreements
Argument Quality	0	0	0	72	106	0,679245283
Attractiveness	2	2	0,037735849			
Authenticity	2	6	0,113207547			
				Total Agreed by guessing	Proportion agreed by guessing	Kappa
Benefit	0	0	0			
Buying intention	5	0	0	3,349056604	0,031594874	0,668780443
Confirmation offline world	0	0	0			
Consistency	0	3	0			
Dream world	0	1	0			
Ease of access	0	0	0			
Expectations	0	0	0			
Experience	1	1	0,009433962			
Expertise/Competence	2	2	0,037735849			
Extreme viewpoints	0	0	0			
Familiarity with brand	1	2	0,018867925			
Fit needs/interests	2	2	0,037735849			
Full picture	1	1	0,009433962			
Group activity	2	3	0,056603774			
Humour	2	2	0,037735849			
Individuals's Tendency to spend money	2	1	0,018867925			

Individual's Tendency to trust	4	5	0,188679245
Instagram Shops	0	0	0
Institutional trust	0	0	0
Interaction	3	4	0,113207547
Involvement	2	0	0
Just for the money	2	2	0,037735849
Length of relationship	1	1	0,009433962
Match	0	1	0
Nationality	0	0	0
negative	0	0	0
Network Size	1	1	0,009433962
New knowledge	0	0	0
Para-Social Relationship	4	4	0,150943396
Perceived Benevolence	2	2	0,037735849
Perceived Honesty	8	1	0,075471698
Perceived integrity	3	2	0,056603774
Perceived Sympathy	4	0	0
Perfection	0	0	0
positive	0	0	0
Positivity	0	0	0
Price	3	5	0,141509434
Private Insights	0	0	0
Purpose of usage	3	2	0,056603774
Quality	1	1	0,009433962
Realness	7	13	0,858490566
Reason unfollow	5	6	0,283018868
Regularity	0	0	0

Related to buying	2	1	0,018867925
Relevance	0	0	0
Repitition	0	0	0
Results	1	1	0,009433962
Role model	1	1	0,009433962
Selling stuff	1	1	0,009433962
Similarity/ Shared values	5	4	0,188679245
Sponsorship Disclosure	2	7	0,132075472
Style	4	4	0,150943396
Too apparent	1	1	0,009433962
Transparency	7	0	0
Trust as flexible construct	0	0	0
Type of influencer	1	2	0,018867925
Uniqueness	0	1	0
Vaste range of options	0	0	0
Wording	6	7	0,396226415
Youtube / TV connection	0	0	0

11 Appendic C: Original Quotations

[1] *"I really just look for the opposite because for me I always say it Instagram is not my real life. So, I just follow things that I would like to wear or what I would like to buy or what I would like to have but I won't have because Instagram is a different life than real life. Actually, she's like my dream life because she travels, she dresses up really nicely. She uses high-end clothing and she has this sense of fashion."* (Participant 22)

[2] *„Wenn ich einen Artikel suchen würde, wäre Instagram die allerletzte Stelle wo ich mir dazu etwas angucken würde, weil ich das Gefühl habe, dass es so was von übers Ohr gehauen.“* (Participant 26)

[3] *„Ich verbinde damit hauptsächlich eine Person, die es sich zu ihrer hauptberuflichen Aufgabe gemacht hat von Instagram zu leben und das macht indem sie interessante Beiträge postet aber eben auch immer wieder Produkte platziert. Klar, kann man auch "Influencen" ohne Produkte zu platzieren, aber für mich ist dieser Begriff mit dem Verkaufs-Aspekt gekoppelt [..].“* (Participant 7)

[4] *"I think the influencer should be a person that is a bright person and inspires the society and does something very beneficial for society. These Instagram influencers don't have a real job or don't have a real thing to do. They are not smart but come from a wealthy family and they want to use that lifestyle to show up to get even more money. [...] If they have the money to travel, they travel and they take some pictures and they post it. They don't have real jobs; they don't have real insights to inspire people. They're called influencers but I don't think that that term represents these people."* (Participant 15)

[5] *„Es ist schon negativ konnotiert für mich, weil es auch durch die Presse sehr negativ geht, dass der Begriff Influencer ja nicht wirklich ein Job wäre. Und eigentlich ist es hauptsächlich negativ konnotiert für mich tatsächlich.“* (Participant 12)

[6] *"Yeah and it's a pretty cool job. [...] But I don't like the shallowness that comes along with it, how they all pretend like oh my life is amazing."* (Participant 1)

[7] *"So as an influencer I see a person that has her or his life on tape most of the time which is a sign of vulnerability and he's not afraid to do that. And that's what I appreciate about them."* (Participant 11)

[8] *„Ich glaube ich bin noch nie einer Person gefolgt, um die für mich als Influencer zu benutzen. Ich habe noch nie gezielt nach einem Influencer gesucht der mir Sachen präsentiert, die ich dann nachkaufen könnte, sondern eigentlich immer Blogger, die dann auch schreiben und erzählen und solche Sachen."* (Participant 27)

[9] *"I think Chiara is really a pretty girl and wears pretty clothes but yeah since she's wearing everything that is sponsored and she has than her own brand and most of the stuff she wears for example is from her own brand to sell it even more. And I think Florence just wears what she wants because she is this nice person."* (Participant 2)

[10] *"I love her posts and she's always sharing stories and I really love all what she's posting."* (Participant 4)

[11] *"I saw that she's really here because she wants to share like what she's thinking about her state of mind in general but I think that the majority of influencers is actually just there for the money-making part or is taking great advantage of it."* (Participant 10)

[12] *"So I thought: It's not who you are in your normal posts. It's just obvious you're getting paid for this and that makes me think: If you're going that way, it makes me less interested in you since I just followed you because of your funny personality."* (Participant 8)

[13] *"They are more posting pictures, but they make videos and I'm just curious about what is real life for them. Because they post like being in the gym or buying stuff or getting ice cream and I'm just curious about that but I hate them."* (Participant 22)

[14] „Sie macht schon viel Werbung und dementsprechend wirkt sie jetzt nicht so authentisch wie es vorher war.“ (Participant 19)

[15] „Zum größten Teil posten die mir einfach zu viel. Wenn meine Startseite nur aus von Posts von ihm besteht oder von der Person oder Storys, die unfassbar lange sind, wo du dich so durchtippen musst und sich irgendwie alles wiederholt. Dann habe ich da keine Lust drauf.“ (Participant 25)

[16] „Authentizität hast du glaube ich genug von mir gehört: Das finde ich sehr wichtig und ich finde im Grunde genommen alle Fragen, die du gestellt hast, laufen darauf hinaus“ (Participant 3)

[17] “You should just be a regular person like my life is also not perfect so their life cannot be perfect. You should not picture it as if your life is perfect because it's just not possible. [...] So, I think it's also nice that you show that some things were not great, or your day was not that perfect.” (Participant 2)

[18] “Which is good that they're at least opening up about that, but I think it makes someone more trustworthy if they just share more like constantly how they are feeling so not always their extreme lows or just their perfect pictures. But everything that's in between there as well. I would like it to read if someone says: Actually, I had a rather boring weekend. [...] Because sometimes I feel like a lot of influencers know that the followers know that the influencer world is pretty fake. So, to get rid of that image they share their weaknesses or their fears.” (Participant 1)

[19] „Wenn ich das Gefühl habe irgendwie nah dran an einem echten Leben zu sein. Da geht der Trend glaube ich generell auch so ein bisschen wieder hin, nicht nur Fake-Welt. Aber das wäre für mich auch auf jeden Fall so, dass ich das Gefühl habe, dass es nicht immer nur gestellt ist. Nicht immer nur die heile Welt, die da dargestellt wird. Dass man die Leute auch mal ungeschminkt sieht und einfach auch mal in einer witzigen Situation sieht oder es mal so eine spontane Story ist, die auf mich zumindest

nicht inszeniert wirkt. Das fördert schon mal Vertrauen, wenn sie mir nicht ständig versuchen etwas zu verkaufen.“ (Participant 7)

[20] “Maybe be authentic but this word it's used so many times that it lost essence. By authenticity I mean if something is not OK just admit it. First of all, try the things you promote. Then if you think they are not okay don't promote them or at least let the people know "For me the product didn't work but you can try it and see" whatever.” (Participant 11)

[21] “She's very chatty and an open person and she also makes YouTube videos and I find her like trustworthy because she's just this kind of person that shares a lot.” (Participant 29)

[22] “She also shares stuff with her family and when she visits something. I like that she lets the door open and we can see a bit in her personal life. So, she's showing vulnerability and I appreciate that.” (Participant 11)

[23] “Most of the time, it's because they share personal stuff and I find them pleasant and its more likely that I follow them even though they do many ads.” (Participant 20)

[24] “My trust went down. And she was posting some stuff on some promotions, but I wasn't feeling like following that at all.” (Participant 4)

[25] „Da ist schon ein Riesenunterschied würde ich sagen. Dass sie ständig hin und herfliegt und eine Wohnung in Paris hat und eine Wohnung in Hamburg. Dann stellt das ja schon eine gewisse Differenz her, weil ich weiß Ich bin auf einem ganz anderen Level was das angeht. Aber ja durch so Sachen wie den Brokkoli, den ich auch sehr gerne esse oder durch Humor habe irgendwie schon eine gewisse Verbindung zu ihr und ich glaube, dass es doch schon die größere Rolle spielt als jetzt die Gleichheit von Geld oder so.“ (Participant 12)

[26] „Ich glaube, dass es für mich schon wichtig ist. Also wenn ich jetzt überlege, ich glaube ich folge schon eher Leuten, die ein ähnliches System haben wie ich. Ja, es ist

prinzipiell schon spannend sich mit Leuten auseinanderzusetzen, die ein anderes Wertesystem haben aber auf Instagram habe ich dann keine Menschen wirklich, die so anders sind als ich. Weil man sich das nicht täglich angucken will.” (Participant 7)

[27] „Also ich würde sagen, wenn jemand z.B. ein Influencer irgendwas promotet dann würde ich schon voraussetzen, dass die Person weiß wovon sie redet. Wenn die Person nicht selber kompetent in dem Thema ist, dann sollte sie es halt auch wirklich nicht promoten, wäre ja sinnlos.“ (Participant 9)

[28] “Well I mean if it's sponsored, I also just kind of take it with a grain of salt. You never really know if they would also recommend it to you without being sponsored.” (Participant 17)

[29] „Es ist schon wichtig, für mein Interesse halt. Kann ich Leuten viele Sachen nicht abkaufen, wenn ich weiß, dass sie damit Geld machen und dann ist es immer so ein Motiv. Dann das ist es ja wirklich nur ein Job ich folge eigentlich lieber Leuten für die es nicht nur ein Job ist. Wo ich das Gefühl habe zumindest, dass es nicht deswegen machen.“ (Participant 7)

[30] „Also ich glaube, dass es bis zu einem gewissen Grad schon wichtig damit man irgendwie die Person einschätzen kann. Gerade man irgendwo drauf geht und auch ein bisschen erwartet einen bestimmten Content zu sehen, dass es nicht heute so und morgen so ist. So eine Grundlinie ist irgendwie schon wichtig, aber ich finde es auch wichtig, dass Leute ihren eigenen Prinzipien kritisch gegenüberstehen. Wenn jetzt die Veganer sagen würden, Es sind irgendwie 50 neue Studien rauskommen, die beweisen das Fleisch essen toll ist, aus den und den Gründen und deswegen hinterfragen wir jetzt was wir machen, finde ich das auch gut.“ (Participant 7)

[31] “Especially if someone is doing advertisements for a lot of products and then different products and they don't seem to match with their profile, then I don't trust them.” (Participant 20)

[32] „Ich finde schon Transparenz schon wichtig. Ich finde es gut, dass ich dem Influencer in diesem Sinne vertrauen kann. Dann weiß ich seine Meinung ist eventuell bezahlt worden. Bevor ich mir dieses Produkt kaufe, sollte ich das in Erwägung ziehen.“ (Participant 3)

[33] “I think it's good to show people that you're actually getting paid for it or not paid definitely. But if they wouldn't say it, I would maybe trust a little bit more on the product, but I would also kind of feel like yeah why would they hide that? I think it's nice and good to state that you're getting paid for certain things.” (Participant 14)

[34] „Es ist ja das Werberecht angezogen worden und dann waren alle Influencer total ängstlich und haben einfach unter jedem Beitrag 'Werbung' geschrieben. Du kannst gar nicht mehr sehen ist es jetzt Werbung, ist es einfach nur dass sie aus Angst jetzt schreiben, dass es Werbung ist obwohl es ihre eigene Meinung ist und meistens wird in einem Post geschrieben: "Ich schreibe jetzt Werbung hin wegen dem Werberecht aber es ist eigentlich meine eigene Meinung" Selbst dann bin ich mir noch nicht so sicher ob es wirklich ihre eigene Meinung ist.“ (Participant 3)

[35] “So she was already very famous and everything she posted like if it's a story or just a regular post I think everything is sponsored. She doesn't have to pay for anything and it's just a really quick picture with it and then that's it. So, I would never really trust anything she would say.” (Participant 2)

[36] „Wenn die Person nicht transparent ist. Die Person ist nicht authentisch dann denke ich mir: Wieso soll ich der Person überhaupt folgen? Wieso soll ich der Person überhaupt vertrauen?“ (Participant 9)

[37] „Sie hat einmal eine Story gemacht über die Plattform Instagram und da ganz speziell über die Insights von Instagram also was genau irgendwie "erreichte Nutzer" bedeutet, also die ganzen Begriffe der Insights-Option und wie sie dazu steht. Ich fand irgendwie, dass sie da so ein bisschen Transparenz gegeben hat, irgendwie total toll und irgendwie sehr interessant und es hat irgendwie so ein bisschen mein Vertrauen gestärkt.“ (Participant 12)

[38] „Und bei den Frauen ist es ganz primitiv einfach die Attraktivität der Frauen, die mich auf den Follow-Button drücken lässt.“ (Participant 24)

[39] “Because I think when I hear someone’s voice and the way how a person talks it could really influence my perception of that person.” (Participant 21)

[40] “I think I was in that period thinking about getting a Fitbit but I was like it's kind of expensive. And I found these in-between options. So, I was like Okay, I'm gonna order these, looks nice. So, the site was professional I was like OK.” (Participant 11)

[41] “I think I was in that period thinking about getting a Fitbit but I was like it's kind of expensive. And I found these in-between options. So, I was like: I'm gonna order these, looks nice. So, the site was professional I was like OK.” (Participant 11)

[42] “Because I follow her and she pointed it out several times, it was almost the only option for me because it was also available on a big platform like Douglas. Actually, the main reason for my purchase decision was that it was easy to get it in the end.” (Participant 12)

[43] “And then it appeared, and several people said it's amazing. I was like OK, maybe she's lying. It's OK, but if several people are lying then maybe it's not true. So maybe they are not lying. Maybe they are honest. So, I was like OK I'm going to get it and see myself.” (Participant 11)

[44] “Yeah. It's just when someone does one thing it's trustworthy but when a lot of influencers are doing the same thing then it gets again less trustworthy.” (Participant 1)

[45] “I have two or three pages that I follow for a really long time and they grew a lot during this time. I think I wouldn't unfollow them. If you see them growing. It makes me happy that they are now able to do these advertisements.” (Participant 20)