

**WHO HOLDS THE REAL INFLUENCE?
GENERATION Z's PERCEPTIONS ON INFLUENCERS AND
SOCIAL INFLUENCE**

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Tiivistelmä <p>Sosiaalisessa mediassa toimivien vaikuttajien määrä on lisääntynyt huomattavasti viime vuosina. Organisaatiot pyrkivät luomaan näiden sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien kanssa samaistuttavia sisältöjä, joiden avulla tavoitellaan etenkin nuoren yleisön suosiota. Organisaatioille voi olla kuitenkin haastavaa luoda oikeanlaisia sisältöjä, sillä nuorten käsityksiä sosiaalisen median vaikuttajista ei ole tutkittu riittävästi. Näin ollen tarvitaan lisää tietoa siitä, miten nuoret käsittävät erilaiset vaikuttajat ja ketkä ovat sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien lisäksi heidän päätöksentekoaan ohjaavia tahoja.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää, miten nuoret määrittelevät vaikuttajan ja mistä teemoista määritelmä koostuu. Lisäksi tutkitaan sitä, miten erilaiset tahot, mukaan lukien sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat, ohjaavat nuorten päätöksentekoa ja ketkä nuorten mielestä vaikuttavat heihin voimakkaimmin.</p> <p>Tutkimusta varten järjestettiin 13 temaattista, puolistrukturoitua yksilöhaastattelua Zoom-sovelluksen kautta. Haastateltavat olivat iältään 15–20-vuotiaita. Haastatteluista saatua dataa analysoitiin temaattista menetelmää hyödyntäen. Näin pystyttiin tunnistamaan kriteerejä, joita nuoret asettavat vaikuttajien tunnistamiselle, sekä teemoja, joista heidän käsityksensä vaikuttajista rakentuvat. Lisäksi haastatteluissa hyödynnettiin Likert-asteikollista harjoitusta, jonka avulla selvitettiin, kuinka voimakkaasti eri tahot ohjaavat nuorten päätöksentekoprosesseja.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen löydösten perusteella nuorten kriteerit sosiaalisen median vaikuttajan tunnistamiselle ovat kohtalaisen hyvin linjassa olemassa olevan tutkimuksen kanssa. Vaikuttajiin suhtaudutaan kuitenkin vaativammin kuin on ennen tunnistettu. Nuorten asenteet kaupallisuutta, henkilöbrändejä ja sisältöjä kohtaan sekä heidän suhtautumisensa oma- ja maailmankuvaan ovat tärkeimpiä teemoja, joista nuorten käsitys vaikuttajista rakentuu. Tulokset osoittavat kuitenkin, että esimerkiksi ystävillä ja vanhemmilla on sosiaalisen median vaikuttajia suurempi merkitys nuorten päätöksenteossa.</p> <p>Tässä tutkimuksessa esiin tuodut nuorten näkemykset vaikuttajista ja sosiaalisesta vaikutusvallasta lisäävät käsitystä siitä, mitä seikkoja nuorille suunnatussa markkinointiviestinnässä tulisi ottaa huomioon. Tulokset tarjoavat myös työkaluja, joiden avulla tutkimusta vaikuttajien ja nuorten suhteesta voidaan syventää. Lisätutkimusta kuitenkin tarvitaan suuremmilla massoilla täysin luotettavien johtopäätösten saavuttamiseksi.</p>	
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract <p>In recent years, the amount of different so-called social media influencers has notably increased. Organizations aim to gain the attention of especially younger audiences by creating approachable content with these influencers. However, creating the right kind of content can be challenging for organizations, since research on younger audience's perceptions on influencers is still somewhat insufficient. Therefore, more information on how young people comprehend influencers and which other agents guide their decision-making processes is needed.</p> <p>The goal of this study is to find out, how young people define influencers and on what themes that definition builds upon. Moreover, young people's perceptions on social influence allocated by different agents, including influencers, and their effect on their decision-making is examined.</p> <p>For the research part of this study, 13 thematic, half-structured live interviews for young people between ages 15 to 20 via Zoom were conducted. Based on thematic analysis of the gathered data, significant criteria and themes in young people's definitions on influencers were recognized. Additionally, Likert-scale interview exercise was utilized in examining, how significant different agents were seen in young people's decision-making processes.</p> <p>Based on the research findings, the criteria young people set for defining influencers correlates somewhat to the existing theories. However, young people are generally more demanding on influencers than previously recognized. Young people's attitudes towards commercialism, personal brands and contents and additionally, their self-image and worldview are most important themes that shape their positions on influencers. Nevertheless, the findings suggest, that influencers effect on young people's decision-making processes are secondary to the effect of e.g., friends and parents.</p> <p>Young people's different attitudes towards influencers and social influence presented in this study help widen the understanding on how marketing communications should be considered with young people as target audience. Additionally, these study findings offer tools that can be utilized in deepening future research on influencers and young people. Nevertheless, future studies could employ larger samples and quantitative methods and measures to derive more conceptualized conclusions.</p>	
Keywords Influencers, peer influence, social influence, social media influencers, young people	
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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to introduce the research topic to the reader. First, the background of the study is introduced alongside the detected research gap and motivations for this study. Then, purpose of the study and research questions are presented. Finally, for convenience, the structure of the study is presented.

1.1 Background of the study

Today's changing, digital world and especially social media set constantly new, sometimes unexpected goals to organizations. The struggle to navigate through these changes while still maintaining and building effective relationships with organizations' publics have never been so real (Booth & Matic, 2011; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2018). Processes of forming relationships between customers and organizations are subjects to new, important network areas, making it even more challenging to understand. This type of new relationship can no longer be analysed in isolation, since modern consumers care about other users' opinions and organizations have taken on new, collaborative marketing strategies (Kauffman & Weber, 2019; Dinesh, 2017) As a result of these newfound priorities, a new level of activism from an influential constituency has emerged to the digital field – influencers. (Booth & Matic, 2011.)

Typically, studies refer “influencers” as modern agents or opinion leaders operating in social media and other digital platforms, who shape audience attitudes through e.g., endorsing products and services (Freberg et al., 2010; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2018). The term social media influencers or SMI's for short has solidified its place in communications research. Despite these existing theories, the definition of sole “influencer” has been manoeuvred a lot. Some researches use the term “influencer” loosely without linking it to any specific area of study, or on the contrary – limit it to concern only corporate marketing strategies and social media communication.

In the past few years, the popularity of influencers and exploitation of them in corporate environment with influencer marketing has grown exponentially. In fact, exploiting influencer in influencer marketing strategies seems to be the new natural environment for SMI's to exist. The present study addresses the many ways to incorporate influencers to various digital

marketing strategies, the mechanisms by which influencers affect consumer decisions and the general relationship between an influencer and an organization (Lou & Yuan, 2018; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2018; Freberg et al., 2010; Booth & Matic, 2011; Enke & Borchers, 2019). However, it is notable that these studies are born and raised in a corporate environment and thus answer to corporate needs, which indicates that there's hitherto only little understanding of the fact how consumers consider influencers or furthermore – do “influencers” have any impact to their lives at all. Moreover, in the last few years, a new generation of social media users with new motivations, habits and social norms have entered the game, which is why reconsidering customary ways of influencer marketing need refining.

This study considers this idea of reconsidering influencer marketing from the perspective of the mentioned new generation of young consumers. The perspective of young people, specifically ones born in 2000 and after, generally described as part of Generation Z of Gen Z, is crucial to understand to gain a view in the future consumers and their behaviour. Many researches point out that this generation uses social media much more and in more diverse way than any previous generations have (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017; Kádeková and Holienčinová, 2018). Instead of being digital natives, they are actually social authors themselves (Baysinger, 2015) and in terms of influence, consumption and spending power, they are rapidly coming their own (Jones, 2018). Also, one special feature to note about the Gen Z's is that according to Social media today (2019), they trust traditional influencers less than probably ever before. So how can organizations build relationships with this new generation of consumers without really knowing how they operate and who they trust?

As such, only very little information exists on consumer perceptions, especially those of Generation Z, on influencers and the actual scale of influencers impact on their everyday life. While there's awareness on the positive effect influencers and endorsements have on consumer's purchasing decisions (Lim et al. 2017), many studies fail to look beyond the corporate influencer marketing environment to evaluate influencers and overlook the other effects they might have on people's lives, since in real life the process of social influence and decision-making happens in multiplex networks (Lim et al. (2017). As Reinikainen et al. (2018) state, the effectiveness of marketing lies in content built to feel human-to-human, so it's only logical to ask who those humans are, what kind of meanings do consumers form from interaction with them and how far do the meanings extend in their lives. Essentially, this understanding can bring value to the organization when utilized well.

With the enormous increase of bloggers, vloggers, TikTokers and other SMI's in the digital field, identifying the influencers most beneficial and relevant to one's brand can be a truly challenging task (Booth & Matic, 2011; Enke & Borchers, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2018). Moreover, increasing amount of user-generated content, especially with younger generations, has been seen a new provider of engaging content to the consumers (Tolson, 2010). DeGruttola (2019) even suggests in marketing communication industry's practical publications, social media today, that traditional influencer marketing industry as we know it is at the midst of fall from grace, since audiences lack trust in social media influencers. In fact, they state that people are more likely to make a purchase based on a peer's social post, rather than trusting one from traditional "influencer" (Social media today, 2019). Additionally, although some technologies that assist brands in selecting most relevant influencers or marketing collaborators to them have been developed, they are focused on quantity rather than quality and are as such not yet enough developed in order to be considered completely solid (Freberg et al. 2010). Thus, it is argued in this thesis, that a more consumer-originated, qualitatively developed definition of influencers is needed in order to understand which agents have which type of influence on people and who do consumers even see as influencers to begin with.

1.2 Purpose of the study and research questions

In this study, a total of 13 individual, thematic semi-structured live interviews via zoom application are conducted in order to find out young consumers', age 15 to 20, perceptions and thoughts about influencers and social influence. Primary aim of this study is placed on finding out, how Generation Z perceives influencers and upon which themes do those perceptions build upon. To investigate this, first the motives Generation Z has on using social media and following influencers and how they recognize influencers are explored. Then, significance of different social influence agents on Generation Z's decision-making processes are investigated. By analysing their views, the aim is to further conceptualize and possible expand the currently known and accepted definition of "influencer" and evaluate, how much significance influencers have in Generation Z's decisions in comparison with other agents. It is expected, based on the need for authenticity and recently found information on peer influence, that young consumers consider other types of agents than social media influencers also influential in their everyday decision-making processes and possibly consider them even more worthy of their trust and attention. By examining this, the essential goal of

this study is to harvest more information on Generation Z as the future consumers and how marketing communication towards them could be approached.

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions are formed:

RQ1. What factors affect the way young people perceive influencers and why?

RQ2. How do young people perceive social influence allocated by different agents and how do they affect their decision-making?

1.3 Structure

First part of this study presents the theoretical framework on which this study is conducted. Then, the research data and the way the study is put into practise are presented and the analysing methodology is explained. Next, the research findings are presented. Finally, the study is summed up as conclusions, discussion and practical implications, evaluation on reliability and validity, as well as limitations further research suggestions, are discussed.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents and discusses the main theoretical concepts concerning this thesis. First, the definition of Generation Z in this study is explained. Second, the Users and Gratifications theory amongst this generation and more specifically in the context of social media is investigated in order to understand what the current studies consider the main reasons young people use social media in general. Then, the main concepts of the study, social influence and peer influence, social media influencer, and other types of influencers such as micro-influencers and corporate influencers are examined. The definitions of social influence and peer influence are established here first, since they represent/indicate the features that possible new “influencer” types might possess in the process of initiating the feeling of being seen as influencer by consumers. Next, the current definitions of traditional type influencers are presented, and their influential power is assimilated to the definition of social and peer influence.

2.1 Generation Z

When studying the new digital culture, age has been seen as an important factor that need to be taken into account (Lee, 2009). Furthermore, it has been found that online activities have significant consequences for today’s young people’s lives and identities and therefore should be included in research (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011; Wilska and Pedrozo, 2007). As mentioned, in the last decade there has been countless studies that focus on millennials – typically seen as people born between 1980’s and early 2000’s (Rissanen & Luoma-aho, 2014), and their use of technology and social media. Since millennials were the first generation to have grown up in the digital world, they are often described as “digital natives” who not only use technology different to those who’ve gotten accustomed to it in their adult age, but who’s whole lives are moulded differently by different technologies (Vodanovich, 2010). However, it is notable that many of these studies have been conducted already many years ago, and in those years leading up to 2020, a new generation of users on technologies and social media has emerged.

Representatives of this new generation are typically defined in literature as “generation Z”, the generation born after millennials or depending on the study, somewhat overlapping with the definition of millennials. As suspected, some debate about the definition has

been present in recent researches. For example, Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) suggest Generation Z are people born between 1992 and 2001 and that they can be seen as “millennials” alongside Generation Y. These generations are often seen as having similar features, such as being savvy with technology and having the same comfort-level in global world (Wood, 2013). On the other hand, Bassiouni and Hackley (2014) and Priporas et al. (2017) defined them as a clearly separate generation – people born after the year 1995 and Roseberry-McKibbin (2017) as people born after 1996. Since separating Millennials and Generation Z is the more common way to define young consumers and the study subjects in this study have all been born between 2001 and 2005, this study considers them as representatives of Generation Z.

Apart from just inspecting the year one has been born, Generation Z has some unique features that separates it from previous generations. Wood (2013) specifies four trends that define them: A focus on innovation, an insistence on convenience, need for security and a tendency to procrastinate due to a want to escape reality. Since this generation has a profusion of choice in the marketplace, they’re not likely to settle for buying a new product or service just based on novelty, if it doesn’t offer new innovations in design or aesthetic. Some of the new innovations that Generation Z appreciates are ones that serve to fulfil needs that the second trend as proposed by Wood (2013) presents – convenience. This can be seen from the growing demand for time saving services, i.e. home delivery services and description based services. In addition, because Generation Z is heavily affected by economic difficulties faced by their parents, who typically live around the time of Great Depression, they might also be more prone to want stability and security from their lifestyles (Wood 2013.). Finally, the fourth trend Wood (2013) described, escapism, can be explained in various ways, such as pressure to achieve at a young age and having uncertainties about the state of the world. Rise of this trend can be illustrated with in example rising popularity of 24/7 social network and entertainment services. McKibbin (2017) argues, that Gen Z is also, simply put, more easily bored than previous generations.

2.2 Uses and Gratifications

Since the early 2000’s, countless studies have made in order to understand the appeal on the internet and what are the reasons people integrate it so strongly as a part of their daily lives. During the last decade, that interest has shifted from internet to more specifically social media and it’s various, constantly evolving applications and why people use them so much. By understanding the motives

individuals use these applications, studies argue it may be possible to explain the popularity of certain applications over others, as well as demonstrate relevancy of specific attributes within those applications (Orchard 2014: 388). Moreover, it gives organisations and brand essential information on customers' behaviour and needs in online environments, which gives them a better opportunity to respond to them and hopefully, effectively create engagement (Rissanen, Luoma-aho 2014). One of the most popular research frameworks used in order to investigate these motives behind people's media usage is called "Users & Gratifications theory". In order to gain understanding on specifically young people's use of social media and thus the possible motives to follow social media influencers, this theory of uses & gratification focusing on social media is examined in this study.

According to uses and gratification theory, people receive different gratifications to satisfy their need through the usage of media applications that they choose with varying motives. As described in their research by Rissanen and Luoma-aho (2014: 503), some of the traditional motives in use of media were identified by Katz et al. in 1974 – those included cognitive, affective, escapist and integrative motives. This has also been called the "four needs theory", that Habes (2019) described the four needs theory gratifications in a slightly more modern manner and called them *personal identity, information, social interaction* and *entertainment gratifications*. Personal identity gratifications included an opportunity to promote of one's values, information gratification stands for obtaining knowledge and understanding digital media, social interaction gratification comprehends dialogic communication with other virtual community members and entertainment gratification consist of procrastinating or escaping the pressures of real life. These categories of gratifications – informational, personal identity, social interaction and entertainment, can still be seen as the hypernym ones in UGT research, although recently some new, more elaborate categories have been established. Moreover, increasing number of studies are interested in not only why people choose to use specific social media applications (Alhabash & Ma 2017) but also whether there are any personal features differing from each person that influence these motives (Orchard et al. 2014).

Some studies have inquired the UGT by stating, that the gratification categories should be defined by the nature of different new media channels and not the pre-existing needs to use them, as it's been typically seen (Sundar & Limperos 2013). Approaching users and gratifications from the perspective of a platform, Krause, North and Heritage (2014) suggested that *entertainment, habitual diversion* and *communication* have were main reasons for using some specific music features on Facebook. More specifically, they highlighted the importance of *entertainment* in that since they found music-related social media behaviour to be less utilitarian

than expected, it might provide some useful behaviour-explaining information about everyday music interactions offline as well (Krause et al. 2014: 75). Sheldon and Bryant (2016) found out in their study focusing on Instagram, that main reasons for using this particular platform were *knowledge about others, documentation, coolness and creativity*. Approaching the subject with multiple platforms point of views, Alhabash and Ma (2017) found similar reasons, as they looked into uses and gratifications of instagram, facebook, twitter and snapchat among college students. They main reasons to use the platforms were *entertainment, convenience and passing time*.

From the viewpoint of personal traits as a possible indicator for media selection, Phua et al. (2017) suggests that people with individual differences in for example prior attitudes and habitual behaviour moderate their media selections accordingly. Diversely, Orchard et al. (2014) divided the uses and gratifications into a total of 10 different categories (e.g. *procrastination, freedom of expression, conformity, information exchange, new connections, ritual, social maintenance, escapism, recreation and experimentation*), some of which were more strongly associated with predictors than other. Of these ten, some are presented in this study based on the relevancy concerning target group and theoretical framework in general. Orchard et al. (2014) discovered, for instance, gratifications that had a significantly strong association with age and were specifically relevant with younger individuals. These included *procrastination* and *new connections*, which means that younger individuals were potentially more likely to use social media channels when they were bored, wanted to distract themselves or had nothing better to do and additionally, when they wanted to create new connections online and thus, make new friends.

Looking into the previous research, these reasons could be seen as being part of both social interaction and entertainment categories. Some of the other attributes Orchard et al. (2014: 393-396) investigated as possible predictors for social media were more specific personal traits, such as higher importance of interpersonal relationships, extraversion or sense of autonomy. Individuals who made intense investment in interpersonal relationships tended to favour *informational exchange* as a gratification, which means that they were more likely to use social media e.g. to gain information or advice from others and also give advice and to others. Individuals who that had more extraversion features were also found as one likely predictor for favouring creating *new connections*. Sense of autonomy was found to be a potential predictor for *experimentation*, which was indicated by possibility to portray as someone else or as being able to be deceptive (Orchard et al. 2014: 393-396)

Addedly to the presented two perspective on studying uses and gratifications on social media, it is suggested here that because of this explosive growth of interactive media in the last

decades, even more specific gratifications based on these new reasons could be applied to the research field. For instance, different functions between exponentially growing spectrum of platforms and the individual needs (Phua et al. 2017) and characteristics of people's social media identities could be taken into account. This is particularly true considering research on social media influencers, who have not been yet studied from the viewpoint of uses and gratifications.

Are the gratifications to use a social media platform and to follow influencers in line with each other or do they have ponderable differences? Maybe these reasons shouldn't be put in such strict definitions at all; as a very recent study by Pelletier et al. (2020) states. In their research, Pelletier et al. (2020) provoked the research field by stating, that since social media users have such different gratifications for using different platforms, it is not justifiable to consider these reasons too narrowly and one size simply doesn't fit all.

Although research about uses and gratifications in the context of influencers is rarer, for instance Li et al. (2017) found, that some of the reasons to be a so-called microblogger included similar reasons to social media gratifications, such as informational, entertainment and social maintenance are mentioned. In this study, a specific focus on the UG theory is set on young people, since their habits on using social media on multiple platforms and technologies have been proven to differ from previous generations (Vodanovich et al. 2010; Phua et al. 2017). Thus, it is suggested in this research that most common categories for young people's gratifications on following influencers are created by combining information from a few different presented studies about social media uses and gratifications. More specifically, it is proposed here that young people follow influencers for instance *entertainment*, *procrastination*, *informational exchange*, *experimentation*, *new connections* and *social maintenance* gratification.

However, this study also argues, that since the current younger generation using social media can be seen as not only users, but social authors (Baysinger, 2015), it must be considered, that reasons such as *freedom of expression* and *creativity* might have a slightly more accentuated purpose. Understanding the motives of young people following influencers offers a helpful base in exploring how the influence of different factors on young people's decision-making processes appears and what the mechanics behind them are.

2.3 Social influence

In this chapter, the development behind the main definitions and the different processes of social influence are presented. Next, some of the various concepts in which social influence has been studied especially during the era of digital development and the rise of social media are introduced.

2.3.1 Development of social influence research

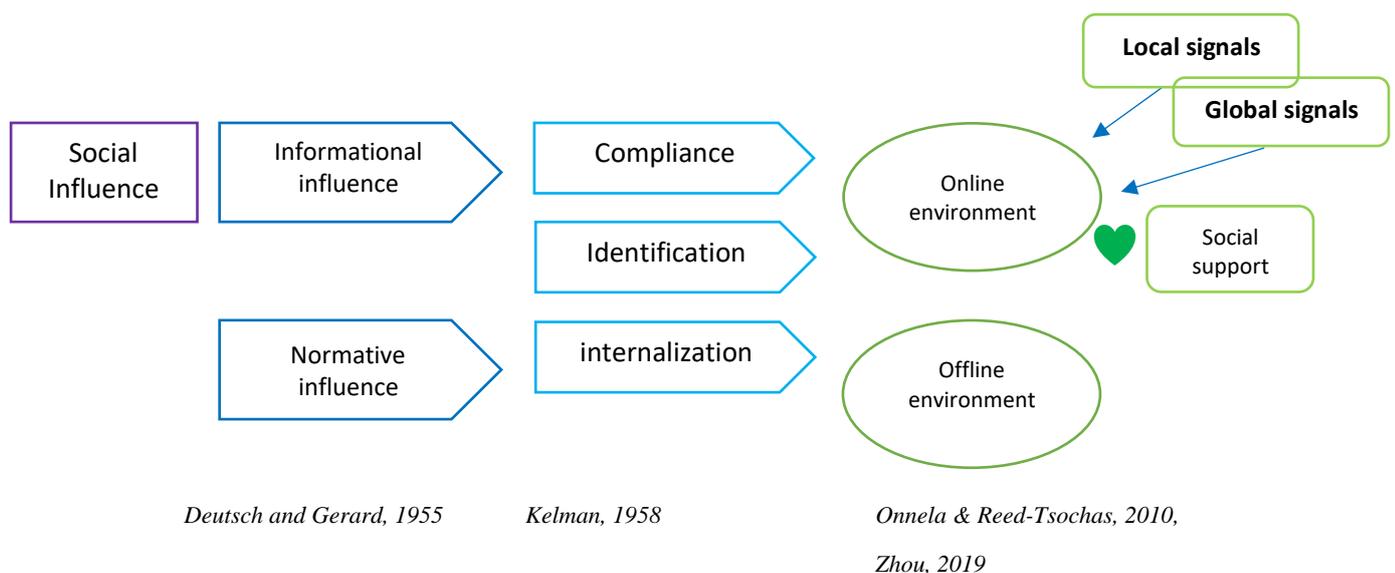
In short, social influence means that other people influence an individual's attitudes, beliefs and behaviour (Zhou, 2019). Going back to its roots in social psychology, social influence has been defined from a couple of different views, of which few are presented in this study. In 1955, Deutsch and Gerard divided social influence into two types, based on two psychological needs that lead humans to conform to the expectations of others. According to Deutsch and Gerard (1955), these include "our need to be right - *informational social influence*, and our need to be liked - *normative social influence*" (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Informational influence, or social proof, means that in an uncertain moment an individual is willing to accept information provided by others as evidence of reality. This occurs typically as a result of experiencing situations where information is too vague or when two or more actors are in disagreement with each other about the situation. Normative influence means that an individual is willing to adjust themselves in order to meet the expectations of others. (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955.)

Couple of years later, in 1958, Herbert Kelman extended the definition with three types of social influence: *compliance* - when individuals publicly agree with others but might keep their personal, disagreeing opinion to themselves; *identification* - when people temporarily change their attitudes and/or behaviour whilst in a presence of an admired group or an individual and *internalization* - when people permanently shift their public behaviour or personal beliefs as a long-term change process. (Kelman, 1958.) It is typically seen that public behaviour changes are the result of normative influence, whereas informational social influence leads to private, more long-term behaviour changes (Kelman, 1959). These basic definitions of social influence as informational or normative can be still seen as a formative base for modern social influence research and their echoes can be heard throughout various papers. Nevertheless, they have been developed further with extensive research in order to answer the need of modern, digital world.

How we communicate our attitudes, beliefs and indicate our behaviour in a social network has been a pivotal faction in research about social influence for the last few decades. Current research has found that social influence plays an important role in how virtual community members behave (Zhou, 2019). Differences in its manifestation and formation mechanics in online and offline environments have been investigated – possibly growing individual needs and being exposed to a vastly growing amount of information being merely few of the reasons why. Onnela and Reed-Tsochas (2010) divide social influence in social networks to consist of two different factors: *local* and *global* signals. Herein local signals mean observed information about a peer or their behaviour in social media and global signals mean observed aggregate behaviour of the population. Onnela and Reed-Tsochas (2010) suggest that social influence can spontaneously possess an on-off nature even when global signals are absent, perhaps in a way it couldn't in an offline environment.

In their study on creating social influence online, Zhou (2019) uncovered that social support and creating group norms is essential in keeping virtual community members active. Although the importance of social support might be great in maintaining offline environment groups as well, the fast-changing nature of online environments makes it even more crucial. However, the different specific determinants of social influence in online environments are still somewhat of a less studied subject (Zhou 2019) and can be predicted to be one of the social influence research trends in the future. For this research, trajectory of the research field as seen most relevant for study is indicated in a figure below.

Figure 1. The development of social influence research



2.3.2 Social influence in different contexts

In current studies, social influence has been investigated in a number of environments and contexts. Smith et al (2013) studies social influence in the context of charity and found out that donor-to-donor peer effect in charitable giving was particularly notable, underlining the importance of social cohesion between people in their process of charitability. This social cohesion is somewhat of a direct continuum of Kelman's (1958) idea of social influence based on identification. Social influence manifests more often within groups of people with similar attributes, more frequently than chance alone would suggest (Lewis et al., 2011). However, though important, identifying with other individuals isn't the only factor affecting people's behaviour and decision making.

Some studies suggest, that to gain social influence, individuals must hold a higher level of knowledge of the topic at hand and, at the same time, be agreeable to people. Mangleburg et al. (2004) studied teens' shopping behaviour and found out that teens were more likely to shop more, when they interacted with a friend holding higher knowledge of current trends and who also shared opinion about it with them. Similarly, Lim et al. (2017) found in their study, that the perceived inadequate expertise of social media influencers decreased the influencers credibility and thus, decreasing the likelihood of buying the product they're promoting. In current research, the credibility of influencers, whether they are defined as social media influencer or other influential individuals, is tightly linked to their perceived higher level of knowledge about the subject they're endorsing.

The effects of social influence on ethical decision making has also been investigated, albeit in organizational environment. Pitesa and Thau (2013) demonstrated, that ethical decision making in an organization is directly linked to the general level of social influence constant in it. The general acceptability of certain actions in an organization, in other words their ethical norms, define this level of social influence (Pitesa & Thau, 2013). Yet another factor that have been recognized being affected by social influence is the implementation of new technology in an organization. Weinstein and Mullins (2012) stated that new technology applications and habits were more likely to become normative in an organization, when people's peers were leading by example. According to the study (Weinstein & Mullins, 2012), it is notably important that these peers were in an important or higher esteem positions in order to have social influence on organization's technology norms.

To better demonstrate and distinguish between definitions and contexts in which social influence has been studied, the selected definitions are presented in a table below.

Table 1. Definitions of social influence

Definition of social influence/peer effect	Related concepts /specifications / dimensions	Opposite	Context / focus
Individual level of social influence/peer effect appears in charitable giving (Smith et al., 2013)	The impact of donor-to-donor peer effect in charitable giving is notable		Consumer behaviour / Charity
...teens' susceptibility to informational influence is positively associated with teens' enjoyment of shopping with friends and their tendencies to do so (Mangleburg et al., 2004)	Teens trust a friend with higher knowledge and a similar opinion about a certain phenomenon as information source	Different opinion about a phenomenon, albeit the friend having more knowledge about it, results in teens being less likely to make a buying decision	Consumer behaviour / Buying decision
...social influences range from explicit organizational ethical standards to others' (un)ethical behavior as an indirect indicator of acceptable conduct in their organization (Pitesa & Thau, 2013)	Ethical decision making is dependent on the level of social influence people are exposed to, i.e. level of ethical code	Less exposed to social influence -> less effect the social influence has on behaviour	Organizational behaviour / Ethical decision making
Technology usage by other important salespeople, or salespeople held in high esteem by their peers, also signals usefulness and may become normative in nature. (Weinstein & Mullins, 2012)	Implementing usage of new technology may become more normative when it's led by example by peers held in high esteem	Peers using less technology promote a general culture of not implementing new technology	Organizational behaviour /Technology use

Whereas social influence can be seen as a general research framework to any influential actions, more relevant information about social influence on young people have been widely studied under the concept of “peer influence”. Since this study focuses on social influence targeted towards Generation Z, it is reasonable to next delineate the theoretical framework towards their fundamental perspective. Hence, in the next chapter, main definitions on peer influence and peer pressure are covered and their significance to this particular study are explained.

2.4 Peer influence

In regards of this research, it is important to understand which matters and features have an effect on young people’s behaviour and ways of thinking. One of the key elements in this is understanding how young people form their identity. There is undeniable evidence of the many effects of peers related to person’s behaviour in social sciences (Gallupe & Bouchard, 2013, Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011; Lewis et al., 2011). Especially peer groups are found to influence individuals’ values and behaviour through in example social comparison (Gallupe & Bouchard, 2013). More recently, the studies have focused on investigating virtual communities and whether the identifying with peer groups is somehow similar or different online and offline. (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 93-94.) So far, similarities have been found. In their research Lehdonvirta and Räsänen (2011: 103-104) found out, that there is a strong link between online and offline identification and social role forming experiences amongst adolescence. This is why peer influence serves as one of the main theories when investigating opinions and perceptions about social media and influencers.

Since so many young people are connected to social networking sites and other online environments, they should be considered as important contexts as the more traditional ones, such as home, school and hobby environments, when considering young people’s identification experiences (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 104; Rissanen & Luoma-aho 2014: 502). However, it is important to understand that social gaps in society may limit the opportunity to access online communities and therefore online environments should not be taken for granted. It is crucial to understand that the maturity of the country as online society needs to be taken into account in research (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 103; Wilska & Pedrozo, 2007).

It is claimed by many theorists, that because of the overgrowing supply of goods, Western world countries are socialised to regard money and consumption as essential, self-fulfilment instruments in life, especially to young people (De Castro, 2006: 183) This is why it can

be asserted, that there is a strong social and cultural link between consumer lifestyle and young people's identities. Additionally, because of the abundance of lifestyle options available, there is also an increasing need to constantly rebuild that identity (Wilska & Pedrozo, 2007: 344-345).

In the case of Finland specifically, the country this research is also conducted in, according to Wilska and Pedrozo (2007: 349) most young consumers (57% of their research subjects) regarded their economic position as good and consequently, their daily expenses included clothes, hobbies, entertainment and other leisure-time activities. Peer groups in hobby circles have been identified as important environments, where young people build their identities and form social roles (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 91). Thus, it is justified to consider offline hobby environments as one of the contexts in which young people build social identification and therefore form their behaviour and opinions.

One interesting element, that must be taken into account when investigating young people who share the same peers in social environments such as hobby circles, is that peer influence might increase the tendency for certain behaviour or characteristics to spread across the environment and consequently, make peers and friends resemble one another over time (Lewis et al., 2011: 70). In practise, this means that some level of resemblance may be expected to play out in research about peers in similar environments. On the other hand, understanding the true impact of peer influence and distinguishing it from other behavioural models such as social selection is difficult without long-term, meticulous data about different individuals' lifestyles and choices (Lewis et al., 2011: 70).

Nevertheless, for instance Lewis et al. (2011: 68-72) detected in their research, that young people who had similar taste in entertainment, in their case music more specifically, were more likely to experience peer influence. This peer influence could eventually have an affect young people's decision-making process in regards of their personal lives. Notwithstanding, it's relevant to note, that peer influence can work in different directions. In some cases, young people are more likely to cultivate similar behaviour to their peers with same taste in entertainment and in some cases, young people can try to distance themselves from their peers, should the entertainment taste hold a lesser value to themselves (Lewis et al., 2011: 68-70).

Peers, in themselves, are usually described as people who are in a similar life situation and/or who possess similar values and orientations to the person in question (Jaccard, 2015: 136). Who then are the most common peers to young people? Most commonly, friends, parents and other family, free time activity such as hobby partners and schoolteachers and classmates (Yang &

Laroche, 2011; Gallupe & Bouchard, 2013; Lin et al., 2015). Of these, friends are possibly the most commonly mentioned and used peers in research and the effect that young person's friends have on them have been widely covered.

For adolescence, parents hold a particularly important role in their behavioural development. Often times, it's typical as an adolescence to seek independence and aim to become their own people, but yet at the same time strive to keep a connection to their parents (Yang & Laroche, 2011: 979). Additionally, teachers have been found to have a significant effect on the ways young people think. It has been found, that if a teacher generates relative thinking in one student, that same thinking is likely to spread across other students as well. (Lin et al. 2015: 625.)

2.4.1 Peer pressure

In their lives, young people encounter certain expectations and pressure from various people and situations. Although many studies recognize that peers, especially peer groups can be a source of support and acceptance to young people, it is often also common for peer groups to cause young people a pressure to behave or act in a certain, socially accepted way (Kiran-Esen 2012: 1302; Santor et al. 2000: 165-166). There are several studies which have focused on finding a correlation between peer pressure and risk-behaviour, such as substance abuse, decreasing academic success (Kiran-Esen 2012), or even risky driving (Shepherd et al. 2011). Some studies propose a stronger psychological correlation between peer pressure and self-efficacy, as it has been found out that young person's belief in succeeding in a task can be increased or decreased when they see their peer succeed or fail in a corresponding situation (Schunk & Meece 2005; Kiran-Esen 2012). In whichever context one sees it, peer pressure is very much a real phenomenon.

Now that social media has spread so widely into a part of our everyday lives in the Western countries and comparing your own life with others is easier than ever, it's possible that Generation Z, young people who were the first generation to be born and raised on social media, feel that pressure more than ever. Kenny et al. (2017) conducted a study on peer influence on young people's body image and found out that peer environment is by characterized by a significant pressure to meet certain appearance expectations with all genders. They observed that social media applications were heavily used by to self-compare with peers and that this comparing action had a clearly negative impact on young people's own body image. (Kenny et al. 2017.) Although it's hard

to detect how this type of peer comparison as an action begins, Kenny et al. (2017) explain in their study, that in example appearance criticism and encouragement to control body weight from peers has been found to be one the direct predictors of body image dissatisfaction.

It should come as a no surprise, that social media plays such a prominent role in peer influence and peer pressure, since it's significance in young people's identity building has widely been acknowledged (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 104; Rissanen & Luoma-aho 2014: 502). Understanding peer pressure is beneficial to this study, because of its possible impact on young people's perceptions of factors in environments like social media, in which they grow and form their identities alongside their peers. This is particularly true, because the study subjects share an almost daily hobby, where the possibility of peer pressure extending to a whole environment exists.

Consolidating features from studies around social influence, peer influence and peer pressure, there are some general guidelines that can be drawn. In general, people are more likely to have their opinions and attitudes shaped by individuals who 1. have a similar, relatable social setting and/or opinion to their own 2. who provably hold a higher knowledge of a certain phenomenon and/or 3. are held in high esteem by others in their social settings. Perhaps one of the most interesting findings recently in peer influence has been presented in a topical industry publication AdAge (2018) by Neff and Stein; they state that most of Generation Z doesn't necessarily have to see the person in order to feel a connection to them. This is where influencers, and in digital world, specifically social media influencers, comes to play. The most commonly defined influencer types and variations of them are presented in the following chapter.

2.5 Influencers

“The problem of influencer identification can be presented as, given a group of individuals which are to be motivated to adopt a new product or information, find the optimum target subset of individuals.” - More, Lingam (2017)

As More and Lingam (2017) state, the central concept of an influencer can be defined as an individual or group of individuals who find the optimum target group whose opinions and/or behaviour they can change. Hence, the concepts of influencer are strongly linked to social and peer influence. Yet, it is clear that several views and context have appeared in the last decade to this

projection of research and some debate about the usage of this term has appeared. Can an “influencer” only exist in social media or operate from a marketing perspective? Or can an influencer be basically anyone with the social influence, like a friend or a doctor? In this chapter, the most commonly suggested definitions of influencers. Firstly, opinion leaders are presented, since they are often seen as the “basis” for influencer research. Then, social media influencers, celebrities and micro-influencers are presented and the possible similarities and differences between them are distinguished.

2.5.1 Opinion leaders

Opinion leaders have been often defined in the context of marketing. In example, Gnambs and Batinic (2012) state that opinion leaders are central disseminators of market information that heavily affect consumer’s buying decisions. More specifically, modern research about opinion leaderships sees them as generalized opinion leaders (GOL), possessing information and initiating discussions about many different products and services, as opposed to focusing for example just on one product (Gnambs & Batinic, 2012). Interestingly enough, the requirement of having higher level of information about a certain product or service than one’s peers in order to initiate influence consumers decisions is often mentioned in researches with “influencer” as a key term. This indicates that from psychological point of view, one of the key attributes in initiating influence is the possession of information about an asset the person talks about.

Although it is more common for research about influencers to connect them to social media and opinion leaders in more commonly their peer’s immediate environment, whatever it might be (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), some more recent studies connect opinion leaders to social media as well. Dhanesh and Duthler (2018) specify, that a person in social media who focuses their content on multimodal self-presentation can be considered as a new type of opinion leader. In some cases, the term “influencer” overlaps or is combined with “opinion leader”. Casaló et al. (2020) actually address opinion leaders operating in social networks as a synonym for influencers.

In some cases, some personality requirements are set for opinion leaders and or influencers in social context. Song et al. (2017) investigated that in order to become an opinion leader in social media, one must have openness, exhibitionism and competence in interpersonal relationships. These traits have been supported by Gnambs and Batinic (2012) as well, adding up general self-efficacy and agreeability to the definition. In sum, according to many current studies, it

seems that in order to become an opinion leader, one must 1. possess a level of information about many products, higher than one's peers and 2. be an extroverted person of some level in order to effectively use this information. This study posits, however, that for example exhibitionism and other corresponding personal traits have less importance in the eyes of the consumers themselves and more value will be put on relatability and authenticity. Indeed, many researchers have stated that the need for authenticity in every aspect of one's business is essential (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

2.5.2 Social media influencers

Social influence, peer influence and individuals who possess the qualities to create it have been studied hundreds of times. The basis of "influencer" research lies, as stated above, in similar aspects to ones of opinion leaders. However, since opinion leaders have been defined long before the development of social media, it seems that in some cases the term "influencer" is merely a more digitally advanced continuum for opinion leader or a more modern substitute for it. However, it must be considered that in many researched the definitions overlap or more significantly, left undefined. In some cases, the term "influencer" is being used without any explanation or the context in which the definition derives from is vague or not recognized at all. Thus, it is justifiable that the term, its current contexts, presumptions and requirements are in need of redefining and/or at least reviewing.

First and foremost, it's important to understand the needs from which the research about influencers most commonly originates from. The most common definition of "influencers" considers them almost invariably from a corporate marketing perspective and additionally, they often include marketing actions including product promotion as one of the criteria. Dhanes and Duthler (2019) say, that "In return of payment or sponsored products and services, influencers produce content on some...", which indicates that one can be considered as an influencer only when they receive payment from the content they make on social media. Similarly, both Kim and Kim (2018) and Enke & Borchers (2019) state that influencers are operators assisting brands in specific marketing and communication activities by affecting the potential consumer group(s) of a certain brand or a product, thus containing the presumption of some form of commercial collaboration contract with a brand. This perspective is intriguing in that it strictly ties the term "influencer" in corporate marketing environment and as such, doesn't include any specific social media

applications or virtual environment into the definition, whereas some other research see this as the most vital requirement.

More and Lingham (2017) point out that an influencer has to work in a social network of some sorts and they need to influence people's opinions specifically through social networking. Moreover, they recognize products reviews and promotions as such social networking activities (More & Lingham, 2017). Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) add to these criteria by stating that the commercial agreement including payment for the promotional content the individual creates in their platform is needed. This payment can be done in the form of cash, free products and/or PR trips (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). So far in the modern studies, it seems somewhat debatable, whether an influencer needs to make money out of their content or is the size of their audience the best measurement. It's worth observing, that in most of the studies the definition has been developed from a corporate point of view, possibly neglecting the consumer standpoint of the subject at hand.

Although doing product promotion in social media is often one of the criteria for being an influencer, some researches highlight influencers as influential individuals with an audience of some significant size or with a strong engagement level between them. Freberg et al (2010) define influencers as "third party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media". Audrezet et al. (2020) stretch this definition further by saying that a person can become an influencer after they've reached an engaged audience that's increasing in size. Some studies state more specifically that only the most followed content makers in their chosen social media platform(s) can be defined as an influencer (Pekkala, 2018; Audrezet et al. 2020). However, Enke and Borchers (2019) look at the idea of influencers to concern also regular social media users, celebrities and corporate influencers, with the inclusion and presumption of them using their platform(s) to promote certain ideas or products by example giving testimonials about it.

Having mentioned celebrities, it's rather interesting that research about influencers sometimes references them as a part of the defining itself (Enke & Borchers 2019). On the other hand, the definition of celebrities itself can be seen to consider social media influencers - "instafamous" people (Jin et al, 2019). Jin et al. (2019) suggest, that these new type of celebrities, "instafamous" people, actually have a stronger connectedness with their audience than traditional celebrities, such as TV stars, since they are perceived as more relatable to consumers, possibly because of the mutual social platforms they use.

Based on the existing research, it's seemingly easy to distinguish between regular social media users and influencer. However, it should be recognized that the factors used to separate an ordinary social media user or even people without any digital networks from influencers vary a lot in the current studies. Sometimes the distinguishing factors are notably vague. Some researches state that an influencer can be recognized as merely anyone who has the ability to influence people's decisions. This would make it possible to consider anyone obtaining social and peer influence over a person as an influencer. Even Enke and Borchers (2019: 268), despite recognizing that social media influencers usually exist and operate from a corporate marketing perspective, acknowledge that an "influencer" itself could be in example a physician, since their recommendations is likely to have an impact on the decisions their patients make. Likewise, Casaló et al. (2018: 2-3) state that essentially anyone, who has the possibility to influence people's opinions can be described as influencer. These definitions don't consider any requirements about the attributes of the audience itself, the engagement level between the person and their audience or any commercial contract with a brand or an organization. Perhaps as a consortium between the corporate marketing influencer with big audience, everyday social media user with the ability to influence and just about anyone who possesses social and/or peer influence, recent studies have introduced a more specific definition of a "micro-influencer" to the field.

2.5.3 Micro-influencers

Micro-influencers are typically described as people who have the ability to affect desired change for users on social media (Dinesh, 2017). Thus, the function comes relatively close to the one about "traditional" influencer from marketing perspective. In general, the difference between a traditional social media influencer and micro-influencer is based more on, according to current research, on their personal branding strategies and the size of their audience. Where traditional influencers are seen as almost professionals in using social media's different channels, such as bloggers, and having a carefully considered personal brand with a wider audience, micro-influencers are seen as any social media user with smaller audience and more personal style in their product promotions, usually operating within their own network of connections, thus, according to Dinesh (2017), utilizing a more relatable perspective. Both are, nonetheless, operators of product promotions and commercial collaborations with organizations.

Micro influencers are also often described as somewhat more authentic and/or trustworthy to the audience than a traditional influencer. In an interview with Experticity CEO Tom Stockham, he states that micro-influencers “are trusted people who other people can have a real conversation with, offline or online.” It should be noted though, that the audience for micro-influencers is often more niche and hyper-focused on one topic, whereas a traditional influencer may have content covering many different areas of life, such as hobbies, beauty, travel, lifestyle etc. For organizations and brands, it’s often also cheaper to tap into the audience of a micro-influencer rather than a popular influencer with significantly bigger audience (Entertainment Close – Up, 2018).

The importance of micro influencers should definitely not be underrated. According to a report by Influencer Intelligence (2020), micro-influencers or influencers with less than 100 000 followers were seen as the most appealing for organizations and brands for digital marketing activities. Because of smaller scale influencers’ more relatable content and more interactional environment, consumers found so called mid-tier influencers, who land in the territory between an influencer and a micro-influencer, and micro influencers the most appealing to them (Influence Intelligence, 2020). It is worth considering, that there hasn’t been a definition to any exact moment in which an average social media user transforms or doesn’t transform into a micro-influencer or an influencer of any other sorts Even micro-influencers are still defined through the needs of digital marketing rather than the audience opinions.

Overall, research field on influencers is expanding constantly and new definitions on the term are to be expected to be presented as technology, the tools and environments it offers, continue to develop. Some of the currently common definitions that were investigated in the study are presented below in order to allow more efficient foundation for assimilating the terms. However, it should be noted, that since this study emphasis on the term “influencer” and how it can be explained is part of the research question itself, no specific definition from the current research field is positioned above others as a more significant one before the empirical study.

Table 2. Definitions of influencer

Definition of influencer	Related concepts /specifications / dimensions	Influence target	Context / focus
“a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, Freberg, 2011, 90-91)	Personal features include for example: intelligence, ambitiousness, productiveness, confidence, candid	Attitudes, lifestyle	Social media / Psychology (shape audience attitudes)
“a type of opinion leader, engage in self-presentation on social media” (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019: 1-2)	Type of opinion leadership. Attract attention through self-presentation, rich multimodal narration of their personal, everyday lives, collaborations with organizations	Buying decisions, lifestyle	Social media / Personal branding
“Social media influencers are the entities in the social network, who help potential customers make a buying decision by influencing his opinion, through social networking” (More & Lingam, 2017: 1-2)	Must be a part of social network. Influences customers buying decisions	Buying decisions	Social media / Influencer marketing
“An influencer can be any person who reviews product, posts a blog about a new product, any industry expert or any person who has a potential to influence people” (More & Lingam, 2017: 1-2)	Any person who does reviews etc. and has the potential to influence	Buying decisions	Psychology

<p>“A number of opinion leaders (influencers have emerged as influential members of online communities and have been shown to be a source of advice for other consumers” (Casalúa, Flavián, Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018, 2-3)</p>	<p>Influential member of online community, source of advice</p>	<p>Attitudes, lifestyle</p>	<p>Fashion industry / Influencer marketing</p>
<p>“organizational stakeholders that can fulfill specific functions for organizations and their strategic communication” Enke & Borchers (2019)</p>	<p>Fulfill specific functions for organization</p>	<p>Buying decisions</p>	<p>Influencer marketing</p>
<p>As contributors gain increasing numbers of engaged followers, they may develop into social media influencers (Audrezet et al. 2020)</p>	<p>(make) actions that include expressing their opinions in product re- views, offering tips on product usage, and posting pictures or videos containing products or services</p>	<p>Buying decisions, lifestyle</p>	<p>Influencer marketing</p>
<p>“The most followed content makers, therefore, can be considered to be new media influencers” Pekkala (2018)</p>	<p>Most followed content makers</p>	<p>Lifestyle</p>	<p>Influencer marketing</p>
<p>”ordinary social media users, real-world celebrities, and corporate influencers. All these types are usually referred to as influencers.” Enke & Borchers (2019)</p>	<p>Give testimonials, are opinion leaders</p>	<p>Attitudes, lifestyle</p>	<p>Influencer marketing</p>
<p>“...an individual with a significant following on social media who is paid by brands to promote their products to said followers, via free products and trips</p>	<p>Makes revenue out of promotion</p>	<p>Buying decisions</p>	<p>Influencer marketing</p>

and/or cash payment per promotional post” (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018)			
People who have the ability to affect desired change for users on social media (Dinesh, 2017).	Micro-influencer: less focus on personal branding	Attitudes	Influencer marketing

3 RESEARCH DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the goal is to explain the different research methods that are applied in this study. First, the research questions are re-introduced. Next, research design is described. Then, the full data collection process including selection and introduction of the focus group, data protection- and ethical evaluations and data collection methods, including the means semi-structured interviews were conducted, are presented. After this, the data analysis methods used in this study are specified and displayed.

3.1 Research questions

The main goal of this study is to find out, how young people perceives influencers and upon which themes do those perceptions build upon. To investigate this, the motives young people have on using social media and following influencers and how they recognize influencers are explored. Then, significance of different social influence agents on young people’s decision-making processes are investigated. By analysing their views, the aim is to further conceptualize and possible expand the currently known and accepted definition of “influencer” and evaluate, how much significance

influencers have in young people's decisions in comparison with other agents. Based on research problems, the research questions are formed as follows:

RQ1. What factors affect the way young people perceive influencers and why?

RQ2. How do young people perceive social influence allocated by different agents and how do they affect their decision-making?

3.2 Research design

This study aims to find out how Generation Z perceive influencers, how the identification of individuals seen as "influencers" build based upon that perception and furthermore, what attributes affect their decision making around the topic. It also aims to find out what kind of social influence do these individuals see others than traditionally qualified "influencers" have and why. This study focused on Generation Z representatives between ages 15 to 20 (n=13) who shared a mutual hobby environment in the sports field in Finland. Because of the focus group's age, the having understanding of young people's decision- and sense-making processes in online environments are highlighted in this study. This connects to the way their identities are formed and it has been established, that peers and other factors possessing social influence in both offline and online environments typically have a significant impact on forming that identity (Gallupe & Bouchard, 2013; Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011; Lewis et al., 2011) and consequently, decision-making processes. Since the fundamental goal of this study is set on increasing understanding of a certain topic, a qualitative research orientation was chosen.

Qualitative research orientation is based on the endeavour of understanding the quality, nature and features of the research subject at hand. Although it has been said that qualitative research, or any research for that matter, offers ways of merely scratching the surface of a certain phenomenon or topic, an important goal of qualitative research is to increase humane understanding of them (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006), instead of finding statistical generalisations (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). Thus, is it crucial for the researcher to have profound understanding on

their data and obtain sensitivity that allows insightful interpretation of that data in order to produce results from it (Syrjäläinen et al., 2007: 8). Qualitative research orientation consists of numerous different traditions and frameworks that can be utilized in approaching the subject, collecting data and analysing it. Research problem or research composition and research questions define, which ways are used throughout the research. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006.)

In order to gain a deeper understanding on the subject of this study, a middle-road between an abductive and inductive approaches was selected. In inductive approach, the research data has a pivotal role in the analysis. For abductive approach, the main interest in the research is on the collected data, but theoretical framework based on previous research plays an important role in guiding the study. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018.) Striving to confirm or support a main theoretical idea is common in abductive approach (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). Since previous research was used to create a theoretical framework for this study and to guide the methodological choices, abductive features can be recognized. However, since this study aims to increase understanding of a topic rather than confirming an existing theoretical idea it can be seen to follow inductive manners as well.

3.3 Research data

The data of this study was gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews. During a time period of 2 weeks in November 2020, a total of 13 individual interviews were conducted. The selected language was Finnish, since it was the native language of all the participants. To select participants, convenience sampling process was used. This means, that participants were selected in a purposed way based on the researcher's accessibility to Generation Z representatives and their eagerness to participate in the study (Kivunja 2015). It was seen that their willingness to participate could affect positively the flow of conversation during interviews and could thus provide the study with versatile data. Convenience sampling has been seen as a functional sampling process because of its frugality and ease (Kivunja 2015). Nevertheless, it has to be noted, that all this study's participants were from the same geographical area and have similar socioeconomic backgrounds, which could steer the research results into a certain direction.

In order to receive comparable data, the selected interviews had one conjunctive feature – they all shared a hobby in the same field of sports. This decision was made since research shows that especially with young people, the importance of hobby environment has been recognized

in their identity building and thus, decision making processes (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 91). This sampling allowed to see whether a shared hobby environment had any effect on the perceived level of social influence and possible influencer identities or not. The selection was targeted on young people between ages 15 to 20, those of representatives of so called “Generation Z”.

After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed into a written form in Finnish using anonymisation in order to remove any data enabling identification. This meant that all recognizable data, such as names, ages, geographical locations, specific social environments or any brand names, either organizational or personal brands, were removed from the text and replaced with generic words such as “person”, “this one place” etc. Such a high level of anonymisation was used especially because of the small sample size of the interviewees in shared environment, where people could be recognized based on merely their age. A total of 520 minutes of audio and video recording was gathered from the interviews and it produced 117 pages of anonymously transcribed text.

3.3.1 Data protection- and ethical evaluation

Before seeking out interviewees, a possible need for ethical evaluation about the research topic, methods, target group selection and interview processes were carried out with the data protection officer at the University of Jyväskylä and the research mentors. Firstly, data processing was necessary for scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes, and it was correctly proportional in relation to the goal in accordance with public interest (section 4.1(3) of the Finnish data protection act). Additionally, since all interviewees were above the age of 15, no strong stimulus or any physical or mental discomfort were exposed to the interviewees and no personal data about their identity was to be collected, it was authorised that no separate ethical pre-evaluation from Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK was needed in order to conduct the data collection process of the research (TENK, 2019).

After the evaluation process, research briefing email containing general introduction about the research, data protection bulletin and a link to a consent questionnaire constructed with Webropol tool provided by the University were prepared. The possible participants were first informed about the research, it’s topic and queried about their willingness to participate to the interviews by face-to-face contact or Instagram direct message in a cautious, understandable matter.

In case of participants giving preliminary, spoken statement of willingness to participate, they were further informed by the research briefing email described earlier. After the participants were given time to get acquainted with the material and fill out the research participation consent, interview times were agreed upon.

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are described as situations, where the interviewer asks the study subject questions (Eskola & Suoranta 2003, 85). Individual interviews were selected as a data collecting method for this research, since the goal was to find out about young people's individual ways of thinking and explaining the phenomena at the focus. Giving the space to young interviewees to be heard as individuals would have been challenging, should they have been in social environment with their peers, that's often created when interviews are conducted for instance by using focus groups (Välilmaa, 2000: 122-123). Individuality was specifically important, since the interviewees were asked to estimate their own relationship with the subject matter. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a certain social environment is always present even during individual interviews, depending on both the interviewer's and interviewees view on the situation. According to Goffman (1971), social expectations of "how one should present themselves" are different depending on the audience at hand. Therefore, it must be taken into account, that the interviewees "real opinions" might differ from their interview answers based on how they want themselves to be seen (Välilmaa, 2000: 123).

Before conducting all 13 interviews for this study's data collection, it should be noted that a test interview, following all selected data protection processes, was conducted in early November in order to test the validity of the selected method. Validity in general expresses, how well the chosen research method serves and measures the features of the phenomena that it's meant to measure (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008). Test interview is typically seen as a good way to allow the researcher to refine their data collection practices before conducting actual interviews (Eskola & Suoranta, 2003). After the test interview many beneficial matters were noticed, and interview frame was modified accordingly. For instance, the order of the interview themes as well as the questions was rearranged into a more logical one that would add a well-needed flow to the interview. Additionally, it was noted that the interview benefited from a serene yet approachable environment that was not too clinical, which is why the interviewer chose to conduct all the interviews from their own home.

The interviews for this research were conducted following a thematic interview method, where the discussion topics were determined in advance. Main topics, that the actual interview questions were built around, were concluded firstly with the knowledge drawn from existing research that was introduced in the theoretical framework and secondly by which ones would serve the research problem the best. According to Eskola and Suoranta (2003), one possible way to build a logical order to interview topics is to first focus more on issues that require interviewees estimation on facts, such as “how many influencers you follow in social media” and then gradually build towards themes that require discussion about e.g., values and social relationships. Therefore, the themes were set in rough order as follows:

Table 3. Order of themes in thematic semi-structures interviews

1. *Estimated facts + attitudes (general use of social media)*
2. *Estimated facts + attitudes + behavioural reasons (influencers)*
3. *Behavioural reasons (social/peer influence)*
4. *Social relationships + values (personal admiration and values)*

Despite following a thematic interview method, the main questions around the topics were determined in advance, and in a large scale had the same format and sequences in order to maintain equal significance to each individual interviewee. Thus, a structured element was present in the research (Eskola & Suoranta, 2003: 86-88; Hirsjärvi et al., 2008; Koskinen et al., 2005: 104-108). Thus, it can be stated, that the interviews possessed features from both thematic and structured methods. Koskinen et al. (2005, 104) describe in their book this type of research as “semi-structured” – which is the term that’s used to portray this research as well.

A general goal for the interviews was to create a non-stressful environment around them. This was ensured by agreeing on the interview time with the study subjects well advance, from 4-7 days prior, by sending them the technical interview instructions at least 24 hours in advance and by reserving to the interviews more time than actually estimated. The estimation based on the test interview and the implemented modifications on the interview frame after it was 60 minutes. Most interviews took place in peaceful environments from the subjects’ side, such as their

own room or an office room at home. Only two interviewees were set in an environment with other people nearby, such as a library. However, in these situations, interviewees used headphones that allowed them to concentrate better on the interview situation. The shortest interview took 31 minutes, and the longest interview was 50 minutes long. The duration of the interview was largely determined by both the eagerness of the interviewee and general flow of the conversations.

Throughout the interviews, it was important not to restrict the interviewees too much in order to sustain approachability and flow in the conversation. To achieve this goal of openness, the semi-structured method has been found very useful (Koskinen et al., 2005: 104). The main questions of the interview focused on stimulating conversation about themes that best served the research problem based on the knowledge drawn from theoretical framework of this study, such as social media usage, who young people choose to follow and not to follow on social media and why, who they consider as “influencers” and why, if there were any qualities that they see essential in being an influencer and who they consider as most influential agents when making decisions about their lives and future plans. The semi-structured method allowed the discussions to meander between the questions according to the eagerness and needs of the young interviewees.

At the very start of the interviews, the general structure of the interviews, why the research is being done and why they were selected as subjects, data protection methods, such as the ways and time period their data would be collected and obtained after the interviews and the anonymising transcription processes were explained to the study subject. They were also reminded, that their participation to the research is always voluntary and reversible. A specific focus was set on highlighting the confidentiality of the interview situation in order to minimize any pursuit of social desirability in the subject’s answers (Eskola & Suoranta, 2003: 85). This was particularly important, since the subjects were all young people.

It has been generally accepted idea in researches where some form of interview takes place, to place more general topics and questions in the beginning of the interview and move gradually towards the more personal ones (Eskola & Suoranta, 2003), since often times interviewees tend to feel more comfortable towards more delicate topics during the latter part of the interview. Thus, the interview in this study was constructed as follows: The beginning of the interview focused on finding out young people’s opinions and perceptions of the topics at hand, such as what they like about social media in general, how many and which influencers they follow or don’t follow and why. In the middle part of the interview, a social media ranking exercise took place. The matters and methods in which the ranking exercise was implemented is described below. The latter part of the interviews focused more on the young people’s future plans and discussing

which type of people they admire and why. An example interview frame in Finnish can be found in the appendices (Appendix 1.)

3.3.3 Social influence exercise

To measure some of the attitudes surrounding the topic of social influence, self-report method in a form of Likert scale was conducted as a part of the semi-structured interviews. This part of the interview is called “social influence exercise”. Likert scale is widely used meter when measuring a certain feature, for instance motivation or attitudes (Metsämuuronen, 2011: 70). Throughout the Likert scale questions, interviewees were asked to freely voice their thought processes and opinions on the subject, keeping the conversational flow going. Answers gathered from this social influence exercise could have been investigated further using quantitative methods, but because of the small sample size and the overall qualitative nature of the study, it was chosen not to do so.

Self-report is one of the common strategies in estimating peer influence (Keefe, 1994). In self-reporting, study subjects are asked to evaluate to which extent their behaviour is the result of peer influence or social influence. There has been some critique to this measurement method. For instance, Jaccard et al. (2005) argue, that adolescent may over- or underestimate the extent they are pressured by others to do things as a way of justifying their own behaviour. However, since this study focused on perceived peer- and social influence and it did not deal with any sensitive themes, such as risk behaviour, substance abuse or health-related issues, self-reporting was seen as a good tool to measure.

The social influence exercise took place at the middle part of the interview. In the exercise, five questions set to assess the significance of perceived social influence, used a 5-level Likert scale. The scale was anchored between extremities “not significant” and “Very significant”. In the exercise, the interviewees were asked to rank five agents based on their significance on their decision-making process and place them in order from most influential to least influential. Interviewees had the chance to assess different agents, all of them if they wanted, with same significance level and all of the interviewees did so, hence the results from this exercise are handled in manner of Likert scale.

The agents in this exercise were selected with guidance from the theoretical framework of this study, albeit not following a certain selected theory. The aim was to select

commonly found peers and other agents with the possibility to generate peer influence and social influence amongst young people. Agents were decided as follows:

Table 4. Agents in the social influence exercise

Agent	Theoretical base
1. Social media influencer or micro-influencer	More, Lingam (2017)
2. Friend and/or friends	Lewis et al. (2011)
3. Coach/teacher	Lin et al. (2015), Lehdonvirta & Räsänen (2011)
4. Parents	Yang & Laroche (2010)
5. Officials (THL, Police, Politicians)	Grönlund & Setälä (2012)

The example contexts to which the social ranking exercise questions were based on were selected in a similar manner, using the theoretical framework as base. The goal was to determine different contexts in which peer influence and social influence have been detected. The contexts were chosen as follows:

Table 5. Contexts in the social influence exercise

Context	Theoretical base
1. Consumer decisions	De Castro (2006); Wilska & Pedrozo (2007)
2. Entertainment (music)	Lewis et al. (2011)
3. Hobby	Lehdonvirta & Räsänen (2011)
4. Ethicality	Pitesa & Thau, (2013)
5. Personal life	Lewis et al. (2011), Jaccard et al. (2015)

First in the exercise, the significance level of different agents in study subjects buying decision process were ranked by asking, how would they rank the given agents if they were to buy a piece of clothing or an accessory. Necessity goods were not taken into account in this study. Second question concerned about their entertainment media consumption, more specifically music, by asking in order of significance level would the agents influence their music listening habits. Thirdly,

experienced social influence in their mutual hobby environment was concerned by asking, to which order would the interviewees place different agents based on their influential effect on them in choosing which and how many lessons to have in their curriculum. Fourthly, their ethical decision-making process was covered by asking, in what significance level would they place the agents' advices when making decisions about e.g., living environmentally friendly or being cautious about equality issues. Lastly, the process of different personal decisions about their lifestyle and relationships were covered by asking, in what significance level's order would they place different agents' advices concerning e.g., relationship advices.

3.3.4 Zoom as tool for qualitative data collection

Some of the most traditional methods for producing qualitative research data have typically included face-to-face and in-person interviews. However, since researchers conduct geographically extensive studies where it sometimes gets impossible for budgetary or other practical reasons to meet the study subjects in person, other interview tools, such as video conferencing have been taken into account (Gray et al., 2020; Archibald et al., 2019). Originally developed to facilitate long-distance and international communication, it has been found that video conferencing tools offer a cost-efficient and convenient alternative to in-person communication (Gray et al., 2010). In the light of the events in 2020, when meeting study participants, or any other people for that matter, in person has the possibility to propose health risks due to the global pandemic, the relevancy of using long-distance communicating tools for studies is more justifiable than ever. Nevertheless, some issues have been brought up to discussion about the ethical, practical and interactional issues surrounding these applications (Archibald et al., 2019), hence it's become increasingly important to be extremely cautious in collecting data with a video conference tool.

Today, there are several video conferencing tools available, WebEx, Skype, Google Hangouts and Zoom to only name a few. The selection of the tool for a specific research or other use case depends typically on the conveniency and monetary demands set by the users (Gray et al., 2010). For this particular study, Zoom was selected as the interview tool mainly because of its conveniency. Zoom has been found by research as being one of the most convenient video conference tools which's benefits overrule the possible challenges (Archibald et al., 2019). Some critique towards zoom has been presented, mainly concerning its data protection policies. In order to maintain integrity in the data collection process in this study, only Zoom tools and instructions

provided by the University of Jyväskylä were implemented. Before confirming the selection of zoom as the tool interviewing tool the data security officer of University was also consulted to be assured on the probity and security of the process. All zoom links for the interviews were created under researchers University profile on Zoom and all the interview data was collected only onto a secure, identification and password required device. All the interview data from the interview situations were immediately demolished after fully anonymous transcripts were finished.

3.4 Data analysis

The goal of this study was to investigate Generation Z's perceptions on influencers, different ways their identification of "influencers" forms and more importantly, what attributes direct their decision making around the topic. Since the study focuses on different ways people process and experience a relatively new phenomena and why, more of an inductive overall approach was set to resolve questions about research design. The collected data turned out to be more complex than expected and it displayed interesting features in unexpected contexts. Thus, one of the puzzling, yet also one of the exciting questions in this research was the selection of data analysis method.

According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), it's very common for researchers to find unanticipated and intriguing issues from the data. In these cases, it's very easy for the researched to lose the focus on their research problem and go off-track in presenting excessively detailed information on the data. In reality, the critical goal is to be cautious in presenting the most relevant information that serves the research problem (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008.) Essentially, the goal of the researcher is to understand the study subject's standpoints and their meanings in all phases of the analysis and interpret, rationalize and present the data in a form from which more conceptual apprehension of the studied phenomenon can be derived (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

Prior to transcribing the data, it was preliminarily figured that a form of thematic analysis was to be implemented in the study. During the transcription process it was decided more precisely that a thematic content analysis method was to be used. Although some vagueness between the definitions of content analysis and thematic exist (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), there are a few reasons for using a method that is understood to consists of them both in this study. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), there are various ways to differentiate between content

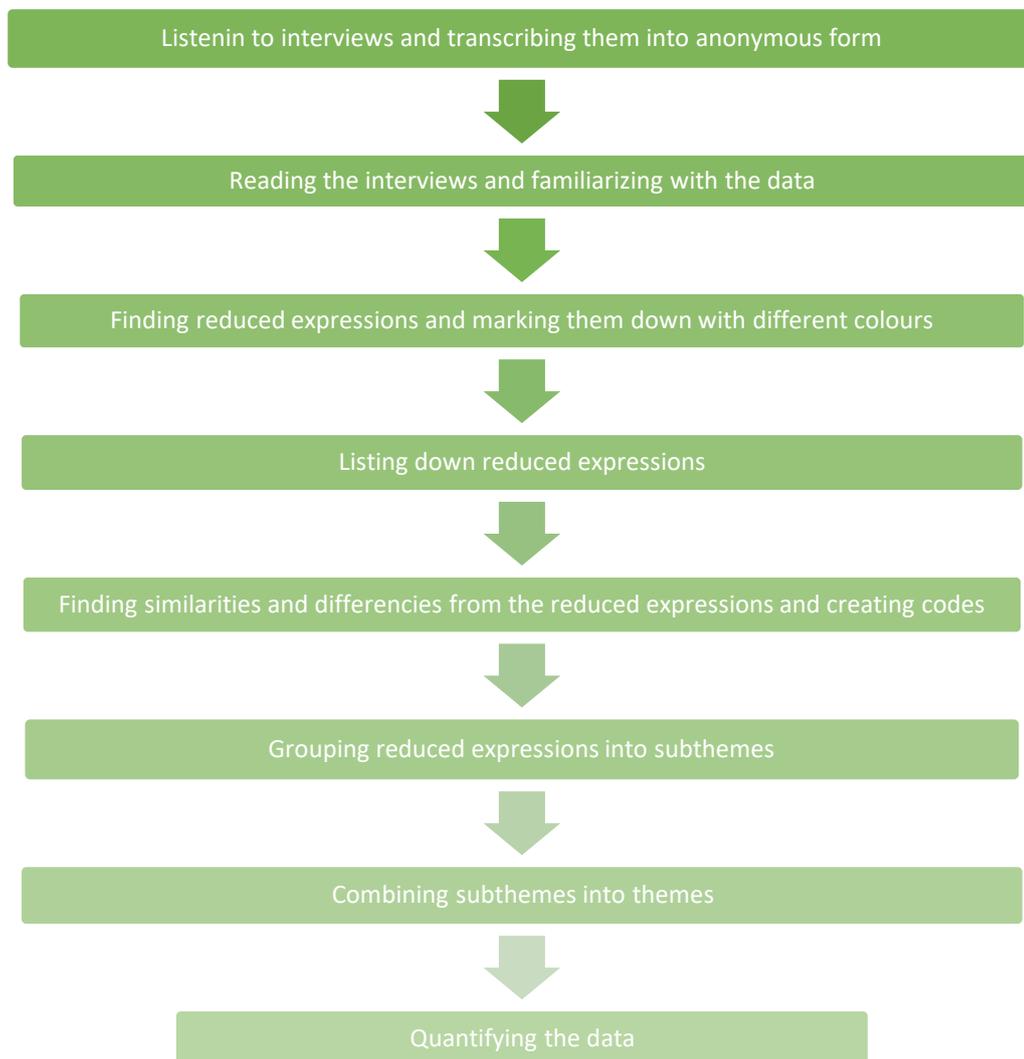
analysis and thematic analysis. In example, some researchers see that using counting in viewing information from the data is seen to typical content analysis. Another view is that thematic analysis would be more focused on interpreting hidden meanings in the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Since in this study some form of numbers is used, such as quantifying the data from the interviews, some shape of content analysis is recognized. However, since this study finds different attributes that might indicate young people's relation to the topic and the ways they're shaped interesting, additional value on potential hidden meanings in the data is placed and thus, thematic analysis takes its place.

Thematic content analysis process in this study is understood and implemented in three main stages, that for instance Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) present in their book. First, the original transcript data was reduced by marking down reduced expressions, consisting of words and sentences, that availed the research problem. Expressions that included similarities, differences or repeating ideas within or between the themes were accentuated in the transcripts by using different coloured strikethroughs.

Second, reduced expressions were gathered together into groups based on their similarities distinguished by their own colour. This phase of the thematic content analysis is often called clustering (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In this phase, it was noted that based on the researcher's interpretation, some expressions had indications of overlapping themes, as they often times do (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In this case the expression was taken into account in the essential theme groups. After forming the main groups, the subthemes representing the expressions actual content were assembled, after which main themes were created by combining different subthemes. Both the themes and the subthemes were named after the phenomena that were interpreted to appear in the data.

Before moving on to interpreting the data, it was seen beneficial to increase notion on which themes were most commonly mentioned throughout the interview. This way, understanding on the noteworthiness of themes could be augmented (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). To clarify this, subthemes were given recognizable code names based on their content. For instance, if the interviewee talked about how they cared what type of character an influencer was, their comment was reduced and arranged under subtheme "Personality's importance", from which a code *Personal-branding-important* was derived. After creating the codes, research data was quantified by using analysis matrix, where the frequencies of the codes could be counted. The thematic content analysis matrix can be viewed from the appendices (Appendix 2). For convenience, the thematic content analysis process used in this study is visualized in the figure below (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Thematic content analysis process in this study, as modelled by Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018)



Finally, clustering was followed by the third step of analysis process, abstraction, where essential information to the research problem is separated from the groups and examined by using theoretical framework as mirroring tool. Then, the premier findings of the study and most meaningful quotes from the data to supports them were presented in a corresponding order to each derived theme. All of the quotations were translated from Finnish to English with the goal of maintaining the true purposes of them, although it should be kept in mind that translation includes an aspect of researcher's interpretation as well. Based on the selected information's interpretations, conceptual conception from the studied phenomenon was possible to delineate.

The analysis section of this study is divided into four main parts, that aim to generate clarifying information to the research problem. In the first part, young people's uses and gratifications for social media and following influencers is investigated with the goal of finding out, what motives drive them to interact with people in various social media environments. Second part aims to explain, which criteria do the study subjects set for an individual to be defined as influencer based on their initial thoughts on what comes to their mind first when thinking about a word "influencer". Third part aims to investigate, what factors affect study subject's perceptions on influencers and what role does that perception conceivably have on their decision-making processes by presenting the detected pivotal themes and subthemes from the data (table X). The fourth part of the analysis includes the social influence exercise results, where the significance of different agents in young people's decision-making process is examined.

It should be noted that a more in-depth level analysis, taking into account also potentially hidden meanings, was performed in covering the overall themes of the interviews, while a lighter analysis was implemented in viewing uses and gratifications and criteria for influencers by the study subjects. This is because uses and gratifications and identification on influencers were the secondary focus on the study, while main focus was aimed at comprehending, from which features young people's perception on influencer forms.

The main themes, which are then further explained in the text following corresponding order to the table, are as follows: *Attitudes towards commercialism, attitudes towards personal brands, attitudes towards social media content, attitudes towards technical features of social media, attitudes towards one's self image, attitudes towards one's worldview and source criticism on social media.*

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The aim of this chapter is to present the main findings in this study. These results are derived with the previously portrayed data analysis methods and their goal is to answer the research questions the best way possible and consequently, increase understanding of the main topic on this study. This chapter has four main parts. First part is aimed at investigating Generation Z's motives to use social media and follow influencers, second part focuses on examining the way Generation Z identifies influencers and the third part's aim is to find out which attributes might partake in forming the perception Generation Z have on influencers and how that might affect their decision-making processes. Fourth part looks more closely into different influential agents in young people's decision-making processes.

4.1 Why do young people use social media (and possibly follow influencers as well)?

By understanding the motives individuals use and engage in social media applications, studies argue it is possible to gather information that gives organisations and brands essential information on customers' behaviour and needs in online environments, which gives them a better opportunity to respond to them and hopefully, effectively create engagement (Rissanen, Luoma-aho 2014). Different motives to use social media applications were investigated in this study by reviewing uses and gratifications theory.

Although uses and gratifications theory did not serve as a base for conducting the semi-structured interviews, one of the research questions aimed to find out what some of the best things in social media were according to the focus group, Generation Z. This was done in order to gain understanding on specifically young people's motives to use social media and thus the possible motives to follow social media influencers. Furthermore, disclosing these motives would possibly help to understand how their perceptions on influencers builds as well.

Because uses & gratifications theory was reviewed in the theoretical framework part of this study, it was recognized, that many of the "best things" about social media that Generation Z representatives mentioned were similar to the social media usage motives that could be found in

numerous uses & gratification theories. In this study, signs of seemingly common motives were drawn from simplified interview data, that were analysed for similar expressions, which were then interpreted to be arranged into 5 categories: Information exchange/gaining knowledge, new connections, social maintenance, entertainment/leisure and freedom of expression. The commonly mentioned motives and their categories are presented in the table below.

Table 6. Generation Z's motives to use social media

Simplified example quotes extracted from data	Motives	Category of motives
"to find topical information about things" (H1) "to gain knowledge" (H2) "get information about certain issues" (H3)(H10) "to see what they do around the world" (H3) "see other people's lives" (H4)(H9) "being in contact with the outside world" (H5) "to keep up to date with what's going on in the world" (H7)(H11) "expand your view of the world" (H11)	Gaining knowledge Knowing what happens elsewhere in the world	Informational exchange / Gaining knowledge
"to make new friends" (H1)(H13)(H12)(H5) "reaching people – whether you know them or not" (H2) "get to know new people" (H7)(H8) "to discover new interesting people around the world" (H5)(H12)	Making new friends Discover people I didn't know previously Getting to know people	New connections
"to keep in touch with your friends" (H1)(H2)(H3)(H4) "to see what happens in your friends lives" (H1)(H5)(H3)(H6) "having a sense of community" (H5)(H7)(H3)(H11) "to see what other people are interested in" (H6)	Keep in touch with friends Seeing what happens in friends lives Following people's lives Community Seeing what other people like	Social maintenance
"I like to watch beautiful, aesthetic photos" (H1) "sometimes I just want to entertain myself" (H4) "it's nice to get style inspiration" (H13)(H12) "to get inspiration for your hobby" (H3) "getting ideas and tips for e.g. makeup or art" (H8)(H13)	Seeing beautiful pictures Getting inspiration for my hobby Finding style inspiration Inspiration and tips for makeup Entertainment Tips for nutrition	Entertainment/Leisure
"being able to share what I think about things" (H4) "it gives me an opportunity to do my own thing" (H7) "I like to produce content for myself" (H6)	Stating your opinions Being able to "do your own thing"	Freedom of Expression

The first category of motives created from interpreting the research data was *informational exchange/gaining knowledge*. Both of these expressions are included, because there seems to be a slight deflection between the notion on information and knowledge needs, yet both were seen important to the focus group and both needs could be satisfied by using social media applications. By information, it is meant here that the study's focus group showed desire to know what the status quo of certain topical issues in the world was. Knowledge, on the other hand, means increasing the existing information level about an issue of choice. One interesting feature here was that influencers were often mentioned as a source of information or knowledge (with common demand for source

credibility) which could suggest that informational exchange/gaining knowledge motive for using social media could be extended to concern social media influencers as well.

Next categories, making *new connections* and doing *social maintenance*, such as keeping in touch with one's friends and peers in a convenient way were seemed to be show indications of importance to the focus group, as they were most commonly mentioned motives. Generally speaking, possibility to connect with all kinds of people, both influencers and those seen as "ordinary" social media users, globally and see what life is like outside of your own country was seen as a valuable outcome from social media. Additionally, having a sense of community and gaining peer support from different community members was mentioned as the best thing in social media by four interviewees. One of them described it as follows:

"In social media it's possible to find people you relate to and if you've had d e.g. mental health issues, you can find peer support from those people, because they know what you've gone through" (H13)

For some interviewees, discussions had details that could signify social media's importance as a source of *entertainment*, e.g. in the form of funny videos or photos with pleasing aesthetics. Visually pleasing content created by especially influencers was often mentioned in obtaining inspiration on lifestyle matters or new ideas concerning their hobby activities. This is why *leisure* is included in this category as well. Finally, a few interviewees mentioned commonalities that indicated their tendency to actively produce content themselves and stated, that social media gives them the opportunity to express themselves via their content and voice their opinions about issues that are meaningful to them. Thus, the final category, *freedom of expression* was conducted from interpreting the data. Although none of the categories were deductively determined or even purposefully investigated, it was interesting to see, that many of the motives fit the uses & gratifications theoretical ones by e.g. Orchard et al. (2014) or Krause, North and Heritage (2014), but were interpreted to involve influencers as well.

4.3 Criteria for influencers

In the theoretical framework of this study, several definitions of influencers, social influence and peer influence in modern research were presented in order to gain basic knowledge on the agents that have social influence and how that social influence appears in different contexts. "Influencer"

as a term was found to be relatively new and typically connected to the context of social media. Peer influence was investigated, since it's a form of social influence that has been widely used in researching young people. However, information on how media users or consumers, especially young people consider "influencers" has been very inadequate.

Since this study follows mostly inductive and, in some parts, abductive approach, the research interview questions were not determined by theoretical framework, but rather by themes that were seen to serve as illuminating the research problem in the best possible way. During the semi-structured interview, some interview questions, such as "If you think about the word "influencer", what comes to your mind?" and "Are there any factors that help you recognize someone as an influencer?" were set to examine the possible criteria young individuals have for defining someone as "influencer". One feature that is worth noticing here, is that even though interviewees might have named influencers who they followed, those names were not mentioned in the transcript data because keeping the data totally anonymous was crucial for the research with such a small sample.

Research data from these questions was simplified, repeating themes and expressions were noticed and marked down in transcribed research data and based on similarities, different categories for repeating criteria were created. From interpreting the data, indications on criteria categories that the focus group defined influencers are described as: *personal brand*, *professional positioning*, *commercialism*, *content*, *audience* and *platform*. Most often mentioned criteria and different categories, as perceived by researcher, are portrayed in the table below.

Table 7. Criteria for being an influencer as seen by Generation Z

Simplified example quotes extracted from data	Criteria for influencer	Category of criteria
"I got to know them from other media" (H4)(H6)(H2)(H8)(H9)(H12)(H13) "public figures/celebrities" (H4)(H6)(H2)(H8)(H9)(H12) "they are social/talkative/lively/extraverted" (H1)(H10)(H3)(H9) "they want to affect people's opinions" (H8)(H2)(H6)(H5) "they have a personality that stands out" (H2)(H7)(H2) "they are people that their followers can relate to" (H10) "they have courage and willingness to put themselves on display" (H4)(H5)(H7)(H12)(H2)	Public figure Endeavour to influence Credibility Extraverted personality Confidence Distinguishing personality	Personal brand
"I appreciate them as marketing professionals" (H1) "they make a better living than in other fields" "they make a living out of it" (H2)(H11)(H13) "they spend most of their day in social media" (H2) (H6)	Marketing professionals Making a living Full-time in social media	Professional positioning
"their job is to advertise their own life" (H1) "the first thing that comes to mind are commercial collaborations" (H4)(H12)(H13) "many of them have ads" (H9) "they get money or products (H9)	Commercial collaborations Advertisements PR products	Commercialism
"they make deliberate content" "they have their own thing going on" (H7)(H8)(H9)(H11)(H12)(H13) "their content has an agenda" (H6)(H9) "they have their own specific opinions or an agenda that they strive to promote" (H7)(H8)(H12)(H10) "long captions with deep thoughts" (H5)(H6) "they make inspiring content" (H3) "productivity – always new, versatile content" (H3)	Personal life at focus Continuous content Deliberate content with an agenda System camera photos Distinguishing attraction	Content
"they have lots of followers" (H1)(H2)(H7)(H9)(H10)(H11)(H12)(H13) "their lives are public to everyone" (H2) "the bigger audience, the bigger the influence" (H4)(H11) "they talk to their audience, like are present to them" (H4)	Publicity Size of the audience Dialogue	Audience
"youtubers are influencers" (H3)(H5)(H6)(H8)(H9)(H12)(H13) "that have one main platform, (like X), but might have also secondary platforms (like Y)" (H5)(H8)(H7)	One dedicated platform One dedicated platform but uses also other platforms	Platform

One of the more mentioned criteria for influencer was deciphered to set in the category of *personal brand*. It was interpreted from the data, that the impression on influencer as a term often includes equivalency or is used as a synonym to celebrities or public figures. This pattern was detected in half of the interviews. Central idea in this seemed to be that influencer is a person who the young person is familiar with from other media or some specific social media platform – however, it should be noted that social media was undoubtedly often, yet not every time mentioned when interviewees talked about “celebrities”. For instance, actors, artists, performers and musicians were often mentioned. Four interviewees further considered, that having such a public figure would require some level of extraverted personality traits, such as being outgoing, talkative and lively that would allow the person to put themselves on display. However, some interviewees pointed out that despite having similarities, they still see influencers as individuals. Having a multimodal personal brand presentation has been also recognized by previous research, in example Dhanesh and Duthler (2018) as one of the traits of an influencer.

“There needs to be some level of, well, I wouldn’t maybe say egoism, but at least willingness to share things about their own personal lives, especially if that’s the main reason people follow them.” (H2)

Second category of criteria formed by interpreting the research data was named as *professional positioning*. This category was seen to be connected with the third derived category, *commercialism* for many reasons, yet they were separated because not all of the interviewees mentioned commercialism as being connected to a profession. In five of the interviews, a term seen to indicate commercialism, such as “commercial collaborations” or “having advertisements” were mentioned when asking who they consider as influencers. Commercialism was one common feature set on influencer as seen in the theoretical framework by e.g., More, Lingam (2017). In three interviews, when commercialism itself wasn’t mentioned, indications on making money or furthermore, making a living on social media as an influencer was mentioned. Interestingly, not all interviewees connected commercialism with professionalism, even though they implied to understand that monetary reimbursements followed making ads of collaborations:

“Many of them [influencers] have commercial collaborations there, in example they get a product that they then advertise - - they clearly have a goal of making money from it.” (H9)

The rendition on young people linking influencers to commercialism and profession is backed up in this study with a few answers on the question about micro-influencers. Generally speaking, micro-influencers, as current studies define it, is a familiar phenomenon to the interviewees, although some divergent opinions on them being an influencer were noticed. Some interviewees, who saw influencer as professionals, would see micro-influencers contrarily as something else than actual influencers, based on the perception that professional influencers earn a living from what they do:

“I guess I would put them in another category of some sorts, since they don’t maybe earn a living by doing these collaborations” (H11)

Based on these findings, it is suggested here, that some Generation Z representatives might link being an influencer to an actual full-time profession, from which influencers make a living, while others might recognize commercialisms monetary advantages but don’t find being an influencer as actual profession. In total, however, indications on professionalism or commercialism were less mentioned categories of criteria in this study.

One of the interpreted ways that many young people to recognize influencers in social media were linked to the way they perceived social media content. As many as half of the interviewees were interpreted to imply, that influencers content stands out from “regular” user

content with features like “agenda”, “their own thing” or “deliberate content” that they perceive influencer promoting. When asked what they mean by this, some interviewees specified, that indicators for influencer-produced content were for instance high quality system camera photos that are posted on a regular, ongoing schedule or long caption texts where they voice their opinions on an issue. It was construed from the data, that all of these mentioned indicators could exist either as standalone or simultaneously together, since some of their mentioned example influencer were for instance photographers, who’s captions are often times very minimalistic, or people, who actively engage in conversations about e.g., ethical issues.

Some interviewees focused more on what intentions they perceived from social media presence, both personal brand and content. Six of the interviewees showed signs of thinking that an intention to affect people’s opinions via social media presence is what defines an influencer. One interviewee stated to categorise micro-influencers as actual influencers based on this reason as well. Although it’s not fully clear what kind of intentions and agendas were most often noticed, consistency seemed to be an important factor in creating an “agenda”, whatever kind of “their own thing” it might be. A few interviewees said to recognize these intentions from content, that is meant to state something about their opinions or their own agenda:

“If a person has text, photos and videos on their profile that aim to promote something, like not just stating the obvious about the weather etc, but to actually influence others, I could consider them as an influencer” (H6)

For an interpreted example of this, influencers who post about their newly renovated home might have an agenda - producing lifestyle content and making people want a similar home, that Generation Z can see as a criterion for being an influencer.

Another aspect, that half of the interviewees indicated could be strongly linked to influencer identification, was audience. This was a criterion that has been also set by many prior research, in example Pekkala (2018), Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018). The significance of having an audience, towards whom influencer’s content is targeted at and who’s opinions they try to influence, was seen as a rather strong. This is an interesting finding, since crediting the audience means that the definitive capability on the term “influencer” lies on an external factor rather than on something that a person can straightforwardly control, as they would e.g., their own content. No specification on other features of the audience were detected, concerning for example engagement, than a comment from one interviewee, who stated that dialogic communication between the influencer and their audience would define them. Instead, one example comment type, that was

mentioned a total of eight times using almost the exact same wording, had the logic as presented here:

“Well firstly, they [influencer] have of course a lot of followers on social media” (H7)

In contrary to audience, almost identically other half denoted comments about a specific platform that they perceive influencers in, which would indicate that for Generation Z, the identity of an influencer is in some level determined by a dedicated platform. Having a dedicated platform was seen to have references to one of the personal branding’s influencer criteria, public figure, since comments following similar logic to the consecutive one was mentioned by seven interviewees:

“Influencers can use many social media platforms, but usually they have a main one that they’re known for, like some follow Youtubers, that they’ve followed for a long time, now on Instagram as well”. (H5)

Based on this and similar comments, it is suggested in this study, that having prior knowledge of the persons overall media presence especially in wider scope of social media platforms might contribute to Generation Z recognizing someone as an influencer.

4.3 Perceptions on influencers: Themes

This section aims to answer the question how Generation Z perceives influencers and on which themes does that perception build on. Research findings in this section present a total of five main themes. First presented theme is attitudes towards commercialism, second theme is attitudes towards personal brand and thirdly, attitudes towards social media content are presented. Then, fourth theme covers the themes of self-image and worldview. Lastly in this section, attitudes towards source criticism are presented as the fifth theme. All of the themes were constructed by interpreting and rearranging the data and their goal is to help answer the research questions best as possible. In order to better understand the themes and distinguish between them, all of the themes are presented in a table below.

Table 8. Themes on Generation Z's perception of influencers

Theme / Question asked from the data	Subtheme	Code	Quote
<p>Attitudes towards commercialism</p> <p><i>How do young people's attitudes towards commercialism shape their opinions about influencers?</i></p>	<p>Influencers making money</p> <p>The number of ads made by influencers</p> <p>Influencers as marketing professionals</p> <p>Compatibility with brand</p>	<p>Commercialism-making-money</p> <p>Commercialism-profession</p> <p>Commercialism-authenticity</p> <p>Commercialism-compatibility</p>	<p>"We've grown in social media, so we've seen the profession of influencers develop" (H1)</p> <p>"Often times influencers make more money than other professions so it would be stupid not to see them as professionals" (H2)</p> <p>"If commercial collaborations appear too often, it can seem like they are doing it just for the money even if they hate the product. It seems less authentic." (H5)</p> <p>"If the collaboration is done in an authentic way and it fits the brands, I don't mind ads." (H13)</p>
<p>Attitudes towards personal brands</p> <p><i>How do young people's attitudes towards personal brands shape their opinions about influencers?</i></p>	<p>Personality's significance</p> <p>Values</p> <p>Shared interest</p> <p>Separating factor</p> <p>Influencer familiar from other media</p> <p>Relatability allows peer support</p> <p>Dialogue</p>	<p>Personal-brand-reality</p> <p>Personal-brand-familiarity</p> <p>Personal-brand-differentiating</p> <p>Personal-brand-important</p> <p>Personal-brand-editorialised</p> <p>Personal-brand-values</p> <p>Personal-brand-relatability</p> <p>Personal-brand-shared-interest</p>	<p>"I know influencers are really not like that – I don't share everything in social media so neither do they" (H6)</p> <p>"If I already know the person from some other media, I might look them up in social media as well" (H12)</p> <p>"For me influencer's personality matters the most when I consider whether to follow them or not. I like when they have their own personal thing going on." (H8)</p> <p>"Influencers should use their platform for a good cause, like to increase information about important topics such as the rights of minorities" (H7)</p> <p>"I'd rather follow influencers whose values align with mine" (H11)</p> <p>"If an influencer is relatable in social media, people might get peer support from them" (H13)</p> <p>"I follow influencers who have same interest than me – such as my hobby" (H3)</p>
<p>Attitudes towards social media content</p> <p><i>How do young people's attitudes towards social media content shape their opinions about influencers?</i></p>	<p>Topicality of subjects</p> <p>Gaining knowledge</p> <p>Authenticity</p> <p>Balance between positivity and negativity</p> <p>Oppositions between content styles</p> <p>Aesthetics</p> <p>Dialogue</p>	<p>Content-authenticity</p> <p>Content-topicality</p> <p>Content-tonal-balance</p> <p>Content-aesthetics-important</p> <p>Content-anonymity</p>	<p>"Often times influencers only share content about the good things in life and I dislike that because it's not authentic" (H1)</p> <p>"It's important that you gain knowledge from social media about topical things that you don't see in the news here." (H7)</p> <p>"Nowadays people do share more about the negative things in life as <u>well</u> but I think they could be shared even more" (H3)</p> <p>"I like to follow content that inspires me – such as art or other creative content" (H8)</p>
<p>Attitudes towards the technical features on social media applications</p> <p><i>How do young people's attitudes towards social media's technical features shape their opinions about influencers?</i></p>	<p>Separating influencers from "ordinary" users</p> <p>Algorithms</p> <p>Issues spreading in social media</p>	<p>Technicality-identifying-users</p> <p>Technicality-algorithms</p> <p>Technicality-spreading</p>	<p>"I recognize influencers by the blue verified-sign. That adds at least some reliability" (H1)</p> <p>"Algorithms are probably the worst thing about social media. You start to see only certain things and it can affect how you think" (H2)</p> <p>"Thing spread out so easily in social media. If you share something it can just explode" (H4)</p>

<p>Attitudes towards one's self-image</p> <p><i>How do young people's self-image shape their opinions about influencers?</i></p>	<p>Self-comparison</p> <p>Body image</p> <p>Performing in life</p> <p>Social activity</p> <p>Attention-seeking</p> <p>Trends amongst age groups</p>	<p>Self-image-performance-pressure</p> <p>Self-image-appearance-pressure</p> <p>Self-image-not-belonging</p>	<p>"It's pretty easy to start comparing yourself with influencers life and get the feeling that you're not fitting the standards that they do, like concerning body image and such." (H9)</p> <p>"We're not allowed to just be. You should always be performing somehow – in school, training or in being social" (H3)</p> <p>"You can start to feel bad about yourself if something bad happens to you. Like am I a bad person because everyone else is having the time of their lives" (H5)</p>
<p>Attitudes towards one's worldview</p> <p><i>How do young people's worldviews shape their opinions about influencers?</i></p>	<p>Effects of using social media</p> <p>Necessity of social media</p> <p>Topicality</p>	<p>Worldview-distorted-reality</p> <p>Worldview-contracting</p> <p>Worldview-expanding</p>	<p>"One might get a rather distorted picture of what real life is" (H9)</p> <p>"It's important to keep expanding your worldview and not get stuck in your own bubble. Even if I disagree with someone it's important to increase your knowledge by seeing what they have to say" (H5)</p> <p>"Because we spend so much time in social media it's possible to see content that only enforces your <u>views</u> and you get stuck in a bubble" (H2)</p>
<p>Source criticism on social media</p> <p><i>How do young people's practises on source criticism shape their opinions about influencers?</i></p>	<p>Social media platforms allow anonymity</p> <p>Content can be produced by anyone</p> <p>People choose to share only a certain side of their lives</p>	<p>Source-criticism-platform</p> <p>Source-criticism-content</p> <p>Source-criticism-personal-brand</p>	<p>"You can say things in social media that you wouldn't say to people's face in real life" (H12)</p> <p>"Everyone is in social media so there's also all kinds of content that might not be true" (H11)</p> <p>"Nobody's life is perfect and only about positive things. I understand that even if people only share good things in social media" (H6)</p>

4.3.1 Attitudes towards commercialism: Authenticity is key

Paid collaborations, obtaining and advertising PR-products or other types of advertisements as a part of users social media presence were found in this study as one of the criterion Generation Z use in identifying influencers. Additionally, a part of the study subjects were found to realise influencers as professionals in the communication and marketing fields. Based on the coding and matrix systems described earlier, a total of 13 mentions around this theme were found from the study. Even though the theme was not amongst the most mentioned ones, it's significance amongst the identification criteria was notable and interviewees who talk around this theme, indicated signs of denoting value on it by bringing it up several times. Thus, it is suggested in this study, that young people's perceptions on influencers are somewhat linked to the different attitudes they have towards commercialism, and by understanding them, conceptual information on how those perceptions build in general can be better appended.

In general, it has been suggested that no matter what the marketing actions for an organization are, the key thing in making it appeal to audience is to maintain their compatibility with the brand (Reinikainen et al., 2018). Briefly put, whatever the actions are, they need to meet the audiences expectations of what the brand is. According to this study's findings, this is argued to be somewhat true in case of influencers as well for a few reasons.

Firstly, many interviewees indicated a high level of social media literacy in that they seemed to be well aware, that commercialism is a part of social media and a part of what influencers do. From the 13 mentions throughout the data on this theme, interviewees having a seemingly neutral expressions when talking about e.g., advertisements was interpreted. No strong expressions, such as indications of hate or annoyance were found in the data – commercialism was seen more as a self-evidently existing matter in social media. One interviewee even pointed out, that an influencer who's known to do a lot of commercial collaborations can be sometimes used as a source of information on a product they're considering to buy – almost as a catalog. However, what was most important to the interviewees who addressed the theme of commercialism, was authenticity:

*"If the collaboration is done in an authentic way and it fits the brands, I don't mind ads."
(H13)*

Those interviewees who talked about commercialism in general, pointed out, that if the influencer who they follow takes part in a collaboration that doesn't fit their previously presented picture of themselves, or if the expectation of the brand doesn't "go well" with the influencer, young people can see those actions as fake. An example of this would be a health-focused lifestyle influencer collaborating with a fast-food chain. In this case, young people could feel like the influencers wouldn't consume the promoted products in real life, thus the influencer might be seen to take part in the collaboration just for the monetary compensation, which was consequently seen in this study as being linked to decreasing authenticity.

Another aspect that interviewees brought up in the discussion is maintaining balance in the number of advertisements. Should the influencer's identity seem to form around only commercialism and they are perceived to lack originality, influencers can be perceived as fake and again, being "in it just for the money". Even though the general attitude towards commercialism is interpreted in this study to be neutral amongst young people, compatibility amongst influencer and the brand and keeping the content's focus on other aspects, such as the influencer's personality and original content were seen as way more substantial reasons to follow influencers.

4.3.2 Attitudes towards personal brands: Being “a good person” matters

Generation Z seems to have relatively tight criteria in choosing which influencers they follow. All of the mentioned themes in the results section of this study play their part in forming perceptions on influencers, yet a few themes were interpreted to emerge as more fundamental than others. The most substantial amount of mentions throughout the data, a total of 56 code mentions, were seen to compose a theme about how young people perceive influencers as people and what do they think are some important features in a person that they require in order to follow them.

Perhaps the most prominent feature that was mentioned in every interview, when asked which influencers interviewees choose to follow and why was the importance of shared interests. All interviewees said to follow at least one influencer, who corresponded with their own interests around topics such as hobby, lifestyle or activism. Most of the interviewees, ten of them, mentioned to follow influencers who they are familiar with from other media. Motives that were listed for following such influencers included ones also mentioned above in the uses and gratifications categories: getting inspiration and gaining information or knowledge. Getting inspiration or other gratification from influencers posts also appears to somehow connect to relatability, another important following criterion for young people. Hence, it is suggested in this study that observing, which influencers young people follow on social media, can provide valid information on their interests and who they see as a possibly good information source.

Influencers producing aesthetic or inspiring content, though important, seems to not be always enough of a reason for young people to follow them. According to the study findings, perceived personality and values, no matter their field of expertise, are important. These were some of the most important factors study subjects saw as enabling differentiating from the sea of influencers. Moreover, having values and even certain personality traits that align with the audiences was mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews. Having shared values or personality traits is interpreted to be connected to relatability – as it’s easier to relate to people who think alike. Construing an influencer as someone with complete opposite values on e.g., ethical matters such as equality could result in the young person unfollowing them, even if their content in general was seen as possible inspiring.

*“For me the most important thing is their personality and values. Even if it’s someone who I admire based on what they do, I’m not going to follow them if they’re a complete d*ck” (H2)*

Although generally speaking young people in this study indicated favouring in their social media influencers whose value world align with their own, one interviewee did point out, that they also could follow people, who have an opposing opinion to theirs in order to widen their own view on certain topics. Furthermore, in discussions about personal brand four interviewees wanted to point out, that they distinguish between the influencer's social media persona and reality and mentioned, that they know influencers choose carefully, what they share in social media. This type of thinking, considered in this research as source criticism/media literacy, was seen throughout different themes of the data is thus explained more extensively in a following, separate part of this chapter.

Recognizing that an influencer has seemingly “good values” was found to be connected to what influencer talk about on their platforms how. According to the findings of this study, Generation Z considers the following factors as showing one's “good values”: supporting equality, supporting minorities – for instance LGBTQIA+ and ethnical minority members, talking about everyone in a kind way and not being discriminative towards anyone. Additional value was seen to be set in how vocal influencers were about these topics and not only when they're the trending topic.

But even being vocal about ethical issues is not enough to be seen as “a good person. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they feel like some influencer gain popularity by being polarizing and creating debates on their social media. Usually this was seen as a feature that lessens authenticity and relatability. Thus, there are clear indications that similarly to commercialism, presentation on values needs to align with the expectations about the personal brand in order for them to seem authentic. It was seen important by young people, that influencers are consistent in their communication about these values and maintain the conversation going in their platforms at all times. Ongoing conversation seems to build the perception on the influencer into more authentic one, should the original expectation of the personal brand align with the topics.

“If someone randomly posts something like “remember to protect the planet” it's like, everyone does that, so that doesn't tell anything. I want the user to be really active, write long texts about the subjects and keep talking about their opinions” (H5)

It is suggested in this study, that influencer's personal brand, audience's prior expectations on it and how influencers presented themselves in their platform is an important matter for Generation Z when they consider influencers and who they would want to follow. Nevertheless, influencers self-presentations never exist in a vacuum but are reflected and interpreted from the content they produce. One option to handle constructing the themes from this study's data would be

to consider personal brand as a part of the content, but since most study subjects, interestingly enough, seemed to mention content and personality as somewhat separate issues, it was chosen to act accordingly in the report. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to consider, why young people consider these matters as separate and don't seem to apprehend the personality as an interpretation based the influencer's content but rather the content as something influencers produce based on their existing personality. This is why the meanings around different styled content and factors young people value in the content are discussed separately in the next part of this chapter.

4.3.3 Attitudes towards social media content: Stand out, get real, or disappear

The content influencers produce in social media platforms and especially what young people expect the content to consist of was the second most discussed topic in the interviewees with a total of 23 code mentions throughout the interviews. Within the topic of content, two directive trends were interpreted from the data: In some cases, interviewees seemed to follow influencers based on their personal brand and how well their interests and values as a person aligned with them – this served as a baseline for the content. As another viewpoint, interviewees followed influencers based on how aesthetically pleasing and inspiring their content is. In the latter case, less value was set on personal brand – in some cases the personal brand was fully absent from the content. It's important to note, that some interviewees mentioned to follow influencers based on both of these detected trends:

"I follow people who either talk about really interesting and important issues, or ones that have really beautiful content but don't talk about themselves." (H1)

Similarly, to personal brand, authenticity of influencer's, and other user's content is seen as an important thing for young people. Authenticity itself and the ways it was perceived in the context of social media content, were connected to another conducted subtheme – tonal balance. Seven of the interviewees mentioned that often times influencers seem inauthentic, because their content focuses too much on showing the positive side to everything in their lives and everything that they do. Some described this with words like "annoying" or "silly", while others concerned it more as neutral existing phenomenon that just exist. Consequently, content about what interviewees described as "real life", which included being open about the challenges and possibly negative things happening in their lives was seen too often as left out. Thus, it is interpreted from of the interviewee's comments, that there are indications of an increasing demand for authenticity and transparency in influencer's content.

“People often just share the best things that happen to them in social media. It’s silly because everyone knows life isn’t just fun and glamorous but still people just share so much stuff that makes it look like so” (H6)

Because so many interviewees saw that there is a trend of sharing only positive things about your life in social media, it is argued here, that users and influencers who share also the negatives sides were perceived as more authentic and more relatable, which then could have an effect on influencers strength of social influence. One interview even stated that by sharing also negative things in life, influencers felt more like “a real people”. Authenticity and sharing content about “real life” with its ups and downs could be further connected to the young people’s receptibility to gain peer support and to build sense of community, that mere mentioned as important gratifications from social media and following influencers.

While some interviewees stated strongly that they care mostly about the influencer’s personality and values and that their content derived from that, a total of eight interviewees also said to value the aesthetics of social media content. As mentioned earlier, these two detected trends in the motives to follow influencers don’t exclude one another, but both emerge within the data amongst many interviewees. Interviewees, who highlighted aesthetics as a priority in social media content mentioned to follow for instance accounts focusing on photography, performing arts or visual arts, from which they get inspiration from. Additionally, some stated that the accounts that focus on their hobby were not so focused on the personality of the content creator rather than the visual versatility of the content.

“Concerning hobby, it’s nice to see different styles or beautiful entireties from in example competitions. Those kinds of things inspire me.” (H3)

It’s an interesting matter to consider, if these interpreted trends of valuing influencers’ personality or visuality in their content are connected to Generation Z’s decision-making processes. For instance, could there be a causality between young people who value personality and changing one’s behaviour concerning ethical issues, especially if the influencer is seen as relatable and has shared values with the audience. Or then, could visually pleasing content serve as more effective way to affect buying decisions of those who value aesthetics over influencer’s personality?

4.3.4 Self-image and worldview: Don't stay in your bubble

In the theoretical framework of this research, peer pressure was handled as one of the expected central attributes emerging in the discussion of influencers and social influence in general. This expectation was, according to the research results, supported, as many of the pivotal traits of peer pressure turned out from the results. All interviewees mentioned that they follow on social media other people who share interests or a similar life situation to them – in other words, people, who they could relate to. However, five interviewees mentioned that they've had feelings of pressure or stress from social media which concerned especially influencers. Is interpreted in this study, that these feelings of pressure could be related to a previously mentioned fact of following influencers that relatable to them, in which case the pressure they feel could be seen as peer pressure. A few interviewees even mentioned that they have un-followed influencers or have thought of unfollowing influencer because of the pressure they feel of performing in life or possessing certain things in their life.

"It feels like it's not accepted to just be and do nothing. There's this compulsion to always perform in some way, either to train the hobby, study or be social with your friends." (H3)

Commonly mentioned aspects that were brought up in the conversation about peer pressure concerned their body image, overall attitude in life, prosperity and social requirements. Many felt that they could sometimes feel lesser about themselves, when they see that an influencer is sharing constantly positive content portraying active lifestyle. One interesting detail in this is that two interviewees, who defined influencers based on their productivity and positive content, were also amongst ones who mentioned that productivity and positivity were factors causing them performance pressure. The fact that many influencers produce content to social media every single day, seemed to give these interviewees an image of having to be constantly active or social in life, especially if the content portrayed the influencer as such. Content which made them feel like this included photos or videos of influencers in example being with their friends, being at the gym, travelling, being outside etc. This was seen to provoke sense of unacceptability in doing nothing. This detail raises an interesting question on how much Generation Z's perceptions on influencers can tell us about their process of forming identity.

Concerning body image, couple interviewees mentioned that some influencers, especially ones specialized in lifestyle and/or sports portray the "ideal" body image that's socially acceptable. This portrayal, especially when enhanced with photoshop and/or some other photo

editing, was seen to connect to young people's negative feelings about their own body and pressure to achieve similar figure. Photoshopping one's body in order to make it fit society's standards was only one of the aspects about social media and influencers that seemed to make young people feel pressured. The nature of the content, particularly when focused merely on the positive things in life, such as being successful at work or school or performing well in sports or other hobbies was often described as something to make one feel inferior about their own life:

"If people share only positive things about their lives and something negative happens to you, you might feel like there's something wrong with you because you see everyone else only having good things happen to them. Although that's not true at all." (H5)

The pressure to perform in life could, according to some interviewees, show in a young person's life without noticing. When asked to evaluate the affect of social media and influencers on their friends or generation, some interviewees said to recognize certain patterns of behaviour, such as constantly perceiving to look a certain way. Some interviewees though to recognize even deeper levels of not just everyday style or behaviour, but also a way of thinking and being, such as being more open-minded towards certain issues as a result of following a variety of people on social media and thus being exposed to those issues more. In entirety, the interview subjects showed indications of having a rather strong idea of their own generation as their own group and differentiate themselves from few years younger or older people.

"I'm sure there are some ways that influencers affect my life without me even noticing. In general, though, I feel like our generation is pretty well aware of the ways social media influencers and organizations try to affect them." (H8)

Being open-minded due to the amount of information Generation Z can expose themselves to in social media was not exclusively seen as a risk-free business, though. According to the findings of this study Generation Z sees couple of different sides on how following influencers and using social media in general affects their worldview. One side of this, which was mentioned five times during the interviews, is that through following a variety of people and influencers in social media can be seen as a way to expand one's worldview, especially because many social media platforms have introduced some kind of features for recommending content, even though the user doesn't follow them. Somewhat of a contradiction with that is, however, that according to this study's findings, majority of young people choose to actually follow those who already share interest and values with them. Only one interviewee said that they didn't mind seeing content from people who think differently to them.

Interestingly enough, another subtheme in the topic of worldview that was talked about was that because of social media's technical features, like algorithms and the ability to talk

anonymously, and because young people choose to follow only certain people they like, there is a risk of contracting one's worldview. Many even mentioned a phenomenon of getting trapped in your "bubble", with which they most likely meant, that seeing only certain type of content that fortifies your existing values and opinions might distort your worldview. This was seen as a thing to avoid and most commonly described as something others than the study subjects themselves did, despite the fact that interviewees most commonly wanted to follow people who already confirmed their opinions. Nevertheless, having "distorted reality" or the ability to separate social media from "real life" were such reoccurring themes throughout the interviews, that they were decided to separate into their own theme.

"Mostly I think it's a good thing to see what other people's lives are like, but you can get a distorted picture of that reality from social media. For example, if there's a country I haven't visited, and I keep seeing this one side of the country on social media, it's easy to build prejudices based on that. Prejudices are something that should be avoided." (H9)

Notably though, speculation around this theme is recognized as problematic for a few reasons. For one, it shouldn't be seen as self-evident, that following people on social media who you share values with is straight evidence of confirmation bias. Rather, quite the opposite can be also argued. Many of the interviewees mentioned, that they've gained a lot of knowledge about issues that have challenged their ways of thinking from the people they've started to follow because of their shared interests or values. Second, it's rather impossible to say in the context of this study, which ways do the shared values and worldviews work – do young people follow influencers because of the shared values or are shared values created through following certain influencers?

4.3.5 Source criticism: We (should) know better than this

On many occasions during the interviews, interviewees found it worthwhile to state, that they understand the difference between social media influencers persona from their real-life persona, or that content on social media does not represent real life, or that even though they were perceived to indicate factors of peer pressure from influencers, they know they're comparing themselves to something that isn't real. This would indicate, that one finding of this study is some level of media literacy on social media amongst this group of study subjects. It needs to be noted, that this perceived media literacy or source criticism was consistent amongst differently aged study subjects.

Social media platforms' technical features were also one of the things that were discussed around this topic. The fact that anyone with the right kind of technology is able to share anonymously anything in social media was something that some interviewees pondered upon and stated, that because of that, they tend to be critical towards content on social media and strive to find source to that information. Additionally, seeing that many people, especially influencers, share only the positive side of their lives on social media, made some interviewees question the authenticity and truthfulness of certain personal brands and social media content.

Generation Z representatives are amongst the first people, who have been born and raised in the era of social media and the explosive growth of different platforms, applications and influencers. That level of digital-nativeness has most likely an effect on how these people grow used to living their everyday lives and which information sources they trust. Some interviewees even mentioned, that since their generation is so attached to social media, it most definitely has an effect on how they think and see the world. This observation was seen by a few interviewees as somewhat concerning.

"If I think about not having social media, I think about like, where would I find all the topical information and... We've so grown into it, that thinking about life without social media seems absurd. And I think that's kind of alarming." (H11)

4.4 Significance of different agents in decision-making processes

The second research problem in this study aims to find out, how Generation Z concerns social and peer influence and moreover, which agents are influential in Generation Z's decision-making processes. In order to gain information for answering this question, particular attention is given to analysing results on the social influence exercise that was conducted as a part of data collection process. This section consists of two parts. First, means on the overall significancy ratings between different agents is presented. The second part presents, how these ranking altered based on different contexts they were considered in and what were the reasonings study subjects described on their ranking processes.

4.4.1 Overall significance of different agents

In the social influence exercise, study subjects were asked to evaluate on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1= not significant, 5 = very significant), how significant effect each agent had on young people’s decision-making processes in presented example situations. Agents that were given as default, based on the existing social and peer influence research, were as follows: Social media influencer, friend or friends, coach, parents and officials. In order to find out about the most influential agents, results from the ranking exercise during interviews were moves to an excel sheet with which the averages of sums, averages and ranks were calculated.

Means of the Liker scale results on significance of each agent and the relation between them are presented in the graph below. As seen in the graph, young people ranked friend/friends as having the most significance in their decision-making processes, second most significant agent to them was parents, third most significant was coach, as the 4th significant actor young people ranked social media influencer and lastly, officials were recognized as having the least significance in the example situations that were presented in this study. Elaborated reasons on why each agent was seen as significant or as not significant as they were ranked are described in the next part of this chapter.

Figure 3. Means on significancy of different agents

Possible influential agent	Mean	Not significant					Very significant				
		1	2	3	4	5					
Social media influencer	2,69										
Friend/friends	4,09										
Coach	3,09										
Parents	3,62										
Officials (THL, police, physician)	1,78										

4.4.2 Agents' significance in different contexts

This study suggests, that perceiving and interpreting reasonings on why young people chose to rank different agents as they did, is important in understanding, how Generation Z concerns social and peer influence and how that relates to their decision-making processes. Although the primary focus of this study has been on influencers and their influential power, it was seen important to set them in a comparable environment with other possibly influential agents in order to gain a wider perspective on Generation Z's behaviour.

In order to examine, if the different agents' significance was linked to certain contexts, interviewees were asked to evaluate how much the given agents would influence their decisions in varying situations. Selection of the presented situations was based on existing research on social and peer influence. The means on each agent's significance, on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1= not significant, 5 = very significant), in young people's decision-making process in different presented contexts are exhibited in below in figure X. In some cases, certain agents were seen as having no significance at all, in which case their score was automatically 1. In many cases, different agents were seen as obtaining the same amount of significance in a context. At this situation, same scores were given to different agents.

Figure 4. Significancy of agents in different contexts

Agent	Buying desicion	Entertainment	Hobby	Ethical decisions	Personal life
Social media influencer	3,69	3,23	1,77	2,85	1,92
Friend / friends	4,38	4,46	4,08	2,92	4,62
Coach	2,31	4,15	4,23	2,00	2,77
Parents	3,54	2,08	4,00	3,77	4,69
Officials	1,15	1,00	1,00	4,15	1,62

Buying decision

The first context that study subjects were asked to evaluate the agents in was making buying decisions. According to the results, interviewees ranked their friend or friends as the most influential agent. The second most influential agent was social media influencer, third was parents, fourth was coach and as fifth, officials were seen as having vanishingly little to no influence at all. For buying decisions, interviewees considered their friend(s) to be most influential for mostly uniform reasons.

Based on interviewees reasonings, actors like relatability and trustworthiness are interpreted to be important for Generation Z's decision-making processes. It should be noted, that often times these reasons in friend's high level of influence were repeated in contexts other than buying as well. Friend's testimonial on a certain product, such as clothes, were often seen very reliable, because friends know them personally and the products are used in a similar or almost the exact same situations as them. Based on this, it is suggested that having a relatable environment to the consumer is crucial in maintaining a high level of social or peer influence with Generation Z.

Second most influential agents for interviewees in buying decisions was social media influencer. Social media influencers were mentioned as being a good source of inspiration and information already on investigation on uses and gratifications. Additionally, since a few interviewees saw influencers as marketing professionals, their content on products was seen as beneficial in buying processes, since they know the type of commercial content they produce. By adding the previously presented results to the ones from this exercise, such as seeing influencers as good source of information on upcoming trends, the research findings are reimbursed, since the same reasons were mentioned by interviewees on why they ranked social media influencer as very significant.

"I ranked social media influencers as the most significant, because through them I can see for example a video on a product and see what it looks like in person." (H4)

The third most significant agents in buying context were parents. Many interviewees mentioned that their parents provide them with money to buy different products, which is logical, in that a big part of the interviewees were minors still living with their parents. A strong connection between age and parent's significance in buying decisions was seen – the younger the interviewee was, the more significance parents have. Despite of this finding, it is interesting that interviewees of legal age seemed to also recognize parents as a good source of consulting in buying decisions, even

if their saying wasn't the pivotal factor. Throughout the social influence exercise, it became distinct that overall, interviewees have a high level of trust on their parents and how they advise and guide them.

"From parents I can get information on what I actually need or if I need something, I can ask them what they think I should get" (H2)

On average, coach was the fourth most influential agent in buying decision. Coach was seen to have rather little significance, apart from buying products in relation to interviewees hobby. A few interviewees mentioned that a coach can be sometimes seen as a style inspiration or source of information, when buying products for hobby. Officials, such as a doctor, Finnish institute for health and welfare (THL) or police, were placed in fifth place for having little to no significance in Generation Z's buying decisions. It must be taken into account, however, that buying decision in this study was considered as buying e.g., clothes or other comfort consumer goods. Necessity goods were not taken into account in this study, which could have somewhat altered the result.

Entertainment

The second context of the exercise, entertainment, followed similar pattern to the first question about buying decisions, including ranking friends first with comparable reasonings. Differences were, for instance, that coach's significance in music choices was seen higher, mostly because they present varying music during in the hobby environment. Many saw coach's as source of inspiration for music choices. Social media influencers were ranked as third most significant agent, based on some influencers' music recommendations on social media. The fact that some interviewees stated already that they define musicians as influencers, made their significance in this context was even higher. On this context, most interviewees ranked parents lower, mainly because many young people didn't share the same taste in music with their parents. In all cases, officials were ranked to the minimum, as having no significance at all.

"I ranked influencers first. If my favourite artist promotes their new album on social media, like "please go listen it", I definitely think like yes can do, it will do it" (H12)

Hobby

In the case of study subjects' hobby and making decisions like how much of their free time will they dedicate to it, coach was seen on average as the most significant agent. Main reason for this was, that study subjects had a seemingly highly level of trust on coach's class recommendations and their knowledge on the level and volume of coaching each interviewee individually needed. Next most significant agent in hobby context was friend or friends, although their ranking was only 0,08 points higher than parents'. It seemed to be important to Generation Z, that they shared their hobby environment with friends, although some pointed out, that because of the general communal sense of the environment, they didn't mind being on a class where they didn't know anyone.

It is an interesting factor to consider, whether peer pressure has anything to do with the selection of hobby classes. Some interviewees said that they choose classes because their friends are there as well, whereas some said that they wanted to be on the same class than their friends. Whether the indication on selecting classes just because their peers are present and not because they want that specific class, is speculative, but might be an allusion of peer pressure in this specific group of study subjects.

"Friends and coach have highest rankings for me, because the fact that everyone else is on that specific class, motivates me to be there as well." (H3)

Parent's significance on Generation Z's decision-making was relatively high throughout the whole exercise and in overall results and as address, they were the second most significant agent. Concerning the context of hobby, many interviewees stated that they trust their parents to know best how many classes they should take in order to still manage in school and other life. It's important to note however, that interviewees higher age correlated with slightly decreasing significance of parents in hobby context. This could indicate that younger representatives of Generation Z rely more on people closest to them in evaluating their assets, where older representatives rely perhaps more on their own evaluation.

"Mom and dad know me the best, so they also know how much time I should spend on hobby so that I don't get exhausted." (H5)

Social media influencers were ranked significantly lower than in previous contexts and only reasoned to be a possible source of inspiration, which was also mentioned in uses and gratifications section of this study. As before, officials were ranked to the minimum, as having no

significance at all, although one interviewee stated that a doctor's recommendations could affect the number of classes they choose to take.

Ethical decision-making

Fourth context, that Generation Z's decisions were examined was ethical decision making. Ethical decisions meant in this study's contexts for instance doing environmentally friendly or equality-wise supporting choices. On average in this context, officials were ranked the highest. Main reason for this was the high level of established knowledge. Most interviewees stated that they trusted for instance THL, since they believed their knowledge to be based on peer-review research knowledge. The second most significant agent in this context were parents, mostly for their perceived higher level of knowledge and life-experience. However, a few interviewees stated that they had a slightly different value base on ethical matters, which was why parent's significance wasn't as high. This finding raises yet another question on how much shared values affect the magnitude of social influence. In evaluating significance of social media influencers, shared values and living by them were also an important factor in why some study subjects ranked them as somewhat high significance. A few interviewees thought, that since influencers often have larger audiences, they have at least some level of quality requirement when it comes to sharing content – this, however, concerned influencers who shared values with them.

In ethical decision making, the role of friends seemed to be somewhat controversial. Overall, their significance level was seen as somewhat significant, although rankings of 1 and 5 both were found in the data. Reasons in ranking friends low included perceiving friend's low level of knowledge on the subjects at hand. Interviewees stated, that since most of their friends are around the same age as them, they expect them to have the same amount of knowledge on the topics. Reasons for ranking friends 4 or 5, however, highlighted the importance of shared values and relatability on one's life situation, as many interviewees mentioned that it's easy to talk to friends about the topics. Coach was ranked on average relatively low, mainly due to the fact that ethical matters were perceived to be a less-discussed topic on hobby environment.

"I trust the people have the most knowledge on it, for instance those who have studied the subject. With friends, influencers and coach, it's all depending on what source they have on their opinions or instructions. I would maybe expect them to have a reliable source which they base their views on." (H6)

Personal life

The last topic that different agents were evaluated in were personal life decisions. In this part of the exercise, influencers were evaluated based on the significance their advice would have on Generation Z's personal life decisions concerning e.g., relationships or their future. Parents and friend's significance in this context were prominent, based on primarily the same reasons mentioned already. Friend's advice is trusted, because they can relate to one's situations the best and especially concerning relationships, friends were often seen to obtain information on a person that parent's possible couldn't, for instance how young people's everyday life in school is. Parents were trusted for their longer life experience and their willingness towards good intentions. The study subjects in this study also perceived their parents as safe and relatively easy to talk to.

"I trust my parents, because I know that they want good for me. No matter what I've done I know they mean well and always love me." (H4)

Concerning their personal life, coach's advices were ranked on average as little under somewhat significant. Reasons that impacted this were somewhat dependent on what the interviewees future plans were. If the interviewee dreamed about a future in the hobby's industry, coach was seen as a possible source of information. However, most interviewees stated, that since coaches rarely know them personally as well as their friends, they wouldn't turn to them in personal advice. A certain level of admiration was interpreted to be connected to decisions about young people's future decisions. Although in general social media influencers were set low in significance on this context there were a few indications, that should an influencer represent something the study subject dreams about in the future, their advices could possibly have slight significance. In this context, officials were seen to have only diminutive significance, unless the official at hand was e.g., a physician.

"By following the people who inspire me on social media, I'm able to keep the dream going. It's motivating to see, in some way, to see my possible future through their lives" (H2)

Throughout this exercise, it was interesting to note, that many interviewees wanted to emphasise their own thoughts and actions effect on their decisions. Although in each context, at least one of the given example agents was recognized as having some significance, some interviewees were more prominent in stating, that despite these agent's existence they make decisions by themselves. This phenomenon was not connected to a specific age. Thus, it is suggested here, that in these cases

some form of social expectations could have existed, in which the interviewees might have felt the need to highlight their independence. Then again, this phenomenon could be also explained in that in self-evaluating, it can be far easier to evaluate influence on someone else than yourself.

Overall, the research findings in this chapter suggest, that in case of the example contexts in which Generation Z's decision-making processes were examined, many agents influence is far more significant than social media influencers. The most prominent perceived factors affecting this significance, as proposed in this study based on the data, were relatability, familiarity, approachability, shared values and higher level of perceivably reliable knowledge. Some of these, such as higher level of knowledge and relatability, were recognized to affect the strength of social and peer effect, as explained in the theoretical framework of this study.

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In the final chapter of this study, the primary research findings are concluded and their relation to the former literature is reflected. After presenting the most significant results, reliability and validity of this study are assessed, after which research limitations along with future research suggestions are discussed.

5.1 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to create better understanding on Generation Z's perceptions on influencers. Additional objective of this study was to find out, how Generation Z experiences social influence as displayed by different agents and how significantly that social influence affects their decision-making processes. In the theoretical framework, concepts of social and peer influence were presented in order to understand their mechanics in the context of this study. Then, current definitions on influencer and different influencers types were discussed, since they offered guidance on the different viewpoints that was utilized in the data collection. Through reviewing the theoretical framework, it became clear that although influencers have been researched somewhat much, research on influencers from consumer and/or user point of view had received little attention and hence, this offered the research gap for this study. The data of this study was collected by using thematic, semi-structured interviews. A total of 13 people between ages 15 to 20, who shared a mutual hobby environment were interviewed. Before analysing the data, many qualitative analysis methods were familiarized and based on evaluating them, thematic content analysis was chosen as the data analysis method of this study.

RQ 1. What factors affect the way young people perceive influencers and why?

Investigating young people's perceptions on influencers in this study is based on combining the different data analysis sections – uses and gratifications, defining an influencer and

perceptions on different themes around the topic towards one, more comprehensive information entirety. The combined findings of this research suggest that there are several factors, that affect the way young people perceives and identifies influencers. Firstly, it should be noted that young people connected the term “influencer” mostly to social media and according to the results, having social media platforms which are used to influence people’s opinions, even if the person has gained the social influence and/or publicity from some other media, are central in being an influencer. These findings are widely in line with the existing research, since the term “influencer” is commonly linked to social media (More & Lingam 2017; Enke & Borchers 2019; Freberg et al. 2011) and additionally, some researchers consider celebrities to be a part of the definition as well (Enke & Borchers 2019).

In previous research influencers as such were often seen to exist in a corporate environment. For instance, having commercial collaborations and receiving money from them or helping corporations in their marketing activities in general were seen as a criterion for an influencer (Casalóa et al. 2018; Enke & Borchers 2019). According to the results of this study, commercialism is indeed a theme young people links to influencers and more specifically, influencers who make a living out of commercial collaborations can be sometimes positioned as marketing professionals. Seeing influencers as professionals is suggested to have somewhat neutralizing effect on how their commercialism is perceived, since those influencers are followed for informational and inspirational gratifications. However, one of the most crucial findings around the theme of commercialism was whichever kind of commercials are made, they need to be compatible which the audience’s expectations that are created from the personal brand the influencer presents in social media – authenticity was the most commonly used term to reflect this. This finding is in line with the current research, as compatibility between the content and brand is generally an issue that has been recognized as increasingly important (Reinikainen et al. 2018).

The conceptual information derived from examining different uses and gratifications in this study seemed to give indications, that young people’s motives to use social media in general can give an idea on what they want from an influencer as well. For instance, study subjects who valued informational exchange or gaining knowledge in social media tended to follow influencers, who were more editorialized about e.g., ethical issues on their platforms. On the other hand, study subjects who were looking for inspiration and/or entertainment from social media, were more prone to following influencers with visually aesthetical social media presentation, in which case the emphasis on personal brand was subsidiary to the visual content.

Linking the definition of influencer to a rich self-presentation in social media is recognized as a feature that influencers obtain in prior research (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). However, this study suggests that this self-presentation creates a brand for the influencer and different attitudes towards that personal brand are essential in understanding, how some young people perceptions towards influencers build. Based on findings on the study subjects, who leaned towards valuing influencers personal brand over visuality, it was found, that there are many expectations from the brand that young people demand. It is suspected, that even though young people representing Generation Z generally aware of the fact, that influencers choose to present a selected side of themselves in social media which doesn't necessarily represent reality, the personal brand, which is created by that self-presentation, matters. Key factors that build perception towards influencers' personal brands were found to be primarily, how familiar young people was with the influencer prior to them being in social media and additionally, how relatable and authentic they were perceived as.

Of the main findings, perceived relatability and realness has found to be a factor that increases the social influence of an influencer (Jin et al., 2019). Contrarily, content perceived as "fake" due to too positive tone or too embellished look that doesn't represent "reality" is interpreted to connect with un-following the influencer. As stated, the importance of influencer having a personal brand that feels authentic and relatable to the audience is suggested to be the key in gaining social influence. Authenticity, although not being the primary focus of this study, was found to connect strongly to for instance shared values. When asked about what values young people wanted to see influencers endorse, most mentioned ones turned out to be supporting for instance LGBTQIA+ communities and ethnical minorities and more generally, being kind and not discriminative towards anyone.

Familiarity is suspected in this study to increase the possibility of influencer being followed, although the importance of shared interests was inspected as very high in this study. One interesting factor is, that Jin et al. (2019) argued that audiences would feel more connectedness towards social media influencers who've become famous through social media as opposed to TV, movies or music industry. However, in this study it was common to define influencers as e.g., musicians or artists who've created self-presentation in social media in addition to their other professions, and most interviewees didn't seem to distinguish between being more connected to either ones. Being active and dialogic in their social media platforms was also seen as somewhat important part in being an influencer, which can be seen as a new, more detailed addition to the definition of influencer, although the importance of self-presentation and producing content has

been recognized in prior research (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; More & Lingam, 2017). For instance, Freberg et al. (2011) do mention that engaging in promotional activities is important for being an influencer, this or none of the presented current studies consider the amount of activity or the importance of dialogic communication as a part of that definition.

Attitudes towards social media content, which also build young people's perceptions towards influencers, followed largely same pattern as with personal brands – depending on the uses and gratifications, young people are suspected to value e.g., sharing editorialised, value-endorsing content or visually inspiring content. Although too positive or too embellished content was seen often as “fake”, it's interesting that the fakeness seemed to be connected to influencers who also have a strong personal brand in addition to the embellished content, since for instance photography accounts with no strong personal self-presentation by the influencers were seen as merely inspirational and not fake. Thus, it is argued yet again, the audience's expectations of the brand matter in how authentic and relatable the content is seen.

Young people have been found to form their identities and thus develop their decision-making processes through online communities similarly to offline communities (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 104; Rissanen & Luoma-aho 2014: 502). Hence, it comes as no surprise, that one factor that's suggested to shape young people's perceptions on influencers are the ways they see their self-image and worldview are impacted by influencers. Even though source criticism and media literacy were reoccurring themes throughout the data, in that interviewees often wanted to mention, how they distinguish between social media and “the real world” and how the people they see in social media represent only their online personas, influencers were at least on some level detected to provoke peer pressure. Feelings of having lesser of a life or being lesser of a person concerning e.g., body image or school success were detected especially in case influencers' content was perceived as too embellished and too positive. In general, most of the study subjects were vocal about the fact, that they would wish from influencers more authentic content, showing negative sides of life as well, should a personal brand be prominent in the first place.

Finally, many members of Generation Z consider influencers to have a possible impact on their generation's worldview. Although being active in social media and following different influencers around the world was seen as a viable way to expand one's worldview and gain knowledge about the state of the world, many determined, that because of social media algorithms, the very same thing might lead to a “bubble” effect, where young people only follow influencers who fortify their already existing ideas and hence, narrow their view of the world. In discussions about the worldview, source criticism was brought up as an important factor that young

people evaluated themselves to either obtain or be in the process of learning. Overall, it is proposed in this study, that Generation Z representatives being the first generation to live their whole lives with social media affects the way they perceive social media and influencers through a more critical lens, how they think about the people behind the lenses, and how they demand authenticity from influencers and other people on social media.

RQ2. How do young people perceive social influence allocated by different agents and how do they affect their decision-making?

Derived from the data, factors that affect the significance of agent's influence in young people's decision-making processes were relatability, familiarity, the level of knowledge and topicality and reliability of that knowledge. On the contrary, agents who were seen as not significant could be described to be distant and incomprehensible. The more relatable, familiar and knowledgeable the agent was seen, the more significant they were evaluated to have towards decision-making process. Although no comparison between the value of these factors were measured, it should be noted, that in most given example contexts, relatability was seen as valued relatively high, but in the context of ethical decision-making, higher level of knowledge and more specifically, obtaining peer-reviewed knowledge was seen as most significant factor.

Relatability is more prominent of the factors that was found to affect social influence or more specifically, peer influence, as the number one most significant agent in young people's decision-making processes was evaluated to be friend or friends. Although some debate on whether young people are affected by peers because of their shared interests or if shared interests are shaped via peers exists, in example Lewis et al. (2011) found, that peers with similar taste in entertainment was likely to increase the effect of peer influence. In general, it has been accepted that relatability increases the possibility of a person being influenced the one they feel connectedness to (Kelman, 1958; Jin et al., 2019; Onnela & Reed-Tsochas, 2010). For instance, social media influencers who study subjects felt relatability with because of e.g., shared values, were seen to have some, although much less, significance than friends.

Concerning familiarity, the term, in the form it's presented in this study, wasn't particularly seen as a main term in social or peer influence. However, having shared environments with peers has been discussed to be important in how young people shape their decision-making

processes (Gallupe & Bouchard, 2013; Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011), based on which it could be interpreted in this study that some level of familiarization is an important part of it. The findings of this study would suggest in a deeper level, that the closer personal relationship there is between peers, the stronger peer influence is. Of course, it's impossible to detect in the frame of this study, whether the type of the relationship has any effect on this. The one thing that can be interpreted from the data, is that the social influence young people experience from their parents is significant mostly for the higher level of knowledge and social influence experienced from friends is significant mostly because of their mutual relatability.

Having a higher level of knowledge as perceived by peers has been mentioned by Lim et al. (2017) and Mangleburg et al. (2004) as a factor that affects, how likely people are to change their opinions or behaviour based on what their peers suggest. Having higher level of knowledge was a factor affecting social influence for instance in cases of ethical decision-making, where officials were on average ranked high, and getting advice for personal life decisions, where the interviewees ranked their parents relatively high based on their longer life experience.

Lewis et al. (2011) and Zhou (2019) state, that peer influence is especially strong in peer groups, whether they exist in online or offline environments, and that those groups obtain great influence on young people's decision-making processes. Since all of the study subjects had a shared hobby environment, it is justifiable to determine, that the different social norms that exist within that environment affect the way the study subjects in this study perceive a generally known phenomenon such as influencers or peer influence. It is possible, that since the hobby environment includes working close to friends and typically requires some level of commitment from parents, the general value of friends and parents in decision-making processes could result in being higher.

5.2 Discussion and practical implications

In the ever-changing digital world, it has gotten increasingly difficult for organizations to keep up with change and know, where their consumers really spend their time. As many organizations strive to find new ways to engage their customers, it's also increasingly common for organizations to rush in collaborations with the trending influencers (Booth & Matic, 2011), since they've been found useful as the new, more human-to-human marketing tools. However, the amount of different type influencers in digital environments increases, identifying the most beneficial and relevant one's to marketing field has been seen as challenging task (Booth & Matic, 2011; Enke & Borchers, 2019;

Reinikainen et al., 2018). Not only has the number of influencers exploded, but concurrently the new generation of social media users, Generation Z, have emerged into platforms. With their exceptional level of digital nativeness, how can we be sure if influencer marketing towards Generation Z is worth the money anymore? With the added understanding of the topic in this study, it is suggested, that some practical implications could be derived from the study results.

Although according to the findings in this study, DeGruttola's (Social media today, 2019) statement on traditional influencer marketing industry being at the midst of fall from grace could be argued not to be completely true, some things are worth considering. As the goal of this study, increasing conceptual understanding on how Generation Z perceives influencers, was reached, more possible information on the usefulness of influencer marketing towards Generation Z could be gained. By finding out, what attitudes young people have towards e.g., commercialism and influencers personal brands, it was detected, that the general perception towards influencers was less hostile than expected, albeit more differently critical.

Before conducting the study, there was somewhat of a presumption that young people would debunk influencers as too fake and thus, useless. Although fakeness was present in the findings and perceived through incompatible content and brand, it could be suggested that Generation Z most definitely sees there's a certain place for influencers as well. That place is dependent on how individuals are motivated to use social media and on what level they see influencers as professionals. As described, if a young person uses social media to gain knowledge, they consequently expect the influencers that they follow to answer to that need. If they seek to find inspiration, visually aesthetical content is what they look from influencers.

However, despite seeing that there is a time a place for influencers, the importance of considering other agents that are present and influential in Generation Z's life cannot be underestimated. DeGruttola (2019) suspected, that people are more likely to for instance make a purchase based on a peer's social post, rather than trusting one from traditional "influencer". Similarly, many researchers (Mangleburg et al., 2004; Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011; Gallupe & Bouchard, 2013) have highlighted the importance of considering peers in young people's decision-making processes. This point of view is enforced by this study, as friends were evaluated as the most influential agents in Generation Z's decision-making processes. Thus, the effect of friends and looking into different trends amongst peer groups is suggested to be essential in considering, what kind of marketing is useful with Generation Z.

Authenticity in any content marketing and moreover, the compatibility with brands is proposed as an essential giveaway of this study for both influencers and brands. It is suggested that companies would benefit from putting their focus on what their existing and pursuable audiences expect and want, rather than finding out, who the up-and-coming trendy influencer is. Similarly, influencers would benefit in finding out, what their audiences expects of them. Thus, the statement by Reinikainen et al. (2018): “Audience is king” is most definitely reinforced by the findings of this study. It would be essential for organizations to remember, that influencer marketing itself doesn’t obtain any value, if the organization isn’t sure of the compatibility between different audience’s expectations and what they are about to do.

5.3 Reliability and credibility of the study

The credibility of a research or a study is most commonly evaluated through reliability and validity (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Some methods of evaluating qualitative research have been criticised for their vagueness, mostly because many of them have been developed in quantitative research field and thus aren’t seen always as adaptable to qualitative field (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), especially because qualitative research allows much more leeway in between theoretical frameworks, data analysis and results than quantitative research (Eskola & Suoranta, 2003). Nevertheless, it is always important to evaluate credibility of the research or study by some criteria. In some cases, reliability and validity can even be understood in many different ways (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). Some even suggest, that using reliability and validity as words is subsidiary to what content is actually given to them (Eskola & Suoranta, 2003).

One of the most recognized ways to measure reliability of a research is repeatability (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). This means, that it should be possible to repeat the research and receive same research results. It is essential, that the research results are not coincidental (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008). Thus, reliability is more focused to evaluating the execution of the study and more specifically, methods and credibility of data analysis (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). It is crucial for the researcher to report all phases of the study as accurately and honestly as possible (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008), which is why reliability of this study is fortified by presenting the processes of data collection and analysis as comprehensively and tangibly as possible. In this study, reliability could be tested by having two researchers conduct the study with the described methods and ending up

with the same results or having the same study subjects provide same results. In these cases, the study could be seen as having good reliability (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008).

There are some factors, that might affect the reliability of this study. Firstly, the fact that the researcher was more or less acquainted with the study subjects as a result of having the same hobby environment might have affected the research results in some ways. Interviewees might have been more willing to share their honest thoughts with a more relatable person than an external researcher. However, the effect of possible social expectations has been recognized in this study. Social expectations could affect the results in that interviewees could want to present themselves in a certain light in the eyes of the researcher. Also, the way researched sees and relates to the interviewees could have an effect on how the interview results are interpreted. However, certain social expectations can always be present between the interviewer and interviewee, which could result in interviewees adjusting their answers accordingly to what they see is expected from them (Välilmaa, 2000).

Another aspect that might affect the reliability of this study is time and the fact, that in ever-changing world of social media and in examining young people who are in the brink of forming their identity, it's hard to evaluate the stability of the research results. This form of evaluating reliability is seen as diachronic reliability (Saaranen-Kauppanen & Puusniekka, 2011). If the research would be duplicated even in a few years, it could be possible that study subjects gave different answers to the same research questions. A few of the older interviewees stated, that they would have answered these questions differently, should they have been younger while taking part in the interview – although evaluating the credibility of this statement is purely speculative. Nevertheless, these types of reliability questions are always present in all qualitative research in despite of study subjects age, since qualitatively handled phenomena are rarely immutable (Saaranen-Kauppanen & Puusniekka, 2011). Another element, that can be considered in evaluating this study's reliability could be the year of 2020 and whether the extremely uncommon circumstances caused by the global pandemic affect the relationship of Generation Z and social media influencers.

Validity of the research means evaluating, whether the research actually examines the issues that it promises to examine (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Another way to understand validity is, whether the measures set in the study actually assess what they're said to measure (Metsämuuronen, 2011: 125). For qualitative interview research, one way to assess validity would be the compatibility of interpretations. This means whether the interviewees have understood the interview questions in the same way the researched intended them to be interpreted or not (Hirsjärvi

et al., 2008). If the researcher analyses the questions based on shared interpretations, but in reality, the interviewee understood them differently, the results cannot be seen as valid (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008: 227).

Documenting transparently and honestly the different ways the researcher has interpreted the interview answers is in key position in maintaining validity (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). As always, explaining and justifying decisions and results throughout the research are very important (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Thus, describing processes extensive in all phases of the study and especially focusing on transparent data analysis has been held in high value in this study. Additionally, including direct quotations and addressing, what the interviewees said vs. what it was interpreted to indicate were constantly expressed throughout the results. These factors can reinforce the credibility of the research and enhance the reading experience (Hirsjärvi et al., 2008).

In addition to documenting transparency, there are a few things that help strengthen the validity of this research. First, as already mentioned in the research data section of this study, in order to add validity of the interviews, a test interview (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2011) was conducted before the actual interviews and the interview frame was adjusted accordingly so that it would better serve conversation flow and endorse shared interpretations. The different conditions in which the interviews took place were described in a detailed manner (Hirsjärvi et al. 2018). Additionally, all the interviews were recorded and retentively transcribed (Hirsjärvi et al. 2018) so that the data could be more accurately investigated and interpreted. In analysing the data, research results were reflected to the prior research presented in the theoretical framework and prior research was also used to explain the background of the study. This has been seen as a good way to increase the validity in a research (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008).

Hirsjärvi et al. (2008) state, the validity of the study does not endure, if uncertainty on shared interpretations is taken into account in the analysis. Recognizing possibility of leeway in interpreting the research data has been addressed throughout the data analysis process and furthermore, uncertainty on the meanings behind the interview answers was address in the analysis best as possible. However, thematic interviews can often be labyrinthine in many directions and in that way, add the possibility of misunderstandings, especially if the questions need to be particularized.

5.4 Limitations and future research suggestions

As in all studies, this thesis also has limitations that need to be considered. One of the limitations is the relatively small sample size. Having 13 interviews limits the completeness of the conclusions that can be derived from the data, because it doesn't offer nowhere near a full picture of the phenomenon. However, this is rarely the case in any qualitative research, where the goal is merely increasing the amount of existing knowledge on different phenomena (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Thus, the results of this study should be considered more on a widespread than specific level.

While choosing study subjects based on shared hobby environment was a strategical choice in this study, some limiting factors in this study could be formed from other homogeneity of the study subject group and the lack of any control group, from which by comparing to a different baseline, indications of social expectations and group norms within the specific subject group could be detected. Since this study was conducted with study subjects from same geographical location and suspectedly similar socio-economic positions, it must be taken into account that duplicating this study in a different environment could provide researchers with different results. Additionally, the maturity of the country as online society needs to be taken into account, when conducting research about e.g., social media (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011: 103; Wilska & Pedrozo, 2007), in which case for instance having the technology to access social media is must be possible.

Using self-evaluation as a method of evaluating social influence could be seen as possible limitation to this study, since it might allow biases in the data (Keefe, 1994) with e.g., selective memory or attribution, where positive outcomes are attributed oneself, and negative outcomes are attributed by external forces. It might be worth considering, whether social and peer influence by different agents could be measured by some other methods as well. However, it must be taken into account that the validity of this study has been enforced by being as transparent as possible throughout the study and taking these limitations into account.

Due to the novelty of this study's topic, there are several suggestions that can be made for future research. This study focused on bringing forth different factors that affect the way Generation Z perceives influencers and social influence. Possible causalities between these factors and for instance individual traits and whether they affect the significance of different factors was not evaluated in this study. Moreover, examining each factor more specifically and investigating for instance, how shared values form between young people and influencers or how source criticism towards influencers is practised by young people would be interesting continuums for this study.

In general, influencers should be further studied from the perspective of consumers, as it seems that Generation Z perceives them somewhat more critically than millennials. Possibly more comprehensive measures of social influence on social media and influencers would be beneficial to future research as well.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix 1

Haastattelurunko

Yksilöhaastattelun aloitus

Moi ja tervetuloa tähän haastatteluun. Kiitos, että olet päässyt paikalle puhumaan kanssani vaikuttajista, vaikutusvallasta ja somesta. Minun nimeni on Laura Kääpä ja toimin tämän haastattelun moderaattorina. Olen maisteriopiskelija Jyväskylän Yliopistossa ja teen tällä hetkellä maisteritason tutkimusta, eli graduani, jonka tärkeä osa tämä haastattelu on. Tämän haastattelun tarkoituksena on selvittää sinun näkemyksiäsi, käsityksiäsi sekä mielipiteitäsi vaikuttamisesta, sosiaalisen median vaikuttajista ja muista teidän elämääne vaikuttavista henkilöistä. Tätä tutkimusta varten tällaisia yksilöhaastatteluja järjestetään yhteensä 12 kappaletta.

Sinua on pyydetty tähän haastatteluun, sillä olet 15-20 vuotias ja sinua yhdistää muiden haastateltavien kanssa yhteinen harrastus. Tutkimuksien mukaan myös teidän sukupolvenne käyttää sosiaalista mediaa ja teknologiaa hyvin eri tavalla verrattuna aikaisempiin sukupolviin ja tämä on mielenkiintoista tutkimuksen kannalta.

Tässä haastattelussa ei ole oikeita tai väärä vastauksia. Haluaisin rohkaista sinua jakamaan ajatuksiasi ja ajatusprosessejasi vapaasti aiheesta tai muusta liittyvästä aiheesta, joka asiasta tulee mieleen. Kerro siis vapaasti kaikki ajatukset, jotka mieleesi tulevat. Tutkimuksessa positiiviset ja negatiiviset tai toisistaan eroavat kommentit ovat aivan yhtä mielenkiintoisia.

Olet varmasti huomannut, että nauhoitus on päällä. Tämä haastattelu äänitetään, koska haluan tutkia mielipiteitäsi ja näkemyksiäsi mahdollisimman tarkasti ja aidosti, enkä halua luottaa omaan pääkoppaani kommenttien muistamisessa. Näissä haastatteluissa esiin nousee usein erittäin hyviä pointteja aiheesta, joiden kirjoittaminen ylös nopeasti on erittäin haastavaa ja voisi katkaista haastattelun kulkua.

Tässä haastattelussa tulemme kutsumaan toisiamme etunimillä, mutta muista, ettei nimiä eikä mitään muuta tunnistettavaa tietoa mainita varsinaisessa tutkimuksessa ja kaikki esitetyt kommentit tullaan tuomaan esiin niin, ettei asiayhteydestä pysty sinua tunnistamaan. Tämä haastattelu on myös luottamuksellinen. Kun tämä haastattelu on ohi ja kommenttisi on saatu kerättyä kirjoitettuun muotoon, haastattelun ääniraidat tullaan tuhoamaan välittömästi. sinulla on aina oikeus myös keskeyttää tutkimukseen osallistuminen omasta tahdostasi.

Noniin, aloitetaanpas! Aloitetaan muutamalla ”lämmittelykysymyksellä”.

TEEMA I. Sosiaalisen median käyttö

- Mikä sinusta on parasta sosiaalisessa mediassa? Entä huonointa?
- Ketä/keitä seuraat sosiaalisessa mediassa vapaa-ajallasi? Miten olet päätenyt seuraamaan heitä?

TEEMA II. Sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat

- Mitä sinulle tulee ensimmäisenä mieleen kun kuulet sanan ”some-vaikuttaja”?
 - a. Seuraatko tällaisia some-vaikuttajia? Jos seuraat, miksi juuri heitä?
- Koetko, että some-vaikuttajia yhdistää jokin kriteeri?
 - a. Koetko, että some-vaikuttajia yhdistää jokin luonteenpiirre?
 - b. (Micro-influencer kysymys, mikäli mainittu esim. että yleisön koko vaikuttaa siihen että on vaikuttaja)

TEEMA III. Sosiaalinen vaikutusvalta: harjoitus asteikolla 1-5 (1= ei yhtään vaikuttava, 5 = eniten vaikuttava)

- Kuka seuraavista vaikuttaisi eniten ja vähiten siihen, että ostat uudet, tietynlaiset kengät tai vaatekappaleen?
- Kuka seuraavista vaikuttaisi eniten ja vähiten siihen, että valitset tiettyä musiikkia kuunneltavaksi?
- Kuka seuraavista vaikuttaa eniten ja vähiten siihen, mitkä harrastustunnit valitset?
- Kenen neuvoihin luottaisit eniten ja vähiten eettisissä päätöksissä (ilmastöystävällisyys tms)?
- Kenen neuvoihin luotat eniten ja vähiten, mitä tulee ihmissuhdeasioihin ja/tai henkilökohtaisen elämäsi päätöksiin?

Tekijävaihtoehdot:

- Some-vaikuttaja
- Kaveri
- Valmentaja/ohjaaja
- Vanhemmat
- Viranomainen (poliisi, THL, lääkäri)
- Joku muu, kuka?

TEEMA IV: Henkilökohtainen elämä, ihailun kohteet

- Mitä haluaisit vielä saavuttaa tulevaisuudessa?
- Ketä ihaillet ja miksi?
- Mitä suunnitelmia sinulla on tulevaisuudessa?

Appendix 2

Perceptions on influencers	Interviewee's expressions													
	H1	H2	H3	H4	H5	H6	H7	H8	H9	H10	H11	H12	H13	Total
Attitudes towards commercialism														13
Commercialism-making-money	x	x							x		x		x	5
Commercialism-profession	x	x			x	x								4
Commercialism-authenticity		x				x					x			2
Commercialism-compatibility					x								x	2
Attitudes towards personal brands														56
Personal-brand-differentiating		x		x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	9
Personal-brand-important	x	x			x		x	x					x	6
Personal-brand-editorialised	x	x			x		x	x		x	x			7
Personal-brand-values	x	x			x		x	x			x			6
Personal-brand-relatability					x	x				x	x		x	5
Personal-brand-shared-interest	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	13
Personal-brand-familiarity	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x		x	x	10
Attitudes towards social media content														26
Content-authenticity	x	x		x		x					x		x	6
Content-topicality	x	x			x		x				x			5
Content-tonal-balance	x		x	x	x	x			x		x			7
Content-aesthetics-important	x		x	x		x			x	x		x	x	8
Attitudes towards one's self-image														9
Self-image-performance-pressure			x		x						x			3
Self-image-appearance-pressure			x			x			x		x			4
Self-image-not-belonging			x			x								2
Attitudes towards one's worldview														14
Worldview-distorted-reality		x			x				x	x	x			5
Worldview-contracting		x	x						x		x			4
Worldview-expanding		x			x			x	x		x			5
Source criticism/media literacy														17
Source-criticism-platform					x		x	x		x		x		5
Source-criticism-content	x		x	x					x	x	x	x	x	8
Source-criticism-personal-brand	x			x		x								4